

A young man with dark hair is shown in profile, looking towards the right. He is wearing a light-colored shirt. In the background, a car is glowing with a bright blue light, suggesting a supernatural or futuristic theme. The overall scene is set at night with a dark, moody atmosphere.

Quirk of Fate #4

Demon Dabbling

Lisa Oliver

Demon Dabbling:
A Demon and a Chipmunk Story
Quirks of Fate #4
A Standalone story by Lisa Oliver

Demon Dabbling: A Demon and Chipmunk Shifter story – Quirk of Fate #4

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First Edition October 2023

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Dedication

To my wonderful readers who let me know my stories help them 'escape' in trying times. Sending you warm cyber hugs.

To Holly, Publication Pixie, for her excellent editing work- any mistakes left here are still mine.

To JP and Phil, you two are amazing friends who keep me going on my trying days.

Love wins, always, and smiles help.

Share your smile today.

Author Note

This story was written for my “Secret Sauce” tier on my Patreon, where it was shared as chapter increments over the past few months. So, those wonderful people have already read this. If this is you, thank you so much for your continued support, and please check the Patreon for your download link.

Hug the Ones You Love,

Lisa xxx

Chapter One

Zese

There were two places on earth where Zese felt super happy, and he was in one of them – his kitchen. His current project was trying to perfect a Thai chicken and couscous salad that he'd seen on the Food Network channel the night before. When Zese wasn't driving his truck across the country, delivering goods to the masses, he was either watching the food channel or trying out new recipes.

Spicy recipes were his favorite. He was a demon. Loving hot food was a given. But Zese also loved the precision and time it took blending spices to get just the right mixture. He wanted to feel the burn, but it had to be just right. The Thai chicken recipe took a bit of tweaking – it's not like a person could taste or smell the food he watched on television, but after his second helping Zese was finally content he had the balance of spices perfectly balanced and looked around the kitchen at the bombsight that surrounded him.

It's gonna take longer to clean up than it did to eat, he chuckled to himself.

The ring of his phone distracted him from the mess, and he pulled it out of his pocket gingerly - his fingers still glistening with the sauce from his chicken. He saw his friend's name flashing across the screen and smiled. *I knew he wouldn't forget.*

"Hi, Rig," he answered.

"Zee, are we still on for drinks tonight?"

"Sure are. But not a huge one, aye, we both start our next contract tomorrow morning."

"So early the sparrows haven't even farted yet, yeah I know," Rigmus chuckled.

"Same place, same time?" Zese asked.

"You know it. See you in an hour."

Zese hung up and looked at the kitchen again. He stacked everything into the sink, wiped the benches, and decided a shower was more important than the

dishes. He could do them when he got home. *Maybe.*

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“To twenty-six years earthside,” Rigmus declared, raising his glass towards Zese.

“Twenty-six years,” Zese agreed, as they both took long sips of the burning liquid. It soothed Zese’s throat and thrummed through his veins, not enough to relax him entirely, but enough to clear his sinuses.

Half-heartedly chatting to Rigmus about nothing in particular, Zese let his mind wander. Something about his anniversary always made him stop and take stock. Even Lucifer had been a bit thrown by Zese’s summoning. The issue had been that no one knew who or what had called him. There were rules about those sorts of things, and Lucifer himself had struggled to come up with a reasonable explanation, finally deciding it must have been the Fates which was odd enough in itself. But twenty-six years later Zese still didn’t know why he’d been called earthside.

No use getting caught up in unanswered riddles, he chided himself. The music in the bar pumped in the background, and Zese couldn’t help but smile as his foot tapped along to the beat. He watched as people danced and laughed. Others were playing darts in the corner of the room, and the three pool tables Zese had conveniently perched next to, were already occupied with competitive friends teasing and placing bets.

This is exactly what I needed, Zese thought.

Their first round already gone, Rigmus had insisted on footing the bill for the night, proclaiming it wasn’t every day a demon celebrated the anniversary of being pulled from the Underworld. Apparently the unanswered why was just an insignificant side note, but that didn’t change the fact that even after all that time, the strange longing that lived somewhere between Zese’s chest and stomach still ached. For some reason, in the past year it’d gotten worse than ever. Regardless Zese chose to embrace everything about a life with sunshine and weather that liked to change as often as he changed which podcast he’d become obsessed with.

Life on earth was so different from the Underworld, and yet in some ways, it was exactly the same. Zese’s eyes were drawn to movements in the shadows,

his ability to see even in the dimmest light meant he could take in the sight of the two lovers canoodling and pawing at each other, thinking the shadows offered them some privacy.

I want that, he murmured.

His demon rumbled his agreement.

When Lucifer had suggested it was the Fates that had called Zese to earth, he'd let himself believe it was for a mate. But after such a long period of time and no sign or scent... It was hard to keep the faith. So instead, Zese filled his mind with all the things he had been able to do since he arrived.

He'd learned to cook and play the guitar. He'd been able to enjoy many a sunrise and sunset. And one of his favorite things was how much he'd been able to travel and explore the country. Despite the inner ache that never quite seemed to disappear, for the most part, Zese had created a life he could be proud of.

"Any word from down below lately," Rigmus asked, placing a fresh whiskey in front of him.

"Nothing this month, but let's not jinx things," Zese teased.

When a demon went rogue on earth, Lucifer called on Zese to take care of the problem. Relocation jobs, he called them. Zese, and more often than not, Rigmus were tasked with tracking the wayward devils down and returning them to the Underworld where they belonged. A few years ago, they were lucky to see any action four or five times a year, but more recently rogue demons had been popping up roughly once a month and it seemed to be getting more frequent.

Rigmus chuckled, probably remembering the last job they'd done. Some young punk who thought it would be hilarious to set fire to every bus stop in a five-mile radius.

"You thinking about the firebug, too?" Zese said with a grin.

"I was, yeah." They both laughed, and Zese listened as Rigmus chatted easily about his latest obsession which was teaching himself how to grow and train Bonsai trees. Rigmus always had some new thing he threw himself into tooth and nail. Zese was much the same, but he tackled things more like a dog with

a bone rather than having a fleeting flirtation with different hobbies, which was what Rigmus was like.

“You still determined to be on MasterChef before you go?” Rigmus asked, clearly seeing Zese was distracted. He couldn’t help being introspective. Going from being a demon warrior with hundreds of troops reliant on him for their survival, to a truck driver who could play guitar and cook anything he had a recipe for... *It’s been quite a journey.*

“You know it. A demon has to have dreams, or why else am I here?”

Rigmus’s deep throaty rumble made Zese smile. He’d been lucky enough to stumble upon Rigmus about five years before, in the bar they were currently sitting in. Rigmus had been drawn to his misery – the ache had been bad that day - and the two had spent the night drinking and kicking ass at the pool tables nearby.

After a fun-filled night, Rigmus had taken him under his wing for want of a better word. He’d hooked him up with the long-haul truck driving job that Zese still enjoyed and helped him find an apartment. Not that Zese was at home much, preferring to be out on the road. But it was a place he could call his own and despite leaving his kitchen in a mess so he could go drinking with Rigmus, it still had an amazing setup, perfect for Zese’s cooking ambitions.

“It’s strange, innit? That you still have no idea who summoned you or why?”

“I try not to think about it too much.” Zese shrugged and took a swig of his drink. “I’m just following my gut, and I’ll see where life takes me. One day, one day, it’ll all make sense, and until then, no sense dwelling on it.”

“Too true. Lucky I found you when I did, huh.”

“You’re not wrong, Rig,” Zese said, and he genuinely meant it. Downing his drink, Zese gestured for Rigmus to do the same, “Let’s play a few games of pool and then get out of here.”

“Early start, yeah, I remember.”

An hour later and with a few extra bucks in their pockets, Zese and Rigmus headed outside into the cool night air.

“I scored the Interstate 90 from Seattle to Massachusetts,” Rigmus casually

dropped into conversation as they wandered the empty streets to the bus stop.

“Lucky bastard,” Zese chuckled. “I asked for the US Route 60.”

“Ahh, finally gonna make it all the way to Virginia Beach,” Rigmus replied, nodding his head in approval. “By all that is good in the world, I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“I’m hoping it’ll put my demon at ease if nothing else. He got a little hard to control on our last trip when we didn’t end up there like we were meant to.”

They fell into step and continued the rest of the walk in companionable silence, giving Zese a chance to plot out his route for the next day. From start to finish, his trip would take almost fifty hours of driving time if he went non-stop. When he factored in only being able to drive fourteen hours in every twenty-four, it was gonna take at least a week to make the return trip.

In the last five years, Zese had seen a huge chunk of the country, from the main roads and highways anyway. His primary route took him from Phoenix to either Georgia or Tennessee, but on his last trip, he’d felt compelled to go further. It was such a strange feeling. His demon, who was usually content to sit quietly and enjoy the ride, had been almost urgent about the fact. But Zese was a stickler for his schedule and had managed to wrangle the wayward beast.

He'd stopped at almost every truck stop between Arizona and Tennessee and was glad, if nothing else, for the opportunity to sample a few extra drop-offs along the way. Fate or not, Virginia Beach was where he was headed this time, and if everything went to plan, maybe he'd find what he was looking for - if only Zese knew what it was.

Chapter Two

Percy

Percy ran his hands through his fuchsia colored hair – well, the color of the week was a more apt description. Plastering on a complimentary cherry red lip gloss to accentuate his already ample lip, he touched up his mascara and cleaned up the excess from his face. It was the curse of having long lashes. When it was wet, the mascara always left a semi-circle of speckles under his golden hazel eyes, but that was an easy fix.

It was only Wednesday, so Percy didn't bother with his usual bold eye makeup, deciding to reserve that for the weekend when the club bounced all night, and the tippers came in droves for Percy's Virginia Beach renowned custom cocktails. Luminosity had been Percy's second home for the last three years, and to anyone looking in from the outside, he basically ran the place.

Taking one last look in the mirror, and finally happy that his face shone and sparkled in all the right ways, Percy scooted over to his closet, running his hands through the glittering multicolored array of options before him. Spying a lime green tank top that read "Dream On" he reached for it and then pulled that over his head, careful not to muss his carefully applied makeup and styled hair. All that was left to do was throw on a pair of simple, but purposefully, skin-tight black jeans, and his rainbow Converse before deeming himself presentable and ready.

His phone started to buzz, letting him know it was time to go. *Right on time*, he smiled. Percy had his getting ready routine down to a fine art and had learned many years ago that it was the little things that mattered. So he took one last minute to spray on his favorite cherry blossom perfume before he grabbed his bag and headed out. He planned on visiting his Grandmother, or Babushka as she preferred to be called, before his second shift of the day. He would have about an hour for her to kick his ass at Texas Hold 'em before he was due back into work.

Percy was tired already, but seeing Babushka always made him feel better, and he knew as soon as the music of the club sunk into his soul, he would last the night, and beyond if needed.

His little yellow Honda Civic was something else that made him smile,

waiting where he'd left it in the parking lot. It may not be the prettiest thing in the world, but it was cheap to run and never once skipped a beat. Turning up the volume on the sound system, which was probably worth more than the car itself, Percy headed off to the Golden Oaks retirement village that Babushka called home.

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“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthdaaaaay, dearest Percy...” Babushka was singing before she'd even laid eyes on him. Percy couldn't help but smile. She had a knack for knowing when he was nearby, she always had, but every time it still caught him by surprise.

Rounding the corner, Percy saw her for the first time. Today she was wearing neon pink tights with a purple and orange striped batwing top. Her fluffy black boots were firmly planted on her tiny feet. Her almost white hair changed color almost as often as Percy's, and he could see she was just about due a touch up, based on the way the bright pink of a few weeks ago sat in a more muted, pale version atop her head today.

Her sparkling golden eyes, which matched the rest of the family, were odd for their kind, but they all wore them with pride. Babushka's bright gaze softened as she looked him up and down, her arms already outstretched for him to walk right into. “Twenty-six today, my sweet Percy, where does the time go.”

Percy grinned and tousled her hair. She was even shorter than Percy at five feet exactly. She nuzzled her chubby cheeks against his chest, and he sighed into her embrace. She pulled back from him, her piercing eyes glistening with worry, and stared into his soul. It never ceased to amaze him how she could do that, so her next words weren't a total surprise. “Percy, what has that idiot boss done to you this time?”

Ahh, Babushka, straight for the jugular.

As if she had heard his thoughts she chuckled. “Come sit. We don't have much time, and I need to feed you and serve as your confessional before you head back to work.”

Percy did as he was told, warmed to see coffee and a few of his favorite cakes all lined up on pretty plates already at the table. “I tried to convince Gladys

and Janie to join us, but for some reason, they don't want to play cards with me again until next week," she said with a smirk.

Percy mock gasped. "The audacity. I wonder if that has anything to do with how much you've already fleeced from them this week already?"

"Fleecing implies there was no skill involved," she replied with a pretend pout. "But enough about me, what's Gerard gone and done now."

Sighing, Percy shook his head, his cake sitting like lead in his stomach at the thought of his boss. "He's been getting worse and worse as the days go by. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was possessed."

"It's possible, I suppose. He's always been a creep. What's changed?" Babushka asked, pouring him a coffee, that she loaded with creamer and extra sugar.

Percy paused, knowing his Babushka was not going to be impressed with what he had to say. "He's given me an ultimatum, and even though I know I can't accept, I'm just trying to buy myself some time to figure out what to do instead."

"An ultimatum! What is he playing at? Tell me everything." Babushka's spoon rattled in her cup as she stirred, her agitation clear to hear.

While Percy filled Babushka in on all the sordid details of Gerard's "proposition," she tutted and shook her head. By the time he had finished, the cards were long forgotten, and Babushka's face had contorted into one that resembled a wild animal who hadn't eaten for days and had spotted a juicy steak.

"I'll kill him," she shrieked.

"As much as I appreciate the sentiment..."

"He can't be allowed to get away with this, Percy," she hissed.

"I know, I know. I'll probably end up reporting him. It's unfair dismissal and sexual harassment at a bare minimum."

"On what planet did he think he could get away with this?" she huffed.

"As I said, he's different somehow. What used to be annoying flirting has become much more *insistent*." Percy sighed. "I plan on telling Benjamin and

Skye tonight.”

“It’s supposed to be a day for celebrating your birthday, Percy, not commiserating a job you love,” Babushka grabbed hold of his hand across the table.

“I know Babushka, I know. But the sooner I tell them the easier it will be. Plus, it’s gonna be hard to find a new job. He’s gonna be so pissed at me, I doubt I’ll get a good reference.”

Babushka tutted and tsked some more, before thrusting a plate full of cakes in his direction. “If I was ten years younger, I’d come down there and give that two-bit vulture a piece of my mind.”

Taking a piece of caramel slice, Percy mustered a smile. “I’m sure you’d be just as terrifying now, Babushka,” Percy soothed. “Anyway, are you going to let me try and win some of Gladys and Janie’s money from you?”

“Pah, not a chance,” she laughed. “But I do have something for you.” She said, reaching behind the cushion on the chair she was sitting. Handing him the envelope, her eyes misted over, ever so slightly.

“Babushka, we have a no gift rule, remember?” Percy said, his hand hovering with the envelope just out of reach.

“Yes, well. What’s done is done,” she muttered, thrusting it into his hand.

“Thank you,” Percy whispered.

“You don’t even know what it is yet,” she grumbled. “You may hate it.”

Percy carefully opened the envelope and looked at the beautiful hand-crafted card. “Did you make this,” he breathed as he took in the ornate detail and intricate designs.

“I have ample spare time on my hands these days,” she replied brusquely.

“It’s stunning.”

“Good, yes. Now open it before I die where I sit,” she said with a grin.

When Percy opened the card a slip of paper fell out and into his lap, picking it up and reading it, he gasped. “This is... this is... Oh, Babushka, you amazing, intelligent, intuitive woman. How did you know?”

“You always said you wished you knew more about food, and I figured it could help expand your employment opportunities to have some more skills under your belt.”

“This is one of the best culinary schools in the area,” Percy breathed.

“It’s not a full course in case you didn’t like it. But they call it a taster. So you can learn about food pairing and basic recipes. The fundamental tools that you can expand on later if you want. They have classes all throughout the day, so you should be able to find something that fits your schedule. The voucher will give you access to any ten lessons you want.”

Percy jumped out of his seat and launched himself into Babushka’s waiting arms, “You’re the best. I love it.”

“Never give up on yourself, Percy. You have more to offer than you realize, and you outgrew Luminosity a year ago. You just haven’t been able to admit that just yet.”

Nodding, Percy agreed. “Gerard may be forcing my hand, but at least it pushes me to find something else, something more permanent.”

“You still want a place of your own one day?”

“That’s the dream Babushka,” Percy said. He snuggled himself into the chair next to her, huddled into her side, and let himself breathe as she stroked his hair.

“You follow that dream, Percy. You follow it until it’s real and then you follow another one.”

Percy smiled and held the old woman close.

Chapter Three

Zese

Zese was awake before his alarm, the coffee pot had heated and was ready for him to indulge by the time the alarm did go off signaling his need to be up for the day. His demon was crawling under his skin, itching to get on the road. As soon as his cup was empty and he'd thrown some clothes and toiletries into a bag, Zese texted for a taxi to get him to the yard where his truck was waiting for him.

Half an hour later, Zese's long legs hoisted him up into his seat without hassle. He reached back and jammed his overstuffed bag into the sleeping cabin, conveniently located behind him, and after a bit of readjusting and fidgeting, got himself settled.

His first job, whenever he was headed out on a long haul like the one he had scheduled, was to hang his trusty talisman over the rear vision mirror and attach his phone to the Bluetooth so he could listen to podcasts as he drove. With being on the road for about a week, Zeke liked to be comfortable. Although, as a demon of the Underworld, it didn't take much.

"Z, you there? Over." The familiar voice crackled through the CB radio, echoing around the quiet cab, and busting through Zese's thoughts of red skies and demon horns.

Scrambling for the receiver, Zese replied, "Roger that, Rigmus. Over."

Zese heard booming laughter through the intercom. "Don't forget to make regular stops, Z. You pushed it on your last trip and the Boss is watching. Over."

"Which one? Over."

A dark chuckle followed. "Both, knowing Lucifer. And Carmichael is just looking out for his business, and you, in his own way, so behave - best you can, anyway. I'll be in touch with your next reminder. Over and out."

By the gods, how things have changed.

The night Rigmus found him, Zese had been lamenting or more accurately, trying to drown his sorrows in another bottle of Jack. He'd found it rough holding onto a job, feeling compelled to search every inch of any town he

found himself in – hunting, seeking. Rigmus, the most empathetic demon Zese had ever met – and one of the strongest - took pity on him and introduced him to Carmichael, owner, and operator of Land versus Time. It was a long-haul trucking company with the slogan “no road too big or too small.” In the last year or so, Zese had stuffed down all of his demonly desires and knuckled down to make some kind of a life for himself in his new reality.

Carmichael was a hard ass. If anyone messed up, they knew about it. He took his work, his trucks, and the regulations that kept them safe, very seriously. And while he may not hold a candle to Lucifer’s pit of the Underworld, Zese had found odd similarities between how his two bosses ran things. Enough to make his life work or, at least, keep trying to.

Zese wrinkled his nose and scratched the back of his head, *I just wish I knew why the fuck I was called up here.*

His demon flashed beneath his skin.

Yeah, yeah, keep your horns on, I was just sayin’.

With the rumble of the truck’s wheels beneath him, it was easier to keep his mind on matters closer to earth. Rigmus’s trip was coveted by most lifestyle long-haul truckers. He would get to cross the two floating bridges. “One day,” Zese grumbled. “One fucking day, that’ll be me.” The other considerable upside to the trip, was that it kept the driver on the road for at least a few weeks.

Zese was determined to be the next to be given the honor. He would know then his place in the company would be secure, that he’d made it. If it was coveted by his colleagues, then naturally, Zese wanted to beat them to it. Plus, the pay was amazing, not that money held much credence with Zese.

In human terms, he had more funds than he knew what to do with, but it was the status Zese craved. To be deemed worthy in the earthly realm, to be trusted with such an important route, would mean he had proved himself, something Zese was constantly trying to do. The added bonus of a new route would mean all new roads and all new diners to explore.

Chuckling to himself, Zese pulled his mind back from wherever it had traveled off without him, again, and settled in to absorb the long road ahead.

A few hours later, Zese was still chuckling in his cab, daydreaming about a demon run trucking company. Keen on problem solving, Zese hadn't figured out how to disguise the fact that demons wouldn't need much sleep. Generally speaking, earthside people who don't sleep were either using drugs, something Zese had zero tolerance for, or were slightly crazy, and who would trust crazy people with their cargo?

For Zese, sleep was a nice thing to have, a way to pass the time, and he had to admit he always felt refreshed after a night of sleep. But it wasn't what he'd call necessary. He knew he could drive twenty hours straight if he was allowed, but earth, much like the Underworld, thrived on its rules, and Zese knew better than to push them.

He was grateful that Carmichael had taken a chance on him. His first twenty-one years topside had been... a tricky adjustment. Well, that's what he told himself. Untethered and with no purpose, Zese had only been earthside when he'd been summoned, so there had been a lot of things to see, do, touch, taste, and experience when he first arrived.

He had to admit he had been a little gung-ho, and after several failed attempts at other jobs, and years spent wandering with no real purpose, finding Rigmus had turned things around for him. Zese would happily admit the past five years had been the happiest of his life.

Well, as happy as a demon on earth could be when filled with an internal longing he couldn't place. Being out on the road meant Zese had endless hours to listen to podcasts. He learned about ancient earth history, which was always amusing, the way so much of it had been rewritten and interpreted by writers of different times. Learning about studies on criminal minds was always interesting, too, if simply for the fact that so many people tried to justify behavior they knew was wrong. Zese listened to people talk about politics, mindset, meditation, and gardening. Everything was just so damned fascinating.

And when Zese got tired of listening, the wide-open expanses of the highway gave him plenty of time to think. Earth and the roads he traveled had their fair share of chaos, but the wide expansive plains, the desert and mountain ranges, beaches and cities that never slept, gave Zese an odd sense of calm. One he hadn't really known in the hustle, bustle, and demands of his role in the Underworld.

One of the main things Zese spent time thinking about, dissecting, remembering every tiny detail, was the night he felt the call to earth, twenty-six years before. He'd just had a raging fistfight with an unruly demon and was wiping the blood from his knuckles when he felt an unshakeable urge to head up.

It'd been such a rare feeling – it wasn't as though Zese was a name known by many summoners on earth – that he'd asked a few of his commanders if he had finally lost his mind. But the closest thing to a friend he had down there, a small slimy demon named Hugo, had convinced him, after three days of battling the unruly sensations, to seek Lucifer's counsel.

"You're the third this decade," Lucifer had mused. "Well, best you go and find what the Fates want with you."

And I'm still looking for the answers to that infernal question. Zese found a certain solace on the road and secretly hoped that if he traveled far enough, he would eventually stumble on whatever had called him to earth to begin with. After three failed attempts at returning home, Zese was stuck on earth, until he found what he was looking for.

Would help if I knew what it was.

And we're not going down that path again today. Zese was in danger of boring himself. Determined to find a worthy interruption of his wayward thoughts, he switched on his MasterChef podcast and listened to it rattle away in the background, the world outside stretching before him with endless possibilities.

Zese let out a long sigh and settled into his seat. A few days on the road would do him some good. Earth was an endlessly fascinating place and there was always something to fill his downtime. He truly adored walking around the art exhibitions and museums, and big old libraries filled with beautiful books were all brilliant ways to pass the time. Or they would be if it wasn't for that freaking longing sensation in his soul, that tugged at the back of his brain. *Which I'm not thinking about.*

Despite his rocky start on earth, Zese had persisted and built a life for himself. His demon knew they were needed up here, even if neither of them knew why yet. And Zese knew better than to argue with his inner companion – his demon had the power to make life easy and equally had the power to be

a real pain in the ass.

Zese found it beyond awkward trying to order at the drive through when his voice was all growly and grumbly, and he still flushed with embarrassment thinking about the time he tried to pick up donuts with flames flickering in his eyes.

There was another time, when the demon was horny, and Zese had refused to take a twink home from a club one night. His demon had given his human form a tail for a week. Zese chuckled at the memory.

The damned thing ripped all my pants.

A strange tingle in his sacrum told Zese he was being summoned. By Lucifer. He'd only been on the road an hour or so, but Zese knew he could get away with a pitstop as long as he was quick about it. He'd learned his lesson after the last time he had ignored the call and kept driving. Lucifer had simply translocated him from the truck, and it had caused quite an accident.

Lucifer, in his typical fashion, had found the whole thing very amusing, meaning he could and would do it again. Preferring not to tempt fate, and knowing his Underworld boss wasn't the patient type, Zese sent a silent word he would be down soon and parked up at the closest truck stop, just a few miles down the road. He had been hoping to have a nice clean run, but as generous as Lucifer could be, he was protective of his time, and a summons meant he was expected to appear immediately.

Just one last thing to do first. Zese grabbed his radio handpiece. "Rigmus, you there? Over"

"Yep. Over."

"I've been summoned. Over."

"Ha, ha, that'll teach us. Talk about him, and he shall appear. Any idea what he wants? Over."

"No clue, I guess I'll go find out. Over."

"Buzz if you need, I'll be stopping in the next five. Over and out."

Zese grinned at the intercom in his hand, before hanging the receiver back up again. If shit hit the fan, Rigmus would be there to help, especially if there

was something in it for him - he was a demon, after all. But more importantly, since they had stumbled across each other, Zese had felt less alone, not content, but less... like a lost puppy who'd been told not to bite.

Forcing himself to focus, Zese got himself ready to head south, deep south, he chuckled to himself. Stepping out of the truck, he looked around, making sure no one could see him, and closed his eyes, letting the pull of the summons take him down, down, down. No matter how many times Zese made the trip, it always made his heart skip a beat. Translocating was such a fascinating tool, especially when the destination was down.

“Ah, Zese. Thank you for joining me on such short notice.” Lucifer was sitting at his desk, trolling through a stack of papers, no doubt deciding the eternal torment of unruly souls. Despite the weight of the job at hand, he looked relaxed and content, as always.

“My Lord,” Zese replied, giving a short bow. “How may I serve you today?”

Lucifer laughed. “Spare me the formalities, Zese. We both know you hate it when I call in a favor. But, as I’m still waiting for the Fates to allow you to return home, and I’m still covering your armies for you while you drive trucks, I feel the least you can do is bring home a wayward soul from time to time.”

Zese quirked his brow. “Who got out this time?”

“Does it really matter?” Lucifer said, making odd, agitated motions with his hands. “I got word this morning that something is wreaking havoc in clubs, pubs, and bars in Virginia, and when I checked in on you, I was delighted to see you’re traveling that way.”

“How convenient,” Zese grumbled half-heartedly. In truth, he’d do anything his boss asked of him.

“Don’t grumble, Zese. I want you to find this wayward beast and bring him back where he belongs.”

Zese couldn’t help the sigh that escaped his lips.

“Come now, it could always be worse. The Fates might make you wait a century.”

“You truly enjoy tormenting me, don’t you,” Zese grunted quietly.

Lucifer grinned, his perfect teeth gleaming like butter wouldn't melt. "Maybe I do, maybe I enjoy the internal squirming, the fear that I might be right that eats you at you from the inside." Lucifer threw a small folder at Zese. "This is all I have."

Zese opened it, the folder was empty.

"My Lord," Zese grunted through gritted teeth. "This is empty."

"So it is. That must be because I have nothing I can share with you about this."

Zese seethed and Lucifer, who seemed to be reveling in his response, chuckled. "Come now, Zese, you wouldn't begrudge me the occasional request for help. You were and still are one of my best..."

"Since when did you resort to flattery, it doesn't suit you."

"Good, because you and I both know you'll do it anyway, so let's save some time."

Zese grunted. Not the most eloquent reply but something felt off, and he couldn't put his finger on it.

"He was last spotted in Virginia Beach."

Zese rolled his eyes, "Helpful. Thanks."

"Why so despondent today, Zese? Still no luck on your quest for... Have you worked out what you're seeking yet?"

Zese growled and steeled his breath. "No. Lord Lucifer. Still no luck."

"Shame, maybe your trip to Virginia Beach will enlighten you. You're not going to find much traipsing around the long solitary roads of the US with only fellow truckers and Rigmus for company."

"Point taken. I guess. Was there anything else? Sir?"

"Yes. Take Rigmus to Virginia Beach with you, I know he hangs around you like a bad smell. You'll need backup, and I can't spare you anyone from here, at the moment."

"No problem, he's already offered to help if needed."

"Good, good, I'm glad you have each other for company up there. I would

hate for any of my creatures to come to any harm, and..." Lucifer hesitated, and Zese tensed. It never boded well when Lucifer hesitated about anything. "I have to be pragmatic here. You should know by now I'm nothing if not a pragmatist. Better safe than summoned by the wrong person, or worse, wouldn't you say?" Lucifer pursed his thin lips and tented his hands.

"You think the wayward demon was summoned?"

"There are only a few ways a demon can go to earth, dear Zese. You, of all people, should know this. Summoned, with my consent, and a few other nefarious means which we don't need to get into now."

Zese gave a small snort at the jaded reminder and fidgeted as he often did when he was tired of standing still. "Anything else, Your Eminence?"

"No. You may go back for your precious truck. I'll expect to hear from you when you arrive in Virginia Beach."

"Yes, Boss."

Lucifer gave him a strange smile as he sent him back up, up, up to his trusty truck. Zese reached inside and sprayed some deodorant on him, anything to mask the smell of sulfur he always stunk of when he returned. No matter how short the trip, he could always smell it for days afterward.

Smelling slightly fresher, he decided to let Rigmus know he was back.

"Rigmus, you there? Over"

"What did he want this time? Over."

"We've got a small job. Over."

"Can't be small if he's sending both of us. Over."

"Can we meet up tonight? Over."

"Yep. I'll be in touch. Now go and eat. Over."

Zese never needed an excuse to eat, it was one of the things he loved most about earth, the exorbitant options he had regarding food. He loved to eat, loved to cook, and most of all loved when he didn't have to do his own dishes. He ran his timeline in his head. If he ate immediately, he could make it to Elk City before he had to stop for the day.

He smoothed his pants and strolled inside, catching sight of himself in the huge, mirrored windows. Sometimes he forgot that by human standards he was a big man, all shoulders and biceps that rippled as he moved, no matter what he ate or how many hours a day he sat on his ass, he was muscles on legs.

He usually kept his rugged dark locks shorter than they were in his current reflection, and he did a quick job of trying to smooth them back into a reasonable tidiness. He'd be needing a trim soon, as his hair was almost to his shoulders. But Zese could always tie it up if it got annoying. His dark eyes flashed in the reflection, and a ripple of unease traveled through his bones. There was another demon nearby, and not one his demon knew well.

The small flicker of flames in his eyes came and went in a split second, only bothering to linger, when he was angry, on high alert, or his demon was agitated. On the earthly realm, his demon didn't bother coming out to play very often.

Perhaps this is part of the increased activity Lucifer mentioned. Lucifer always knew more than he let on, it was all part of his charm. Whatever was happening, Zese was confident in his ability to cope with anything that came his way.

A woman pushed past him, while he was gazing into his reflection like a teenager getting ready for a date, and he shook off the assessment of his features. If there was another demon around, that individual wasn't going to care what he looked like in his human façade. Besides, Zese was hungry enough to demolish a full breakfast and a whole carafe of coffee.

After he'd placed his order, Zese remembered to start the timer on his phone. He had to make sure he had a full hour's rest otherwise, he'd be in trouble. One grumpy boss was enough. As he set his phone down, he glanced around, checking out the other customers, staff, and his general surroundings. The notion that he would find what he was looking for in a dingy truck stop diner was ridiculous. But Zese still looked every damn time.

No one caught his eye. Nothing caught his eye. Not even the demon he'd felt with his "other" senses earlier. He knew whoever it was would be watching. Zese attracted a lot of watchers, and that was fine. As long as whoever it was didn't try to make friends, Zese figured they could watch all they liked.

Chapter Four

Percy

With his almost permanent smile highlighting his features, Percy sauntered into the bar and assessed the scene. *Shock and awe*, he mused, *I'm the first one here.*

Quickly getting to work, Percy was up to his elbows in lemon, lime, and mint when he felt a figure looming behind him. A shiver ran through him, but his smile remained in place.

“Evening, Gerard,” Percy said firmly, sharing none of the shivers he felt.

“Ahh, Percy, it lights up my world that you always know it’s me.”

Gerard was Luminosity’s owner, and with his creep factor increasing by the day, Percy silently hoped Benjamin wouldn’t be late. He was extremely conscious of the fact they were the only two people in the bar.

“What can I say? You have a distinct energy about you. Plus, it helps that we are the only two here at this time of the day,” Percy replied through his gritted teeth smile.

“Always so quick-witted, Percy, one of the many things I adore about you.”

Coming from anyone else, Percy would have been flattered but Gerard was... weird. His aura was murky even on a good day and there was just something about him that set Percy’s teeth on edge. Realizing his boss was applying the pressure earlier in the day than usual, Percy knew he had to put a stop to it.

“Flattery won’t speed up my decision-making, Gerard. I asked for a week, it’s been less than twenty-four hours.”

“I didn’t realize what a stickler for the rules you are, too,” Gerard grumbled, pressing his body up against Percy’s behind, “but I’ll let it pass this once.” Gerard breathed into his ear, possibly thinking it was a romantic gesture.

“If you were following the rules, we wouldn’t be in this mess,” Percy replied smoothly, inching his body away from the grotesque man behind him. Percy felt Gerard’s lust rolling off him in waves and fought off the need to gag as Gerard leaned closer to breathe him in.

Fight or flight kicked in. Percy tried with all his might to suppress the

shudder that loomed under his skin at Gerard's unwanted attention. *He'll be gone any minute now, just breathe, breathe.*

"Now, you're not insinuating I've done anything other than offer you a reasonable business proposition, are you?" Gerard sneered.

Percy moved away, stacking his cut limes and lemons into the trays. "I told you last night, it's an unfair offer. But you gave me your word, I'd have seven days to decide. And I intend to make use of those seven days."

"Six. You have six days left, Percy. The clock is ticking."

"I'm well aware of how to tell time, thank you."

"The offer leaves the table if someone else comes along and catches my eye in the meantime," Gerard rumbled.

"Well, if that happens, I assume I get to keep my job and I'll wish you a lifetime of happiness." Percy's face lit up at the mere thought. He knew if he refused Gerard's offer, which if he was honest, he absolutely had to, he'd be out of a job.

The only thing holding him back from telling Gerard to stick his job where the sun doesn't shine was basically that Percy was still trying to decide if he was going to press charges against the man. Technically, Gerard hadn't stepped over the line... yet. It would be his word against Percy's that the ridiculous offer was even made.

Whether he laid charges or not, Percy was going to lose his job. Aside from Gerard's advances, the work was fun, and he was paid well for his time. He made enough to live comfortably, which was a huge bonus after living like a pauper for most of his life. But he recognized times were changing – not least because of Gerard's unwanted attentions - and Percy was going to have to be flexible.

Hopefully, the gift from Babushka will help open a few doors for me, surely my reputation will be enough to get me something else in the meantime.

"Ahh, now I've got you thinking. Your nose crinkles in the most delightful way when you're in thought." Gerard slowly, almost hesitantly, pulled away, but not before making sure his half-hard cock was rubbed along Percy's middle as he went past.

Gerard was impossibly tall, at least six foot four, so to Percy's five foot five, Gerard towered over him. His piercing eyes were a deep, dark shade of brown, almost black, and gave his sharp-edged facial features a menacing look. He was a predator through and through, and what he wanted from Percy didn't need much imagination.

"Nice to know it's a delightful look, at least." Percy smiled brightly. "Now, if you don't mind, I have glasses to wash, garnishes to prepare, and a playlist to check, all in the next hour."

"I'll leave you to what you do best, Percy." Gerard always purred his name. *Gross*. "I'm sure you'll make the right decision." And finally, after the longest standoff in the history of standoffs, he was gone as quickly and silently as he arrived.

Leaving Percy with the sinking feeling that he was going to have to find a new job. Gerard's offer was simple and disturbing. Marry Gerard and become the sole owner-operator of Luminosity or find somewhere else to go. Gerard had been drooling over him since his first day, but Percy had politely and firmly declined every advance he'd ever thrown at him. But in Gerard's words, "I'm done dancing. You either submit to me, in your entirety, or you get the fuck out of my club."

The words had burned through Percy like a knife. He'd always believed in Fated Mates, and he knew Gerard wasn't who the Fates had chosen for him. But for some strange reason he felt he had to see out the seven, now six, days Gerard had given him.

It's gonna be okay, Percy, his chipmunk muttered. I want away from that man more than you know, but there's something about the timing. Just a few more days.

I'm sure I can manage a few more days, I want to give Benjamin and Skye a heads up anyway.

We won't lose our friends, Percy, and we have some savings. We'll be okay.

Despite his reassurance, Percy knew his sweet soul animal was edgy after their encounter with Gerard. *Babushka is right, he feels like a vulture.* Not that anyone knew for sure. Percy had never been quite able to put his finger on it. But Gerard was definitely a predator, or a scavenger maybe, and had set

his sights on Percy the moment he walked through the door all those years ago.

Walking into Luminosity for the first time had been an eye opening experience for Percy. The music had been loud, even at eight in the evening. The dance floor had been pumping, and at first glance, Gerard had been quite a handsome man under the dim lighting of the club. But in the cold harsh light of his office and from the moment he'd opened his mouth, he'd made Percy's skin crawl right there on the spot. But the hours were good, there was room for career development, and more importantly, the pay was right.

Percy had walked out of Luminosity that night with one weight lifted from his shoulders, and another planted firmly in its place. Paulie, his old boss, had been ropeable to hear Percy would be working for Gerard. The pubs and clubs scene was a relatively small one, and Gerard had a less than stellar reputation. Paulie had tried to talk him out of it, but Percy had a hidden stubborn streak and was determined to have options, and that took money. Money Paulie couldn't pay him no matter how much he wanted to.

Deep in thought, Percy nicked his thumb with the blade in his hand – he hadn't been paying attention as he was chopping mint. "Dammit," he grumbled, reaching for a paper towel to clean up the mess. "Focus, Percy. No use dwelling on the past. You look to the here and now, and what comes next," he mumbled to himself.

"Such wise words, young man." An unfamiliar voice rumbled from the other side of the bar.

"We're not open yet," Percy called cheerfully, wrapping his finger tightly and already beginning to prepare a fresh batch of mint. No point in making eye contact with someone who wasn't staying. "If you wouldn't mind coming back in an hour. I'll be more than happy to make you whatever you want on the house for the inconvenience."

"I can see why Gerard likes you so much," the voice said, and Percy got the sense the person had moved closer. "Oh, yes, a lovely specimen. So innocent, so bright. Soooo... much hidden... passion."

"If you're a friend of Gerard's, you've missed him. He'll be back tomorrow around three." Percy had a strange feeling this man, or whatever he was, wasn't going to be easily waylaid. Benjamin would be arriving any minute,

and he could deal with whoever the jerk was in the meantime. All Percy had to do was stay polite until then, and keep the counter between himself and the partially hidden stranger.

“Gerard’s no friend of mine. An acquaintance at best.” Red eyes peered at Percy from the shadows and there was no way he could conceal his shudder this time. “But he does have something I want. Nay, something I need.”

“Well, as I said. He’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I think maybe Gerard might be more willing to help me if I take something he covets. Don’t you agree?”

“If you think an eye for an eye is what’ll work for you, then, sure. But I can promise you, I’m not important to Gerard in any way.”

“Is that so? Are you trying to tell me he isn’t trying to convince you to marry him? Even offering you this club in exchange for the transaction.”

Who is this guy? How does he know about that?

Percy’s chipmunk was frozen, a deer in headlights. There was something dark and evil about the man. In fact, Percy would bet good money he wasn’t a man at all.

“I’m not sure who your sources are, but they’re mistaken. Gerard is my boss. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Lies, lies, and more lies,” the voice hissed. “You can’t speak untruths to me. I created lies.”

A thumping and banging announced Benjamin’s arrival, “Evening, Perc.” Benjamin froze as he entered the club, his eyes scanned the room immediately. “Who’s here?” he hissed. Percy didn’t dare speak, but he darted his eyes towards the far corner of the club where the voice had been taunting him.

If Percy had used his beautiful brain, he would have flicked the switch to his left and bathed the room in light, but he realized when Benjamin entered, he’d been frozen in place and hadn’t even noticed.

Benjamin lumbered towards the spot, and a strange crackling sound filled the air. The spell, if that’s what it was, was broken. Percy’s body lurched

forward, and he realized he'd been trying to move his feet all the time the being/beast/thing had spoken. He flicked on the lights, a wisp of smoke was just disappearing as the darkness faded and a strange smell filled the air.

"Sulfur," Benjamin grumbled, scenting the space. "You were just accosted by a demon, Perc. Are you okay? What did it want from you?"

"It's hard to know for sure," Percy said, filling his lungs with fresh air and breathing in the lemons leaking juice on the counter in front of him. *Lemon has such a soothing scent.*

Chapter Five

Zese

Zese was mopping up the last of his eggs with his overly buttered bread when an uninvited guest slid into the booth opposite him. “You’re a hard man to track down, Zese,” the voice grumbled.

Zese didn’t bother to look up from his plate. He had no time for lower level demons or their games. Although he had a sense the one sitting across from him was different, he just couldn’t put his finger on why. “It’s not like I’m hiding, so if you had trouble finding me, that sounds like a you problem.”

“I have a proposal, but I’m not sure such a human place is the best place for us to ‘chat’.” The individual’s voice had settled into almost a whisper, a hiss, but Zese could hear him just fine, even over the din of the diner.

“I’m already running two jobs at the moment, and not keen on a third.”

“This one will be more than worth your time. I can assure you of that.”

“Forgive me if I take the word of a demon with the grain of salt it’s worth,” Zese snorted.

“Don’t you think you should look me in the eye before you insult me? I’m no mere demon.”

The timer on Zese’s phone alerted him that he should be getting back on the road. He had just enough time to finish the half-cup of coffee he had left.

“You’ve got ‘til my cup is empty to talk. After that, I’m out of here.”

“I know the location of something you seek, and they have access to something I want. It would be, as unusual as it sounds, a mutually beneficial arrangement. But you would have to go against Lucifer in order to do it.”

“Not interested,” Zese growled. “Lucifer may be a pain in my ass, but I always know where I stand with him.”

A slow dark chuckle escaped the man’s lips, and Zese felt compelled to look at his guest for the first time. Despite being in a human body, typical for a demon on earth, unless summoned, of course, the demon... *Is he a demon?* ...was front and center, truly the star of the show. His eyes glowed red, his fangs bulged beneath his thin lips, and his skin was haggard. To a human, he

would have been a gruesome, if not a fear inducing sight, but Zese just laughed.

“A demon on a mission, are we?” Zese teased.

“I’ll admit I’ve looked better, but they keep trying to call me home, and I refuse to go. I found an amulet that stopped me from being summoned. I can add that into the mix if it helps pique your interest. I won’t need it after I’ve got what I came for.”

“Riddles and ridiculous nonsense,” Zese said with a chuckle. “I really have other things to be doing. Are we finished here?”

“The riddles cannot be helped. I’m unable to speak freely here, and ridiculous nonsense it is not. I want out of the Underworld for good. No more answering to Lucifer, no more summonings, no more red sky, and dust beneath my feet.”

“Running from the pits, I take it.”

“I still have the odd friend prepared to go against Lucifer for the right price. They helped me get out before my hearing.”

Zese looked up. *Fuck, this must be the asshole Lucifer wants me to bring in. Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“Ahh, I see I’m too late,” the voice crooned. “You’ve already been tasked to hunt me down and bring me in.”

Whoever the two-bit loser was, he had some skills, some power he was clearly masking, and Zese probably should be worried. But he’d been around long enough to know any soul that was running from the pits, and Lucifer, was dark, dangerous, and usually more than a little stupid.

No one could run from the marks on their soul. So whether this man was truly a demon or his whole façade was a sham would remain to be seen. Despite the man’s bravado, Zese knew the type - a lost one, a runaway, and a total fucking idiot if he thought for one second, he was going to get away.

Zese’s phone rang and he answered it without taking his eyes off the creature in front of him.

“Zese, I see our friend found you.” Lucifer's voice breezed through the

phone.

“Hmm, seems that way.”

“Carry on as planned. It is imperative that the return happens from Virginia Beach, I trust you can handle yourself.”

“Yep.”

“Excellent. Don’t die. I’d hate for your mission to be cut short. You’re so close to what you seek.”

As soon as Zese heard those words, the ache in his chest bloomed to life. With a chuckle Lucifer hung up. Zese shook his head trying to clear his thoughts and bared his teeth at the beast before him. “Are you going to tell me your name?”

“Not a chance. If you’re too stupid to know who I am, then you have no business hunting me.”

“Have it your way. See you in Virginia Beach.”

Zese looked up, intending to signal the waitress to settle his account. But there was not a single human in what had been a bustling diner just moments before. Zese masked his surprise. It was likely a simple spell. The beast had demanded privacy for their little chat after all. *Certainly explains the lack of questions, interruptions, or people running scared.* The creature before him was quite repulsive, and coming from Zese that was saying something.

“Looks like your breakfast is on the house today,” the creature mocked.

“Clever trick,” Zese growled. “But I’m done with your games. Tell me what you want, so I can get on with my day.” Zese’s demon, who had been relatively settled and sitting in the background until now, had surged forward.

For all his faults, Zese didn’t believe in the wanton loss of human life and hated the thought that innocents going about their day had been caught up in some stupid drama, but his demon’s reaction was quite unexpected. Usually a reserved creature, his demon side only popped up if they were in imminent danger, aroused – which hadn’t happened in so long, Zese couldn’t remember what it felt like - or on the hunt. None of which was happening now.

Curious to understand what had set his demon off, Zese sat back and let his constant companion come forward. He felt his canine teeth elongate and his pupils dilate, his fingernails extended into claws that left gouge marks in the table, as the demon crawled up and over to be face to face with the incredibly annoying beast before them.

“Ahh, I was beginning to wonder if your demon had fallen into an eternal slumber, but I see he still lurks within you. Pleasure to meet you, a kindred spirit, I see. We both seek something of vital importance, and as I said earlier, we could benefit from working together.”

A cackle escaped Zese’s lips. His demon was taunting the creature – something that never boded well for the person being taunted. “You fool,” Zese snarled, his demon’s voice running thick in his tone. “I have no reason to leave Zese. He is me, and I am him. We are bound to Lucifer, and we’re here to find what we seek. It’s our mission and ours alone.”

A deep hiss escaped their guest’s lips. The power in the demon's words was having quite a reaction on the beast. “I know you, Zephany,” Zese’s demon thundered. “I wondered when you would crawl out of the hole you’ve been hiding in.”

The beast flinched. Zese could only assume it’d been some time since anyone had spoken its name. “I glad you recognize me. In fact, I had hoped you would. It’ll speed things up. You know I’ve made nations fall, and I came the closest to bringing Lucifer to his knees.”

Zese scoffed, his demon finding this whole thing very amusing. “Always the drama queen. You need to go and refresh your lipstick, Zeph. You always did have an inflated sense of your own power and worth.”

Zephany stood, his eyes burning with rage. He towered over Zese, standing at least eight feet tall, and as he let his cloak fall away, Zese was astounded to see the man in his true form. All the demons that Zese had seen in his life were typically red, with flat noses, ridged eyebrows, and huge horns. A tail was optional but many who roamed the Underworld still wore theirs with pride.

The creature in front of him had skin that was black as coal, and his horns sat in a crown over his head, six of them, all gnarled and set off in different directions. His teeth were huge, but his face - his true face - was pointy and

jagged. His nose jutted out like the beak of a mutated bird, and his eyebrows were like tangled barbed wire.

Where a demon would have a leathery red hide, Zephany looked like he had scales all over him. His torso was bare, and his leather pants were so tight Zese wondered how he got them on. The pants were accessorized with a chain belt that housed some of the biggest sickles and battle axes Zese had ever seen.

“Take a good look, and do not make the mistake of underestimating me, Zese.” Zephany snapped his fingers and disappeared in a wisp of smoke, leaving nothing but the scent of sulfur in the air. The glamor he had cast was gone with him.

Zese surveyed the scene, nothing looked different from when he’d first walked in. Customers were eating food, paying for their orders, chatting with friends, just like any other day. Despite being dressed for battle, Zephany had done no harm – *this time*.

He wants something from us. His demon was still unsettled. If he didn’t, all these innocents would be dead, every last one of them.

What’s his game? Zese asked.

Chaos. That being is pure chaos.

I need to get some driving time in. We can get in touch with Lucifer from the road.

The demon grunted his approval of the plan, just as the waitress reappeared. Zese felt his demon fall back, and he blinked his eyes a couple of times before turning to look at her. She nodded with approval at his empty plate. “Looks like you enjoyed your meal.”

“It was amazing as always,” Zese replied, mustering his best smile. It wasn’t Julie’s fault he’d been accosted by a demon. “Could I please grab a piece of your amazing pecan pie and a coffee to go?”

“Good choice, Zee. I’ll be back with goodies.”

“And the cheque, too, please.”

Julie gave him a winning smile and a nod before going to get his things

organized. Zese had one eye on Julie as she bustled behind the counter, but his mind was torn between two things. Lucifer's jaded reference that his reason for being here on earth was in Virginia Beach.

All this time, so close and yet so far.

And secondly, on Zephany. *What the hell does he want from us?*

He knew of one person who could give him more answers to both pressing questions. If he felt like it. Unfortunately, one of Lucifer's many titles was the King of Riddles, and Zese wasn't sure that he'd get any answers any time soon – or at least until he got to Virginia Beach.

Chapter Six

Percy

Percy quietly prayed to the gods, the goddesses, and the Fates that the rest of his evening would be uneventful. Benjamin, despite his extensive sniffing and snooping, could cast no new light on who the strange voice belonged to, only that he was one hundred percent, definitely, no doubt about it, not human. Percy had laughed at the very adamant proclamation.

“Maybe I should be a detective, I got that impression, too,” Percy teased.

“Joke all you want, Percy, but he could have killed you with a wave of his hand.”

The thought alone caused a lump in Percy’s stomach. “Sorry. I don’t mean to make light of it, but I feel like lately, there’s someone lurking in every shadow...”

“Is Gerard bothering you again, I told you I’d-”

“Not bothering me as such. This time he gave me an ultimatum.” Percy braced himself. He’d already decided he had to tell his friends before they found out, and they would find out. Gossip was gold. Benjamin gave a sharp intake of breath and moved closer.

“What’s sort of an ultimatum?”

“Oh, you know, the normal. I either submit to him, body, mind, and soul, or I have to leave the club, forever.”

“That slimy little...”

“It’s okay. Honestly, I’m not even surprised by the shit that comes out of his mouth anymore.” Percy posed, it was the only word to describe the movement that made Benjamin smile. “But honey, he has no idea who he’s playing with.” Percy pretended to flick his hair.

Benjamin chuckled, and the tension in the air eased for just a moment, before he asked, all seriousness back in his tone again. “You can’t possibly be considering his offer, though, right?”

Percy shook his head. “No, I’m just biding my time. I’ve got six days to give him an answer. Which, unless he’s stupid, he’s already going to know it’s

going to be a resounding no. But I need to try and find a new job, and then decide if I'm gonna press charges or not. I can't bear the thought of him pulling his bullshit on someone else." Percy picked up a glass that was already sparkling and began to polish it, his movements automatic, but it gave his hands something to do.

"He shouldn't be pulling this shit on you either, Percy. You have to do something. You can't let him get away with it." Benjamin shook out his hands next to his side. "It makes my skin crawl just thinking about it."

"That's exactly how I felt when I ran into him just before you arrived." Percy shivered at the memory and rubbed the glass a bit harder.

"Well, either you come in a little later, or I'll come in a little earlier."

"I can do that. It's only one more week."

"A week." Benjamin let out a sigh. "Any chance he'll back down?"

"I think even if he did, I've lost what little respect I had for him. He's gone too far this time."

"You're right, I was being selfish. I'll miss you, that's all."

"Oh, Ben, I'm gonna miss you, too. But we'll still hang out, right?"

"Course, Perc, course." His head tilted to the side, looking at Percy quietly. "There is another option."

Percy grinned, "Are you offering yourself as a sacrifice to the Gerard god?" he asked with a cheeky grin.

"Gross, no. Never. In fact, I'd rather be eaten alive by feral cats than let that sorry excuse for a man touch me." Benjamin shook his head, his facial expression showed just how appalled by the idea he was. "You know he's a vulture shifter, right?"

Percy's mouth opened wide making a perfect O shape. "Ooooooh. I guessed. Well, Babushka guessed. That makes so much sense. No wonder my chipmunk scurries away and jumps foot to foot every time he comes nearby." Percy shoved a handful of bar nuts into his mouth. "Hmmm, yeah, that will not do," he mumbled around his mouthful.

"As I was saying... you know what you need," Benjamin said, leaning closer.

“A fucking miracle,” Percy offered,

“To find your Fated Mate. Then Gerard has to leave you alone, right?”

Percy looked thoughtful for a moment. He knew exactly what a Fated Mate was. He’d even read stories about them. Beautiful romances, where two souls found each other, overcome with lust, and then had to overcome some sort of adversity to realize they were made for each other, and then they lived happily ever after.

That would be nice...

Percy looked wistful for a split second longer, before realizing he was daydreaming again, and Benjamin was making a genuine statement that required a response. Percy summoned his most convincing smile, knowing it would melt the sweet bear as it often did. He aimed for one that lit up his entire face, but it clearly fell flat, when Benjamin’s deep, growly chuckle escaped his lips. He was a good friend. “As I said. A fucking miracle. Fated Mates are as rare as hen’s teeth, and how do we even know the Fates extended that honor to chipmunks?”

“The Fates don’t care about species, Percy. You should know that. And neither will your mate.”

“Well, they’ve got less than a week to find me. Or I may just consider letting that feral beast kidnap me.”

Benjamin chuckled, “How do you know he’s not your Fated Mate?”

“Because he smelled disgusting, and the last thing I was feeling was lust, darlin’.” Percy struck a pose again and then carried on with his setup duties.

Karla, Janine, and Skye all made their way into the club, exclaiming loudly over the fact that Percy had, once again, come in early and got all the prep work done. It made him laugh. They made a fuss like that every night despite the fact he’d been setting up early since the day he’d started work there.

“Well, Perc, it looks like all there is left to do is look pretty until people start rolling in,” Skye said with her impish grin. Percy watched as fae in her sparked to life. Her body shimmered with power as she looked Percy up and down. The irises of her eyes were ringed in a vibrant silver, and a frown crinkled her brow as her eyes landed over the space where the grotesque

voice had whispered from the darkness.

“Percy, Percy, Percy,” she grumbled in a tsk tsk tone that only she could get away with. “Looks like you and I need to have a little chat. In private,” she added promptly grabbing his arm and leading him out of the bar.

For her small size, she didn’t lack strength, and Percy had no choice but to follow along behind her. He glanced left and right as she led him past the doorway that led into the bathrooms and kitchen and came to a stop outside Gerard’s office.

“We can’t get in there,” Percy said with a chuckle. “He locks it.”

“As if locks are gonna stop me,” she said with a grin, and with a flick of her wrist, the door swung open. She pulled him inside, and the door closed with a gentle click behind them. In the silence of the room she rounded on him. “Now spill, Percy,” she demanded. “Who was here? What’s wrong with you, and what’s changed?”

Percy opened his mouth to placate her, but before he could even get a word out, his chipmunk scurried and chittered in the back of his mind, his heart started beating like a drum inside his ears, his palms became sweaty, and all he could hear was a strange humming sound fill the air.

“Please tell me you can hear that?” Percy squeaked. He actually squeaked. It was as if he couldn’t talk any other way.

Skye must’ve picked up his chipmunk’s distress. She nodded, wrapping her fingers around his wrist, trying to cast a bubble of protection over them both. Ripples of magic burst forth from her hands, but as fast as she manifested it, her magic shimmered and dissolved.

“What on earth?” Skye looked confused, glancing first at her hands and then around the room again. Her slim neck arched as her head spun around, trying to look everywhere all at once. “There’s a definite presence in here, and it feels...”

“Angry?” Percy offered.

Skye nodded again as her gaze narrowed on the bookshelf behind the desk they were standing in front of. Her graceful features and bright green eyes all hardened.

“It’s definitely angry,” Skye muttered, her eyes fixed on the bookshelf. “Let’s get out of here, we can talk about what’s bugging you in the kitchen. I was looking for privacy, not... Whatever’s in there,” she said, gesturing towards the bookshelf, where the humming was getting louder and louder.

As if responding to an invisible command, Skye flicked her wrist towards the bookshelf almost in a dismissive manner, the bookshelf slid to the left, revealing a hidden closet. The hum continued to grow louder and now unimpeded by the books it had become more of a whir. An obscure glow emanated from the space, and it was beginning to pulse.

Percy immediately felt drawn to both the sound and the light. It called to him, whispering nonsense into his mind. His instincts raged inside him, half of him wanted to get closer, but his survival instincts told him to run away as fast as he could.

Frozen, much like he had been when the being had spoken to him earlier, Percy was unable to move, to think. He was barely able to breathe under the oppressive weight that had suddenly fallen over the room, and was sucking every ounce of joy or life out with it.

He managed to glance at Skye out of the corner of his eye. She seemed to be captivated by whatever the hell that thing was too. And as Percy watched, unable to speak, she walked unblinking around the desk and towards the glow. The weight around him thickened its hold, and just as when the demon came to call, his body felt suspended in time.

Percy watched on helplessly, as Skye inched closer and closer to the source of the light. Her arm reached out as if to touch, everything felt as if it was moving in slow motion, and the knot in Percy’s stomach grew.

Percy! The chipmunk inside him screeched. Snap out of it. Do something. Stop her!

Hesitating for a split second, Percy realized he truly couldn’t move, and with his feet frozen solid to the floor, his brain came back online, and a million thoughts raced through his head all at once. From somewhere deep inside him, a guttural scream escaped his lips.

“Noooooo,” Percy cried. With his voice returned, he called to her. “Skye! Stop! You have to stop.”

Skye hesitated and then lurched back, shaking out her hands and feet, her eyes blinking furiously. “That’s it, Skye. Come back to me.”

Still unable to shift his feet, Percy could see Skye move more vigorously, shaking off the remnants of the dark magic that clung heavy in the air.

“What the hell,” she cried, stumbling backward, and with a flick of her wrist the bookshelf slid closed again. “By the gods,” she mumbled. She spun around to face Percy, grabbing both his shoulders, her eyes flickering with stars. “Thanks. I don’t know... I can’t... That’s some dark ass... Are you okay?”

Percy shook his head, desperately trying to clear out the fog that had settled into his bones. *Heavy, I just feel so damned heavy.* With the bookshelf now securely back in place, the air in the room began to return, slowly but surely.

“I’m no fae, honey, but I could feel it, too. I’m trapped, my feet, I can’t.” Percy tried to move again, this time his feet shifted slightly, less frozen, more trapped in quicksand. “The same things happened earlier tonight when the demon came to visit.”

“A demon?” Skye asked incredulously.

“I’m only guessing. A weird hissing voice visited.” Percy shivered at the memory and tried shaking out his limbs which were finally moving again. “If I had to guess. I’d say whatever the fuck that is, in there,” he said gesturing awkwardly at the closet/shelf/hidden room, “whatever that is, is what that being was looking for.”

Skye looked left and then right. She eyed several books on the shelf and seemed to be almost magically scanning the room, not something Percy had seen her do before, but he could faintly see little flickers of light, almost translucent like bubbles, seeping from her pores as she continued her silent searching.

“Why, oh, why, would our intrepid, asshole vulture be dabbling in magic so dark, lower-level demons would cower in its presence.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Percy insisted. “I don’t want to be anywhere near... whatever that is.”

Skye turned and as she reached out to take his hand, Percy grabbed at his

chest, suddenly out of breath, the room began to spin. Skye's face, the room, the bookshelf, and the strange humming that still rang in his ears... everything swirled into darkness, and the last thing Percy remembered was the sound his head made as it hit the wooden floor of Gerard's office.

/~/~/~/~/

Only the gods knew how long Percy was out for, but as he started to rouse, the first thing to capture his attention was the pounding in his head. If he didn't know better, he would assume someone had beaten him with a baseball bat. He willed his eyes to focus, realizing his ears were still ringing, and his mind recoiled, remembering the events that had led to his fall.

Did I fall? Did I hyperventilate?

"Ahh, good, our guest is finally waking up." A voice smooth as silk, one Percy had only heard once before in a very peculiar dream, breezed into his awareness. It was soothing, calming, and made him want to wake up just to see the source.

Trying hard to get his senses back online, Percy was acutely aware the cold hard floor he had fainted on had been replaced with a soft feathery... Bed? No, couch, definitely a couch. *Where the hell am I?* Percy's eyes flickered.

"I prefer Underworld to hell, young Percy."

The Underworld! Oh, my gods, I'm dead.

A jostling next to him and warm hands on his shoulders accompanied by a strange warmth radiating through his body finally brought Percy back into full awareness, his eyes flickered open to see a truly stunning looking man sitting right in front of him. "Good, I'm glad you're finally awake, I didn't want to call in backup to wake you if I could avoid it. The fewer people who know you're here, and all that."

Percy tried to shuffle back, away from the stranger in front of him, his eyes flitting about the space. A room he'd never seen or been in before swam into view before him. Rich velvet curtains, art so old it belonged in a museum, bookshelves packed to the hilt with books of all colors, sizes, and ages. All were given a purpose thanks to the huge desk and oversized stuffed chair that sat behind it.

“Where am I? Who are you? What in the name of the goddess is happening today?”

The very sexy man chuckled, his dark hair and friendly dark eyes offset against his pale skin and broad smile. “Yes, yes, you’ll do nicely for my lovely friend,” he said with a smile.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The strange man looked deep into what felt like Percy’s soul, into a place that no one had ever dared to delve into before, sending a shiver of fear running through his shocked, hungry, and still aching body.

“My deepest apologies. Where are my manners? I am Lord Lucifer of the Underworld, and I called you down at what appears to be the most opportune of times.”

“You’re who?” Percy scrambled until he was curled up in the back corner of the couch as far away from the scarily beautiful man as he could be. But Percy was also no mooch, he had seen some things in his time, and wouldn’t go down without a fight, even up against a god himself. Percy’s body may have backed away, a reflex. Self-preservation was a real thing, but his eyes never left Lucifer’s face. “I am dead, then. And I’ve ended up in hell.”

“The Underworld,” Lucifer corrected. “And you are very much alive, dear Percy. I see you’ve had a very eventful few hours. Let me help you out.”

Lucifer waved his hand, and instantly, Percy’s body felt good as new again. “Why am I here, and why are you helping me? Aren’t you supposed to be all evil and stuff? I don’t want to make deals with the devil, so if you’re trying to-”

“I hate to interrupt but, please, look at me... I mean, really look at me. I am not ‘the devil’. Bah! How insulting to be compared to a made-up tale designed to scare children into going to sleep at night. No, thank you very much. If I wanted something from you, Percy, I’d have taken it already. I was merely... curious. Curious about who you were, and what was happening. I heard the thud of your head hitting the ground and knew if I didn’t intervene, and then something happened to you, the Fates would have to turn ply their needles and change all of the plans already laid into place. And that, my dear Percy, would simply not do.”

“I am so confused,” Percy grumbled, rubbing his head to check that the pain had really gone as quick as a wave of the man’s hand. It had.

“Ahh yes, I imagine this is all a bit much for one day, and unfortunately, I can’t give you the answers you seek without overstepping. All I’ll say is that every action, every deed, and every word has great power, and you, Percy, are being propelled toward your future. Much quicker than anticipated. So, before I send you home, I just have one thing to say to you, sweet chipmunk.”

Percy looked up at the man. He’d honestly had the most messed up of days in the history of days. “I don’t know if I can take anything else today, Lord Lucifer.”

Lucifer stepped closer. “You’re stronger than you know. But more importantly than that...”

“Yes?” Percy prompted. Something appeared to have captured Lucifer’s attention. He seemed to be listening to something, but Percy couldn’t hear a thing.

“Where was I? Ahh, yes, my one thing to say... don’t die.” Lucifer chuckled. “The fun hasn’t even started yet.” A strange feeling surrounded Percy and as Lucifer’s laughter filled his head, he found himself falling upward, if that was even a thing.

Unsure if he could even trust gravity anymore, Percy landed, the soles of his shoes delicately touching down back in Gerard’s office where Skye was pacing and mumbling incoherently.

“Percy.” She cried running to him, and throwing herself against his slim and still shaking body. If she had been any bigger, she would have sent them both careering backward again. But she was a slim wee thing, and Percy managed to keep them both upright, just. “Where did you go? One minute you were passed out on the floor, the next, your body just plain vanished. I...”

Pulling out of her embrace, Percy looked at her, really looked at her. *What am I supposed to say? She’ll think I’ve well and truly lost the plot...* So instead of trying to muster words that may or may not get him thrown into the loony bin, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his lip gloss. After reapplying it and giving the tasty cherry balm a subtle lick to dilute the

hideous taste in his mouth, he finally said, “You know, Skye. I don’t think you’d believe me even if I told you.” He chuckled shakily. “But hands down, this day has been the worst day ever!”

Skye eyed him curiously and gave him a gentle sniff, her nostrils flaring in disgust at what she smelt. “Percy,” she began.

“Nope, nope, and triple nope. This day has been weird enough. I need to get out of this office, and I’m going back to work. If nothing else, I’m going to try and pretend that none of this... Whatever any of this is... ever happened.”

Chapter Seven

Zese

Zese settled his bill at the diner, leaving his usual more than generous tip. Julie was always so quick to welcome him with a smile, his coffee was always piping hot, and the food was always ridiculously good. But despite his cheery outward expression, Zese was distracted, his demon was agitated, and he needed answers. Immediately. Striding out of the diner and making his way back to his truck was merely step one, but the crackling of his overhead CB radio device caught his attention as soon as he was settled in his seat.

“Rigmus, is that you? Over,” Zese grumbled down the line.

“Where the fuck have you been? Over.”

“I got waylaid by an uninvited breakfast guest. Over.”

“Something weird is going on. Get your ass to Virginia Beach as soon as possible. Over.”

“I’m gonna speak freely, this ‘over’ bullshit is annoying me...”

“Yep.”

“What can you sense?”

“Can’t put my finger on it, but it’s nothing good, and you, my old friend, are at the center of it all.”

“Excellent.”

“I don’t know what our Lord and Master is up to, but this time, we’re in way over our heads.”

“I think you underestimate us, Rigmus. But I agree, our Boss most definitely owes us a little more information before sending us into battle.”

“You think there’s a war brewing?”

“War, I’m not so sure about that, but a simple demon retrieval, this is not.”

“You’ve met him then?”

“Indeed, and there’s no way he’s a regular run of the mill wayward spirit, nor is he a rebellious demon looking to party. He’s on the hunt for something and

will stop at nothing to find the key to his freedom from the Underworld.”

“Sounds fun. I’m in.”

Zese chuckled. “We may need some backup for this one.”

“Easily arranged.”

Zese nodded, more for his own benefit than for Rigmus, his friend didn’t always expect a response. He was deep in thought, already trying to place the strange creature from the diner. So many things made little to no sense. And the one causing Zese the most confusion was why the beast hadn’t hurt or killed any of the humans from the diner. A wave of his hand could have caused a bloodbath, but he seemed to be playing nice, for want of a better word.

So what was his end game? What did he want from Zese? He was a lowly truck driver demon, who came to earth in search of something he couldn’t name. In the grand scheme of things Zese was a nobody. *What does he think I can do to help him?*

“I need to talk to Lucifer,” Zese grumbled.

“You need to be on the road,” countered Rigmus.

“Not before I get some answers. I’ll log a maintenance code to keep things ticking along up here, and I’ll be back in a wink.”

Zese could just imagine Rigmus grimacing down the handheld, but before they could get into a time wasting argument, Zese logged the code, and focused on the sights, sounds, and smells of Lucifer’s office.

“Zese, Zese, Zese. To what do I owe the pleasure of two visits in a day?” Lucifer crooned. He sat on his couch, one leg crossed over the other and his hands resting relaxed in his lap.

“You’ve sent me and Rigmus on a suicide mission, and I want to know why.” It was not a question, it was a statement, and Lucifer’s lip twitched in amusement at the demand.

“Of all the things you could have accused me of... I would never send any of my valued employees on a suicide mission. Quite frankly, you offend me,” Lucifer replied. His voice was smooth, but the subtle edge served to remind

Zese who he was talking to.

Zese dropped his head, “Apologies, Master.”

“Accepted. Raise your head and look at me.”

Zese did as he was asked, but he was compelled to put his foot in his mouth again. “So you had no idea he’d hunt me down and accost me in a diner. Innocent people could have been hurt.”

“Tsk, tsk, Zese. You know how death works. All in their time and a time for everything.”

Zese was not in the least comforted by his words.

Lucifer flicked his hand, summoning a book. “Come, sit,” Lucifer gestured to the corner of the couch.

Zese had never been asked to sit in Lucifer's office, not in all the hundreds of times he had been in there. *There must be some serious shit going down.* Taking a seat, Zese took a deep breath, when suddenly an unfamiliar and mouthwatering scent hit his senses and sent every other thought, question, and worry out of his head.

He stood immediately, trying to find the source of the smell, but his demon quickly confirmed his worst fear - the person, creature, or ... chipmunk that had left the smell behind was no longer there.

“What’s wrong, dear Zese?” Lucifer purred. “Something distracting you?”

“Who... who's been here?” *They sat here, it was today. I can't have missed them by much.*

“Many beings come and go through this office, Zese. Could you be a little more specific?”

Zese and his demon had played this game so many times, it was second nature. They were hunters, and a scent could tell them a lot. The sweet cherry blossom perfume amalgamated with other more intense scents that had hit their nose full force. Zese was compelled to sniff again. Fear, agitation, and musty beer permeated his senses, but there was more. Fear was not unusual for anyone who had been summoned to Lucifer’s office without warning. Another deep sniff, blood... the little creature was hurt, and the mere thought

of that sent Zese and his demon into a frenzy.

With his nose almost buried in the couch cushions, Zese and his demon teased out even more smells. Lemon, mint, tears, a fae, a bear shifter, and undoubtedly the chipmunk was the owner of the scent. His mate... his mate had been curled up in a ball on the couch and Zese had missed them by mere moments.

“A chipmunk shifter, who was hurt, bleeding, but not badly, they’ve been in the presence of a fae and a bear shifter. Who are they, and more importantly, where are they?”

Lucifer shook his head, a smile forming on his lips. “I can’t mess with the business of the Fates, Zese.”

“Can’t?” Zese challenged.

“The hunt is all part of the fun, don’t you think.” Lucifer stood. “Zephany...”

“You expect me to be able to focus on Zephany when I’ve just caught the scent of my mate for the very first time!”

“Well, yes, of course, I do. It’s what I asked of you, is it not?”

Zese was stunned and mad. Like if he could blow steam out of his ears, it would be streaming out like the spray of Niagara Falls.

“So, as I was saying, and please... take a seat... again.” Lucifer moved his hand, sending Zese into the seat. The move was swift and served as a simple reminder of who was in charge here. Zese tried to focus, but his demon was chomping at the bit, the damn truck could wait. His mate... He had to find his mate...

“I get the distinct impression you’re not paying any attention to me, Zese.” Lucifer stalked closer. “I gave you an order, and I expect you to uphold your end of the deal. You came here for answers, and now you sit like a lost puppy waiting to chase a chipmunk that smells of cherries. Is that correct?”

“He must be important somehow if you summoned him here.”

“Curiosity, dear Zese, nothing more, nothing less.”

“But...”

“You may go, but don’t forget the task at hand while you’re on your travels.”

Zese took a deep breath, preparing to argue, readying himself to push against Lucifer, just a little. All he could think about was getting more information about where the scent had come from, but as he was about to open his eyes, he realized that Lucifer had dismissed him, quite literally. He was already sitting back in his truck. It's not as if Zese was making up some bullshit excuse. *I need to go after my mate.* Surely that should take precedence over everything else.

“Fuck, shit, fuck, dammit.” Zese ranted and punched and hit and kicked and thrashed things about. His demon allowed the tantrum for a total of ten seconds before shutting that nonsense down and demanding Zese to “Focus.” He was on the hunt and the truck was too damned slow. Zese needed an out. He needed an excuse good enough to be out of this truck and...

“Zese...”

Zese sighed, *Rigmus is going to be mad. Do I really need him for this job?*

The demon inside growled.

Fine, okay...

Zese grabbed for the CB radio and answered, “I’m a little busy here.”

“What did Lucifer say? Who is this beast?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake, I didn’t get any answers. Distracted, blindsided...

“I didn’t get much out of him,” Zese grumbled.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Now’s not the time, Rigmus. I need to get off this job. I need to find...”

“Stop right there, Zese.”

The scent of sulfur filled the cab, and when Zese looked up, Rigmus was sitting next to him with his fist coming right for his face. Rigmus’s hit landed square on Zese’s jaw, sending a splatter of blood and spit across the steering wheel and front window. Zese wiped his lip and gave Rigmus a slap on the shoulder. “Good to see you too, asshole. You didn’t need to come all this way just to slug me one.”

“Apparently I did,” Rigmus growled. “You’re not being honest with me, I got you this job on the understanding you wouldn’t fuck it up. And yet, here you

are about to fuck it up.”

“Let me...”

Rigmus’s hand flicked upward. “You got distracted. What the fuck is going on? And no lies. I’ll know.”

“I didn’t lie,” Zese grumbled.

“Fine, no half-truths, either. I’m not in the mood. My instincts are going fucking nuts, something big is brewing, and you dragged me into this crap, so spill.”

“I went to Lucifer's office for answers and caught a scent I can’t shake.”

“That’s it? A fucking scent? And you’re willing to throw your life...” The look on Zese’s face made him stop his rant. “Oh, shit... have you caught wind of your fated one?”

“I’m ninety-eight percent certain...”

Rigmus nodded, “Okay then, no wonder you’re acting like a complete and utter idiot.”

Zese half growled, half chuckled, and Rigmus just laughed. “Down boy, we’ll find them.” Rigmus looked from the diner to Zese and back again, not saying a word, but he was forming a plan – it was written all over his face.

“What’s the biggest risk to truck drivers?”

“Falling asleep at the wheel, crashing?” Zese guessed.

“Hmmm, I’m thinking a good ole fashioned accident would be enough to get you off work,” Rigmus mused.

“Yep, that’ll do it. But I don’t wanna get caught up in hospital time, and paperwork, and all that jazz. I need to get moving.”

“You’ll lose one day instead of four, and you can translocate straight from the hospital to wherever you think you’ll find your mate.”

“That’s the problem. I have no fucking clue.”

A voice rang out through the cab. “Stick to the plan!”

“Lucifer?”

“Yep, who else. It must be,” Zese said looking around.

“Maybe he knows something you don’t?”

“He usually does,” Zese mumbled. His demon was not happy, but they had nothing else to go on, so following the plan and putting some faith in their intrepid Master was going to have to be enough for now.

Lucifer’s reputation among his demons included his love of giving them grief. It was often found that he could’ve made their lives easier on a job than he did, simply by sharing more information. But not even Lucifer would mess with the will of the Fates. As impatient as Zese and his demon felt, he had to trust that Lucifer knew enough to give him sound advice.

“Right, well.” Rigmus did a whole body shrug as though shaking himself off. “Lucifer has spoken. I’ll get back to my truck, and I’m guessing I’ll hear from you once you make it to Virginia Beach?”

Zese shot back a forced smile. He was on edge, and his demon was laser focused. Trusting the Lord of the Underworld with something as precious as their Fated Mate was hard. But roaming the countryside sniffing out chipmunks that smelled of cherries wasn’t exactly an efficient use of his time, either. He was just going to have to do things Lucifer’s way.

Rigmus translocated out of the truck, and Zese started the engine, just as his phone rang. It was his truck driving boss this time. “You can have an extra hour on the road today to make up for lost time if you want, Zee. I’ve squared it with the union and adjusted your clocks.”

“Much appreciated, we’re all good to go. I hate being behind schedule.”

“I’ll leave you to it, safe travels.”

A sign from the Fates! I must be headed in the right direction. Little mate, hold tight, I’m coming for ya.

Chapter Eight

Percy

“Are you sure that’s such a good idea, Perc? You hit your head pretty hard, not to mention you still haven’t told me where you disappeared to...”

In all the happenings, Percy had almost forgotten about that - the passing out part, not the trip to Lucifer’s office. He wasn’t going to forget that in a hurry. His hand instinctively traced the egg on the back of his head. He could swear it was shrinking as the seconds passed. Skye’s eyes twinkled with unasked questions, but she seemed to sense Percy’s hesitance. “I need to ground myself, Skye. I’m gonna get back behind the bar.”

“Seriously. We’re not even going to talk about the dark devil spawn artifact in Gerard’s office? Or the fact you saved my life? Or that you were translocated off the floor and returned awake and upright...? None of these things feel like something we should be ignoring.”

She is one hundred percent right...

Percy shrugged. “I just need a dash of normality in my evening. When we close, we can chat. Okay?”

Skye sighed deeply, but she nodded her sweet head, her red curls bouncing around her cheeks before she took Percy by the hand and steered him out of the office. He could feel her sending him energy as they walked out, and while on a typical day, he would have balked at her using magic on him, tonight, he would take all the help he could get. And first thing tomorrow, he was going back to Babushka. He hoped, because she was as old as the mountains themselves, she could give him answers.

As they walked out of the office the sounds and lights of the club hit them. Gerard had insisted on Skye soundproofing his sanctuary, and the contrast between the silent room and the bustling club was a true testament to her skill and power. Why did she hover here in the club when she was clearly capable of much bigger and brighter things?

So are you, Perc, his sweet chipmunk chirped.

Percy straightened his shoulders, fluffed his hand through his hair, and flounced back behind the bar. A crowd of waiting drinkers had been

lingering, waiting for his magical cocktails, and the hours flew by as Percy mixed, flicked, flipped, swirled, crushed, and smiled his evening away. All the while, in the background of his mind, his chipmunk chirped, letting him know that all was well, for now.

Benjamin lingered around the bar, significantly more than usual, and he was most definitely on high alert, as was Skye. Percy generally hated it when his friends hovered. He was an independent chipmunk. But something about that creature, the secret room, and the way Gerard had suddenly dropped an ultimatum on him after so many years all had to be connected, somehow. Percy just couldn't work out how.

"Percy," a high-pitched chorus of voices popped his thought bubbles. He looked up to see Penn, Piper, Poppy, and Parker all standing in front of him, their faces beaming in anticipation.

"Hi, gang, what are you all doing here? Isn't it a school night?"

"Celebrating, silly," Poppy answered. "It's your birthday," she said. "And seeing as you refused to take the night off, here we are."

"You guys are so sweet," Percy beamed. "I'm honored you chose to slum it here in my lowly club," he teased. He quickly swooped around the bar and wrapped his favorite cousins into a warm embrace, giving them gentle nuzzles cheek to cheek to remind them how much he cared for them.

"I hope Penn and Piper have been looking after you. Not leading you astray?"

They all giggled and chuckled between them as Percy dropped his cousins and planted huge kisses first on his sister, Piper, and then on his squirming brother, Penn.

"The infamous triplets, I assume," Gerard's slimy voice seeped through the sounds of the club.

"Gerard." Percy couldn't help but hide his flinch this time. Gerard never came into the club when it was open, not during the week anyway. *What is he up to?*

"Percy, darling. Won't you introduce me to your delightful family?" Gerard swooped in and wrapped himself around Percy in an instant. *What the heck? Since when did he call me darling... and hug me?* If it could be called a hug.

Percy felt more like he had been snared in a trap rather than held in an embrace.

Percy grimaced. “Penn and Piper, this is my boss, Gerard. Gerard, this is my brother and sister. And over here are Poppy and Parker, my cousins. This is Gerard.”

There were mumbles of greeting, and “pleased to meet you”, but Percy’s family knew Percy better than he knew himself. It was clear by the looks on their faces they knew all about Gerard, and how much of a slime ball he was.

“Oh, Percy, sweetie, angel of my life. Surely, you’ve told them I’m more than just your boss.”

“You wish,” Percy chided playfully. Gerard’s grip on him tightened.

“Not now,” Percy said through clenched teeth. “We agreed, I had time.”

“I’m sick of waiting, darling,” Gerard purred into his ear, or was it hissed? Either way, it sent a cold shiver through Percy as Gerard’s grip on him tightened.

Benjamin and Skye were hovering at the edge of his peripheral vision, and it was beginning to feel a lot like a strange standoff. It was Penn who broke the silence. “As we said, Gerard. It’s a pleasure to meet you, but if we could steal Percy for a minute, seeing as you made him work on his birthday, Percy promised us a special cocktail.”

Gerard looked as if he could cheerfully slap the young man. But, in a crowded room and with such a polite and acceptable request, Gerard had no choice but to let Percy go and let him take his place behind the bar again. Skye and Janine flanked him. For a human, Janine was remarkably astute. The pair danced around Percy for the next hour as he mixed cocktails for his family and the other patrons, making sure they were always between him and Gerard.

In the end, he finally had to give up, obviously not willing to cause a scene. Instead he sat at the end of the bar, his beady eyes fused to Percy’s every movement. Percy was beginning to wonder if the man was even blinking, every time he caught Gerard’s gaze, his line of sight was locked on Percy, unmoving. Not for a single second.

“What’s his problem?” Parker asked, sipping on a vibrant green drink, his cheeks already slightly flushed from the previous concoctions Percy had whipped up for them.

“Not here,” Percy mumbled quietly, the smile never leaving his face. Percy took a moment to look at some of the most important people in his life. Piper, with her strawberry blonde ringlets, danced and twirled with an attractive young man. Penn was positioned between Poppy and Parker with the same colored hair as his sister but cut shorter, almost faded at the back and sides, and then left longer at the top of his head, perfectly styled to sit high and full on top of his head accentuating his high cheekbones and full lips.

Poppy and Parker both had shoulder length brunette hair with a small amount of curl, enough for it to bounce as they moved. Parker kept his pulled high into a bun at the top of his head while Poppy left hers to fall around her elfin-looking face. But the striking feature all of them shared, despite their differences in dress and hairstyles, was their piercing golden hazel eyes.

Percy had started dying his hair years ago, changing up the colors to suit his mood or favorite color of the week. They had all grown up together, bouncing between the two houses depending on whose mother was home. They were family, and Percy, despite only being the eldest by a few minutes of his siblings and only a few years older than his cousins, had always felt oddly protective of them.

With all the odd and scary happenings of the day, Percy wanted to encourage them all to leave, to be as far away from whatever trouble was brewing as possible. But the selfish part of him, the part of him that reminded him he was a pack animal through and through, relished the sense of security of having his family close. He could see them, know they were safe, and once all the hustle and bustle of the club had died down and Gerard had finally got the hint and buggered off home, he might even confide in them about a few of the recent happenings. Not all of them. Not the beast or the weird secret room. But Gerard’s offer, he could share that with them... Maybe.

Just before midnight Percy saw Gerard glance at his watch and head out the back. “Worried he’ll turn into a pumpkin,” Skye teased. The club was still packed, as Percy walked over to ring the final call bell. Some glanced up but carried on dancing, others rushed to the bar for their last tippie before the night was over. In the next hour, Percy would ring the final call bell, three

times.

Janie was already in the midst of the nightly cleanse, possibly because she could sense everyone would be wanting to get out of there and possibly because Skye had asked her to, but in this instance, the why was irrelevant but the gesture was sweet.

And in a night that had brought with it more chaos and more questions than any Percy had experienced, the sweetness and simplicity called to him. A timely reminder, that it was the little things that meant the most. Parker swaggered over to the bar. “How can we help, Perc? We wanna take you out for late dinner, early breakfast when you’re done here?”

“You don’t have to do that,” Percy said with a smile.

“It’s your birthday, let us help,” Parker replied.

“And as I recall, last year you cooked everyone a meal and then had half the dishes done before anyone noticed,” Piper chipped in. Her smile matched Percy’s, and he knew she had sensed there was more than met the eye in the night's happenings.

Percy nodded. “If you wanna ask Skye what needs doing while I make the last of the drinks.” Skye was one step ahead, no surprises there, and approached them with empty bins for collecting the dishes. Not a huge amount could be done with the bar still crawling with people, but dishes were a bartender’s never ending story, and people seemed to leave them in the strangest places.

At one on the dot, Benjamin was hustling the last of the stragglers out the door, and after he closed the main entrance he leaned against it, letting out a long breath of relief. Percy had fixed the hardworking bear a gin and honey. The unlikely friends had stumbled on the unusual pairing a year ago, and it had led to a whole new foray into Percy’s mixology journey. He was known for finding the exception to the rule, and the gin and honey combo was definitely a firm favorite, especially with the bear shifters.

Ben took the glass Percy handed him with a grateful smile and perched on the bar watching as the others flitted and floated around cleaning, wiping, and closing up. Skye had disappeared out the back about ten minutes before and still wasn’t back so Percy decided to go and look for her. Ben had been

watching, deeply inhaling, as he sipped on his drink and as Percy went to walk out the back, Ben jumped over the bar and slammed into him in one smooth fluid movement. “Don’t move,” he breathed into Percy’s ear.

Penn, Piper, Parker, and Poppy all froze. Janine didn’t know where to look and Karla stood frozen, a tray of empty cups stacked on the tray in her palm. Before Percy had a chance to ask Ben what the heck he was up to, Gerard stalked out, dragging Skye by her hair behind him.

“You sneaky little fuckers have been in my office.” Gerard dropped Skye to the ground and Percy broke away from Ben and ran to her side. He stole a glance at Piper, the only one in the room with any remote medical training, hoping she would rush to his aid. But she didn’t move, frozen in time like a statue, just like the others.

“What’s... What did you... How?” Percy knew he wasn’t making any sense, but his brain was glitching. A thought would begin to form, and before it could develop, a new one would take its place, and to add insult to injury, he could barely get any words past his lips.

Percy looked up in time to see Ben push off the wall and turn to face Gerard. He crouched slightly as if preparing to pounce, and as soon as he launched, Gerard muttered a few words under his breath. Ben stopped mid jump, suspended midair, looking almost comical.

“How are you doing that?”

“Magic, dear boy, magic.” Gerard smirked, snaking his way to Percy who was still kneeling on the floor next to his friend. “And now that I finally have you all to myself, we need to make some adjustments to our agreement.”

“No. My answer is no. Not now, not ever, not in an alternate universe. Not even if our coupling was the only hope of the survival of the planet. You disgust me.” Percy got to his feet. His eyes glistened with anger.

“Such spark, such spunk, such personality. I will have you.” Gerard started muttering under his breath again, and Percy felt his legs begin to take root beneath him. Gerard’s breath was hot and sticky on the back of his neck, and fear washed through him. *Have to hang on...*

Percy’s keen eyes looked, as he watched, and waited until Gerard stalked in front of him. He was such an arrogant prick it almost made him predictable.

He would want to see Percy's face, wanted to see him beg for mercy. *Not tonight, asshole.* Percy thought. *Magic, magic, magic. The room? Whatever was in that room is fueling, whatever the fuck this is...*

A hiss and crackle that Percy had heard earlier startled Gerard into looking away.

"Tsk, tsk, Gerard," the voice from the beginning of Percy's shift whispered through the room. Percy wanted to see this creature, and needed to know for himself whose side he was on...

"Zephyany..." Gerard stuttered and sputtered and took a step away from Percy, and that's when Percy saw it. Gerard instinctively, in the face of danger, reached for a chain that hung off his pants and landed in his pocket. Percy had always assumed the creep just had some weird affinity for pocket watches, but nope. Percy thought of the P popping in his mind.

He's got some badass magical amulet or something in there.

"Greed and sex..." the creature breathed, as his form began to take shape. It almost looked to Percy's straining eyes as if he was being formed from the smoke that clung to the air. As it was drawn towards him, more of his body - was it a body? - became clearer.

The creature was huge, with dripping teeth, red glowing eyes, and a huge hood covering his head. His body was at least eight feet tall. Percy could feel his knees begin to weaken, but with his feet still planted in place, he held firm. His head wanted to drop, and his eyes longed to look away, but Percy held his head high. Although, he itched to run his hand through his hair, to soothe his addled mind from that... whatever the fuck *that* was.

"Don't you know," the creature said, moving closer to Gerard by the second. "That there are bigger things at play here than your obsession with this..." The creature sniffed at Percy... "Oh, it's you," he sneered, rounding towards Percy, and settling his hooked nose just inches from Percy's face.

The glowing eyes mocked him, and Percy wanted to scream. He felt as if every bad thought he'd ever had hit him full force in unison as he gazed into the beast's eyes. "I did tell you, I'd be needing your help..."

Gerard looked angry, shaking off his fear and misery for a second. He rounded on the beast and Percy. "You know this... this... whatever the fuck

it is.” Gerard looked as if his greatest treasure had just been licked by an echidna.

Percy shook his head, more scared of Gerard than the beast, as Gerard looked ready to strike.

“He is mine, the treasure is mine, the power is mine, the magic is mine, mine, mine...” Gerard looked as if he had lost his damned mind.

“Okay, okay... Of course, it is Gerry, I don’t want it, don’t need it...” Percy tried to move away.

The beast stood tall, the tip of his hood brushed the high ceilings, and his mouth turned up in what could almost be called a smile if it weren’t for all those teeth.

“You need to shut up.” The beast flicked a hand at Gerard, and he froze in place, just like everyone else in the room. Percy still couldn’t move his feet. Ben was still mid pounce above the bar, Skye was still on the ground and his family was still dotted around the club suspended in whatever they’d been doing when the magic struck them.

And that made Percy was mad. The thing was messing with his friends. And it was truly mad, and not just an ‘oh, man someone took the last peanut butter, chocolate chip cookie’ mad, but a ‘how the fuck could you mess up my life’ mad. Turning to face the beast, he roared, letting out every ounce of his pent up feelings. The demon/ beast thing looked at him, and an amused twinkle appeared in his eyes, or at least Percy thought it was amusement. It was hard to tell.

“Impressive,” the beast mocked. “My turn.”

The roar that followed shook the entire building and left Percy with a ringing in his ears he thought would never stop. Pain radiated through his head, and all resolve in him dwindled to dust. The room began to swim in front of his eyes, and Percy sank to his knees, his hands instinctively clutching his head, as the sound ran circles through his mind. The pressure was building, and an obscure thought ran through Percy’s head. His chipmunk muttered something in the recesses of his mind that it felt like their head was going to implode or explode, whatever came first.

But then the noise stopped. And the beast chuckled. Yep, he bloody laughed,

before grabbing Gerard's body and was gone. The words, "See you soon," hovered the air around Percy as he slumped to the ground and wrapped his arm around his slim frame, praying to whoever would listen that everything that had just happened was all just a bad dream.

Benjamin was at his side in an instant, gently encouraging him to open his eyes and get off the floor. When the gentle approach didn't work, Benjamin shook him, "Percy, for fucks sake, open your eyes," he shouted.

Percy wanted to, he was desperately trying to. But a part of him wondered, if he just kept them closed, maybe the world would all go back to normal. Maybe the cold disgusting floor beneath him would transform into his soft nest of a bed back at home.

Hmm, bed would be lovely. All cozy and soft and warm.

"Quit playing, Percy. It's time to face the real world."

Dammit, Penn could read him like a book. The desire to check on everyone finally outweighed his desire to pretend none of what he'd just seen had actually happened. Percy forced his eyes to flutter open.

Benjamin was on one side and Skye was on the other. As Percy's eyes took in the room, he could see Penn and Piper close by, sitting on the floor with expressions of pure terror plastered to their pale faces, and Poppy and Parker were sitting at the bar, both with a stiff drink in their hands.

All twelve eyes trained on his face, looking as if they were waiting for him to speak. Not wanting to disappoint, Percy pulled his face into a smile, the best he could anyway, and in his most excellent impression of a sane, well put together person, he made some lame attempt at humor. "Well, this place deserves a 1-star review on Yelp."

Benjamin was the first to roll his eyes. "So, I take it you're okay?"

"As okay as a chipmunk who's seen more demons in one shift than in their lifetime," Percy quipped. "But man, oh, man, am I starving."

Skye shuffled closer, waving her hands over his body, all the while watching his face intently. She quirked her head from side to side, and just when Percy was beginning to think she'd gone mad, she stopped. "I don't think anything is broken, there's no sign of any internal injuries either, so you should be

physically okay.”

“Physically, okay?”

“Well, yeah, none of us are exactly coping with the whole, our boss is friends or working with a demon beast thing, that just stole him and took him god knows where...”

“And then there’s the promise of ‘see you soon,’ to think about as well,” added Benjamin.

“Okay, cool. So shall we close up and get some food?”

Skye and Benjamin groaned. “We’re seriously not gonna talk about this?” Benjamin grumbled.

“Later? Please?”

“I’ll be here at four,” Skye said, getting to her feet. She said her goodbyes and headed for home, or wherever she went when she wasn’t at work.

Benjamin stood and then helped Percy to his feet. “I’ll come at four, too,” he said, his voice all rumbly with worry.

“Thank you. For everything, especially the whole saving my life thing. I owe you.”

“You owe me nothing, Percy. Just try and stay out of mischief before this afternoon.”

Percy pulled out his phone, gob smacked to see it was eight in the morning. Where the heck had the time gone? He’d been out for seven, almost eight hours. *What the actual...*

Percy walked over to Penn and Piper and pulled them up onto their feet. He wrapped them both in huge hugs and the three of them stood and soaked in the plain and simple act that they were still alive. Parker and Poppy had forfeited their drinks and joined them. The five of them stayed like that, not needing words, just happy to be together.

It was the grumbling of Percy’s stomach that finally pulled them all apart. “I have work at the diner at ten,” Parker said with a groan. “Can we go there for food?”

“I’m sure demon attack comes under reasonable reasons to call in sick,”

chuckled Piper.

“Nah, they’re short and the distraction will do me some good. I’m not sure I’d sleep even if I did head home.”

There was a rumbling of agreement from them all. Percy could only hope that some warm food and strong coffee would be enough to make them feel a bit more okay. He hoped.

Chapter Nine

Zese

Zese had hauled ass and made up his time on the road. Once he'd made it to Elk City, he'd stopped at the truck stop just out of town and was greeted with a welcoming smile by Lorna. The kind-hearted middle-aged woman always had her hair pulled back in a messy bun, but everything about the diner was clean and well put together.

Despite it being so late when he rolled in, she still fixed him a meal fit for a king - steak, eggs, and all the trimmings. After he'd devoured that and taken the time for a quick shower and pitstop in the bathroom facilities, Zese had collapsed into his sleeping quarters, on edge but pleased that despite all the distractions of yesterday, he was one step closer to Virginia Beach.

It would have been around one in the morning when he awoke with a sick feeling in his gut. "Something's wrong, something is very, very wrong," Zese muttered, scrambling out of his bed and into his seat. He roared the truck engine to life and was twiddling the knobs on his stereo. Nothing, not a single sound, aside from static greeted Zese's ears.

I need to find my mate, and having to stick to this infernal schedule is doing my head in.

Easy, we'll get there, his demon urged.

Now wouldn't be soon enough, Zese groaned. *I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong.*

He growled slightly, gave the console a punch, and then grumbled some more as the plastic casing crumpled like dust. "Dammit! Can't I catch a damn break!"

Grab your phone and put on one of your podcasts.

Zese nodded numbly. That's what he'd been trying to do on the radio - listen to something, anything really which would help soothe him. Since learning his mate was more than likely in Virginia Beach and being unable to get to him quick enough because of stupid things like Lucifer's instructions and maximum driving time laws - the situation was causing Zese's mood to be more fractured than usual.

He foraged in the center console looking for his phone when a body appeared in the passenger seat. Zese's reflexes sent his phone flying at the person who suddenly occupied his cab. Lucky for him, Lucifer caught it in one hand and shook it at the broken radio. "Looks like you have more than enough broken things to contend with," Lucifer chuckled, handing him back his phone.

"Lucifer," Zese looked around, a little confused. "Apologies, I was asleep and then..."

"I owe you an apology for the rude awakening. What time can you get back on the road?"

"Ahh, about four hours' time... Why? What's wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong, as such, but there has been a development."

"Is the chipmunk okay?"

"My sources did not indicate anyone was harmed."

"Well, thank the gods for that," Zese let out a breath.

"However, our friend, the one I asked you to bring home for me, has changed his plans and taken a rather unfortunate excuse for a hostage." Lucifer paused, seemingly looking for some kind of reaction from Zese. But his demon was calm, well calm for him, so he felt no need to respond.

Lucifer went on, "I don't usually bother myself with such mundane things, and while his absence from his earthly duties won't really be missed by anyone, and despite the fact, he will come and visit me when his days are up, he has in his possession a rather important artifact that I need found and returned. It appears time is of the essence."

"Okay. So does that take precedence over bringing Zephany back to you?"

"Seeing as it was Zephany that took the man who has the artifact, I was thinking more of a two birds one stone situation."

"Hmm, mmm, and you want me to do what? Translocate with the truck?"

"As much as I love the idea of seeing that happen. I think you can make the travel the old-fashioned way." Lucifer's gaze was filled with childlike wonder, as if he was imagining the whole truck being translocated in a heartbeat, he was patting his hands on his legs, but his eyes stayed fixed on

Zese.

“I’m both relieved and slightly disappointed in your answer,” Zese said with a chuckle.

“Look, Zese, about earlier in my office...”

“Forget about it, I was caught up with the scent and...”

“That’s precisely the reason for my apology. I never meant for it to sound like anything was more important than your mate. There is nothing in any realm that takes precedence over a fated one.”

Zese nodded. “I know in your own way you were just trying to keep me focused. I can guess that my mate is in Virginia Beach. Both you and Carmichael are both sending me there. That the Fates are finally weaving the threads so our paths may finally cross.”

Lucifer smiled. “Good, I’m glad you can see it that way.”

“This Zephany character...”

“Yes, of course.” Lucifer clicked up the book that had been in his hand earlier. “We got side-tracked didn’t we.” Lucifer flicked through the pages until he found what he was looking for.

“He’s worlds apart from any of the other demons you’ve sent me to retrieve before now,” Zese mumbled.

“Do you doubt yourself?”

“Well, no. It just feels different than before.”

“You are not wrong on that account. But remember, Zephany was a threat once before and was thwarted. I have no doubt we can contain him again.”

“How do we do that?”

“Well, last time it was done with the power of three,” Lucifer said vaguely as he scrolled down the page, his eyes skimming the words with the lightning speed of a well-read god.

“Ahh, yes, the elusive magical power of the number three. I’ve never truly understood how it works,” Zese muttered to himself.

Lucifer closed the book and placed it back on his desk, looking thoughtful for

a moment. “The trinity, so to speak, holds its power thanks to perfect balance. If we can find some triplets lying around, preferably ones with a tie to Zephany, even a loose one, that would be delightful.” Lucifer was tapping his fingers on his knee, not something Zese saw him do very often.

“I’ll add that to my list of things to find on my way to Virginia Beach. But for now, do you think you can tell me about Zephany?”

“As with most creatures, no one truly knows how he came to be,” Lucifer said, waving his hand in dismissal.

“There must be something you can tell me. Anything.”

“All I know is that the last time I ran into him, he had delusions of grandeur about taking my place in the Underworld. He had the audacity to accuse me of losing my touch.”

Zese tried to suppress a snigger, not because he thought in any way Lucifer had lost his touch, but because he could imagine how that little scene would have played out.

“What he failed to understand was how loyal my demons can be.”

“No question of that, Sire, you’ve never done anything for us to question your dedication to your realm.”

“Thank you, Zese. Sadly, every now and then someone needs to be reminded of that. He almost got me, too... if it hadn’t been for three delightful demon children.”

“Children? How powerful can he be if he was taken down by children?”

“It’s not the size of the body, Zese, but the willingness to be a conduit to powers greater than our own.”

Images flashed through Zese’s mind, and his imagination ran wild, thinking of the different ways those poor children may have suffered as conduits of fate. Almost as if he could read his thoughts, and Zese had no reason to believe he couldn’t, Lucifer smiled.

“No harm came to them, Zese. I may want to hold onto my realm for as long as I can, but I’d never let children suffer at my expense. A conduit simply acts as a vessel, a holding bay, so to speak. Three was how the world came

into being, and it was three that saved us from Zephany's tyranny that day. I can't help but wonder through, what set him loose again..."

While Lucifer was muttering about intent and the calamities that were going to befall the wayward demon once he had been tracked down again, Zese found his eyes drawn to the book that Lucifer had set down on the dashboard, approaching it with curiosity, "Do you mind?" Zese asked before he let his hand touch the leather cover.

"No, no, go right ahead," Lucifer mumbled before carrying on with his private rant.

As Zese flicked through the pages, he took a sharp inhalation of breath, the book was full of monsters, of legends. Tales told around campfires to remind younger demons that there was always something out there, bigger, and scarier than them. He flicked faster, not wanting to linger over the tormentors he'd grown up hearing about. He instead focused on finding the page he was looking for.

Zephany, he read, feeling his demon shudder under his skin. When the angels were cast out of the great creator's realm, well before time began, some chose to follow the great outcast's son. Some had the intention to follow others to the world below to act as guardians to those souls who would otherwise be lost to the darkness. Still others had ill intent before they fell. Zephany lurked in the shadows of the light, looking for any opportunity to forge his escape. The angels sang the day he fell, willingly, to plot and ply and become for a different realm, with all hopes in a different time. He always felt himself destined for things greater than his station in life. His arrogance was always high, and he was known for being quite tactful in gaining supporters.

Zese looked up. "So he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants?"

"I fear it's become his life's mission to overthrow me, and if he escaped from the depths of where he was cast, he must have had help."

Zese nodded. "Well, best we catch him before he tries to bring his radical ideas of change down here."

Lucifer sighed. "Indeed, my friend, indeed. We do not need a repeat of last time. It was a blood bath."

Chapter Ten

Percy

Percy had eaten, or at least nibbled at his meal. It turned out that despite being starving beyond words, as soon as he put something in his mouth, it tasted of ash and something gross and metallic that Percy did not enjoy. Instead, he drank at least three cups of coffee, before he excused himself to use the bathroom. He was wiped out even though he'd been in some form of unconscious state for only the gods knew how many hours.

Passing through the small crowds of people, Percy didn't see any of them. Since Parker had started working in the diner the year before, Percy had become a local as such and "Little John's Truck Palace" was a building he knew well. Which was just as well, as it was cellular memory that carried his body to the bathroom.

Percy checked every stall, still jumpy for obvious reasons. Though he had to chuckle at the stupidity of making sure there were no people in the toilets when the creature that had taken Gerard could pop up out of nowhere without so much as a noise to give him away.

Poor Gerard. Sure he was a creep, and clearly, he'd been driven mad thanks to some devil jewelry or something similar. But Percy wasn't a malicious soul, and he shuddered to think about what lengths the creature would go to in order for Gerard to do his bidding.

Driven by madness. In hindsight, Percy realized he had spotted the change a few months ago. Fueled by greed, he doubted Gerard would give up anything that appeared to be so damned valuable without a fight.

After taking care of the essentials, Percy stood in front of the mirror to wash his hands and splash some water on his face. He looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge backward and then run over by a truck for good measure. The strange looks he got from the waitress suddenly made a lot more sense. Percy chuckled. *And you thought you had 'I've seen a demon' on a flashing neon sign above your head.*

Grabbing some paper towels, Percy soaked them in the warm water he'd had running over his hands a moment before, and he proceeded to carefully and slowly wash away the layers of grime and smeared makeup that marred his

face.

Satisfied that he was done, he cast one last look at his reflection, and quickly swallowed a scream when he saw what looked back at him. He rubbed his eyes and swiped at the mirror, hoping and praying it was some sick twisted response to all the stress the last day and night had brought along with it. And despite the fact that what he could see with his eyes didn't match what he could feel in his hands, he stared in horror at his own reflection, distorted, and changed, and taunting him.

He looked like a demon himself, with red glowing eyes that close up looked like they were flickering with real live flames. His mouth and teeth had been transformed into gruesome elongated teeth that jutted out at odd angles. His hand flew to his mouth, *I'd be able to feel it, right*, he reassured himself. His mouth, to the touch, felt the same as it had when he washed his face. Definitely no fangs.

Percy was beside himself. It was a trick. A stupid dumb cruel trick that highlighted one harsh truth he couldn't fight. That creature, whatever or whoever he was - Zephany was that what Gerard called him - was clearly trying to torment him, transforming his pretty pintsized chipmunk face into a living, breathing monster. At least when Percy looked at himself, that's what he saw.

His chipmunk was unusually quiet. Percy knew he should be worried. But he had enough on his plate as it was without having to worry about anything else. Percy was fighting with himself. He didn't want to give the creature the satisfaction of knowing his tricks were succeeding, but at the same, Percy was terrified, *and it's justified, damn it*.

A dark whisper of a cloud seemed to cling to Percy's skin, waves of heat crashed over him, and the smell of sulfur filled his nostrils. He spun in circles, his eyes wild, and his heart beating a million miles per second, whereas not five minutes before, he could barely move he'd been so tired.

"What the actual fuck?" Percy whispered to himself. *I have to get out of here*. Continuing to curse his miserable luck, he quickly plotted his exit strategy, pissed off when he remembered that his lovely yellow Honda Civic was still at the bar.

But I do have my phone, so that's something. The only question is, who do I

call? Who can I trust?

Two names sprang to mind, but Percy only needed one. He quickly weighed up his options as he retreated from the restrooms, knowing his family would be along to check on him any minute. With his head popped out of the doorway, he looked left and right. Choosing the path he hoped had the least chance of being stopped and questioned, he swung left and walked through the kitchen, his head held high, looking as if he belonged there. No one stopped him and he was able to duck out of the back door, finally finding himself in the fresh air of the morning.

With the cool air helping to calm him, Percy called Benjamin. The bear shifter only lived down the road and was more than happy to come and pick him up and take him back to his car. Percy managed a weak smile as the familiar red pickup truck pulled up around the side of the building as Percy had asked. Benjamin didn't pepper him with annoying questions, he just drove back to Luminosity as soon as Percy had climbed in and done up his seatbelt.

"Thanks, Ben," Percy mumbled as he got out of the car.

"See you at four, Perc." And with that, Benjamin was gone, his truck rumbling out of sight and around the corner before Percy even tried to move.

He had to go back inside the club. He'd left his bag in there and he was too responsible to leave the bar unlocked. Mustering the last remaining shreds of sanity and courage he had left, Percy squared his shoulders, gave his hair a quick toss for good measure, and stalked into the building.

The usually inviting warm space felt cold and dark. Percy dashed behind the bar, his bravery waning at lightning speed and he grabbed for his bag and then rushed out as quickly as he could.

What if Gerard never came back? What would happen to Percy's home away from home? What if the demon decided they all needed to die? What was all this about in the first place? Too many questions and not nearly enough brainpower for Percy to even begin to unravel the growing mysteries. Percy locked the front door, the reflection of his glowing red eyes flickering in the tinted glass of the front door.

Percy shuddered. The only person he wanted to see was his Grandmother,

more affectionately known as Babushka. A tribute to their Siberian forefathers, who generations and generations ago, made the long haul from their homeland to the Americas, where they had stayed and made their home.

Aside from the name she had insisted they call her from the moment they could speak, Babushka was not traditional in any other sense of the word. But she was kind, wise, and never minced her words. Percy needed a touch of that to help bring him back down to earth. He feared he'd lose his mind before the creature could even harm a hair on his head.

My head, maybe that's it. Maybe I've just hit my head too many times in short succession... Maybe I have some minor brain damage, and I'm not being tormented by a demon at all... yes that could be feasible.

Oddly relaxed by the idea, Percy trotted back to his car, this time off to see someone he knew would make him smile.

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“Percy, Percy, Percy. You look like death on legs you poor child, come here. Come give Babushka a hug.” Percy was used to being greeted before he even entered the room, but how she knew he looked so bad before she'd even laid eyes on him would remain one of the many mysteries that was Percy's grandmother.

As soon as he laid eyes on her, he felt his body begin to relax. Her current ensemble consisted of neon green tights with a pink and grey striped cardigan hanging over a black flowing lacy top. Her ever present fluffy black boots graced their usual spot. Her hair, which had previously been a faded muted pink was now a vivid blue, that made her eyes sparkle with more mischief than usual.

Her sparkling eyes, softened as she looked him over, “Tell me. Tell Babushka what monster needs to be slain.”

“How did you-”

“Bah, always with the how and the why. This is not the time for more questions, your head swirls with too many already. Sit,” she commanded.

Percy sat. She bustled about, first grabbing a few blankets, and tucking him in tight. Then she went scuffling through drawer after drawer until she found

an old tin of sweets which she promptly opened, telling Percy to “open wide,” as she dropped two on his tongue. Sweet and spicy all at once. Percy felt better the second they started to melt in his mouth.

Lastly, she perused her bookshelf. She only had one small shelf, but she had a book for every occasion, and clearly, she was on fire because she didn’t even know what was troubling him yet, and she was looking for the answers.

“Pish-Posh Percy, of course, I know what’s wrong with you.”

Percy chuckled quietly.

“Demons, or more accurately, the monster who has his eyes set on you is no laughing matter.”

Percy froze in his seat.

“Tut tut, no time for how and why, remember. We have work to do.”

Percy watched her curiously as she went and fetched a small step ladder. Once she had wobbled her way to the top of the fourth step, she started patting her hand along the dusty lip of the shelf. From where Percy was sitting there was nothing up there, but he’d already been told off twice in a matter of minutes about asking questions, so he focused instead on the flavors that were swirling around in his mouth.

He had identified what he thought was caramel, chili, and cardamon, when he heard a happy “aha,” as she jumped from the top step, landing with barely a whisper of noise. There was a big old book covered in dust in her hands and a triumphant grin on her face.

“Now,” she said, snuggling into the armchair, her chair, the only place Percy had ever seen her sit. She was directly opposite him, and her eyes darkened slightly. “Tell me about your monster, Percy. Don’t leave anything out. Not a smell. Not a syllable.”

Percy nodded and filled her in on recent events starting with Gerard’s gross creepy offer right up until his demon reflection in the diner’s mirror. Not once did she interrupt, which was odd for her. Her eyes remained fixed on his face, and she encouraged him with nods and hmm mmm’s and nothing else until he said, “And then I knew I needed to come here. I didn’t know where else to go.”

“You did the right thing, my sweet Percy.”

All of his efforts, all of the stress, all of the worry had all coagulated in his cells. Wrapped up warm, in his Babushka’s scent, in a comfy chair he’d sat in a hundred times before, and with the sweet spicy lozenges finally fully melted on his tongue and his story told, Percy was bone tired – could not do anything else bone tired. He fought against the feeling, blinking rapidly, willing his eyes to stay open. Babushka looked at him and smiled. “It’s okay, Percy, you sleep. I will wake you when it’s time.”

Chapter Eleven

Zese

Zese's day on the road had been a blur. As soon as the clock struck five in the morning he was on the road. He did the roads from Elk City to Knoxville in a little over fourteen hours, he ignored the CB radio as Rigmus hassled him to make stops. He would ask for forgiveness later.

As much as it pained him, knowing he was only an eight-hour drive away from Virginia Beach, when Zese was forced to stop for the night, he knew he could be forgiven for not taking breaks while on the road, but if he drove any more than fourteen hours the truck would simply stop. So he had no choice but to obey that particular law. Though for the chipmunk who smelled of Cherries, he was sorely tempted to get as far as he could before anyone realized he was over his hours.

Eat, sleep, shower, and drive. Zese barely had time to think about where he was or what he was doing. His sole focus – getting to Virginia Beach. He'd put little to no thought into how he would track his mate down once he finally arrived. But he was resourceful, and the Fates hadn't steered him wrong yet. Well, aside from the twenty-six year wait, that is.

Turning off at Charlottesville, veering through Richmond and then finally at Norfolk, Zese knew he was closer than ever before. With a little over eighteen miles to go, Zese would be in Virginia Beach in the next twenty minutes. His head and his heart, not to mention his impatient demon, could not wait.

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The pokey overpriced diner he'd had a bacon and egg sandwich with an endless cup of coffee to wash it all down with had been replaced with a huge truck stop Zese had never seen before. The massively oversized sign read "Little John's Truck Palace." And a tingle of recognition washed over him, that and the decadent scents of waffles and syrup filled his nose. "Lucifer," he grumbled.

Jumping out of the truck, he headed inside. A truck diner was a great place to get the lay of the land and the types of people Zese could hope to meet in the area. Plus, it was somewhere new for Zese to add to his growing map of

diners. Zese was a bottomless pit when it came to breakfast foods – hell, all foods, if he was honest. His appetite was huge. It had been since he'd come to earth.

“What can I get ya, honey?” A buxom waitress asked before he even sat down. She eyed him hungrily, her eyes raking up and down his body, and her tongue kept running over her bottom lip. She wore a pale pink lip gloss that washed out her skin pallor, a few too many buttons sat undone, no doubt that was how she added to her tip collection and her skirt had been hemmed just a smidge too short for anyone halfway decent. But her eyes were kind, and being a demon, Zese could appreciate all the various urges humans had to contend with.

When Zese didn't answer her straight away she grabbed his bicep and steered him to a booth in the corner. “You're new,” she purred. “I've met most local truckers and you, honey, are not one of 'em. I'd remember you.”

“Just passing through,” Zese mumbled. It was better than the grunt he wanted to give as a reply. More human, more polite. He took his seat and glanced at the menu briefly. “Banana waffles, extra bacon, and coffee. Please,” he added and tried to muster her a small smile. It definitely didn't reach his eyes, but kindness was a choice, and it wasn't the waitress's fault that he'd hardly slept and was living on an edge he felt he'd been walking a lifetime by that point.

She flashed him a grin and sashayed away, leaving Zese to take in his surroundings more thoroughly. It was early, possibly not long after six or seven, so it was the typical morning crowd. Truckers with tired eyes pouring over overstuffed plates and slurping coffee. A few stragglers from the night before who hadn't made it home yet and needed the extra grease to help them survive the day. A few waifs and strays, drug dealers, gang bangers, and the infamous people who worked the streets at night. Every town had them.

As Zese's eyes scanned the room, his gaze fell to the table on the complete opposite side of the room to him - four young'uns sat huddled over their coffee cups, their conversation a deep flurry of words. But there was something about them that caught his attention. He could, of course, listen in from where he was, but he wanted a closer look. The booth behind them was empty, and it had a view of sorts, okay so saying it had a view was a stretch. But either way, if he was asked why he moved it'd do as a passable excuse.

Without a second thought Zese strolled across the room, it wasn't a huge space, so it didn't take long. He could feel curious eyes watching him as his legs ate up the short distance.

It was the scent that hit him first... "Oh, sugar, didn't you like where I sat you?" The busty blond was back, with a steaming mug of coffee. Zese hid a smirk and rumbled up a "thanks," as she set the coffee down in front of him.

"Your food won't be too far away, sugar." As she swished herself away, she took the overbearing smell of her cheap perfume away with her and Zese could go back to hunting. Or being nosey. Regardless, Zese's demon was stirring in the back of his mind.

Confident that the source of the smell from Lucifer's office had been the room and recently, very, very recently, made the demon within purr gently. Zese licked his lips and imagined pushing the mystery person up against a wall and tasting every inch of them. Zese readjusted his pants. *Focus*. He had to find where the scent had disappeared to. But he couldn't help but listen to the intense chatter close by. Their scents were close to the one he was seeking. Maybe they were family? Maybe they would know where the one he was searching for was now?

Zese narrowed his gaze on the party of four - two men, and two women. More interesting than that was the empty space where a fifth person had been sitting, their meal mostly untouched and their cup decidedly empty, just like their seat.

Those who remained seated were damn near drowning in a cesspool of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. He listened in for a while, picking up their names. Poppy, Parker, Penn, Piper, and someone named Percy, who was apparently the missing person. *Is he the man my demon is hellbent on finding?* Their conversation would have sounded half mad to anyone else, but Zese was oddly fascinated. Shady bosses, shadows, darkness, and memory loss? *Maybe I should pay closer attention to their words, not just their scents.*

"Your guess is as good as mine about what shit he's got himself caught up in, but you know Perc, he's sweet as pie, and there ain't no way he put himself or us in harm's way on purpose." Poppy may have spoken firmly, but the way her hand was tugging and twiddling in her brunette locks made Zese think she was more stressed about their issues than she was letting on. The slight

southern twang made Zese smile, he was a sucker for the people of the south.

“The only person to blame for any of this shitshow is Gerard.” Penn spoke with a deeper level of determination. “He’s always had his sights on our Percy, and last night just proved his creep levels are growing.”

The demon and Zese both took offense to this Gerard person immediately. The mere thought of someone creeping around Percy was offensive. Though Zese couldn’t be quite sure why.

“True,” Piper chipped in. “But why can’t we remember any of the details, and what isn’t Percy telling us?”

Parker was the last voice to speak up, he had a quieter pitch than the rest of them, but Zese made sure to hang on every word. “You guys are such idiots. Am I the only one who smelled the sulfur? Percy is protecting us. From what, I have no idea. But the way that creepoid boss of his just inserted himself into our little reunion like he had a right to be there, as if Percy and him were an item... Did none of you notice that the staff behind the bar all hovered and watched... Something else is going on there, and Percy is trying to handle it himself.”

“What the hell does smelling sulfur have to do with anything and where did Gerard go? He just vanished, and Perc was white as a ghost.”

The waitress, whose name tag read “Lucille,” was back with Zese’s meal. He gave a quick smile and quickly wished he hadn’t because the determined minx took it as an invitation and promptly sat down.

“You gonna tell me your name, sugar?” She purred, moving forward, and pushing her breasts out for even closer inspection. Zese had never been swayed by boobs. He just wanted to eavesdrop in peace. Those kids, chipmunk shifters, the lot of them were involved somehow, and the mysterious Percy was in trouble. *Is he the person my demon wants to find so badly?* His demon stirred, telling him he was on the right track at least.

Lucille tapped her long lime green fingernails on the table, waiting for him to answer. Rather than being rude, he simply said, “This looks great, thanks so much,” and started eating. He may or may not have shoveled the food in faster and in larger quantities than he usually would, and he may or may not have been chewing rather enthusiastically. But it served its purpose, and Zese

stifled a chuckle as Lucille flashed him a look of disgust and tucked her prize assets away before throwing one last snort in his direction and heading to the booth next to his.

“Parker, honey. Your shifts have been switched out.” Her voice had transformed back to her initial purr as she addressed the quietly spoken man he’d just been listening to.

“Thanks, Luc, I thought my shift started at ten, what's changed?”

“It’s strange actually, honey,” she said, twiddling with her pen in her hand as she spoke. “You’re not on this week at all. Are you going somewhere nice?”

Zese could taste the confusion as it rolled around the table, Zese had already heard them say they’d only come here this morning because Parker had a shift. But despite him clearly being caught off guard by the last minute change he rolled with it and replied, or more accurately lied smoothly. “Sadly, I’m not heading anywhere this time, Luc, just need to spend some time with my grandmother, you know how unwell she’s been.”

“Sure, sugar, sure. Just give me a shout if you want those cups refilled.” And with that, she sauntered, swished, swayed, and pranced her way back to the counter, very deliberately wiggling her ass even more than earlier.

“You didn’t tell us Grandma's sick, or that you were having a week off,” Poppy grumbled.

“She’s not sick, well, no sicker than usual, not when I saw her yesterday. She still fleeced me playing Texas Hold ‘em, and I asked for the week ‘cause I wanted to go see Dad, but my boss said no.” Parker sounded flustered.

“Shit just keeps getting weirder and weirder.”

There was more muttering and grumbling from around the table. “Well, if I don’t have work today, I may as well go and get some sleep.”

“You really think you can sleep,” Poppy asked, her voice thick with fear and worry, and if Zese was reading her right, she was borderline manic.

“Poppy, honey.”

“Don’t patronize her, Penn,” Parker grumbled.

“Come on, guys, we have to stick together,” Piper said. Zese could hear how

hard she was working to keep her voice calm. Those kids were well and truly spooked, but where was the mysterious Percy?

“Typical Piper, always the one trying to smooth things over. Are you gonna ask the devil himself to play nice if he comes back?”

That sparked Zese’s interest. He was sure he’d heard Parker mention smelling sulfur, but to be fair, it wasn’t an uncommon smell in Zese’s world, and with everything else clouding his usually impeccable instincts he’d missed the relevance. His mind started to piece together the snippets he had gleaned. He stuffed another mouthful of banana waffles in his mouth, they were bloody good.

“You don’t really think the devil himself would pop on into Luminosity, and take Gerard of all people?” Poppy was talking in a hushed voice now, but Zese had no trouble hearing her.

“Maybe not the devil, but a devil,” Penn replied, a tone of smugness dripping from his words.

“Ahh, it’s not a family breakfast without Pompous Penn making an appearance,” Parker teased.

Penn harrumphed but didn’t let the slight stop him from carrying on, Zese could feel the thoughts rolling through his head. And he had plenty to share with the class.

Zese half listened, half ate, half wondered what Percy looked like... Listening to Penn drone on about demons and devils from a very boring and very inaccurate, but a pretty typical human perspective. He chuckled to himself, *you’d think shifters would be better educated about the paranormal world*. They used to be, but these days... He was mid thought when another dropped into his head, this one slicing through his consciousness like a hot knife through butter... Triplets, and twins... triplets and twins, there was a prophecy... surely not...

Parker stood up, “As much as I’d love to sit here all day and listen to another riveting lecture on hell, demons, and anything else you can dream up from your dusty books, Percy’s been in the bathroom for like twenty minutes now. I’m gonna go check if he’s okay.”

He’s here? He’s here, and we didn’t notice?

His demon stirred, agitated by the accusation. *He's not here...*

Zese couldn't stop himself. He got up and followed after the person the others called Penn, his small slight build moved quickly through the now quite busy tables and booths. His dark hair bounced long on top of his head, secured in a bun that looked like it had been there all night and had not been readjusted. Lean arms were mostly bare, and a well-defined back was accentuated by a shirt at least one size too small. Penn's black jeans clung to his almost nonexistent ass. He wasn't ugly, but he wasn't who Zese was looking for.

Zese waited a full ten seconds outside the bathroom door. The chipmunks were clearly rattled and Zese didn't want to spook them. He'd only just pushed open the door when he heard Penn shout. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. Where the hell are you, Perc?" As Zese stepped into the doorway, Penn slammed into him, clearly in a hurry to get back to his family.

His hands clung to Zese's shirt for a second as he tried to catch his balance. He then brushed his hands down Zese's shirt, as if wiping away his touch, "I'm... I'm so sorry, my cousin, he..."

Penn pushed past him, and Zese got to work. He inhaled deeply, and there in amongst all manner of unspeakable smells was a hint of cherry blossom, and something so delicious, it made Zese's mouth water, the scent he assumed belonged to the elusive Percy. In the sink was a wad of wet paper towels smeared in makeup and grime.

He'd definitely been in here, but questions flowed thick and fast. *What's got these chipmunks so spooked? Why did he leave without saying goodbye? But most importantly, where the hell has he gone now?*

The demon came forward in full force this time, Zese could feel him lurking beneath his skin itching to be closer to the scent.

Enough playing around, let's find him.

Zese couldn't agree more, something about this chipmunk called to him and his demon in the worst way, and in his heart of hearts, he knew the only way to get to the bottom of any mystery was to face it head on.

The hunt was on, and this time Zese wasn't going to be stopped by anybody.

Chapter Twelve

Percy

Percy woke up groggy and disoriented, he found himself wrapped in a thick fluffy blanket that looked like a rainbow had thrown up on it, he snuggled it closer and smiled as his Babushka's scent wrapped around him, hugging him tightly.

"Ahh, there's my little ray of sunshine. How are you feeling?" Percy looked up to see Babushka's plump frame squished into an armchair sideways, so her legs flopped over the arm, his hands busy crocheting something as fluffy as the blanket he was wrapped in and a fresh plunger of coffee sitting on the table steaming between them.

He sat up and gingerly stretched out his body. "A little sore, a little dry, but otherwise okay," Percy mumbled, but he managed to summon a smile for his precious Babushka.

"You may want to check your phone, I ended up turning it off. It was ringing off the hook, and I didn't want to impede on your privacy or have you woken up."

"Shit. What's the time?"

"No clue, sweet pea, no need to know such trivial things at my age."

Percy let out a soft chuckle - which came out as more of a grumbled moan - reminding himself he needed something to soothe his throat. Without missing a beat, as she rarely did, Babushka pushed herself up out of the chair humming to herself and returned mere moments later with a tall glass of cold water. Thrusting it into Percy's hand, she grinned. "You're gonna need to be your best today, young man."

Percy wanted to question her, to understand why. There was a clipped importance to her tone that sent off a silent alarm in his mind. He checked in with his chipmunk, who seemed content enough. That in itself should have been odd, but Babushka had always put them both at ease.

He cast his eyes over her now as he sipped on the water. It was just the balm his dry mouth needed, and he soon found his sips had turned to gulps, and the cup was empty, leaving Percy feeling fresher than ever.

Babushka now had her nose tucked into the old book Percy had never seen before, and he had an insane urge to jump up and snatch it from her hands.

Jeez, what's gotten into me? One cup of water and I wanna pry dusty books from my favorite person. He could feel his chipmunk shaking his head, and Percy could almost feel the accompanying eye roll, which prompted a small but delicate laugh to fall from his lips. This time the sound was stronger, firmer, and much more back to normal.

Percy reached for his lip gloss, and slathered his poor deprived lips before reaching to replace the water with coffee. As soon as his cup was full to the brim he reached for his phone.

Time to face reality, I guess.

Percy flicked off texts to Benjamin, Skye, and then Penn to let them all know he was sorry for bailing on them all, but he was fine, and he would meet them at four that afternoon, at the bar as promised. He still had a few hours to get his head on straight and find some answers to some very tricky questions.

He checked in with his chipmunk who, just like Percy, had an aversion to stress and fear. Now Percy knew all of his people were okay, he was able to settle back with his second cup of coffee and read the book Babushka had left on the table.

About ten minutes before she'd perched a kiss on his head, "I'm off to get my hair fixed, sweetie. Stay as long as you need, and be sure to eat something."

"Trinities and triplets, prophecies and dark magic? This is all well over my head," Percy mumbled to himself, scratching absently at his head.

He stood up to stretch his legs and as he walked around the space, his chipmunk jumped to full attention in his mind, a strange tingle ran through him head to toe and his eyes were drawn to the hallway.

Something's wrong, very, very wrong.

"Hello," he called out, sounding braver than he felt.

The most handsome man he had ever seen stood in the doorway, he looked frozen in time, standing like a statue with his eyes burning a hole right into Percy's soul.

He was even taller than Gerard, if that was even possible, with muscles as far as the eye could see. His rugged dark hair fell in disarray around his chiseled square face and if Percy didn't know any better, he was sure he saw a flicker of flames burn through his eyes. They were as dark as black coffee, but there was a kindness, a longing, a lust that made them sparkle.

Out of instinct more than anything Percy inhaled deeply, his chipmunk who'd been remarkably quiet, was chittering madly in his mind, jumping and leaping, not out of fear but unbridled excitement. The scent that hit his nose made heat creep from his toes to his ears as it swallowed him whole.

Lemon and cinnamon and something earthly and masculine hit his nose and made his dick twitch in excitement.

"It's you," the deep gravelly voice mumbled. "Finally, after all these years. I've finally found you."

"Me?" Percy managed to squeak. "I'm nobody special."

The man moved towards him faster than Percy had anticipated, and he was holding Percy's shoulder in his huge warm hands in the blink of an eye.

"You are everything. You are the reason the sun rises every morning. You are the reason the tides come and go, and you are the most beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes on."

"Wow," Percy replied, feeling his cheeks turn crimson.

"You smell like cherry blossoms and freshly cut grass," the man mumbled, sniffing him from chin to ear and making Percy feel like he was going to combust into flames. All Percy could think about was kissing those lips that were saying such sweet things.

"You smell pretty good yourself," Percy managed to say around the lump that had taken hold of his throat. "But who are you?"

"Where are my manners, my apologies. I am Zese, demon of the Underworld, truck driver, and avid cook. And who, my gorgeous little snack, are you?"

Percy swore his eyes were as big as saucers as he took in the words this man, Zese, had spoken.

"You're... you're... you're a demon?"

“No need to be scared. I would never hurt you, you are mine.”

“I’m what now?”

“My mate, of course. Surely you can feel it, too?”

Percy couldn’t deny the man made him feel things no one ever had before, his scent made it hard to think, and all Percy wanted him to do was to take those big warm hands and put them all over his body, put those sweet pouty lips around his cock while Percy ran his hands through that luscious looking hair and...

“Hang on, do you know the demon who stole my boss?”

Zese blinked a few times and shook his head, almost as if he’d been indulging in some fantasy of his own.

“Do you think you could tell me your name?” Zese asked instead.

Percy dropped his gaze, but Zese clearly needed to see him and with a tenderness Percy had never experienced before he used one singular finger to raise Percy’s chin up so he was looking into those pools of black coffee again. There were definitely flames flickering in them now.

“I can see how scared you are, but I promise you I will stand between you and danger at every turn from this day until I take my last breath.”

“You’re super intense, aren’t you,” Percy said with a chuckle. “We just met.”

“I meant it when I said I’ve been searching for you for years – twenty-six years, in fact, and now I have you in my arms I will never let you go again.”

“I turned twenty-six yesterday,” Percy squeaked.

Some sort of recognition or maybe it was a realization flashed across Zese’s face. “And I celebrated twenty-six years earthside yesterday. The Fates are a fickle mistress,” he chuckled. “But I have you now.”

“Percy. My name is Percy.”

“So they must have been your family I saw at the diner,” Zese replied looking amused. “Excellent.”

“You didn’t hurt my family did you?”

“Oh, sweet Percy.”

By the gods how he loved the way Zese almost purred his name.

“I would never hurt you, or anyone close to you. Demons are not monsters.”

“The one who’s been stalking me and has stolen my boss is a monster.”

“Zephany,” Zese growled.

“That’s him.”

“He’s an exception to the rules, they are common amongst all species, and demons are not exempt.”

Percy nodded, looking up at Zese through his long lashes. “So what do we do now?”

“What would you like to do?” Zese asked quietly, running his hand up and down Percy’s arm with one delightfully manly finger.

“I can think of a few things,” Percy confessed. “But I’d rather not do any of them here in my Babushka’s suite,” he said with a smirk.

“I’ll take you anywhere. All you have to do is ask?”

“You’re something else, Zese. You know that right?”

“We have much to learn about each other Percy, but I’ll agree with you on one point. You’ll never find another like me.”

Chapter Thirteen

Zese

Zese's demon was so close to the surface he was concerned his fangs, horns and claws might burst free any second. But his demon was no fool and he could sense Percy's hesitation and fear.

We finally found him.

Mine, his demon purred. So pretty, so perfect, so delicate, and... he took a deep sniff, he smells so delicious.

Down boy, we can't just jump his bones.

Why on earth not, he is ours. Mine. I must have him.

Yeah, yeah. I'm with you there, but let's take things slow. The little chipmunk has had a rough few days.

I'll rip Zephany's flesh from his bones for scaring our mate.

"I wanna rip your clothes off," Percy confessed. That sweet blush had grown from a dusky pink to a deep crimson the longer they'd stood staring at each other.

Zese could feel Percy leaning into the touch he was delivering up and down his arm and the small goosebumps that had risen to the surface. Zese couldn't mistake the smell of arousal, which was driving his poor demon to distraction.

But the man in his arms at last, his Percy, their mate, deserved their best of Zese, and the last thing he needed was to go full demon on him the first time they lay together.

As much as that would be fun, he reassured his demon.

"Shall we get out of here then?" Zese asked, unsure how long his resistance would last with his mate in such close proximity.

"I'm due at Luminosity at four o'clock," Percy said quietly.

"Tell your friends you won't make it," Zese almost purred in his ear. "Your place or my truck?"

“I live close,” Percy said with a giggle.

“By the gods, I hope it’s next door.”

Zese knew he was hanging by a thread, but being interrupted by Percy’s grandmother would not do.

Percy laughed his sweet laugh that was a pure tonic to Zese’s soul. All his travels, all the hours, days, weeks, months, years spent trolling the states looking for his mate, and here he was standing right in front of him.

“Before we go anywhere,” Zese said, feeling a little hesitant. “May I kiss you?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Percy replied, licking his lips.

Zese didn’t need any more permission than that, and as he dipped his head to capture his first taste of his mate, he felt as if his heart might erupt from in his chest.

As their lips touched, the kiss quickly deepened as Percy opened his lips giving Zese full access. Their tongues collided and dueled for control. Zese’s hand moved quickly to the back of Percy’s neck and as Percy’s hips melted into him, Zese couldn’t contain the moan that landed in Percy’s mouth.

By the gods, he is fucking perfect.

Zese lost all track of time as he devoured Percy. He wanted to taste all of him and hoped he was conveying that sentiment as he kissed and licked and nipped at Percy’s neck, jaw, and ears.

Percy gave as good as he got as his hands roved over Zese’s body, leaving tingles and heat everywhere he touched.

The sound of a throat clearing from behind them, forced them both back up for air. “I do hate to interrupt such a beautiful meeting. But maybe you’d be more comfortable with some privacy?” The old woman couldn’t have been more than five feet max, her hair looked freshly dyed in a neon purple color, which coupled with her golden eyes and chubby cheeks made her look more adorable than anything else.

“You must be Percy’s Babushka,” Zese replied, quickly pulling his body away from Percy’s despite the sweet pout he got for his efforts. “My

apologies for ravishing your grandson in your suite. I just..."

"Couldn't keep your hands off him," she finished for him, her eyes bright with mischief. "I was young once."

"I'm Zese," he said, extending his hand out in greeting.

"I don't think so, young man," she replied, pushing past his hand, and wrapping her arms around his waist. "You're family, that means you get hugs."

Zese was taken aback, he couldn't remember getting a hug in his life. Not once, not ever. It was... it was quite lovely. He awkwardly wrapped his beefy arm around her frame and gave her back small patting motions he was sure he'd seen on television, and she laughed high and loud.

"Not used to hugs?" She asked.

"That was my first?" Zese admitted, his eyes dropping in shame.

"I'm honored," she replied. "Now take your stink of sex out of here and Percy," she said, reaching for him. "You're the first in a long time to be blessed with a mate, and this one," her eyes roved over him, "is quite the catch."

"Thanks, Babushka. Sorry for-"

"Pish-posh, Percy. The Fates do that on purpose, giving you a little push in the right direction." She wagged her eyebrows at him. "Now, off you go to claim what's yours."

Zese felt heat rise on his cheeks, amongst other areas and she gave a huge laugh in response to his embarrassment. "Just don't forget to tell your friends you won't be making that four o'clock meeting. They'll worry. But I would still do it later today, if possible."

"Do you know something I don't?" Percy asked quietly.

"Always, dear one," Babushka replied. "The quicker your demon here has scoped out the bar, the better."

Percy nodded, pulling out his phone immediately and sending a few messages off. His fingers moved so fast that Zese could barely keep track. The more he watched his little firecracker the more he wanted to rip those

clothes off him.

When he was done with his phone Percy gave his Babushka a quick hug, grabbed Zese's hand and dragged him, yes dragged him out of the room without another word.

Zese felt a tug of uncertainty as he walked Percy towards the truck. "This is me," he said gesturing to the massive machine.

"Oh my gods. You drive this? It's fuckin brilliant! I've always wanted to ride in one of these. Oh, wait," he said looking at Zese with a delectable glint of mischief in his eyes. "Does this thing have a bed?"

"Sure does. It's for long hauls so it's kitted out for me to stay in when I need to."

"Excellent." Percy was positively glowing. "Let's find somewhere to park her up."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Damned right I am," Percy said with a grin. "Is that okay?"

Zese's demon was besotted. But then again, so was Zese. "You really were made just for me," he murmured, and then with his demon's speed and strength amplified by lust he had Percy fastened into the passenger seat and the truck running before his precious little mate could change his mind.

Percy was busy touching and looking at everything, his eyes wide. But Zese didn't miss the looks he kept throwing in his direction, either.

"I never thought I'd be blessed with a mate," Percy said quietly as they went in search of a secluded place to park.

"Neither did I, being a demon and all."

"A demon and a chipmunk. You couldn't make that up if you tried."

"I reckon the Fates have been planning this a while," Zese mumbled.

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, I was summoned to earth, the day you were born. I've been looking for you ever since."

"Wow," Percy gasped, his perfect glossy lips making the perfect O.

Zese grinned, but his mind was most definitely on the other things that adorable mouth could do. “Funny that I should stumble across you while you're in the midst of some interesting events.”

Percy laughed. “That’s one way to put it, I guess.”

“You wanna tell me what’s been going on? I picked up bits and pieces from the people at the truck stop diner - I’m guessing they’re your family? They had similar scents to you.”

“Yeah, I feel bad for leaving them, but I just had to get out of there, you know. Clear my head.” Percy’s face showed every emotion, and it broke Zese’s heart.

“You gotta look out for yourself from time to time, I’m sure they understand.”

“I hope so. It’s some pretty crazy shit I’ve dragged them into.”

Zese sat quietly watching the road ahead, already picturing the spot he planned on stopping, but they had about twenty minutes on the road, and he wanted to know everything he could about this adorable chipmunk.

His bright clothes and skintight pants were distracting, but then again, so was that delightful mouth. Zese shook off his sordid fantasies.

We have plenty of time for that.

Not soon enough, his demon grumbled.

“You wanna talk about it?” Zese cast him a sideways glance and tried to give what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Well, it all starts with Gerard, my boss from Luminosity.”

Luminosity? That’s where one of the sealed portals is.

“He’s always been a total creep, but at a distance, you know? Then suddenly he gets all fierce and pushy about things, he even asked me to marry him in exchange for the club. He knows how much I love that place.” Zese could feel Percy watching him cautiously from under those long lashes.

“You want me to kill him for you, or just rough him up a bit?”

Percy’s delightful laughter filled the cab of the truck, and Zese felt his cheeks

heat up again. “What? Did I say something funny?”

“You managed to ask me that while keeping a perfectly straight face, you may as well have been asking me what I want for dinner,” Percy replied, still smiling.

“Well, I don’t see the need to make a fuss. If anyone hurts you, I hurt them. It’s really very simple.”

“Oh! So you weren’t joking?”

“Not even a little,” Zese replied, watching carefully for signs he may have upset his mate. That was the last thing he wanted to do before they’d even truly started anything.

“That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me,” Percy said with a grin.

It was now Zese’s turn to laugh. “I’ll never get tired of telling you how perfect you are for me,” he said with a grin still stuck on his face. “We can come back to whether you want this Gerard asshole killed later if you like, but what’s been happening?”

Percy filled Zese in as best he could, about the voice and Gerard’s office and then the beast Zephany, and him taking Gerard away, the amulets - everything!

Zese hmm’d and ahh’d in all the right places, but mostly he let Percy vent and get the stress of the last twenty-four hours off his chest. He talked so fast at times, Zese was even more thankful than usual for his demon hearing.

When he looked about set to pass out from talking so much Percy finally stopped, took a deep breath, and then looked expectantly at Zese.

“Zephany’s a prize jerk with an inflated sense of his own importance, and this Gerard guy sounds like he deserves everything coming to him.” Zese had got the general gist of it all.

“But we can fix this, right? There must be some way to stop Zephany before he does anything truly stupid. What does he even want?”

“That’s the million-dollar question now, isn’t it,” Zese grumbled quietly. “At first, I thought this was just another assassination attempt on Lucifer with the

hopes of taking over the Underworld, but after listening to you, now I'm not so sure."

Zese flicked on the indicator of the truck and began to slow down enough so he could pull off.

"Are we almost at our destination?" Percy asked, sitting forward, and peering out the window with curiosity.

Zese was acutely aware of his senses becoming more heightened, the sound of Percy's heart quickening in his chest, the scent of arousal growing in the air around them. He had an insatiable urge to rip the poor man's clothes from his body and never let him get dressed again. Percy was perfect for him.

Chapter Fourteen

Percy

Percy felt lighter after venting to Zese. He hadn't felt the need to censor himself or hide his fear or worry. He wasn't sure if the fact that Zese was a demon and didn't laugh at him was part of the reason, or if it was because they were mates, or maybe because Percy was just so damned desperate to get it off his chest. But reason aside, he definitely felt better.

The second the truck began to slow down the whole mood in the cab changed. Percy was suddenly aware of everything around him - the scents, the sounds, the overwhelming sensations zinging through his body that told him he was about to be changed forever.

Claimed. Mated. Bonded. Accepted.

His chipmunk was doing somersaults and backflips at the mere thought. Percy watched as Zese pulled off the main highway and down a narrow road.

"Where are we?" Percy asked, looking around him at the big old trees and overgrown paddocks.

"It's an old unused truck stop. I only know it's here because I make a point of mapping all the diners on my routes. I hope to try them all one day."

"Why diners?"

"I'm not really sure. I love food, cooking, travel, and people. Driving trucks has been the best job I've had since coming up here, so I guess it's a way for me to explore new places, meet new people, and eat new food that I can try and cook when I'm home again."

"You're a fascinating demon."

Zese chuckled. "When people think of demons, they think fire and brimstone, bloody thirsty horn dogs who go around 'sinning' for fun. Really, I'm not so different from you."

"Lucifer seemed nice when I met him," Percy said looking thoughtful. "You'll have to show me around the Underworld one day."

Zese didn't reply, but he pulled into an old parking lot type area that housed nothing more than a ramshackle truck stop not much bigger than the average

7-11. Percy had decided that the moment the truck stopped, he was going to pounce and claim his prize, but now the moment was imminent, fear and doubt bubbled to the surface.

When the rumble of the engine stopped, Percy unhooked his seatbelt and turned to look at Zese. The moment their eyes met, any and all hesitation Percy had felt seconds before vanished when he saw the absolute certainty and almost awe on Zese's handsome face.

Percy was never one to shy away from his feelings, so he decided to stick to his original plan. He pounced across the center console landing on Zese's lap. As he got himself comfortable, he let his hands roam freely and when Zese let out a delicious moan, Percy captured it in his mouth, stealing it away with a heated kiss.

"We need to get to bed," Zese mumbled.

"Show me."

Zese jerked a thumb behind him, and Percy reached over him and pulled back the curtain revealing a sweet little space, big enough to be comfortable but not enough to be considered luxurious. The blue and green striped blanket looked soft and comfortable, the blue of the pillowcase matched the blanket and the mattress looked soft and inviting.

"Will it be big enough for two?" Percy asked.

"Only one way to find out," Zese said with a grin. "Or, if you've changed your mind, we can get a hotel room, or go back to your place."

"Not a chance. From the sounds of things, you've waited twenty-six years for this moment."

Percy carefully unfolded himself from Zese's lap and dove into the quaint sleeping quarters. Once he had bounced on the mattress, determining it was as comfy as it looked, he waggled his eyebrows at Zese.

"Are you gonna join me?"

"Damn straight."

Zese moved like a force of nature and as soon as he landed on the mattress, he pulled Percy down with him and took possession of his mouth. Percy

could feel the heat of his gaze as they explored each other – fingers, palms and tongues. He worried, for all of two seconds, how long they could keep kissing so intensely. His cock felt like it had doubled in size and was pressing rather uncomfortably against his pants.

“You taste so good,” Zese moaned. “I could kiss you all day.”

“I had a few other ideas to add to the mix,” Percy replied, playfully nipping Zese’s bottom lip.

Zese growled, but it sounded like pure lust, and with his hair disheveled and the flames flickering in his eyes, and his demon’s fangs threatening to drop any second, Percy had never wanted anyone more.

“I’m at your mercy, sweetness.”

Percy’s hands made quick work of removing their shirts and pants, and Percy had to force himself to remember to swallow at the sight of Zese’s cock swollen and leaking inside his green cotton briefs. He licked his lips in anticipation and readjusted himself in his own skimpy underpants as he freed Zese’s cock.

“By the gods,” Percy exclaimed. “You’re huge.”

Zese chuckled softly. “Demon perks maybe?”

The time for talking had come to an end. Percy wrapped his lips around the tip of Zese’s cock and began to suckle at the salty pre-cum. *By the gods, his cock tastes as good as his mouth.* Percy began to hum a happy tune as he licked and sucked while Zese’s head fell back, and he looked like he was struggling to compose himself.

Percy popped his mouth off for a second and instructed Zese to, “Lie back, relax, and enjoy.”

Zese did as he was told, and as Percy readjusted himself to get comfortable, Zese swung him around. “It’s only fair I get to taste you, too.”

Percy giggled before encasing his lips back around Zese’s cock and then running his tongue along the thick vein that ran underneath. He let his tongue swirl slowly around the head before taking him deep into his mouth, a little more each time.

Zese on the other hand, was a king tease as his fingers trailed over all the new flesh he could see. He paid particular attention to the soft skin between Percy's legs as he slowly nipped at and kissed all the parts of Percy he could reach. His fingers traced the outskirts of the skimpy lace underwear that didn't quite cover everything up.

The more desperate for touch Percy got, the harder he sucked on Zese, and by the time Zese finally dipped behind his underwear and slowly pulled them out of the way, Percy was ready to scream.

"Are you gonna tease me into submission?" Percy asked.

"It seems to be working," Zese said, his voice hushed and deep.

Percy turned around and stole another kiss, deepening it as Zese opened his mouth for more access. "Stop teasing me," Percy half asked, half begged. "I want you, I need you."

Percy wasn't quite sure how Zese did it in the confined space, but as fast as he could blink, he went from being on top to being sprawled beneath Zese. His eyelids flicked in anticipation as Zese lifted his legs and dropped his head. Percy's body quivered as Zese's tongue traveled from the head of his cock, down his balls, giving them some extra attention, before making his way to Percy's pert hole.

Percy felt as if his limbs had turned to spaghetti as he looked into Zese's eyes and watched as his tongue started to tease his taint with licks and tiny gentle nips. His tongue swooped around the outer rim a few times before he let out a sigh of pure happiness. "You taste exquisite," Zese mumbled before he used his tongue in long flat licks to taste every part of Percy.

"Oh, my gods," Percy groaned as he felt Zese's tongue dip inside. His sensitive nerve endings fired in all directions. Zese's tongue was masterful, it dipped and dived, swooped, and licked, driving Percy to the brink in a matter of minutes.

"I'm gonna stretch you out now, get you nice and ready for me. Do you want that?" Zese's eyes were huge and black, and his teeth were definitely more fang than human.

"Yes, my gods, yes," Percy moaned. He was putty in this man's hands, powerless to the magic of his tongue and overcome with so many emotions.

He'd never experienced that type of intense connection with another living being before, and he never wanted it to end.

Zese opened a side hatch in the truck and pulled out a small bottle of lube, it looked like it hadn't even been opened yet. Watching as Zese ripped open the lid and doused his fingers was so fuckin' hot, Percy worried he might come then and there.

"Breathe for me," Zese instructed as he gently inserted the first finger.

"Yessss," Percy hissed as the burn turned to pleasure.

Zese moved with finesse in and out, widening his motions as he went, preparing Percy for the second finger, which entered him with barely a twinge this time.

"So tight. You're gonna feel so good wrapped around my dick."

"Can't wait. Need. More."

"Patience, I don't wanna hurt you."

Zese began to scissor his fingers, running the tips over Percy's insides until he felt a zing from deep inside. "Fuck! Do that again."

Zese chuckled and brushed his finger over the sensitive ridge he'd found that sent Percy's body into spasm.

"You ready?"

"Yes, one hundred and ten percent ready for you to be mine," Percy replied.

"That's all I needed to hear."

Zese lubed up his cock, and without a moment's hesitation, slid the tip inside.

Percy breathed out and pushed back against the new intrusion. Despite the three fingers used to stretch him, Zese had some girth to him, and the sensations stole Percy's breath for just a second.

"You okay?"

"Perfect, honestly. Keep going."

Zese slowly inched his way inside, and when he was fully seated Percy was astounded at how right it felt. He had never let himself dream of this moment,

and yet here he was, with his mate, in the sleeping cabin of a truck about to be claimed by his very own demon.

Their eyes locked on each other and Percy started to move before Zese could even ask if he was ready.

“Are you okay?” Percy asked.

“I’m scared I’ll hurt you.”

“I’m made for you. Show me what you’ve got.”

“You’ll tell me to stop if it hurts?” Zese’s body was vibrating under the pressure to hold himself still.

“I promise.”

Zese let out a breath and let Percy continue to move while they found a rhythm, his thrusts got deeper, more confident... And then the demon inside took control.

“Are you sure you’re ready, little chipmunk?”

Percy weakly nodded, he was mesmerized by the hypnotic flames in Zese’s eyes. He felt the pressure firm up around his hips, and the pace began to quicken.

Feeling completely at the mercy of his demon, Percy’s body vibrated with need, seeming to sense his desires, Zese’s firm hand began to stroke his throbbing cock in time to the punishing rhythm.

“Not gonna last,” Percy panted.

Zese grunted, and his fangs released in their entirety, he pulled Percy close to him and sunk his teeth deep into Percy’s chest muscle, right over his heart. Running on pure instinct Percy let his teeth drop to the skin he could reach right where Zese’s shoulder met his neck, where he left a bite of his own.

The second Zese’s blood hit his tongue, he came. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, and he felt a swirl of heat circulate around him. He was mildly aware of Zese coming around his tightened muscles and feeling Zese lazily lick the wound on his chest, so he followed suit, watching in amusement as the bite mark closed in front of his eyes.

What shocked him more was the shape of the scar. A perfect circle, with a

perfectly symmetrical tree inside - Percy gasped and looked down on his chest where he saw his own new mating scar, his was also a perfect circle with a flame inside, it was beautiful.

“Mine,” Zese growled around his teeth, he placed his hand over the scar on Percy’s chest.

“Yours,” Percy replied, suddenly feeling exhausted, sated, and happy. He placed his hand over Zese’s and let himself be pulled down into a warm embrace.

Chapter Fifteen

Zese

Laying in Percy's arms, still slick with sweat and slightly out of breath, Zese was overcome with an incredible sense of calm. A peace he'd never felt before rolled over his entire being. After twenty-six years, his summons to earth finally made sense.

My mate, he mused.

Mine, his demon grumbled.

Yes, yes, I belong to both of you, Percy's tinkling voice echoed inside his head.

Zese turned to look into Percy's eyes. "You are everything I've never thought I deserved."

"Well, someone seems to think you do," Percy replied, his matter-of-fact tone and the softness of his gaze made Zese want to own his body all over again.

Zese reached across the perfect lithe body that was happily snuggled into his chest and rifled for some wet wipes to clean them both up. The scent of sex and fresh arousal was making it hard for him to form clear thoughts, and there was part of him that knew they had places to go, people to see, and a wayward demon to return to the Underworld.

After grappling with the frustratingly hard to open wipes sachet, he held a few in his hands to warm them up a little before carefully tending to his mate. Despite him warming them up, Percy still writhed and giggled beneath his ministrations, making Zese's cock spring back to life in a split second.

"Down, boy," Percy teased. "We should probably think about making our way to Luminosity pretty soon."

"I know," Zese sighed. "But you can't blame a demon for trying." Finally satisfied that they were both clean, Zese trailed a finger from Percy's neck to his hip, happily watching his mate's instant response to his touch. Wherever his fingertip had touched was now alight with goosebumps, and Percy's breath stuttered.

"We won't make it anywhere if I don't get some clothes on," Percy said with

a grin.

“I’m okay with that,” Zese replied, giving his best cheeky wink. “I’ve waited twenty-six years for this day to come, Percy. Your friends can wait a little longer, while I devour you again.”

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No less than an hour later, Zese grumbled as he watched Percy climb back into the passenger seat of the truck, so he had more room to tie up his shoes. He was still mumbling as he put his shirt back on and then pushed his way back into the driver’s seat.

“Hush, sweet demon. Once this is over, we’ll have all the time in the world.”

Zese felt the weight of his world echo through their newly formed mind link and let the comfort those words brought with them settle into his soul. Even his demon was sated, for now at least.

Finding his keys in the ignition where he’d left them, a quick flick of Zese’s fingers and the truck roared to life. Percy’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “I can tick truck sex off my bucket list now,” he said, grinning wide.

“Oh, yes,” Zese replied, his eyebrows raised in curiosity. “And what other places do you have on your bucket list.”

“Luminosity’s kitchen, the Japanese garden in the city, a plane, a Ferris Wheel, the Cape Henry Lighthouse, and a horse drawn carriage.”

Percy rattled off his list with barely a second thought, and Zese couldn’t help the booming laugh that erupted from his chest. “That’s quite a list. I’m sure we can get through them all before the year is finished.”

“Really? All of them by the end of the year? That’s only five months away.”

“Hmm, mmm. It sure is, and then you’ll just have to come up with a new list for next year.”

Percy’s cheeks flushed that glorious shade of pink that made Zese’s cock twitch in happiness.

“I’m sure I can manage that,” Percy squeaked before turning his gaze back out the huge window in front of him to take in the sights as they traveled back to Luminosity.

Traffic was light, so they made good time, and it wasn't too long before they parked, Zese's truck taking up the entire back parking lot, usually reserved for deliveries.

"Will the truck be okay here?" he asked Percy as he looked around for another place to move his beast on wheels.

"Yesh, it'll be fine. The biggest order of the day should have come in a few hours ago, and the next one isn't until tomorrow afternoon."

Zese nodded and was checking everything was okay on his dash when his CB radio started crackling.

"Zese, where the hell are you? Over."

"Rig. I'm here."

"Did you make it? I've been waiting to hear, and shit, man, I'm hearing some messed up rumors. Over."

"I made it, and Rig... You're gonna wanna swing over here as soon as you can. There's someone I want you to meet. Over."

All Zese heard in reply was a crackle of static, but before he could press his friend for more info, he felt the familiar buzz of a demon translocating and looked out his passenger window to see Rigmus brushing off his pants and looking up at him expectantly.

Zese reached over to give Percy's hand a gentle squeeze and plant a gentle kiss on his cheek before saying, "You get to meet my second favorite person. You ready?"

Zese jumped down and greeted Rig. "I fucking did it, Rig."

"What did you do now?"

"I found my reason."

"The one who summoned you, did you work out why? Don't leave me hanging, man, spill."

"I'll show you."

Zese dragged Rigmus around to the passenger side and pulled open the door. Percy was just slipping his cherry lip gloss back into his pocket, and his lips

glistened in the light making Zese want to kiss him all over again.

“Percy, meet Rigmus, my closest friend and fellow demon. Rigmus meet Percy-”

“Your fated one...”

“Yep,” Zese replied, popping the ‘P’ on the end.

“Wow. It all makes a lot more sense now, doesn’t it.”

“Sure fucking does,” Zese said, giving his friend’s back a friendly slap.

“I wonder...” Rigmus trailed off, then shook his head. “It’s a firm honor to meet you, Percy.”

Zese helped Percy down from the truck and watched as his mate and his best friend shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

“This calls for some special cocktails tonight,” Percy said. “We have so much to tell you both. Can you stick around a while, Rigmus?”

“Yeah, for sure. I wouldn’t miss this for the world. Plus, Zese and me have some business to discuss. Shit’s getting weird out there, man.”

“Shit’s getting weird here, too,” Percy said pertly.

“Let’s get inside and get some drinks in us, shall we?” Zese suggested. His heart had never felt so full watching Rigmus and Percy chat as if they’d been friends forever as they walked into the club.

But the feeling of peace and tranquility he felt just moments before was quickly replaced with a bristling unease as they entered the building. He and Rigmus exchanged a look, letting Zese know it wasn’t just him, and even Percy shuddered slightly as he entered the well-lit bar.

A fae, a bear shifter, and the kids from the truck stop diner all lounged around on bar stools. They all looked up one by one as the unlikely trio approached.

“You gonna introduce us to your new friends Perc,” the fae asked, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Skye, Ben, Penn, Piper, Poppy, and Parker. Meet Rigmus, a new friend and Zese, my Fated Mate.”

“Well shit! I wasn’t expecting that,” Penn and Piper said simultaneously.

Ben eyed him suspiciously, Skye beamed, and Poppy and Parker were already off their chairs with eyes wide.

After a few minutes of greetings, hand-shaking, and back slapping, Percy was behind the bar huddled with Ben, standing far too close for Zese's liking. But he got the sense Ben had been a good friend to Percy, so he kept his possessive mouth shut, for now. Skye was drilling Rigmus, and Percy's family were chatting happily amongst themselves, leaving Zese to soak it all in.

First on his radar, now he knew the people they'd come to meet posed no threat, was to work out what the fuck was so off about the place. He'd felt it the moment he passed through the doorway. He wracked his brain, trying to understand what his instincts were trying to tell him. After a few unsuccessful attempts at deciphering the very vague clues at his disposal, Zese ended up asking his demon.

Who wasn't happy.

Zese was trying a stint at being understanding about how physically close Ben was to Percy – the operative word being 'trying'. His demon side didn't see anything to be understanding about. He just didn't like it and was intently watching every twitch Ben made.

Percy glanced over his shoulder and threw him a bright beaming smile before turning back to continue making the drinks he was concocting. Zese knew Ben wasn't helping in any way with the mixology – he clearly felt the need to check in with his friend Percy. Zese was confident enough in his instincts to give them that time without letting his demon interfere – for now.

He better not touch my mate again, his demon grumbled.

Zese just laughed. *He's keeping his hands to himself.*

Why can't he stand a foot to the left? The demon grumbled. *He's too close and he'll make our sweet chipmunk smell like bear.*

Then we'll have fun marking him with our own scent later, won't we?

That pacified his demon, for the moment, but Zese could feel half his attention was stuck on Percy, refusing to budge. And after how long they'd waited, Zese couldn't blame his demon half for his new obsession. Percy was

a delight to watch.

Putting a careful barrier up between his mind and Percy's - he didn't want to scare the delightful chipmunk without due cause - Zese asked his demon what was sending his instincts into overdrive.

Isn't there a portal here?

The veil between the earth and the Underworld is thin.

Okay, but what does that mean exactly?

It's likely an old gateway, long ago closed up.

As I said, a portal! What aren't you saying?

Someone has been trying to open it.

Have they been successful?

They have.

Well fuck.

The process is not complete.

Yet, Zese grumbled.

It requires a blood sacrifice to break the last tendrils.

Of course, it fucking does.

Chapter Sixteen

Percy

Percy chuckled to himself as he halfheartedly tracked his new mate's feelings of possessiveness. He glanced at Ben and took a tiny step sideways, not enough for Ben to notice but enough to show his demon he understood.

He was busy mixing a new cocktail, one with a hint of chili and lime over gin, and mixed with... hmm, he wasn't sure yet. Lifting the glass he took a deep smell and was toying between tonic and soda water, the difference was subtle to most, but Percy knew it'd make a world of difference to how the end result tasted.

Before he could decide, Percy realized the warmth that had sat at the edge of his mind since his mating was oddly blank. He tapped into the space reserved for Zese and realized he'd been blocked somehow. A buzz of anxiety flitted through his body.

Is Zese tuning me out, or is it something more insidious?

Our mate, the chipmunk sighed happily at the use of the word, is protecting us from something.

I don't need-

Oh, hush you, the chipmunk snapped. If he thinks we need protection, then we must.

I don't like it, we just-

Met. Yes we have, and he still has a lot to learn about us, just as we have a lot to learn about him.

So you're telling me to trust him.

One hundred and ten percent. Now go back to mixing your drinks.

Percy huffed, making Ben look at him sideways, again. "Are you sure you're okay, Percy?"

"I promise you, Ben. I've never been better."

"He better be good to you," Ben grumbled quietly.

“You’re so sweet,” Percy said with a giggle. “I’m sure the Fates don’t make mistakes.” Ben harumphed, making Percy grin even wider. “You’re the one who said I needed to find my fated one to make Gerard back off, and bam, I did. Well, he found me, actually.”

“I did say that, and I’m glad you’re happy. You are happy?”

“Ecstatic, actually.”

“Well, if you’re happy, then I’m happy. It’s an honor to be gifted a fated one.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” Percy replied.

He popped a wedge of lime into his completed drinks and carried the tray carefully over to the bar handing out his newest creation as he went. He’d decided to serve Zese last, partly because he wanted to steal a kiss, and also because he wanted Zese to know, that he knew that their mind link had been temporarily disabled. *Was that even a thing?*

Percy found it easy to smile whenever he looked at Zese. As a couple, they were fire and ice, chili and lime, and even though it was hard for Percy to put his faith in a man he’d only known for a few hours, he chose to give Zese the benefit of the doubt. Until he had a reason not to, of course. But knowing that Zese was his mate, Percy felt certain it was unlikely the demon would ever let him down. He had been waiting Percy’s whole life to find him after all.

As the swirling glass of green liquid with just a hint of red flakes shimmering inside was plonked in front of Zese, his eyes caught Percy’s, and his hands immediately sought his. Percy gave him his free hand willingly and smiled. “Is everything okay?”

“I wish I could say yes to that, sweet Percy,” Zese grumbled.

“Is that why you shut me out?” Percy asked, being sure to keep his voice quiet.

“I’m sorry. I hoped you wouldn’t notice, but when we came in here-”

“It’s a mother fucking portal,” Rigmus yelled all of a sudden.

“Yeah, that,” Zese grumbled, flicking his thumb in Rigmus’s direction.

Rigmus was up on his feet, flames flickering in his eyes. All eyes were on

him as he paced and grumbled.

“Sounds like we better tell our new friends what’s been happening here,” Skye said.

“I’m starving,” Zese moaned. “Can we talk in the kitchen while I whip up some food? One sip of this divine drink has me hankering tacos.”

There were assorted nods and smiles from everyone as they all moved into the kitchen. Percy watched with fascination as Zese took stock of the kitchen, his eyes wide with delight. It wasn’t much to look at it, but Percy knew it had all the mod cons and pretty much anything a high-end kitchen would need. It hadn’t been used much in recent years, but once upon a time Luminosity had been a hub for fine dining. Percy would have loved to have seen it in its heyday. In the time before Gerard turned it into a seedy club.

“You lot talk, I’ll cook. Anyone allergic to anything?”

Percy could hardly believe his eyes as he watched Zese grab an array of fresh ingredients that had been bought with the plan of serving burgers that night and turned the simple ingredients into a culinary feast. The scents and aromas of the spice blends combined with the speed and finesse with which he cooked made it hard for Percy to focus on the conversation that was going on around him.

He only had eyes for Zese.

But it turned out Zese was able to multitask, and he asked questions and nodded along as Ben, and Skye filled them all in on what they knew and what they’d found out. Rigmus and Zese exchanged more than a few knowing looks as they patiently listened.

It wasn’t until Skye was talking about what they’d found in Gerard’s office that Zese stopped midway through dicing a tomato and the knife clattered to the bench. “Show me. Now!”

Rigmus and Zese followed as Percy was dragged along by Skye. *I do not want to go back into that room.*

Skye stopped them outside the door. “You should know, it had some strange power over Percy and me. It’s like it…”

“Was calling to you?”

Skye nodded, and Percy felt his mouth go dry as he remembered.

“What did it sound like?” Rigmus asked, his hand poised over the door handle.

“Wings, I think,” Skye said chewing on her bottom lip.

“Well, shit,” Rigmus replied. “You two stay outside, while me and Zese will go and have a look, okay?”

A mixture of relief and fear washed over Percy. He didn’t have to go into the room again – that was the relief part. But the other side of him – the one that desperately wanted to keep Zese safe from whatever strange magic was hiding in that space was terrified, both of what might happen to his new mate, but also what might happen if Zese fell under the spell of whatever was in that office.

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Zese

Zese could sense Percy’s inner conflict and wrapped him in a fierce embrace. “If it’s what we think it is, it’s from the Underworld, so it has no power over us, okay?”

Percy nodded weakly, and Zese passed him over to Skye asking them to stay within earshot, “Just in case.”

Zese followed behind Rigmus, who had no trouble breaking the spell warding the door closed. “Amateurs,” Rigmus grumbled as the spell fell in shattered pieces to the floor.

“Shh, it was probably Skye,” Zese warned quietly.

“She should know better then. I’ll show her how to do it properly, later.”

Zese nodded. Like his friend, he was keener on working out what was causing the dark edge he could feel in the club, than worrying about a few piddly wards that would never keep him and Rig out anyway. As soon as the office door closed behind them, he could sense the darkness growing around them.

Moving behind the desk the pair made quick work of pulling back the hidden bookshelf and finding the altar that lay hidden behind it. The vortex that

signified the portal was beginning to open was a swirling mass of flames, stars, and a myriad of colors.

The scent of sulfur filled the air as they got closer. What sounded like the thrumming of a million wings beating in unison was one of the many sounds that signified the pits of the Underworld. But it wasn't the wings his mate and the fae had heard. Zese knew it was the screams of the souls of the damned.

“Well, this is worse than we thought, huh Rig?”

“Damned straight. We gotta tell Lucifer.”

“Yep. The only way to shut this thing down is from the Underworld, right?”

“It's been a while since anybody had to, but from memory that's how it works. And we need a set of triplets and isn't it just lucky we have a set on hand.”

“No fucking way!” Zese yelled.

“What's your issue?” Rig shook his fist at the vortex. “We need them to shut this thing down.”

“You wanna take three twink-sized chipmunk shifters into the Underworld to close a portal and battle a demon like Zephany.”

“No one said anything about battling Zephany, but where else are we gonna find a set of triplets fast enough to deal with this mess?”

“There has to be a set in the Underworld, surely?” Zese did not want his precious mate going anywhere near his home world. “You'd think Lucifer would have some on hand as a contingency, if nothing else.”

“I can't think of any and you know Lucifer.” Rigmus scratched his chin as he stared at the swirling mass. “He's not a contingency planning sort of guy.”

Zese hated that his friend was right. “How in the hell do we get ourselves into these messes, Rig?”

“Wish I knew, Zee. Wish I knew.” Rigmus perked up as he turned away from the vortex. “At least you won't have to worry about any of these messes after this one.”

Zese looked at his friend totally confused. “Why's that?”

“Did you forget young Percy already?” Rigmus scoffed. “You’re mated now, doofus. No more summoning for you.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s bloody handy.” Zese cracked a grin.

“For you, maybe. But it doesn’t mean I’m gonna stop bugging ya.”

Zese laughed. “Well, now we know what we’re dealing with, we’d better go and talk to the crew outside. And I’m still waiting for my damned dinner.”

“Are you gonna tell them about the triplet thing?” Rigmus asked as he shut away the vortex of doom.

“Guess I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“Sad but true.” Rigmus nodded. “They do have the right to say no. We can’t force them, and we won’t. Remember, they have to be willing for the artifacts to use them.”

Zese harumphed and sent a silent prayer to the Fates that he wasn’t expected to lead his brand new mate into the depths of the pits to be used as a channel for artifacts of magic so potent they could peel the skin from a demon’s muscles if one had a wrong thought in their presence.

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Percy jumped back as Rigmus opened the office door. He’d had his ear pressed against it, although even with his chipmunk’s help, he hadn’t been able to hear much.

“What is it? Is it bad? Are we all going to die?” Percy’s words fell from his mouth in a jumbled mess, the relief overriding his fear momentarily now he could see Zese was safe. He was beyond thankful when Zese pulled him into his chest and held him close. His soothing hands eased Percy’s worry, until Zese went and opened his big, beautiful mouth.

“Well, the dying angle is a possibility if we don’t get that thing closed,” Zese murmured into his hair.

“I was half joking,” Percy mumbled.

“Sorry, babe,” Zese replied quietly.

“Don’t happen to know of any triplets, do ya?” Rigmus asked. “That’d be super helpful.”

“Why?” Skye asked curiously, before Percy could say anything.

Zese was glaring daggers at Rigmus who gave him a shrug and turned to answer Skye. “I’m so glad you asked. Before I forget, remind me to show you how to set decent wards before I head off, yeah?”

Skye’s cheeks flushed pink, but she nodded. “I’m just learning,” she mumbled.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s no drama, not too many fae have access to the same texts as we do down below. You’re a natural, so you won’t have any trouble with something stronger.”

“The triplets?” Skye prompted.

“Let’s go and eat,” Zese interrupted. “We’ve got an issue that has to be fixed. Everyone will have a role to play, and I don’t feel like having to explain everything twice. I want to eat first.”

Ben, Penn, Piper, Parker, and Poppy had all been helping themselves to drinks while they waited. Percy hoped they wouldn’t be too filled with Dutch courage when Rigmus and Zese explained about their need for a set of triplets and what they wanted them to do. He had good reason to follow Zese to the ends of the world and beyond – their mating was stronger than any fear he might have, or doubts he had floating around in his head about being suitable for any actual fighting if that was what was needed. But Percy didn’t want his brother and sister to be caught up in a demonic feud, or anything that felt as evil as the spell he’d already been under, not if he could help it.

Chapter Seventeen

Zese

Zese walked past everyone perched at the bar again and made his way back into the kitchen. It was truly a thing of beauty. If his kitchen at home was his happy place, the club kitchen was his idea of Nirvana. If he had his way, Gerard would stay in the Underworld, and he'd take the man's place in the club in a heartbeat. *Shame things don't work like that*, but still, a demon could dream.

As he busied himself finishing the tacos, he let his mind drift. All he wanted was to cook great food, fuck his mate – often - and find a place worth settling down to live out his happily ever after. All that stood in the way to that dream was a psycho demon, a vortex to the pits of the Underworld about to open once a sacrifice had been made, and finding some triplets who would venture into the Underworld, be deemed worthy of the artifacts needed to close the portal and vanquish Zephany.

One, two, three, simple. Yeah, and my night job is the tooth fairy. Zese checked his food. It didn't need much longer, but Zese's brain wouldn't shut down.

Some days it was harder than others to understand what the Fates were up to. Zese desperately wanted to speak to Lucifer, but dammit, he was gonna eat before he did anything, made any decisions, or spoke to anyone.

“Talk to me,” Percy whispered in his ear.

Okay, so maybe Zese was prepared to make an expectation for Percy. Hell, he'd lasso the moon for his guy if he had to. So, being the good mate he was determined to be, Zese shook off his mood and plastered a big fake smile on his face, then turned to look at Percy.

“Oh, my gods,” Percy said between peals of laughter and pointing at his face. “What the fuck kind of fake bullshit is that.”

Zese's face dropped, but he felt his eyes soften. “Sorry, I was a million miles away, and didn't want you to see I was brooding.”

“Tall, dark, handsome, and brooding,” Percy replied, his tone lowered, and his hand trailing Zese's arm. “Sounds like just my type.”

This time Zese smiled for real.

“But do you know what I find truly sexy in a man?”

“Tell me,” Zese mumbled.

“A man who trusts me not only with his body but with his heart and mind as well.”

“Well, shit.” Zese laughed and pressed his heating body up against Percy’s, pinning him to the kitchen counter. He wanted nothing more than to strip his mate bare and bend him over it - now!

“Sorry to interrupt,” Rigmus groaned. “But, uh. Is the food ready?”

Percy laughed, and Zese reluctantly pulled himself away, glad to see the effect he’d had on Percy’s sweet tight body as he went back to putting the finishing touches to the food.

A few short minutes later, Zese was placing the last bowl of delights for people to serve themselves. The scent of garlic, ginger, lime, chili, and assorted spices hung in the air. Accompanied by the refreshing stark contrast added by fresh lettuce, a three-cheese mixture, and freshly browned meat that was still so succulent it barely needed any added sauces. But that didn’t stop Zese from prepping a fresh salsa, and guacamole, and he had been so relieved to see some sour cream to top off his masterpieces.

Last to hit the serving station had been the freshly warmed taco wraps. He liked his soft, but he’d dug out a few crispy ones from the back of the pantry for those who preferred a bit more crunch to their tacos.

The highlight of Zese’s love of cooking, apart from eating his creations, the thing that gave him the greatest sense of satisfaction, was watching people enjoying the food he’d created. On the odd occasion, he had cooked for Rigmus and the guys at the yard. But there was something *more* as people helped themselves to his dishes – a sense of family and friendship and shared trauma over a meal. It was nothing short of remarkable in Zese’s eyes and really, truly, satisfying.

Well, that, and the little noises of appreciation that kept falling out of Percy’s mouth. Yeah, those were some sounds Zese hoped to recreate later when he got his cute mate home again.

“So,” Rigmus mumbled around a mouthful of taco, the sauce dripping down his chin and his eyes half glazed as he stuffed his mouth with food. “We should probably.... talk about... what’s happening.”

All eyes were on Rigmus and Zese. And Rigmus, clearly not keen on skimping on his meal, deferred to Zese.

“We know you have a demon problem. It’s worse than we thought in one regard, but better in another.” Zese hadn’t finished eating either.

“Awesome,” Penn replied, holding his fork piled with lettuce and salsa. “I vote good news first.”

The others muttered their agreement around mouthfuls of food.

Zese swallowed first. “We know why Zephany chose Luminosity as the base for his operations, and we can guess why he chose Gerard to be the front for his little plan.”

That got everyone’s attention.

“This property sits on an old portal between the Underworld and Earth. It makes sense that Zephany would target the one person who could give him uninhibited access to the portal.”

“Gerard,” Ben grumbled. “Bet it helps that he’s a seedy, greedy, creepy asshole, too.”

“Most definitely,” Zese agreed quickly. “It would have been much harder to convince a boy scout.”

Zese glanced around the room. Giving them all a chance to soak up what he’d said before he continued.

“The other bit of good news is that the portal isn’t fully open – not yet. Rigmus seems to think for it to be fully opened, it needs a blood sacrifice, which tells us the magic that sealed it is damn near ancient.”

“So we have some time then?” Skye asked.

“Yeah. But we’re not sure how much. Zephany has Gerard, and it wouldn’t take much to convince him to give his blood to open the gateway,” Zese said, trying to keep his voice calm and matter of fact.

“Will he die?” Poppy asked.

“It depends on Zephany, and how useful Gerard might be alive versus dead.”

That got a reaction from the group of friends. Zese listened as they murmured and chattered amongst themselves. The whole situation would be overwhelming for them. Percy and the people in his life were decent and valued life. They wouldn't want anyone to lose their lives. But at the same time, none of them really liked Gerard. From the small amount he'd heard, Zese didn't think there was a lot to like, although he wouldn't judge anyone on hearsay alone – yet.

“Okay, well, if that's the good news. I'm not sure I'm gonna like the bad news much at all,” Piper said quietly, chewing her lip, her half-eaten taco sitting on her plate.

“The bad news is to close the portal and stop the demons from having free reign on earth... we need triplets,” Rigmus replied when Zese had gone silent.

“Why is it always bloody triplets?” Ben groaned.

Zese, who had been watching how the others reacted as Rigmus spoke, noticed that Percy was chewing his bottom lip, Penn was paying a superfluous amount of attention to the floor, and Piper was just wide-eyed and floundering. *Off to a roaring start.*

Skye looked deep in thought, Ben was rubbing his head in his huge hand, while Poppy and Parker were sitting so closely together, they could have shared a chair.

“Look,” Zese said, breaking through the tension. “I'm not suggesting for a second that I expect the triplets in *this* room to volunteer. But we can't get around the old magic, and it's... odd and quite frankly agitating preference for the number three.”

Rigmus chuckled at their inside joke. “Oh, yeah, make no mistake. I wasn't angling here, but I can't deny the fact that it feels kinda kismet to have a set of triplets in the room, and we are on a time-sensitive mission.”

“What are you asking of us, exactly?” Percy asked.

Oh, hell no! Zese did not want to be discussing this with his mate. “No one's asking anything of *you*, Percy,” Zese grumbled.

“It’s sweet you want to protect me, and I’m sure my siblings, too. But how can we give you an answer if we don’t know what you’re asking? We also can’t recommend an alternative until we know what we’d be asking of them.”

Percy sounded so matter of fact, Zese couldn’t come up with a single reason not to answer the question. But before he could even think of a reply the room erupted into a momentary chaos as a new guest arrived - in quite a dramatic fashion, too.

Bloody Lucifer, always a show pony.

Zese noted with some amusement that Lucifer had used his, “I’ll be in the company of mortals entrance” this time, complete with thunderclap, the roar of the damned souls, and the smell of sulfur, and flames at his feet. He looked impressive with his flowing cape cascading out behind him, and the grin on his face that was so damned sexy, even Percy’s cheeks flushed.

Rigmus just laughed. “About bloody time you showed up,” he teased.

“Is that any way to address your Master and Lord of the Underworld, Rigmus?” Lucifer asked, pointedly looking down his nose at Rigmus. Both Zese and Rigmus looked equally confused for a split second until Lucifer roared with laughter. “Oh, your face,” he chuckled. “You should have seen your face. Clearly, I’m messing with you.”

Rigmus still looked a little unsure, but he smiled all the same.

“I was merely making a grand entrance for the benefit of your lovely guests,” Lucifer purred, glancing around the room. “And my, oh, my, what a delightful assortment you have on offer this evening.” Lucifer turned with a dramatic swirl of his cape, looking at each person in the room. “Let’s see who we have here... Skye the fae, Benjamin the bear, and then we have the triplets... Oh, before I forget, it’s so nice to see you again, Percy. I’m so glad your mate finally caught up with you. And Zese, my greatest congratulations and best wishes to you both... Now where was I, oh, yes, the triplets Percy, Penn, and Piper, and then the twins, Poppy, and Parker, who are all chipmunk shifters. Have I got everyone correct and accounted for?”

Except for Zese and Rigmus who were exchanging an, “oh, my gods does he have to be such a jackass” look, while all eyes were on Lucifer. There were some gasps, a few “oh, my gods,” and the usual amount of “wows.” But what

no one had expected, well, Zese certainly hadn't, was Penn's reaction.

In that moment he was the epitome of the kid who got the cake, saw the Easter bunny, and well, it was clear he was instantly infatuated. Penn's face had transformed from one of quiet trepidation to one of pure joy and a hefty dose of heavy-lidded lust. The moment Lucifer had stopped speaking, Penn was on his feet so fast he sent his chair clattering to the floor in his attempt to rush to the Lord of the Underworld.

"My Lord," he gushed. "I've dreamed of this moment my whole life. It's an honor, a privilege, a lifelong desire of mine to be in your mere presence, and that you know my name. I am truly humbled, Your Eminence."

He looked so damned funny, perched like a person about to propose on one knee, clutching Lucifer's hand with both of his, his hazel eyes so earnest. "I can die a happy man having not only been able to see you in the flesh but to touch your hand," Penn gushed. And Lucifer being Lucifer, lapped up every second of the attention. Preening and caressing the man's hair as if he were a favored pet.

Zese had to hold back a gagging sound as Penn started peppering the hand he was clutching for dear life with what sounded like a hundred kisses.

"I'd follow you to the ends of the universe just to stay in your presence a fleeting second longer," Penn babbled.

"Well, looks like two down, one to go," Rigmus mumbled, causing Zese to throw him a nasty look. "What?" Rigmus retorted, shrugging his shoulders. "It beats having to go hunting for triplets, doesn't it?"

Zese cast a longing look at Percy. The last thing he wanted was his mate's first visit to the Underworld to be for something that could prove horrifically traumatic, but sadly, he couldn't come up with a single valid argument against it.

Percy looked at Piper and cleared his throat. "We won't go unless it's unanimous, Sis. What do you think?"

"Honestly," she said, releasing a breath as if she'd been holding it in. "I can't let you two go unsupervised. It'd be mayhem, so I guess you can count me in. But... I'd still like to know what the hell we're in for," she muttered, "before fully committing."

“A smart young woman,” Lucifer beamed, trying to release his hand from Penn’s now vice-like grip. The pathetic looking soul was still on his knees, his eyes almost wet with tears of happiness as he gazed at Lucifer like he was the sun, burning his eyes but unwilling to look away.

What the fuck is that all about? Zese wondered, shaking his head.

I have no clue, Percy giggled, *but it’s kinda cute.*

Chapter Eighteen

Percy

Percy could feel the unease rolling from Zese, though he was doing a damned good job of masking it from his face. Skye and Ben were deep in conversation behind the counter, urgently whispering. Part of Percy wanted to know what they were conspiring and part of him didn't know how many more new revelations he could tolerate. Piper had looked resigned to joining them, and he hated feeling as if he was twisting her arm as he and Penn had done so many times in their lives. She'd followed them into some questionable situations just to "keep an eye" on them over the years, but going to the Underworld wasn't the same as Jamieson Kingsley's party.

The trip was going to be dangerous. Percy wasn't sure little chipmunks were designed for the Underworld. He needed more information, too, and Lucifer's arrival, aside from making Penn the happiest man alive, seemed to suggest that things were going to have to move, and quickly at that. Percy let out a deep sigh and instantly felt Zese's eyes rake over him.

They hadn't had long together – mere hours - but there wasn't a single part of Percy that could question his demon's loyalty to him. Not even being in Lucifer's presence swayed that little nugget of truth. And it was that shining light that spurred Percy to action.

"Okay," he declared with a few short sharp claps of his hands. "Sounds like we have a shit load to learn and not a lot of time to do it." Percy looked around the room and made a few quick decisions. Hoping with all his might they were the right ones.

"Piper, Parker, you may as well go home. Can you please check in on Babushka tomorrow, and we'll be in touch as soon as we're earthside again."

The twins started to protest, but Zese and Rigmus both backed him up.

"Percy's right. Too many fingers in the pie makes it messy," Zese remarked.

"No use wasting any more time sitting around here. You have lives to live," Rigmus said, shooing them out the door. Percy ran over and hugged them both, Piper joined them, and finally Penn realized there were more people in the room than just Lucifer. He reluctantly let go and joined the others in a huge hug.

Whispered words of “good luck,” and “we love you,” were murmured between them all. Parker promised to visit Babushka, and Poppy quietly sobbed as her brother led her away.

“What about us?” Skye asked, her and Ben an apparently united front in worrying about Percy – which he appreciated, but in Percy’s head, the fewer people that were going to the Underworld to fight a rogue demon, the better.

“I’m guessing,” Percy said looking to Zese for help. “We’re going to need some eyes and ears up here in the bar to keep an eye on things, aren’t we?”

Zese nodded so Percy gave his attention back to his only real friends in this realm. “If you don’t want to-”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Ben replied firmly.

“We can’t and won’t be sent home,” Skye said with a fierce determination, a flicker of her fae power glimmering around her slim frame.

Rigmus chuckled, “I figured that’s what the Luminosity staff huddle was. That works. You two with me for some basic training, and we’ll leave these five to iron out the Underworld stuff.”

Percy found himself swept up in a tandem hug, pressed on both sides by Skye and Ben.

“You better make damned sure you bring them back in one piece,” Ben muttered to Zese as he followed Rigmus out.

“So much love, loyalty, and conflicting emotions in one room. I do miss my days on earth,” Lucifer mused. “But in order to stop a horde of demons from taking over the world you all know and love I suggest we get this show on the road, don’t you?”

“What happened to our debrief?” Piper asked quietly.

“I find show and tell a little more effective,” Lucifer replied smoothly. “You’re not beholden to me in any way, and at any point on our adventure you need only say the word, and I’ll send you home with a flick of my fingers. Will that suffice?”

“All of us?” Piper said, her hands on her hips now.

Lucifer chuckled. “My lady, none of this works without the power of three,

and for a mess as mighty as this one, triplets it is. If one of you wants out, any one of you at any time, you will all be returned to earthside. But please try and remember, if we don't stop this veil from opening, earth will be overrun with demons so fast you'll wish you were back in my realm before breakfast tomorrow."

"Maybe if you were less of an asshole, the demons would stop trying to escape," Piper mumbled.

"Oh, my dear, Piper. You've been listening to ghost stories again. The demons don't want to leave because I'm cruel to them."

"Why else would they want to leave?" Piper had moved closer and was almost standing toe to toe with the Lord of the Underworld, her expression firm. Clearly not everyone shared Penn's adoration of the Master of demons.

"Dominion and domination, of course. Zephany has promised them a world of endless sin, ample souls for them to feast upon, and a world with no ruler, no regulations, no power to keep them in check and maintain balance."

"So, you maintain balance? Is that what you're saying? I don't want the party line. This is my flesh and blood on the line, and I'm not going anywhere until I understand why all this is happening."

Lucifer clapped his hands. "Such spunk and sass and fervent determination. I like you, Piper, I like you very much. Okay, a short theology lesson for you to ease your conflicted mind and then we can get on our way, or not if you change your mind."

Percy watched stunned. He was so proud of his sister. Zese seemed to have gotten bored a little while ago, as if he was expecting Lucifer's little rant, and had moved to stand behind Percy, holding him close. His warm fingers tracking gentle lines up and down Percy's arms made it difficult for Percy to focus, but watching his sister stand toe to toe with a legend like Lucifer was riveting, nonetheless. All he needed was a bowl of popcorn.

Penn was sitting at Lucifer's feet, twiddling the edge of his cape in his hands and grinning like the cat who got the cream. It did cross Percy's mind that maybe he should be worried about his brother, as Penn was seemingly oblivious to what was going on around him. But Penn seemed genuinely happy, and Percy didn't know what was going on in his mind – if there was

anything going on at all.

“The shortest and most time efficient version is this,” Lucifer started. “Earth sits in between two realms, my realm, what humans think of as hell - I personally despise that rendition, but you’ll see for yourself when you get there-”

“So, you’re telling me hell, or sorry, the Underworld, isn’t fire and brimstone, and eternal suffering and damnation?” Piper had interrupted, which was very unlike her, but the disbelief was clear on her face.

“Oh, how the stories have been twisted over the years,” Lucifer lamented. “No, that’s not how I see my realm or how I run things. Ask Zese, or Rigmus when you see him again, they both grew up there.”

“Why are the demons trying to escape then?”

“For the most part, the Underworld is a realm like any other. We have communities, schools, gardens, and marketplaces that would make your heart sing with happiness,” Lucifer said. The wistful look on his face made Percy long to see the wonders of Zese’s world.

Piper was tapping her foot, seemingly impatient for Lucifer to get to the heart of the matter.

“And like most communities, there are always those that seek more. Just like on your earth, there are always the select few who believe they are destined to rule and when there is no place for them to rule in our realm, is it any wonder they would jump on the opportunity to rule another? Demons like Zephany prey on the desires of those around them. Just as he did with Gerard, he has done something similar with those from my realm. Does it sadden me? Of course, it does, but I’ll not take any being’s free will from them.”

Piper’s jaw had slackened a little, and her hands had dropped from her hips and were now clasped in front of her body. “I meant no disrespect,” she muttered. “I just wanted to know what me and my brothers would be getting into. This is all very new for us and totally out of our realm of experience. I appreciate you taking the time to clarify things for me.”

“For far too many years, I’ve had to defend my realm and my people. The pits are a very real place, but they are reserved for those who cannot and will not be rehabilitated. And this is where Zephany is spouting his rebellion

speeches.”

Piper nodded, and Percy was grateful to have learned more, not just about Zese’s home, but about Lucifer, too. Like many who lived on earth, everyone had an opinion about the “devil.” But Lucifer’s impassioned speech showed a leader who walked the same treacherous path of guidance versus rebellion as any other leader, and yet still managed to maintain a good life for most of the masses in his realm.

Percy’s heart which had been beating a million miles an hour just thinking about “the Underworld” was now calm and steady. He knew they were doing the right thing, even if he didn’t know the ins and outs of what was expected - not yet anyway.

“So,” Lucifer looked from Penn, who was now standing and who had been hanging on Lucifer’s words, to Piper, and then to Percy, still being held tightly in Zese’s arms. “Are you all ready to join me in the Underworld to discuss tactics, artifacts, and the basics of closing a veil between worlds and returning a demon to the pits?”

Zese’s embrace tightened around Percy, and a wave of uncertainty rolled between them. Percy squeezed his hands tighter than he meant to, but he nodded in Lucifer’s direction though his eyes stayed planted on the unwashed floor of the club.

Before another thought could pass his mind, the ground seemed to swallow him up, and he felt himself tumbling. Percy squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the strange sensations to settle in his body. He could still feel the steady presence of Zese holding him close, and his mind wandered to Penn and Piper, hoping they were okay.

When he opened his eyes he blinked a few times, letting his eyes adjust to the red tinge that emanated all around him. The smell of dust settled in his nose, and a huge structure stood before him. It was a magnificent blend of old and new, steel and glass, wood and iron, and it was so tall Percy could barely see the top even as he willed his eyes to focus.

“Welcome to the Underworld. Our first stop on today’s adventure will be the records and relics room,” Lucifer announced.

Percy looked around and saw various creatures. Demons and humans alike

were going about their business. The demons caught his eye. Standing over seven feet tall, with red leathery looking skin, and long, sturdy looking tails swishing along behind them as they bustled down the street. Some held hands, others had small children with them who were so adorable it made Percy's heart swell.

"Welcome to my home," Zese grumbled quietly into his ear causing a shiver of delight to roll through him. Percy could think of more than a few things he'd rather be doing with Zese in that moment, but apparently earth needed saving and it was up to him, Penn, and Piper to do it.

How the fuck did this happen? Percy mused. *It's like my life has become a giant cliché.*

You've been special from the moment you were born, Zese's voice sounded in his mind, his lips not moving.

"Only to you," Percy mumbled.

"Apparently, I must share you with the world a little longer," Zese grumbled.

Percy instinctively looked for Penn and Piper, who were standing hand in hand behind Lucifer. Penn's eyes were glued on the mammoth skyscraper in front of them, while Piper, much like Percy, was taking it all in with a smile on her face. The demon children were definitely cute.

Chapter Nineteen

Zese

Zese had wondered for so many years what it would be like bringing his fated one home. The places he would show them, the grand tour of the fields and the markets, followed by a tour of the inner circle where the leaders and warriors lived and worked. He fancied his fated one's reaction to the tavern he'd frequented, (they would love it as much as he did) as well as the traders and friends he would introduce his beloved to.

It seemed nothing had truly gone to plan, Zese wasn't even sure how he'd left things with his earthly boss. Had his truck even been unloaded? Where did his workmates think he was? Or had Lucifer taken care of all that? Where was Zephany now? Was Gerard still alive or was he being fattened like a lamb for slaughter? Blood sacrifice was a dark and old practice. The only shedding of blood Lucifer tolerated was the kind between friends when punches were thrown thanks to slights of the tongue - all quickly forgotten over another drink.

Zese felt Percy tugging him forward, pulling him from his thoughts and forcing him to stay present. *In a short time, all this mess will be over*, he consoled himself. Zese and Percy would be free to visit the Underworld as tourists, fuck like rabbits, and fulfill every desire Percy had ever had from the moment the current mess was over until his last breath, which would probably never happen because Zese would see to that.

Not being a scholar or an academic himself, Zese hadn't entered the room of records and relics since a school trip when he was no taller than Lucifer's knee, and from what little memory he had of the place, it was floor to ceiling shelves filled with scrolls. For the life of him, Zese couldn't work out why they were there, but Percy, Penn, and Piper all seemed eager to get inside, and Zese would do anything to make his mate happy. Even if it meant trolling through dusty scrolls while Lucifer gave them a history lesson. If that's what his plan was. *Who could tell with Lucifer?*

But as they entered into the cavernous entryway, it was lined as far as the eye could see with bright baubles Zese had no recollection of seeing when he was last there. His breath caught in his chest as he watched Percy pull away from him, as if in a trance, his eyes wide in wonder.

Zese maintained a close distance, but he got the sense his mate was being

pulled by an unseen force, and it was never a good idea to meddle with things like that. Unsavory consequences happened when demons meddled, especially with Lucifer present.

“Triplets, may I have your focused attention for a few brief seconds,” Lucifer said.

Penn, Piper, and Percy all turned to look at him, but Zese could see they were already being drawn away again. It looked like, for them it was a challenge even just keeping their feet still.

“I said I believed in show and tell. This building holds the artifact you will need before we move ahead. It will be calling to you - not your ears, but your soul. Follow the whispers of your heart, but heed my words. Do not touch a single thing until you are completely sure it has chosen you. There are relics here older than time itself and with powers so great they cannot be trusted.”

Slow nods flowed between the three as they all headed off in a different direction. Zese went to follow Percy, but Lucifer stopped him. “Zese, he needs to be free to follow his soul's calling. Leave him to his quest. We need to have a chat anyway. I haven't formally congratulated you on your mating.”

“I don't want to-”

“You're no use to him in this place. Percy will follow the call, he will find what is meant for him and he will return. Trust in him.”

Zese nodded, though he felt a heaviness settle in his chest as soon as Percy wandered out of his line of sight.

“My faithful servant. Relax a little.” Lucifer waved his hand, summoning a table that held two glasses and a decanter of a smooth golden liquid, along with two chairs with high ornately carved backs and plush red cushioning. “Let's sit, drink, talk. I may not get the pleasure of your company for a while once this is over.”

One part of Zese kept his mind on his mate, alert to any distress, but the other mindlessly sat while Lucifer poured them both a hefty glass. Dragging his eyes away from the now empty hallway Percy had traveled down, Zese forced himself to look at Lucifer. Now they were back in their hometown, Lucifer had dropped the pompous costume he'd worn topside.

He looked more relaxed and comfortable in his own environment. His ankle casually rested on his other leg and his elbow leaned delicately on the table as he watched Zese sideways out of the corner of his eye.

“I’m very proud of you, Zese. Many would have crumbled and given up in your situation,” Lucifer said quietly, a cadence of absolute truth clung to his words.

“I had my rocky start,” Zese mumbled.

“But once you found your center, you never let it go, you never wavered or gave up. And now, you’ve been rewarded with your fated one by your side.”

“This is a bit of buzz kill,” Zese said with a chuckle.

“A minor inconvenience in the grand scheme of life, wouldn’t you say?”

“Time will tell, Master. Time will tell.”

“You are no longer beholden to me, Zese. Your only concern now is to love and protect Percy with all your heart and soul. But I offer a word of warning.”

Zese raised his eyebrows and took a large sip of the soothing spirit from his glass.

“When Percy is in the heart of this ritual, you will want to run to him, you will feel compelled to answer his plea. You mustn’t.”

“You can’t ask me to ignore him,” Zese replied with more heat than he anticipated but surely Lucifer wasn’t foolish enough to think Zese would ignore his mate if he needed him.

“There will be a moment when the artifact will take full control of him. Just before that, Percy, Penn, and Piper must all open themselves to the powers that they’re chasing right now. In that space, people are vulnerable, scared even. Not in pain but some experience a deep panic, and with a bond like yours, especially with it being so new, it would be natural for Percy to seek your comfort in that moment.”

“And I would never deny him that.”

“But you must. A vessel must be completely empty and open to be utilized. All of this is for nothing if you can’t trust his inner strength. He wouldn’t have been chosen if he wasn’t worthy.”

“What do you mean, chosen? This is just a massive coincidence, isn’t it? If not Percy and his siblings, any other set of triplets would have been fine...”

“Usually, I would agree with you, Zese. But not this time.”

Zese sighed. “You knew he was special? That’s why you’d called him down to you before we’d even met yet?”

“It was a theory, but the way the magic sparked when he arrived in my office, I knew it had to be true. Zephany’s uprising was to be expected, and the only way to put this to bed once and for all was written into the threads of life long before I was thought into being.”

“Why didn’t you warn me?”

“Why do you think the Fates called you to earth the day he was born? Surely you’ve pulled that thread loose by now.”

Zese shook his head and refilled his now empty glass. “We figured out the timing, but I have no idea why.”

“Your presence on earth meant he was watched over, and your perseverance to find him, despite not knowing who or what you were seeking, that kind of energy is protective. The Fates knew your meeting would be viable and inevitable, so he was watched over more intensely.”

“It’s not like I had a choice,” Zese grumbled.

“Ah, but my sweet demon, there is always a choice. Always. And when you are faced with your next hard choice. I urge you to put your faith in your mate. The balance of the world depends on it.”

“No fucking pressure, then,” Zese grumbled. The chiming of a clock that Zese couldn’t see rang out three times, bouncing off the walls of the huge open space.

“My, my. That was quick,” Lucifer said with a smile. He stood, and Zese followed suit, thankful that he had when the table and chairs disappeared a split second later.

Lucifer’s eyes were trained on a particular spot, so Zese followed his gaze, itching to see Percy, even though it felt as if only a few moments had passed. It was long enough for Zese, and with Lucifer’s warning still ringing in his ears, he longed for his sweet mate's touch to reassure him he was okay.

Penn emerged first, clutching a green swirling orb in his hand, a huge smile on his face. “Look, Master, this one chose me. Me? Can you imagine it? I never want to leave...” Zese zoned out as Penn continued to babble and preen with Lucifer, who was dutifully praising him, even patting him on his head.

Next was Piper with her purple orb, her hair was disheveled, but she showed no other signs of distress and wore a smaller smile than Penn’s, but a smile all the same.

The seconds ticked by as Piper stood next to Zese. “He’ll be here any second, you’ll see.” Zese mustn’t have looked convinced because she patted his arm gently. “Both of us would know if something bad had happened. He’s stronger than you think.”

Zese had to smile then at the sisterly adoration in her voice. He had no doubt his mate was fierce and determined and had many fascinating talents and strengths for Zese to discover and enjoy. But in the face of an adversary as ruthless as Zephany, and the salvation of the world at stake, Zese felt he had earned the right to be a little wary and feel a little protective of his new mate.

An internal clock Zese had never been aware of before was ticking loudly in his ears, and his inner demon was prowling beneath the surface of his skin when Percy, in all his adorable glory, finally trotted down the path his siblings had come before him. The orb in his hand glowed with all the colors of the rainbow and some that Zese couldn’t name if he tried. It, like Percy, was extraordinary.

His demon purred in delight and Zese was overcome by a need to touch his mate. Without waiting for him to reach them, Zese strode forward and pulled Percy into his arms. That wasn’t enough. Zese pushed him back with more force than he meant to, causing Percy to gasp. But Zese was filled with an insatiable need to kiss and taste and touch - to devour his mate.

Percy relaxed into the kiss, opening himself up to be tasted, an action which made Zese moan in delight. “The things I’m gonna do to you,” Zese whispered, and he was thrilled to see his mate eat up every word.

“All right, you two. We have a veil to close and a world to save,” Piper called out to them.

“As if we need reminding,” Percy said with a grin. “More of this later, much, much more.”

“Are you okay? You’re not hurt?” Zese asked, looking over every inch of skin he could see.

“I’m okay. It was a bit weird, kind of like walking in a fog. I was just compelled to walk this way and that, not really seeing where I was going. Then just when I felt like I was going nowhere, or thinking I was walking in circles. I saw this luminous light and the most incredible voice calling to me. No, it was singing to me in some language I’d never heard before. I wanted to shrink away from it, but my hand, as if it had a mind all of its own, reached

out, and it jumped right off the shelf into my hand. As soon as I touched it, my vision came clear, and I had to find my way back, but thankfully my feet knew the way.”

“Sounds like you had quite the adventure, little chipmunk,” Zese ruffled his hair and kissed him again, before taking his hand and walking back to their unlikely group with a pep in his step. With his mate by his side all was right in the world.

“My wonderful chipmunks, step two is complete,” Lucifer beamed. “What comes next will follow the same rules of intuition and trust. Are you ready?”
And wasn't that the question of the hour? Zese would have felt happier about everything if he knew what that everything was.

Chapter Twenty

Percy

Am I ready? That was the question of the hour, and Percy wasn't sure he had the answer yet. Zese's warmth flooded through him, and with the strange glowing, singing orb that seemed to have chosen him clutched in his hand, Percy got the impression he could be brave if he chose to be.

But just as that thought crossed his mind, he felt a switch flick deep inside him, and the "what if's" started to plague his mind. What they'd done so far was very likely nothing compared to what they would face next. An artifact chose them – that was the easy part. Though Lucifer seemed thrilled things had gone so smoothly, suggesting maybe it hadn't last time, although Percy had no way of knowing. But his chest was puffed slightly, and he knew he had a silly grin on his face. The soothing scent of lemon and cinnamon from his demon flooded his senses.

That is what will make the difference. My mate. Percy knew without any doubts that with Zese by his side he could conquer any mountain, and overcome any obstacle. Despite the comfort that thought brought with it, somehow, a gut instinct told him that Zese could be sidelined for what was coming next, just as Lucifer would be. If the issue had been something Lucifer could've fixed, he'd have done it already. But Percy didn't know what would come next – he had no idea of what was being asked of him and his siblings. Were they even strong enough to harness whatever power the strange orbs held?

Percy knew Lucifer was waiting for his answer. *Am I ready?* But it was difficult to speak with his mind in panic mode. Images flickered before his eyes, and the orb gave the impression of surging through his body. There were images of his childhood, the days spent causing mischief and mayhem with his siblings and cousins. Babushka's sweet voice as she beckoned them from the outside world with promises of cookies and milk. He felt Zese's warmth slipping away from him as the images and memories continued to surface. A life that seemed so long ago yet really wasn't when faced with eternity. Then there was his life now, his friends Skye and Ben, and even Gerard, though Percy no longer considered him a friend. He found it hard to think of the man as a foe though, and couldn't help but wonder where he was in all this madness.

Having grown up primarily under Babushka's watchful gaze, Percy had always known of magic and the deep mysteries the world held tight. He'd always had a sense of good and evil, right and wrong, and an innate knowing that if he was blessed, the Fates would gift him a mate of his very own. But his world had been turned on its head. There was no good and bad, just choices. Percy had chosen to trust his instincts, and his instincts had led him to the Underworld, with his mate by his side, about to do battle with a demon that made the Lord of all demons nervous.

What the actual fuck am I doing? Percy asked himself, and the orb buzzed harder.

"Percy," Zese's voice seemed to call to him from the darkness. He looked around and all he could see was black. He was alone, completely, and utterly lost in the shadows of his mind. His mate's frantic voice called to him, and he couldn't find the source as it rattled around the empty space.

"Zese," Percy called. "I'm lost, I need you."

Percy could hear his mate raging outside his mind. *Is that where I am?* Percy looked harder, trying to make out an outline, find a speckle of light or even a glimpse of something other than the complete nothingness that sat before him, and at the same time, wrapped around him, making him feel cold and empty.

"That's it," Percy exclaimed. Lucifer had told them they would be vessels for the artifacts that chose them. He clutched the buzzing orb closer. "And for that you need me to be empty, don't you?" Percy mumbled to the glowing ball.

It buzzed in agreement, and Percy chuckled to himself. "Okay, so what do I do now?" With one riddle answered, it was onto the next one. Though Percy wished he could communicate with Zese who sounded like he was having a full scale panic attack right about now. Either that, or he was about to tear down the walls of the Underworld looking for Percy.

Taking a deep soothing breath and with as much gusto as he could Percy yelled loud and clear into his mind, *I'm okay, sweet demon, I'm okay.* The yelling outside, wherever he was, stopped, the stomping and storming inside his mind settled, and Percy took another breath. Now he had to find his brother and sister - easier said than done in a sea of nothingness.

Clutching his buzzing orb firmly in both hands he looked in every direction,

turning in what he hoped was a full three hundred and sixty degree circle. He did this three times before he got a sense of where he thought the orb wanted him to go, and he took a few careful steps, worried that the ground beneath him could be nothing more than air.

He'd taken about ten steps and was beginning to breathe a sigh of relief when his fears became reality, and Percy felt himself teetering on the edge of a huge abyss. Nothing looked any different, but Percy felt the shift immediately and pulled his foot back, stopping himself from taking another step.

Part of him wanted to turn around, but a knowing deep inside him told him he was supposed to go down, he was supposed to fall. But could he do that? Wouldn't he die when he hit the ground?

"Trust me and trust yourself," the whispered voice sang to him.

"Ah, shit! Well here goes nothing." Percy hesitated.

It's all gonna be okay, his chipmunk murmured. You were born for this moment, and the Fates will guide you, just close your eyes and listen.

Pushing his fear aside and letting his inner voices guide him, Percy held firm to the knowledge his chipmunk had never steered him wrong. Closing his eyes, Percy let one word escape his lips before he took another step forward. "Zese," before he fell willingly into the darkness.

It was a strange sensation. The world had been a sea of nothingness and now the empty space swirled around him as he continued to plummet towards the unknown. Percy kept waiting for his life to flash before his eyes, but the flashes never came, but the ground did, and it came fast.

One second he was falling, swirling, his body hurtling through the empty cavern of emptiness, and the next he was landing softly on his feet looking into a huge expanse of bubbling molten lava, mountains scattered with small cages with scrawny limbs protruding from them. Every sight, sound, and smell repulsed him in a new and grotesque way. His eyes scanned his surroundings equally curious as he was astounded by what he saw, until the reassuring voice whispered, "We are close now. Keep moving."

Percy nodded, more to himself than to anyone in particular, and he let his feet and the orb guide him. The further he walked, the more he was assaulted by truly terrifying and peculiar sights. To his left a man was hanging upside down from his toes, being tickled by peacocks as they pecked at the ground beneath him. To his right, a woman walked slowly, then dived gracefully into

a pit of molten lava, only to emerge covered in burns and screaming blue murder, before repeating the process again and again.

Tall, hooded figures that looked to be no more than shadows in cloaks roamed the edges of the fray, but they paid no attention to Percy. Being close to them made his skin crawl and urged his feet to move faster. Somehow knowing he was nearing his destination, Percy was almost running by the time a clearing appeared before him. He saw Penn and Piper looking equally traumatized as he felt, standing huddled together, staring at a huge pulsing gateway.

Not hesitating for a second, Percy sprinted to make up the distance between him and his siblings. The screaming from the tortured souls behind him grew louder, but still he ran. Even when he reached them, Percy didn't stop, sweeping them both into his arms in one swift movement, he pulled them to the ground as they tumbled and fell, landing in a heap of limbs. Percy had never felt so relieved not to be alone.

After they had hugged, and Percy had ensured his siblings were unharmed, they all helped each other back up onto their feet, where they all stood staring at the gateway they were supposed to close.

"I know Lucifer said he was a believer in show and tell, but surely he could have mentioned what the heck we're supposed to do now that we've arrived at the gate."

"I was the last to vanish into the darkness," Penn said quietly. "I got the impression Lord Lucifer hadn't expected things to go like this."

"What makes you say that?" Although Percy wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

Penn chuckled nervously. "That might have been because the last thing I heard him say was, 'No, no, no. It's not supposed to happen like this'."

"Right. Well. That makes sense." Percy shook his head. "Not!"

"So far, we've been pushed to open ourselves up and listen to our instincts. My instincts are telling me to smash my orb into the ground, but I feel like we're supposed to say something, although the words aren't clear in my mind," Piper said quietly.

She was looking intently between Percy and Penn, clearly hoping one of them would have the magical words locked in their souls somewhere, but Percy was drawing a blank, and based on the look on Penn's face, he had no

idea either.

Just as Percy was about to suggest they sit and think for a minute, a rolling wave of thunder and the sound of a thousand wings ripped through the air and swirled around them. A massive cloud of dust, like a tornado, whipped between them and the gate, leaving them with no choice but to cling to each other for dear life. Percy dug his feet into the ground and hoped they didn't get pulled apart.

Penn and Piper were clinging to him just as fiercely. Every other sound had been consumed by the roaring of wings, but as the tornado type swirling slowed, the sound morphed and sharpened from thunderous flapping to the screams of a thousand lost souls. The noise was excruciating, and the three of them slumped to a heap with their hands over their ears, unable to drown out the torturous noise as it threatened to consume their sanity.

Then suddenly a huge demon stood before them, with his arms open wide. The souls of those who had transported him reverted from screams to whispers only to allow the monster to speak.

"You got further than I'd anticipated." His tone was mocking and grated on every one of Percy's nerves.

Standing, because Percy refused to die on his knees, if the demon's intention was to kill them, he pulled Piper and then Penn up to stand with him as they faced down the terrifying beast. The demon stood over ten feet tall, his skin as black as coal, with gnarled horns that sat like a morbid crown on his head all jutting out in different directions. His jagged teeth numbered more than a man could count, and were so large he couldn't close his lips fully.

His face was jagged and pointy, his cheekbones looked like they'd been carved into his face. The lines were exaggerated by the presence of a beak, rather than a nose, that looked like something that had come off a mutilated oversized bird. His eyebrows looked like the barbed wire one saw on top of old prison fences edged his small squinty eyes that were as black and empty as the space where Percy first found himself before his fall into the unknown.

Without any introduction, Percy had no doubt that the demon that stood between them and the gate was Zephany. The sheer size of the beast made Percy feel small and insignificant, even with his siblings flanking him. There was a moment where nothing but doubt filled his mind, and the only thing

Percy was sure of was that they would die. Percy would never again hear Zese laugh, or watch his eyes flutter as he came to ecstasy. He'd never get to finish their sexy bucket list, or watch his demon cook, or make him a cocktail after a hard day at work.

There would be so many things Percy would miss. He'd never again wrap his arms around his sweet Babushka or his favorite cousins or laugh and joke with Skye and Ben. The last thing that he would see before his life came to a crashing halt would be the despicable beast that mocked them with its sheer presence and power.

"It's always amusing to me the ones Lucifer chooses to come on these little self-destructive missions," Zephany taunted. "So tiny, so insignificant. Ah, yes, that must be it. He chooses the ones that no one will miss. Is that it?" Without waiting for them to reply he reached into a bag that hung amongst large axes and sickles from the oversized belt around his huge middle and pulled out a glass jar.

Before Percy's eyes the jar which had started out not much taller than a foot high began to grow, and as it grew, the contents of the jar became clearer. Gerard.

Well, Percy thought, at least we know once and for all that he's still alive. For now.

Something about seeing Gerard looking so vulnerable and weak, trapped inside an oversized jam jar at the mercy of a soulless demon like Zephany, caused something inside Percy to snap. His usually subdued and passive chipmunk was ready, gearing up for battle. The man/beast/demon/monster was standing between them and their happily ever after, and there was no version of his story where Percy wasn't going to do anything and everything in his power to get back to Zese and start living his life to the absolute fullest. No more fears, no more holding back, no more living with regrets!

Percy let out a war cry and without a word or a moment's thought he screamed and cast his orb onto the ground hearing the shattered glass echo throughout the pits of the Underworld.

Chapter Twenty-One

Zese

One minute his cherry scented mate had been holding his hand and the next he was gone. Zese had looked at Lucifer only to hear him say, “No, no, no. It’s not supposed to happen like this.”

He’d floundered then, his demon fierce under his skin. His teeth had elongated, and his claws were out and ready, looking for an imminent threat that never arrived. The chipmunks who’d been clutching their shiny orbs had all vanished right from under their noses without so much as a whisper of where they’d gone.

That’s when Zese had heard Percy calling to him from the darkness. Zese had been storming and raging, pounding on walls and the ground, looking for a tunnel, a gateway, an opened gate, any sign to indicate where his beloved had gone.

He knew Lucifer was yelling at him, but Zese’s mind was consumed with Percy. Where had he gone? Would he ever see him again? Just when despair was set to rip Zese’s heart from his chest he’d heard a whisper in his mind. “I’m okay, sweet demon, I’m okay.” Those six little words were Zese’s lifeline. His mate was okay... for now. That meant that Zese had time to find him before Zephany showed up, or so he hoped.

Lucifer had given up yelling at Zese and was now pacing, muttering to himself, when Zese finally got his shit together and approached him. “Zese, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened. I keep trying to translocate to the pits, but I can’t...”

Zese tried to zap himself to the gate that led to the pits, but when he opened his eyes all he could see was Lucifer watching him intently. “Even when I boost you, you can’t either. What the fuck, what the actual fuckity, fuck is going on?”

In all their years together it was the first time Zese had ever seen his unflappable Master look worried and out of control. It took every ounce of his strength and willpower to *not* fall into an unfocused rage all over again. That wasn’t going to help them, and it sure as shit wasn’t going to help Percy, Penn, or Piper.

“We need to get to the pits?” Zese asked.

“It’s my best guess, that’s where the gateway is.”

“What a dumbass place for a gate,” Zese mumbled. “Right where the assholes who’d wanna use it can see it every second of their damned days.”

“That was the whole bloody point, and now is not the time to be giving me decorating tips, okay.”

“Okay, I’ll put a pin in that design flaw, and we’ll come back to it once the chipmunks are safe and the Zephany has been sent back to where he belongs.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal there, Zese. Let’s do this shit.”

“So, how the hell do we get to the pits on foot?” Zese would break a world record sprinting if he had to.

Lucifer gave him a smile. “It’d be quicker to fly,” he said, letting his huge wings unfurl from behind him.

“Fuck, yeah.” Zese let his demon come to the fore without another thought.

They burst through the doors of the records center and took to the air. Zese couldn’t remember the last time he had been fully in his demon form, not in all the time he’d been on earth that’s for sure. It felt like coming home to himself all over again, as his demon flapped his huge wings, Zese admired the way the community that had raised him looked from the same skies he’d learned to fly in.

He had to admit it would be much more fun if Percy was tucked safely in his arms, enjoying the sights with him, but he had to hold onto the hope that those days were fast approaching, in the same way that Zese and Lucifer were fast approaching the gates that separated the community from the pits.

From the moment he could form a thought, Zese had been taught to avoid the pits and any surrounding areas as if his life depended on it. The pits were for those few wayward souls where there really was no goodness to entice out, for those so completely lost to their own madness, they could see no benefit to a life shared with others. As a rule souls like that existed so infrequently, they became almost a myth, but when amassed across a lifetime, the pits were a place to be avoided if not feared.

Knowing that his brave and fearless mate was behind the vast cliffs that separated the pits from the rest of the Underworld made Zese’s heart skip a beat, and his demon’s wings flapped harder. From their position high above the bustle of the city, it was clear there was something happening at the

furthest edge of the land allocated to the pits. Flashes of light illuminated the sky, and the strangest magic seemed to steal the air all around them.

Lucifer was beginning to descend towards the main gate, and Zese followed suit. Greeting the ogre that guarded the gates with a friendly smile and a wave Lucifer took a step back just as the ogre's club came crashing down in front of his feet.

"No one passes," the ogre boomed.

"I beg your pardon," Lucifer growled, rising to his full height and hovering at eye level with the guardian of the gates. "Do you know who you're speaking to?"

"I answer only to Lucifer himself," the beast said proudly.

"I am Lucifer, you imbecile, now stand down or suffer my wrath."

Lucifer had unleashed his full form, one Zese had never seen before and had only heard about in whispered stories from those who lived a long time ago. It was a fierce sight, one which would make a weaker man weep if he were ever face to face with it. But with so much at stake, it was no wonder Lucifer wasn't feeling overly charitable with the overzealous gatekeeper. Ogre or not. Justified or not. No one defied Lucifer, and most definitely not when he was in a hurry.

Zese hovered impatiently, jumping foot to foot, watching intently as the ogre, who clearly had poor eyesight from the get-go, registered the booming threat from his Master. A hundred warriors stormed the gates and at the sight of Lucifer in his blazing, flaming glory they all dropped to their knees. Zese felt compelled to do the same, but he stood his ground, he wasn't on the wrong side of Lucifer at this moment, those idiots were.

"Open this gate this instant or every single one of you will spend the rest of eternity as nothing more than mole rats and worms for the crows to feast upon," Lucifer roared.

"Why didn't you just let him in, you idiot," the tallest scraggly bearded warrior shrieked at the ogre as the gates slid open.

"You told me not to open the gate to anyone except Lucifer himself, and then told me he'd never use the gate, so anyone claiming to be him was a liar," the ogre mumbled as he hauled the gate open wider for them to pass. "Apologies, Master."

The apologies were a mere whisper, easily ignored as they finally passed

through the excessively high gates, forged from the steel found only in the Underworld. It was a metal so strong even the lava from the center of the earth would do no more than blemish it momentarily. It took an ogre and a hundred men to pull the gates open wide enough to let them through.

Without another word to anyone, Lucifer shrunk in size and flapped his wings again, which was Zese's sign to catch up quickly, or be left behind. Initially Zese was following Lucifer blindly, but it didn't take long for his sharp senses to catch a whiff of his sweet mate's scent, or to catch sight of his scuffed footprints in the ground below.

But more than that, the sounds of the ensuing battle rang around the pits and bounced off every cavernous mountain range in sight. Even the shadows that guarded the souls were avoiding the area, and that meant that whatever was going down, it had to be ruthless. The shadows had been chosen as guardians of the damned because they had no aversion to anything and couldn't be swayed or coerced. But whatever was happening was too much even for them.

Zese banked left on his huge wings and let the current glide him around the expansive corner. He was hot on Lucifer's heels now, and as they rounded the last corner that stood between them, and his love, his breath caught in his throat at what he saw before him.

The orbs that when he'd last seen them had been clutched in the hands of each of the triplets were now enveloping their respective host. The three giant orbs, one green, one purple and one which caught Zese's eyes and held it, a luminescent rainbow: Percy!

In a formation of sorts the swirling globes of color danced around the monster Zese recognized as Zephany, only he was in his true form. By the gods, he was a beast and a half. Flames and smoke spewed from his mouth as he threw everything he had at the glittering orbs that were trying to ensnare him. The clanging of metal on metal, and a low hum of a chant danced in the air. A crackling and hissing seemed to erupt with each blow. But Zese couldn't see from this distance who held the upper hand.

Lucifer had slowed, but every instinct in Zese's body wanted to surge forward. To narrow the distance between him and Percy, his sweet, fierce Percy. If he was blessed enough to hold that man in his arms after this, he'd never, ever let him go.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Percy

The moment Percy had cast the orb to the ground, his soul let out a resounding and audible, “Yes,” and the magic that had once been encased in the swirling mass of colors, enveloped him in a warmth rivaling the hugs from his Babushka. The whisper that had quietly and gently guided him earlier was now a crisp clear cadence in his ear.

“Good work, Percy. We knew we could count on you. Now let’s finish this.”

Percy looked to Penn and Piper, who were looking from Percy to the orbs in their hands and then back at the monster that was Zephany. He could sense their hesitation, but Percy had to trust that they would follow their fate and make their choice just as he had. There was no going back now. He was all in and would see this through to the bitter end.

Zephany moved to strike, a smirk on his hideous face, or at least Percy assumed it was a smirk. It was hard to tell. But regardless of the expression the monster wore, there was no doubt he was a trained warrior, something Percy was not. But with the guidance of the voice in his head, the determination of the ages behind him, and fueled with an insane amount of magic that swelled inside the orb with him, he let go of his own thoughts, imagining them rolling out of his mind like water, and let the magic that he entrusted with his body, lead the way.

Percy dipped and dived avoiding hit after hit, when he eventually realized he couldn’t doge forever he was going to have to attack, but he had no clue what his orb was capable of. As if answering his unasked question a cascade of attacks were launched and a slow bubbling chant began to swell from deep within his soul.

To his left, Percy saw a swirling orb of purple and a very scared looking Piper with her eyes shut tight holding on for dear life as her orb swerved and dodged, shooting the occasional jet of smoke and fire at the enemy. To his right, he saw Penn having the time of his life. He almost looked as if he was playing an arcade game inside his swirling green mass of color and light. The grin on his face made Percy smile and gave him a brief reprieve from the severity and fear that was wound around him.

The battle raged on. It was hard to know which side was winning. Technically it was three against one. But that one was a treacherous

opponent, and was not going to go down without a fight. The arsenal that he hung around his waist was dwindling though, something Percy took as being a good sign. All around his feet lay the tattered ruins of the weapons the orbs had already destroyed and any signs of demons lingering to help had long ago scattered.

But it was the chant that took hold of Percy's full focus. "Let go," the voice said. "Give yourself to me."

Percy wanted to hold onto a few things, his Babushka, and his first kiss with Zese, but the voice inside urged him to let them fall away, too. Percy felt like a traitor for a brief second until the full force of the chant took him over completely. Before his eyes closed, he swore he caught the flicker of a scent that made him want to lock his lips, but then the world went dark and all he could hear was the chanting.

The words were being spoken from his lips, in his voice, though he no longer recognized the sound. He only knew that his lips were moving. Percy didn't understand the words, but he could feel the power swelling inside him.

Soon his brother's voice joined the chant, and a few minutes later he could hear Piper's voice, too. The stark emptiness that had started this strange journey was now slowly being filled with a myriad of colors so bright and beautiful that Percy wanted to look away, but he couldn't avert his eyes.

An immense pressure began to build within the orb, one that threatened to tear at the fiber of his very being. Just as Percy's body began to adjust to the pressure, it transformed into a heat so intense he cried out Zese's name in a long loud scream. Somewhere in the background he heard his demon's voice. It was like a cool washcloth over his heat ravaged forehead. "I'm here. You're not alone. Trust yourself and let go, sweet Percy. Just let go."

The voice and his chipmunk all joined the chant inside his head until all he could do was feel and scream the words that rang out from his lips - the words of the ancients, the words that would send Zephany back to where he belonged and close the gate again.

Pulses of magic and heat zinged all around him the air felt thick and his body struggled for breath between the words. But as the sounds grew in strength, and as he and his siblings found their united voice, everything pitched into one beautiful crescendo. Zephany fell to his knees, letting out a long, loud, terrifying scream. But the chanting didn't stop. Percy felt as if his skin was

peeling from his muscles and everything inside him screamed at him to stop, he dug into a well deep inside of him he didn't even know existed. He chanted longer and louder, clearer and with an authority, that in no way belonged to him, but felt so right falling from his lips.

Percy didn't need to understand the words to be able to feel their power, and making one last life changing choice, he opened his eyes to see Zephany begin to disintegrate into smoke and ash right in front of him. Victory, he thought with a sigh, and the orb with him in it came crashing to the ground in the same way he had cast down when the madness had begun. Just before he was sure he was going to crash, Percy felt his body being scooped up into familiar yet unknown arms, and darkness hit him. Whatever the outcome, he was done...

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Percy was drifting, vaguely aware of the warm chest he was pressed against, the arms that carried him with such care, and the murmuring of a deep voice that called him back to his body. Percy's eyes flickered and he saw the red sky moving above him, and the face that had kept him going in his darkest moments: Zese.

"Thank the gods," Zese mumbled, coming to a stop. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Never," Percy croaked. His throat was raw and swollen.

"Hush, you're safe now. We'll talk when you're better."

Percy nodded and settled his head back against Zese's chest preparing for sleep when a thought struck him hard and fast, and he tried to squirm free.

Zese held fast, "What's troubling you. What do you need?"

"Gerard," Percy said in a squeak. Zese looked confused but regardless, he turned back. His eyes raking the aftermath of battle. "Glass jar," Percy managed, but his throat was protesting loudly, and he couldn't utter another word.

Zese pulled him a little closer, "I'll handle it. Now rest."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Zese

Having followed his instincts to run, Zese had managed to sweep Percy into his arms as the magic cascaded in all directions around them, and thankfully caught his sweet chipmunk shifter, before his body hit the ground.

Lucifer had Piper in his arms and Rigmus, who'd popped in just as the fun ended, was carrying Penn. The three of them walked, not wanting to add any additional strain by translocating the fragile bodies they each held.

Rigmus had stopped when Zese had and was looking back in the same direction. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"Percy woke up for a minute, he said Gerard was there. Something about a glass jar. Sounds messed up, but we better check."

"Let's focus on the heroes of the hour. We can get one of the guards to go and look when we get to the gates."

Zese grunted. It was a good plan and there was no way Zese was putting Percy down to look for some arrogant vulture. "The bastard can wait."

Lucifer had slowed and was watching them as they commenced their journey. "Problem?" he asked.

"Percy saw Gerard, doesn't want him left behind," Zese mumbled.

"Would you rather we left nature to take its course?" Lucifer asked gently.

Zese grumbled quietly. "No, if Percy wants him..."

"You do realize I can't let the vulture leave the Underworld. Not after what he's done," Lucifer replied coolly.

"Well, I figured as much. But Percy..."

"He'll get his closure," Lucifer said in his usual commanding but reassuring tone.

That was all Zese needed to hear and when a demon lackey in a rather skimpy loincloth came bounding toward Lucifer like a puppy, Zese left them to make their arrangements and took his beloved back to Lucifer's castle.

The high towers were a sight for sore eyes by the time the long journey was complete. What had been a relatively short flight had taken over an hour on foot. But as Zese watched Percy sleep peacefully in his arms, he vowed he'd walk a million miles, over hot coals if necessary, to ensure his mate was safe and comfortable.

He has an immense amount of strength, the demon inside purred.

That he does, Zese agreed. *Let's hope it's not challenged again too soon.*

Over my dead body, the demon huffed.

Zese chuckled and turned to ask Lucifer where they should be heading when a flurry of wings greeted him. Zese looked at the six figures who had fallen to their knees before him, or more likely Percy.

"Master told us to be ready," one with bright red hair announced, his head still bowed.

"You may stand," Zese said brusquely. "Announce yourselves."

It was going to take a fair bit of convincing for Zese to hand over his precious cargo.

"Apologies, Zese. We mean no harm. Lucifer summoned us to be ready to care for the heroes. I am Jazareth, and these are my associates."

"I'm not leaving him. I'm not leaving any of them."

Jazareth's eyes twinkled. "We expected nothing less. Please follow us this way." Zese turned back to look for Lucifer. "The Master knows the way. Come now. We have much to do."

Casting a glance at Rigmus, who just shrugged and followed, Zese huffed a sigh and did the same. They traipsed through wide hallways lit with oversized lanterns. Huge tapestries decorated in rich colors and depicted scenes of the upper realms and those from the history of the underworld decorated the endless hallways.

Zese had explored Lucifer's castle very little. He'd seen the office, of course. But he'd never thought much about what other treasures the space might hold. Everywhere he looked there was a new wonder to see and ponder over, if he wasn't already on an important mission, he might have been able to

enjoy it.

“Not much further,” Jazareth announced. “Just here, just bring them in here. There is a bedspace for each of them.”

Zese looked around the room with curiosity. It was warm and well lit. The huge windows overlooked the market bustling with people below. Plants and flowers of every color and variety took up huge walls growing both vertically and horizontally around the vast space.

In a row under the windows were four beds. “Who’s the fourth bed for?” Zese asked suspiciously.

“Lucifer warned there was an extra arrival, due imminently. Please, you can stay close. But we need to get to work.”

“You never did say what your work entailed,” Zese said, determined not to let Percy go until he was absolutely sure whatever was going to happen was safe. His mate had already been through enough.

“We are the Master’s healers. We study and work from this very room. He trusts us. I ask that you do, too.”

Rigmus had already set Penn down on the bed next to where Zese stood, and two of Jazareth’s associates were already hard at work. One was laying on hands while the other was mixing a strange looking concoction.

Not being familiar with healers, Zese hesitated, but his need for Percy to be okay won out over his reluctance to let him go. “One wrong step, and I’ll remove your hands,” Zese warned.

Jazareth just smiled and got to work. As he worked, he explained to Zese what he was doing, and what his partner, Johann was doing. They cleared the excess magic from Percy’s aura, checked him for physical injuries and laid balms and poultices where they were needed.

Lucifer breezed into the room a short time later and placed Piper down for the same treatment, while the scantily dressed demon carried in Gerard. Zese couldn’t help but gawk at the sight of a grown ass man trapped inside a glass jar being carried by a damn near naked demon. That was most definitely not something a person got to see every day.

Rigmus wasn’t so restrained, and his booming laughter made everyone look

up.

“Oh, my.” Jazareth really sounded surprised. “I haven’t seen that spell in at least a millennium. That’s gonna take some work.”

He snapped his fingers, and three more clones of him appeared. He was the only one with red hair, but aside from that, they almost looked like cardboard cutouts. Each healer stood five feet high at most. They all wore long purple cloaks that covered every inch of them, and they all had the most unnerving bright yellow eyes, sharp noses, and pointy chins. Despite their odd appearance, Zese couldn’t deny their quick efficient way of working, and all other thoughts left his mind when he felt Percy’s hand squeeze his.

“Percy,” he whispered.

“Zese.” Percy’s voice was still husky, but much stronger than before. Johann glided forward with a tall glass that held a bubbling liquid with the faintest tinge of pink in it.

“Here. Drink this Master Percy. It’ll soothe your throat and aid your healing.”

Zese helped Percy to sit up, slowly and gently guiding him, propping pillows that had appeared out of nowhere and fluffing until the grimace of pain was gone from his face. With some help, Percy took a long sip from the glass, and his lips raised into a smile. “It tastes like watermelon,” he whispered before taking a deeper drink.

Before long, Percy’s glass was empty, and his eyes looked brighter, he wasn’t struggling to hold his body still as much as when he initially woke, and he was happily looking around the room when Penn and Piper woke up.

“You’re all going to be just fine,” Jazareth announced half an hour later.

“Thanks to your quick thinking and unmatched skills,” Lucifer said eliciting a faint blush from the healer.

“We are here to serve the Master,” he replied smoothly, and a sea of heads bowed around the room.

“Plus, you get to play with all these neat toys,” Lucifer teased.

Jazareth chuckled, it was an odd sound, almost as if he rarely did it. “That

certainly helps on a dreary boring day, Your Eminence.”

After one last check on the three chipmunks, the extra healers vanished while Jazareth and Johann stayed huddled over Gerard’s bed in the far corner.

Zese perched himself on the edge of Percy’s bed, careful not to jostle him, and took a firm hold on both of his hands. “You had me worried half to death,” he chided gently. “No more battling with demons for you.”

“Are Penn and Piper okay?” Percy asked quietly. “I can see them, I know they’re talking, but you know... it could be a front. That does happen.”

Zese looked around the space to see them chatting animatedly to Lucifer and Rigmus. “They’re just fine. You’re all going to be back home and back to your normal lives in no time.”

“Technically, I won’t be,” Percy said quietly. “My life is forever changed now that I have you. And my time with Gerard has come to an end so...”

“Hey, hey. Don’t worry. You’ve got all the time in the world to work out what you want to do with yourself. We have all the time in the world,” Zese corrected himself.

“I’ll need to speak with him if they ever get him out of the jar. I need to make sure he’s going to look after Skye and Ben while I’m gone.”

“You know what, Percy,” Zese said quietly looking around the room. “I have a feeling everything is going to work out just fine. I can feel it.”

Percy managed a small smile. “Can you help me get over there, so I can talk to Penn and Piper.”

“With pleasure,” Zese said with a smile. He pulled back the decadent velvet blanket and hoisted Percy into his arms before strolling over and sitting down on Piper’s bed pulling Percy firmly onto his lap as he went.

Percy curled up on his lap and chatted easily with Penn and Piper and seemingly content that his siblings were in fact not only fine, but highly animated about the adventure they’d just been on. He fell asleep with Zese stroking his hair.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Percy

Seventy-two hours had been and gone. Percy, Penn, and Piper were still enjoying the hospitality of the Underworld, and thoroughly enjoying it, too. But unfortunately, Gerard was still in a magically induced coma as he recovered from the depths of the trauma he'd endured.

Zese had insisted on just one more day, and then they were all going back earthside. "There's no point in waiting around for Gerard. People will have started to notice your absence, and I'm sure Babushka is waiting for you."

There was a firm logic in what Zese was saying, but something inside Percy was being completely illogical about talking to Gerard. Maybe part of that was because, for once in his life, Percy wanted to stand his ground, look the man in the eye, and tell him exactly what he thought of him.

His time in the Underworld and his brush with magic, demons, and the threat of death had made him see in vivid color what an absolute pushover he'd been, and Percy vowed and declared that moving forward he wouldn't allow anyone to make him feel small again.

"Gah! I don't want to feel sorry for him..." Percy's voice cracked as he tried to hold his conflicting emotions in check.

"Then, don't," Zese said simply. "He doesn't deserve your good heart. He's an ass, and if you hadn't asked for him to be saved, he'd be dead and rotting in the pits by now."

"You know Percy. I've been toying with how to tell you this..." Lucifer's voice trailed off.

Percy turned away from the table full of ornately decorated jars he'd been looking at. They were visiting the market, Zese hovering to make sure he didn't overdo anything. He was lost in thought about which one to buy for Babushka when his traitorous brain reminded him of Gerard. But jars aside, he gave Lucifer his full attention.

"It's hard to believe the Lord of the Underworld might be lost for words," Percy teased.

"It's not that I don't know what I want to tell you, but more that I don't want

to upset you in anyway. We're forging a friendship, and I would hate to jeopardize that."

Percy chewed on his lip as he processed Lucifer's words. But before he could decide the best way to respond, a squawking crow overhead alerted an incoming and seemingly urgent message.

Lucifer allowed the noisy bird to land on his shoulder and listened intently as it relayed the message. Lucifer's eyes widened, while his hand conjured a rather large cookie which the crow took in both talons as it flew back to the castle, making an equal amount of noise as it had when it arrived.

"It seems our chat will have to wait, dear Percy. Your vulture is finally awake, and it seems he wants to speak with you quite urgently."

Percy's shopping would have to wait, too, but as Zese's wings emerged and Lucifer unfurled his own, Percy's heart palpitations increased. While he couldn't argue it was a rush to fly over the city, and he'd done so a few times already but being so up in the air and so vulnerable to falling made Percy glad to see the ground again.

"It's quicker this way," Zese said with a wink.

"As long as you hold me tight," Percy said with a smile.

"Always, Percy. Always."

Back in the room where the strange but undoubtedly skilled healers had brought Percy, Penn, and Piper back from the brink of something called 'Magic Madness.' He'd learned since he'd been treated, that the magic the artifacts used was both ancient and ridiculously strong, which meant anyone who came into contact with it needed to be cleansed as soon as possible to ensure no long-term damage took place.

Percy had to admit he'd been quite amused as Jazareth had explained that to him the following day. "People go mad," he proclaimed. His very serious expression just set off a stream of hysterical giggles from Percy. He'd considered he was mad enough going near the magic in the first place, but of course, he didn't say so when the healer had truly helped him, and he was so serious in his concerns.

With Gerard the only soul in the room when they entered, a chill ran down

Percy's spine. He knew it was a reflex. That after years of being under that man's thumb, it was only natural for his body to react the way it'd learned to. But his chipmunk wasn't cowering in fear this time - he was standing staunch and firm in Percy's mind - and with that and Zese at his side Percy strode forward with his head held high.

"Gerard."

"Oh, Percy. Thank all that's holy. Save me from these demons, please."

Percy couldn't help it, Gerard's words were beyond ludicrous and not at all what he'd been expecting. Without warning Percy doubled over in laughter. He couldn't help it. Gerard wanted to be saved from the demons? Was this the same man that has been consorting with the worst demon of them all?

Gerard fluffed and huffed and declared rather loudly, "Nothing about this was funny."

"I have to disagree with you, Gerard. So just so we're clear. You called for me so I would save you from the demons?"

"Well, yes. We've been friends and colleagues for years. When they told me you were here. I knew I could count on you to do what's right." Gerard looked at Percy, and Percy looked at Gerard, and Zese was looking between both of them giving the impression he wanted to rip Gerard's eyes from his head.

"Friends?" Percy said slowly. "You think we're friends?"

"Well, yes, of course. Why else would you still be here if not for me?"

And there it was. In one blinding moment of clarity, Percy remembered exactly who Gerard was. His mouth opened and his years of staying silent blew up.

"You arrogant son of a bitch. No, wait. That's an insult to the bitch. You've never cared for anyone but yourself. You were a terrible, creepy boss and to make matters even worse, you're a horrid, self-serving man. In no realm, in any universe are we or have we ever been friends.

"I stayed here in the Underworld with my actual friends, with my mate who loves and adores me, and so I could see where he grew up and where he'd come from. I stayed on Lucifer's invitation because me and my siblings tore

Zephany to shreds when he was trying to unleash demons on earth.

“A plan in which you and your selfish puny little brain thought was a good idea. So for you to have the damned cheek, the damned nerve, the damned audacity! To call on me to help *you*... You make me sick, and I wouldn't help you if you were the last man on any realm, in any time.”

Phew, Percy finally stopped to come up for air. *That felt good!*

Gerard was now sitting in stunned silence staring at him while Zese was doing his best impression of a slow silent clap from beside him. “Feel better, my love?” Zese asked.

“Much,” said Percy.

“Please, Percy,” Gerard said quietly. “They'll never let me leave here. Surely you know that. I just wanted... I just thought...”

“What?” Percy demanded. “That after all you've done, that sweet little Percy would swoop in and what.. Save you? I don't think so. You got yourself into this mess, and you can damned well get yourself out of it.”

“What about the club?” Gerard asked weakly. From where Percy was sitting, he was clutching at straws, but Percy would bite. One last time.

“What about it?” Percy asked. “You made it very clear I wasn't welcome there anymore if I didn't agree to being in your bed, and I wouldn't let you touch me with a ten-foot ruler, let alone your grubby hands.”

“You can have it!” Gerard said quickly. “If you get me out of here, it's yours. I'll sign it over no strings attached and you'll never see me again.”

This caught Percy by surprise. It was his dream come true to own the club. It was where he'd felt the most at home. Where all his friends were, and after seeing Zese work his magic in the kitchen, Percy had let himself believe just for a second that his dreams might be a possibility. But at what cost? Unleashing a man like Gerard back out into the world didn't seem like the kind of thing a hero would do.

“Deal,” Lucifer's voice said from the entryway to the room. “Gerard, my good man. Percy will get you out of here. Just as soon as we've all witnessed you signing the forms.”

With the click of his fingers, a stack of papers were in Lucifer's hand, and after striding across the room and dumping them in front of Gerard's shocked face. A small, sprightly, almost human looking, but not, woman, in the most exquisitely tailored lilac suit and sparkling green eyes, proceeded to point out where Gerard needed to sign, initial, and date.

The whole process took about fifteen minutes, and then she was right there next to Percy with a similar looking stack of papers for him to sign, initial, and date.

"There," she said when he was finished. "Congratulations Percy, you are the proud new owner of Luminosity. It'll take three working days for all of this to be filed in your realm. If you have any questions, please ask His Eminence, and I'll be summoned forthwith."

"Is this real?" Percy squeaked.

"Very real," Lucifer said proudly.

"Well, the paperwork's done. So get me out of here, Percy. You have to hold up your end of the deal."

Percy looked at Lucifer, who had the strangest grin on his face. "Oh, yes. Let's get him out of here, Percy."

With a confused look on his face, Percy took Gerard by the arm and led him from the room. Standing in the wide expanse of a hallway, Percy searched for Lucifer's face again to ask, "Where do I take him now?"

"Absolutely nowhere," Lucifer beamed.

"What?" Gerard blustered.

"Percy has held up his end of the deal. You said, and I quote, 'If you get me out of here, it's yours. I'll sign it over, no strings attached, and you'll never see me again'. Percy has held up his end of the deal. He got you out of 'here' being the room you were in, and now you are 'there' where you stand. And now, my friend, I have some plans regarding your future."

Lucifer took Gerard's arm and translocated them both away. Percy stood looking stunned, but Zese was right there to catch him before he fell the ground. Leaning into Zese's chest Percy looked up into those glowing dark eyes and whispered, "What just happened?"

Zese chuckled gently. “Demons are renowned for finding loopholes in deals, dear Percy. Lucifer found the mother of all loopholes. He never intended on letting Gerard leave here. That’s what he wanted to tell you in the markets. But part of him must have known something like this might happen.”

“I can’t... I don’t... Was that woman a real lawyer?”

“Oh, yeah. A hundred percent, she works at a huge prestigious firm in Los Angeles, but when Lucifer calls, she comes running. It’s all completely real.”

“I own a club?”

“You do.”

“We own a club,” Percy beamed.

“I like the sound of that even better. Now let’s go and find your siblings and go home, shall we?”

“We have so much to talk about, so much to do. Where will we live? Do you want to own a club? Do you want to move to Virginia Beach? Will you still drive trucks?” Percy’s mouth was going a hundred miles an hour, until Zese stopped his rant with heated kiss.

When Percy was positively panting and unable to form words Zese released his lips and smiled against them.

“Anywhere with you is my home. I’ve always dreamed of cooking for a living, so if you’ll have me in your business, you’d be making my greatest hopes come true. Does that answer your pressing questions?”

“Yes.”

“To what?”

“To everything life has given us and all the things yet to come.”

“Then let’s stop chatting and go and live our lives, sweet Percy.”

Epilogue

Percy

Five months later

Percy and Zese walked hand in hand through the brisk air of the late afternoon, taking in the sights and the sounds of the carnival that twirled and danced around them. The chill in the air hadn't deterred anyone, and Percy lapped up the sounds of children laughing and playing. He snickered at teens who whispered and joked in corners, and he swooned at lovers who walked hand in hand just as he was doing with his mate.

The air was electric between them. In a few hours Percy and Zese would be at the grand reopening of Luminosity. The pair had worked tirelessly with a little help from their friends, to transform the seedy nightclub vibe, into a full blown restaurant, that coalesced into a tasteful but still very loud cocktail club by night.

The menu Zese had created was divine. The new cocktail menu included a "Percy's whim" which gave him free rein to create something new whenever he felt like it. The interior and exterior of the place had been given a complete makeover – effectively getting rid of any of the negative vibes that had inhabited the walls while Gerard was boss. The staff, which were predominantly old friends accompanied by a few new ones, all had stylish but comfortable uniforms that accompanied their new contracts with excellent benefits. Percy could honestly say he'd never felt so proud of anything in his life.

Well, other than Zese of course.

It never ceased to amaze him how his man could steal his breath with just a look, kind of like the one he was giving Percy now.

"You know," Zese said with that side eye that made Percy's heart skip a beat. "We have one last thing on our list."

"What? What did we forget, the opening is tonight, and we don't have time for any last minute-"

"Hush," Zese replied, his lips only mere millimeters from Percy's and the heat that always emanated from his stunning mate caused Percy's cheeks to

flush. "I was talking about our more, personal list," he said flicking his thumb at the Ferris wheel circling the almost dusky sky.

Oh," Percy cried rather loudly. Followed by a more subtle and what he hoped was sexy, "Ooooh."

Zese chuckled. "Wanna blow off some steam before our big night?"

"What if we get caught? Or seen?"

"Really? The man who slayed an ancient demon is worried about being caught with his pants down."

"Hmm, good point. But I see even one kid above or below us, the deal is off."

"I've got some tricks to maintain your dignity," Zese murmured, rubbing Percy's arm in a way that made Percy want to melt into a puddle.

"Well, in that case, let's go."

Percy half pulled Zese, who was doing a great job of pretending to dawdle as he checked out Percy's ass, and as they stood in line, Zese whispered some very enticing dirty talk into Percy's ear.

"Can't wait," he whispered.

Not bothering to strap themselves in, when the Ferris wheel took off, taking them high up into the air Percy was filled with exhilaration and anticipation all at once.

Zese wasted no time getting his hands down Percy's pants and made quick work of the prep. He shimmied Percy's pants down just far enough to gain easy access before lifting him up and then sliding him carefully onto his waiting cock.

As the Ferris wheel soared higher and higher, so did Percy and Zese. And by the time the ride had come to a stop they were both sated, sweaty, smiling, and more than ready for their special night ahead.

"Thank you for putting a magical shield up, or whatever it was you did," Percy said with a grin.

"Oh, I can't do stuff like that."

"Well, what did you do to preserve my dignity, then?"

“I made sure you finished your list before Christmas,” Zese teased.

“Demons and their loopholes,” Percy said with a sigh.

“Yeah, but you love me anyway.”

“There’s no getting around that, my sweet demon.”

“Good, because you’re stuck with me, and I can’t wait to see what mischief we can get up to next.”

“How about we go home, shower, get ridiculously dressed up, and then go and open our future.”

“I don’t think I’ve got anything else on tonight, why not.”

Percy laughed, loud and long just like he had for the past five months in Zese’s arms. Life was perfect. It was everything Percy had dreamed of and more. And for that reason he felt as if the smile would never leave his cherry glossed lips every again.

Later, as Percy eyed himself in the new floor length mirror they’d installed in their new flat, conveniently located in the refurbished upstairs of the club, he marveled at just how much his life had changed.

The sea of people waiting for the cutting of the ribbon was astounding, but the moment the deed was done, and the doors were officially opened, people came in droves.

The first half of the evening was a whirlwind of exemplary food and decadent cocktails. As the fine dining wound down the scene, thanks to a small amount of magic and some heavy duty magnets, transformed into an epic dance floor.

People shimmied and swayed and were kept hydrated with Percy’s cocktails. The music was so loud people would still be feeling the vibrations of it when they woke up the next morning. The dancing platforms were packed in a sea of sequins and satin of a magnitude Percy had never seen before.

The biggest and brightest had come out to see what had become of the once infamous Luminosity, and from the rave reviews and smiling faces all over social media, Percy was confident opening night was a raving success. Which meant moving forward they had a chance to make something truly magical

happen in the place Percy genuinely called home.

“What could be more magical than slaying demons?” Zese asked quietly.

“This,” Percy said, looking around the table as their friends and family all sat together, drinking, and talking and tapping their toes, getting ready to do some dancing of their own.

“Look here,” Lucifer said, showing Zese his phone. “This reviewer says... ‘Luminosity is visionary. The owners are delightful, and I couldn’t find a single flaw. I looked, honestly. Perfection at its finest. I’ll be returning again soon’. That’s gotta be good right?”

Murmurs of amazement and slaps of congratulation wound their way around the table as Skye, Ben, and Rigmus who’d all earned the night off to celebrate, reveled in the words.

“I never did thank you,” Percy said, looking Lucifer in the eye.

“You’ve brought a whole new kind of magic into our lives Percy. No need to thank me for helping bring about what should have been yours all along.”

“Still, I owe you.”

“Never make a comment like that to Lucifer,” Zese hissed. “Are you mad?”

“Too late,” Lucifer cried clapping his hands like a small child. “Percy owes me... Oh yeah, I like the sound of that.”

“What have you done,” teased Zese.

“Apparently made the Lord of the Underworld very happy,” Percy said with a grin.

“Not as happy as you’ve made me, Percy. I thank the Fate’s every damned day for bringing you into my life.” Zese sealed those words with a kiss, and Percy knew in that moment that kiss was a promise, a promise that his demon would never break.

“To our new lives,” Zese said, raising his glass.

Percy had just reapplied his cherry lip gloss for the umpteenth time that night as Zese stole kiss after kiss, but there was no way he would ever complain about it, not when the man rocked his world in every possible way.

“I’ll drink to that.”

The sounds of their friends toasting to success and happiness was a gift Percy never anticipated, just one of the million things Zese had given him when he gave him his heart.

“Our heart,” Zese rumbled into his ear.

The End.

About the Author

Lisa Oliver lives in the wilds of New Zealand, although her beautiful dogs Hades and Zeus are now living somewhere else far more remote than she is. Reports indicate they truly enjoy chasing possums although they still can't catch them. In the meantime, Lisa is living a lot closer to all her adult kids and grandchildren which means she gets a lot more visitors. However, it doesn't look like she's ever going to stop writing - with over eighty paranormal MM (and MMM) titles to her name so far, she shows no signs of slowing down.

When Lisa is not writing, she is usually reading with a cup of tea always at hand. Her grown children and grandchildren sometimes try and pry her away from the computer and have found that the best way to do it is to promise her chocolate. Lisa will do anything for chocolate... and occasionally crackers. She has also started working out, because of the chocolate and the crackers.

Lisa loves to hear from her readers and other writers (I really do, lol). You can catch up with her on any of the social media links below.

I finally got my Patreon page up and running – you can check that out at <https://www.patreon.com/LisaOliver>

Facebook – <https://www.facebook.com/lisaoliverauthor>

Official Author page – <https://www.facebook.com/LisaOliverManloveAuthor/>

My new private teaser group - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/540361549650663/>

My MeWe Group - http://mewe.com/join/lisa_olivers_paranormal_pack

And Instagram - https://www.instagram.com/lisa_oliver_author/

My blog - <http://www.paranormalgayromance.com>

Twitter – <http://www.twitter.com/wisecrone333>

YouTube (I am so awful at this lol, but it makes me laugh) - https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuPx1orrUiUHt_ECNaX8SWw and

TikTok - <https://www.tiktok.com/@lisaoliver135> (These could be easier to watch because the videos are shorter lol)

Email me directly at yoursintuitively@gmail.com.

Other Books By Lisa/Lee Oliver

Please note, I have now marked the books that contain mpreg and MMM for those of you who don't like to read those type of stories, or for those who prefer them ❖❖ Hope that helps ù

Cloverleah Pack

Book 1 – The Reluctant Wolf – Kane and Shawn

Book 2 – The Runaway Cat – Griff and Diablo

Book 3 – When No Doesn't Cut It – Damien and Scott

Book 3.5 – Never Go Back – Scott and Damien's Trip and a free story about Malacai and Elijah

Book 4 – Calming the Enforcer – Troy and Anton

Book 5 – Getting Close to the Omega – Dean and Matthew

Book 6 – Fae for All – Jax, Aelfric and Fafnir (M/M/M)

Book 7 – Watching Out for Fangs –Josh and Vadim

Book 8 – Tangling with Bears – Tobias, Luke, and Kurt (M/M/M)

Book 9 – Angel in Black Leather – Adair and Vassago

Book 9.5 – Scenes from Cloverleah – four short stories featuring the men we've come to love

Book 10 – On the Brink – Teilo, Raff and Nereus (M/M/M)

Book 11 – Don't Tempt Fate – Marius and Cathair

Book 12 – My Treasure to Keep – Thomas and Ivan

Book 13 – Home is Where the Heart is – Wesley and Castor

The Gods Made Me Do It (Cloverleah spin off series)

Book One - Get Over It – Madison and Sebastian's story

Book Two - You've Got to be Kidding – Poseidon and Claude (mpreg)

Book Three – Don't Fight It – Lasse and Jason

Book Four – Riding the Storm – Thor and Orin (mpreg elements [Jason from previous book gives birth in this one])

Book Five – I Can See You – Artemas and Silvanus (mpreg elements – Thor gives birth in this one)

Book Six – Someone to Hold Me – Hades and Ali (mpreg elements but no birth)

Book Seven – You'll Know in Your Heart – Baby and Owen (mpreg)

Book Eight – Worth It – Zeus and Paulie (mpreg)

Book Nine – When Three Points Collide – Ra, Kirill and Arvyn (M/M/M) (mpreg elements, no birth)

Book Ten – Special Enough – Odin and Evan

Book Eleven – Reconciliation: Seth's Story – Seth and Luka (mpreg is a small part of this story)

Book Twelve – Being Loki - Loki and Anubis

Book Thirteen – Give Me A Reason – Helios and Bruno

Book Fourteen – [Untitled at this stage] – Fenrir and Dorian (Coming Q4 2023)

The Necromancer's Smile (This is a trilogy series under the name The Necromancer's Smile where the main couple, Dakar and Sy are the focus of all three books – these cannot be read as standalone).

Book One – Dakar and Sy – The Meeting

Book Two – Dakar and Sy – Family affairs

Book Three – Dakar and Sy – Taking Care of Business

Bound and Bonded Series

Book One – Don't Touch – Levi and Steel

Book Two – Topping the Dom – Pearson and Dante

Book Three – Total Submission – Kyle and Teric

Book Four – Fighting Fangs – Ace and Devin

Book Five – No Mate of Mine – Roger and Cam

Book Six – Undesirable Mate – Phillip and Kellen

Stockton Wolves Series

Book One – Get off My Case – Shane and Dimitri

Book Two – Copping a Lot of Sin – Ben, Sin and Gabriel (M/M/M)

Book Three – Mace's Awakening – Mace and Roan

Book Four – Don't Bite – Trent and Alexi

Book Five – Tell Me the Truth – Captain Reynolds and Nico (mpreg)

Alpha and Omega Series

Book One – The Biker's Omega – Marly and Trent

Book Two – Dance Around the Cop – Zander and Terry

Book Three – Change of Plans - Q and Sully

Book Four – The Artist and His Alpha – Caden and Sean

Book Five – Harder in Heels – Ronan and Asaph

Book Six – A Touch of Spring – Bronson and Harley

Book Seven – If You Can't Stand the Heat – Wyatt and Stone (Previously published in an anthology)

Book Eight – Fagin's Folly – Fagin and Cooper

Book Nine – The Cub and His Alphas – Daniel, Zeke and Ty (MMM)

Book Ten – The One Thing Money Can't Buy – Cari and Quaid

Book Eleven – Precious Perfection – Devyn and Rex

Book Twelve – More Than a Handful - Karl and Tanner

Spin off from The Biker's Omega – BBQ, Bikes, and Bears – Clive and Roy

Balance – Angels and Demons

The Viper's Heart – Raziel and Botis

Passion Punched King – Anael and Zagan

Soul Deep – Uriel and Haures

Found – Raphael and Seir

Demon Masks and Angel Wings – Michael and Orobas

Love Before Time – Lucifer and Gabriel

Arrowtown

A Tiger's Tale – Ra and Seth (mpreg)

Snake Snack – Simon and Darwin (mpreg)

Liam's Lament – Liam Beau and Trent (MMM) (Mpreg)

Doc's Deputy – Deputy Joe and Doc (Mpreg)

Cam's Chance – Cam and Fergus (Mpreg)

Stone Cold Obsidian – Dian and Kee (Mpreg)

Brutus's Surprise – Brutus and Heath

Hal's Silence – Hal and Blade (mpreg although not the main focus of the story)

City Dragons

Dragon's Heat – Dirk and Jon

Dragon's Fire – Samuel and Raoul

Dragon's Tears – Byron and Ivak

The Magic Users of Greenford – a new trilogy.

Book One - Illuminate

Book Two – Eradicate

Book Three – Validate

My Arranged Marriage Fantasy Romance Books (not Fated Mates)

The Infidelity Clause – Nikolas and Caspian

Don't Judge A Prince by his Undergarments – Mintyn and Sirius

An Article of Lies – Xavier and Remy

The Pirate's Treasure – Rojan and Petrov [coming Q4 2023]

Quirk of Fate

Summons – Edward and Mammon

Reggie's Reasons – Reggie and Dirkin

The Mating of Blind Billy Hipp – Billy and Dathan

Demon Dabbling – Zese and Percy (you just read it)

Quirk of Fates Shorts

Saving Moses – Tucker and Moses

Catching Damont – Damont and Rebel

Hellhound Collar Series

Collar and Scruff (Prequel) – Raoul and Jason

Better Than Sweets (Book 1) – Java and Cyril

Precious Blue (Book 2) – Beau and Blue (mpreg elements in last chapter.)

Cain's Shadow – Cain and Ollie (mpreg)

Assassin's Alley

Not that Kind of Demon – Python and Cyrus

Tangled Tentacles – in Collaboration with JP Sayle

Book one – Alexi – Alexi and Danik

Book 2 – Victor – Azim and Victor (mpreg)

Book 3 – Todd – Todd, Lucas, and Ki – MMM (mpreg)

Book 4 – Markov – Markov and Cassius

Book 5 – Kelvin – Kelvin and Magnus (mpreg - Markov)

Assassins To Order With JP Sayle

Marvin – Marvin and Ajani

Ben – Ben, Nico, and Teilo (MMM)

The Baby Question – a short story catching up with men from the Tangled Tentacles and Assassin series (MM, MMM and Mpreg)

Duron – Duron and Beaumont

Conrad – Conrad and Kylo (mpreg elements)

Standalone:

I Should've Stayed Home: Irwin's Story – Part of the Nocturne Bay collab series – Irwin and Kolton

The Fall of the Fairy Tale Prince – Charlie and Lex (A spin off from Dancing Around the Cop and Change of Plans in the A&O series)

Stay True to Me – Con and Ven

Rowan and the Wolf – Rowan and Shadow

Bound by Blood – Max and Lyle – (a spin off from Cloverleah Pack #7)

The Power of the Bite – Dax and Zane

One Wrong Step – Robert and Syron

Uncaged – Carlin and Lucas (Shifter's Uprising in conjunction with Thomas Oliver)

Also under the penname Lee Oliver/Lisa Oliver

Northern States Pack Series

Book One – Ranger's End Game – Ranger and Aiden

Book Two – Cam's Promise – Cam and Levi

Book Three – Under Sean's Protection – Sean and Kyle

Book Four – Newton's Law – Newton and Tron