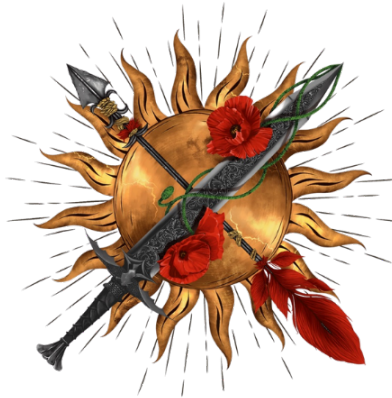


Cupcakes and Kisses



A featherlight touch to my cheek and then my brow stirred me awake. Rolling onto my side, I lifted my lashes. Vibrant amber eyes met mine.

Beautiful eyes.

Beloved ones.

The happy surprise of seeing him sitting on the bed beside me chased the cobwebs of sleep away. “Cas,” I whispered, breathing in the unique scent of spice and pine that was all him.

A slow smile spread across his lush lips, revealing a deep divot in his right cheek, then the left. A hint of two blade-sharp fangs appeared, sending a wicked, delicious thrill through me.

I'd be hard-pressed to pick a favorite smile, but I cherished this kind—the wide, real ones that warmed the striking lines and angles of his features. Especially now.

“My Queen,” he murmured, dragging the pads of his fingers down the side of my face to just below the scar on my cheek.

The light from the nearby lamp I'd left on cast a glow over him. He was still dressed from being on the road with Kieran, the buttery soft leathers he'd taken to wearing of late covered in a fine layer of dust. He had the collar of his shirt loosened, and I noticed the numerous weapons he usually bore upon his body were absent.

“I didn't think you'd be back so soon.”

“Hmm?” He dragged his gaze from the path he'd been tracing down my throat to the thin strap of my nightgown. “I'm sorry. You called me *Cas*, and now I'm thoroughly distracted.”

I laughed. “Really?”

“You have no idea what hearing you call me that does to me.” His gaze lifted once more to meet mine. “Truly.”

He was teasing, but I did know.

As did Kieran, who knew everything about the first time the Ascended had captured Cas. He had forgotten who he was, made to feel more like a *thing* than a person. Hearing himself be

called Cas had snapped him out of the darkness. Anger rose in me just thinking about it, stirring the Primal essence in my veins, but I pushed it down before it could take on a whole new life because Cas was free. Safe. And most of those who'd hurt him all those years ago—and again in the not-so-distant past—had been dealt with. As would the rest of them.

Every single person who had ever laid a cruel finger on him would one day pay a grave price.

That was a vow I hadn't forgotten.

The thin blanket slipped to my hips as I rose onto my elbow, cupping his cheek. The bristle of the short hairs was rough against my palm as I guided his mouth to mine. Still unused to the fangs, I was careful as I pressed my lips to his. Cas opened for me without hesitation. The sweep of his tongue was a jolt to my senses, and gods, I missed the taste of him, even though he hadn't been gone that long.

A growl rumbled from deep within his chest as he shifted from where he sat and guided me onto my back. The weight and feel of him as he settled his body over mine whipped up a shiver of delight. He deepened the kiss as he palmed my hip, curling his fingers into the flesh there. I slid my hand into his damp hair, gasping as he flicked his tongue over one of my sharpened

fangs. Another tight shiver curled its way through me, and my back arched, pressing my chest into his. I had no idea that my fangs could be so sensitive.

“That doesn’t help with being less distracting.” Cas dragged his lips over mine. “I think you missed me.”

I slid my hand over the nape of his neck. “I did.”

He rested his forehead against mine. “A lot.”

“Always.”

His lips curled into a smile against mine. “I missed you, too. Pretty sure I was getting on everyone’s nerves talking about how I needed to get back to you.”

“Even Kieran?”

“I think he’s learned to just tune me out.” He kissed the corner of my lips, and I knew that was somewhat impossible. It had taken us a while—the three of us—to realize that no one had ever openly discussed certain things about the Joining. One of them being the fact that our bodies appeared to sync to one another’s. Or rather, their bodies synced to mine. But another thing was Cas’s and Kieran’s ability to not only pick up on each other’s emotions but also mine. And while Kieran believed that was an amusing bit of Karma, I found it to be highly *annoying* when they sensed the changes in my mood.

Especially when they decided to comment on it.

“I think Netta was about to bite me at one point,” Cas continued. “Just to shut me up.”

“She would never.”

“She would.” He kissed the other side of my lips. “And has.”

I laughed, but the sound quickly faded as I guided his head back so his eyes met mine. “Did you...find him?”

Did you find *them* went unasked.

“No,” he said quietly, squeezing my hip. “The city is huge, though. We still have large chunks of it to check, and he knows the layout and where to hide when he doesn’t want to be found—both of them do. But we’ll find them.”

I exhaled, long and slow, nodding as I let my senses stretch out to him. Cas had so many layers. The fading sweetness of his amusement. The rich taste of cinnamon—pride. Chocolate and berries: *love*. But underneath them all, I tasted the tart prickliness of frustration. “I could try to use—”

“Let’s not try that,” he cut in with a teasing grin. “We really don’t need a repeat of what happened the last time you tried to use the Primal essence for something one normally wouldn’t.”

“I would like to know who determined what the essence should and shouldn’t be used for.”

“Your grandfather?” Cas suggested. “Grandmother?”

My eyes narrowed. “Don’t bring logic into this conversation. That’s normally Kieran’s job. Or at the very least, Nail’s.”

Cas snorted. “None of us wants another impromptu visit from your grandmother.” Pausing, he shuddered. “Or Nektas.”

“I don’t think either of them likes being referred to as a grandparent,” I said, and it was weird to even think of them as such since neither looked much older than us. “And if Tawny can get over being momentarily frozen, so can they.”

He arched a brow as he stared down at me.

“Fine.” Letting my arms flop to the bed, I sighed. “I won’t try.”

Cas chuckled, dipping his chin to brush his lips over mine. That quick, press of lips quickly became something infinitely more, leaving us both breathless and wanting.

“What is it with you and such silly, tiny straps?” Cas asked as he slid said straps down my arms, baring my breasts.

“I...I don’t know,” I panted as his lips danced over the skin he’d bared, licking and nipping, *tasting*. Warmth invaded my blood, and deep in my chest, the essence throbbed with heat instead of ice. “It’s just how they make them.”

“I think that’s a lie. You have them altered just to torment me.” His mouth closed over the tip of my breast, coaxing a

ragged moan from me. “F&ck,” he groaned, lifting his head. The hollows of his cheeks stood out starkly as he dragged his fangs over his lower lip. “I do love them, though.”

A pleasant flush spread down my throat and over my chest. “I don’t think you’re still speaking about the straps.”

The dimple in his right cheek appeared as a slow half grin spread across his face. He glanced up at me through thick lashes, his eyes pools of liquid gold.

“You know what I’ve been thinking?” He reared onto his knees.

“Only the gods know what...” I trailed off as he reached behind himself, grabbing a fistful of his shirt at the collar and then pulling it over his head. The muscles along his shoulders and chest tightened as he tossed the garment aside. My gaze glanced off the delineated lines of his chest and the lean, tightly coiled muscles of his stomach as his hands went to the snap on his leathers. He shoved them down his hips. My lips parted on a sharp inhale as an indecent fluttering motion swept through me.

“Seems like I’m not the only one distracted,” he commented, the sugary-sweet burst of his amusement tickling my tongue.

“Perhaps it will help you pay attention to what I’m saying if you refrain from ogling my man bits.”

“Man bits?” I choked on a laugh. “You were just staring at my breasts!”

“Does manhood sound better?” Cas countered as his hands went to the hem of my deep green nightgown. “And I was staring at the straps.”

“Liar.” I bit down on my lip as he drew up the hem of the gown, the rough calluses of his palms sliding over the scars on my thighs. “And, no, I would rather you didn’t call it manhood *or* man bits.”

“Then what—?” He paused to dip his head and capture the turgid peak of my breast in his mouth. “Your breast looked lonely,” he explained. “What would you prefer I call *it*?”

“Cock?” I whispered.

His gaze flew to mine. “Say that again.”

My cheeks warmed. “Cock.”

Cas’s grin was downright indecent. “How in the hell can you make such a word sound so...charmingly *innocent*?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know how or why we’re even talking about this.”

“You started it.”

“I did not.”

“Was it me, then? My bad.” His lips parted as he got an eyeful of the lacy undergarments I wore in the same color as the gown. “Pretty,” he murmured. My hips twitched as he drew his finger along the delicate, scalloped edge. “Very pretty.” Those heated eyes lifted to mine. “Do you like them?”

“The undergarments?”

He nodded.

“I suppose so,” I answered, thinking that was a strange question.

“Then I apologize.”

“What for?” I gasped as he tore the material with one quick swipe of his hand. “Cas!”

“I’ll get you a new pair,” he promised.

My heart pounded, and I knew his did, too. “You know, you could’ve just removed them like a normal person.”

“And what fun is there in behaving like a normal person?” A wicked smile appeared as his finger moved down the very center of me with nothing between him and my damp skin. He eased that finger inside me. “My Queen?”

My back arched, and my hands curled into the sheet on either side of me.

His laugh was rich, husky, and his stare as he watched himself slowly thrust his finger in and out was nothing short of scandalous. “Ah, now I remember what I was trying to tell you,” he said, doing something utterly devious with his thumb. “What I’ve been thinking about. I’m not sure calling you ‘my Queen’ is still appropriate.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what he was talking about. My hips lifted, matching the plunging of his finger before he added another.

“Especially considering you’re more than a Queen.” His hand still moved between my thighs as he stretched over me, his mouth dancing across the skin of my chest and the underside of my jaw. “Should I call you my Primal Highness?”

I shook my head.

“I believe that’s the official title.” Cas nipped at where my pulse thrummed wildly. “We should see how it rolls off the tongue,” he decided. “Your pu\$\$y is so wet, my Primal Highness.”

“Oh, my gods,” I half-laughed, half-moaned. “I can’t believe you just said that sentence out loud.”

“Believe it.” His mouth danced over my cheek. “Or how about...do you want my *cock* inside you, my Primal Highness?”

I clasped his cheek. “How about—?” My head kicked back as he pressed his thumb against the most sensitive part of me.

He stared down at me, his features a mask of innocence. “How about what?”

“How...how about you just call me Poppy?” I managed.

“That seems inappropriate.”

“All of what you just said sounded highly inappropriate.”

“True.” He caught my lower lip between his teeth. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

Muscles deep inside me began to coil and tighten as I rasped, “W-what question?”

Cas’s mouth went to my ear, and he whispered, “Do you want my cock?”

A fire lit my blood, and I wasn’t sure if it was that or his question that heated my cheeks. Or my answer. “Yes.”

“Thank f\$ck.” He eased his hand from me.

I watched, my chest rising and falling rapidly as he brought those slick fingers up and closed his lips over them. I turned liquid inside.

“Honeydew,” he growled.

His mouth closed over mine then, and the taste of him—the taste of *me*—twisted my insides in a dizzying, heady way.

There were no more words, not for a while. There didn't need to be as our hearts and bodies seized control. He hadn't been gone long, only a few days, but it still felt like a small eternity since I'd felt him like this, on the tenuous edge of control as we came together. Within a few heartbeats, I was lost to him, all of him, and I knew he was lost to me. All of me.

Because I was drenched in the spicy, smoky flavor of his lust, drowning in it, right along with him.

Cas took his time. We took our time, my legs curled over his waist, and our arms wrapped around each other. There wasn't an inch of space between us as he drove into me, and I rose to meet each decadently slow roll of his hips. There was no rush. No greedy hands or frantic thrusts. When release came, it found us together, and it was shocking and complete, leaving our bodies damp, and our hearts pounding in tune, our breaths mingling as we lay side by side, facing each other on the now-tangled sheets.

“Poppy?”

“Mmm?”

Cas fingers scooped up a few strands of my hair, tucking them behind my ear. “Did you think I wouldn't be here? Today?”

Today? Confusion rose as I opened my eyes.

His gaze searched mine. “You’ve forgotten.” A grin appeared. “Totally understandable. You have a lot on your mind. The upcoming coronation...”

Nervousness surged through me. The more official coronation and ball, which would be held soon in Carsodonia instead of Evaemon, but that was the least of the things occupying my thoughts. “We both have a lot on our mind.”

Cas nodded. “My brother.”

“My sister.”

He cracked a grin. “Your parents-in-law.”

“You mean, *your* parents.”

“Your *grandparents*.” He touched his thumb to my lower lip.

I ignored that. “The kingdoms that became a single kingdom.”

“The Unseen,” he continued, drawing his thumb to my cheek.

“The Ascended that are...*different*.”

“And the Ascended that are the same,” I added. “The Rot.”

His eyes met mine. “Kolis.”

“Kolis,” I repeated, shivering as I wiggled closer to him.

Cas folded over me, bringing our bodies close. And then there was what had been left unsaid.

The Primal power in me.

What it was doing.

To me.

To us.

To the three of us.

I pressed my cheek to his chest, squeezing my eyes shut. His arm tightened around me, and neither of us spoke for several moments. Not until the dread left us both. “What am I forgetting?”

“Today.” Cas reached between us, curling his fingers under my chin. He brought my gaze to his. “It turned midnight just as I arrived. April 20th. Your birthday.”

A ripple of surprise went through me as my eyes widened. Good gods, I hadn’t been paying attention to the dates, and it had completely slipped my mind that I’d been approaching my self-designated birthday.

Cas smiled. Just one dimple was visible, and that surprise gave way to a sweet rise of love, so much *love* that it almost hurt for my heart to be so full of it.

“You remembered,” I whispered.

“Apparently, someone had to,” he teased, sweeping his thumb over my cheek. His eyes fixed on mine. “And I would never forget, Poppy. I will be with you for each and every birthday.”

I stared at him as a wealth of emotion swelled and crested. The back of my eyes stung as tears crowded my throat.

“Don’t.” Cas rose onto his elbow to hover over me. “Don’t cry, Poppy.”

I smacked my hand over my face.

“Why do you keep doing that?” He laughed roughly. “It sounds like it hurts.”

“I’m trying not to cry,” I sniffled.

He took hold of my wrist. “I don’t see how smacking yourself in the face helps.”

“It does.”

“Poppy.” He drew my hand from my face.

“They’re happy tears,” I told him.

“I know.” He kissed my palm, right where a faint sheen of dampness smudged the golden imprint. “But your tears still kill me,” he said, his brows knitting as something small and hard suddenly poked at my palm. “Even when they turn into diamonds.”

I followed his stare to where two tiny diamonds shaped like tears rested in my palm. “Damn it,” I whispered. “I still don’t get how that’s possible.”

“Neither do I.” He plucked them from my palm and then stretched, placing them on the nightstand before settling once more beside me. “But it’s rather impressive.”

“Yeah, it...it kind of is.” I plastered myself to his chest. “Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me for that.” Cas kissed the top of my head. “And you probably won’t be thanking me later.”

“Doubtful.” I threw an arm over him, squeezing him as hard as I could.

“Remember that when Kieran arrives with cupcakes—”

“Cupcakes? Kieran has *cupcakes*?” I sat up straight, my eyes going wide. “Where is he with these cupcakes?”

Cas was clearly fighting a grin. “Remember this when Kieran arrives with cupcakes,” he repeated, “that Tawny and Emil insisted on making.”

My eagerness faded into confusion. “Tawny made them? I don’t think she or Emil have ever baked a thing in their lives.”

“Exactly,” Cas replied dryly.

“Oh.” My shoulders slumped but didn’t stay that way. “But it’s the thought that counts.” And that was the truth. To have any of them remember my birthday and do something to celebrate it made me want to cry again. “And that’s incredibly sweet.”

Cas arched a brow. "I've seen the cupcakes, Poppy."

"What do they look like?"

"It's hard to describe, but they look like they'd be better suited for throwing at the Craven."

"Uh..."

His lips twitched. "However, Netta made a batch or two. Just let Kieran pick which ones you should eat."

"Oh, thank the gods."

Cas's gaze dropped to my chest. "I'm thanking the gods right now."

"Stop it." I planted my hands on his chest as I started to climb over him.

He stopped me, palming my hips. "I know you're excited about cupcakes and that's all you're thinking about right now..."

I glared down at him because that *was* all I was thinking about right now.

"But it's the middle of the night."

Oh. Yeah. It was. I sighed.

His grin kicked up a notch. "And while I have you all to myself, I'm thinking about other things I'd like to have in our mouths," he said.

A fine shiver rippled through me as I curled my fingers inward, pressing my nails into his chest. My breath caught as his hands slid to my rear. “Like what?”

Cas chuckled. “How about I show you?”

And he did, long into the night and the early morning hours of my birthday.