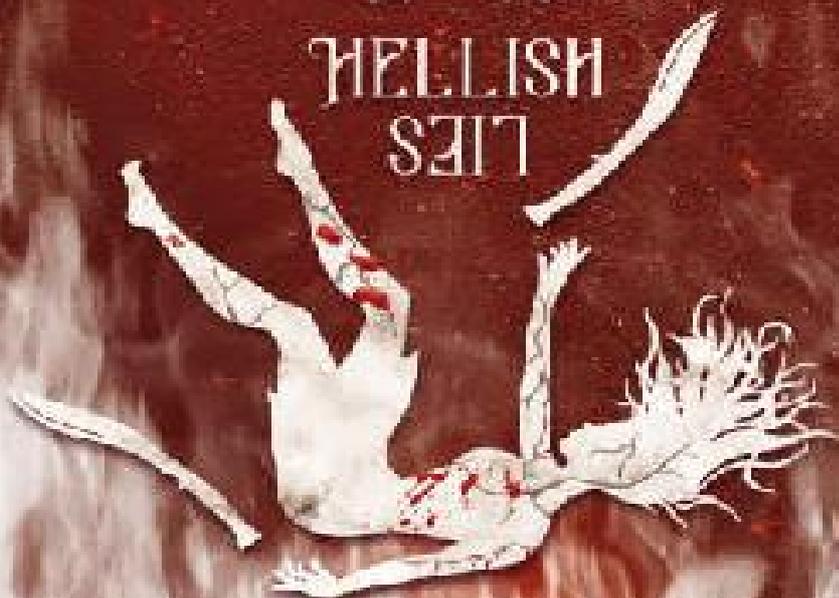




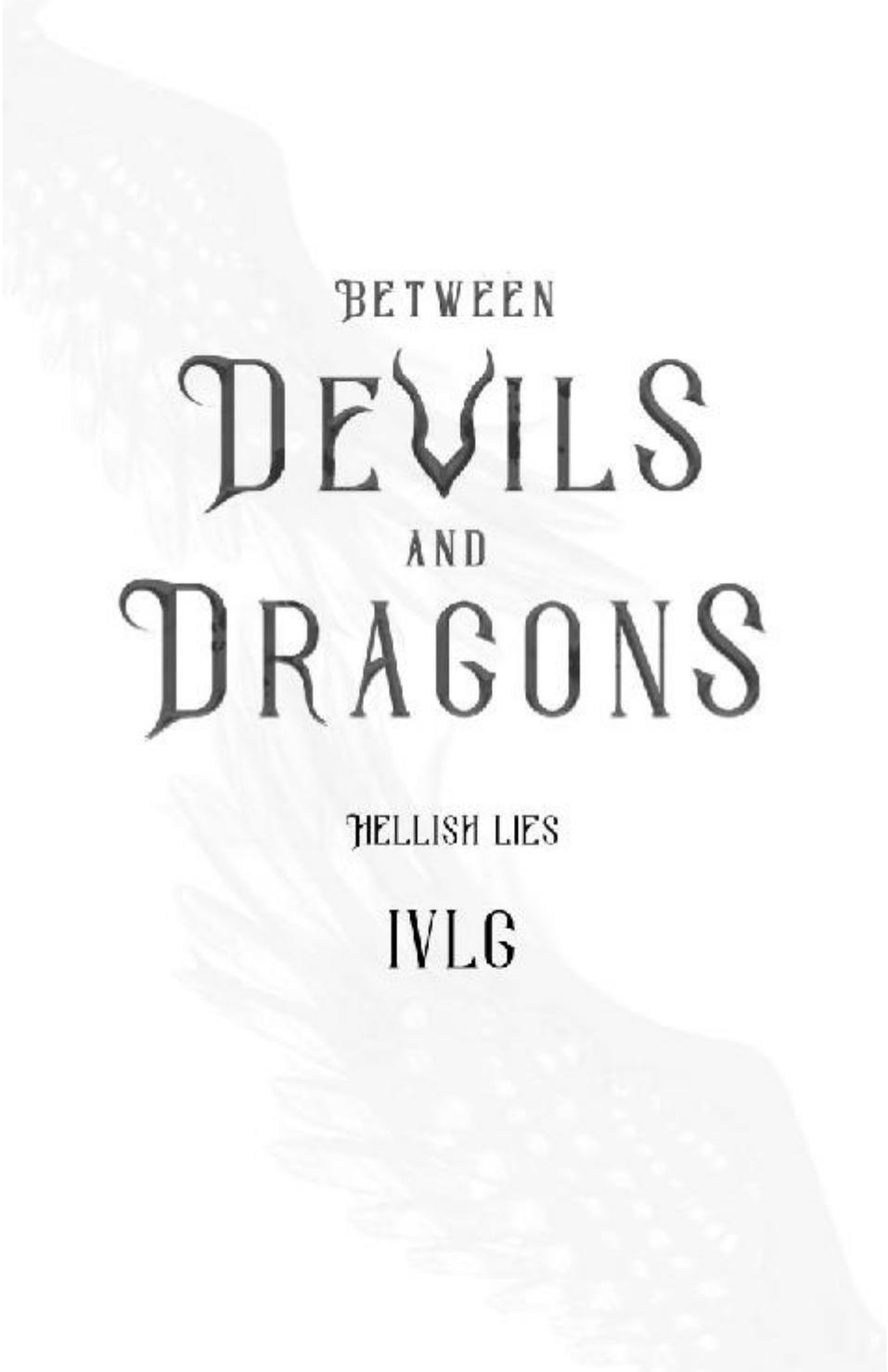
BETWEEN
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AND
DRAGONS



HELLISH
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Between Devils and Dragons – Hellish Lies

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*To the souls that yearn to live yet another life in a world
created out of words.*

*To the ones that long to laugh with new characters they'll soon
call friends and to the hearts that can't help but love yet
another man next to a dozen other fictional lovers.*

This is for us.

Warnings & Promises

If this book found its way into your hands, let me start off by thanking you. There are *millions* of books in this world, and yet, right now, you are dedicating your time to reading this one.

Please acknowledge that this book is intended for mature audiences only. It contains heavy and potentially triggering elements including: explicit sexual scenes (daddy kink, blood play, choking, different variations of dubcon/noncon, SA, rape, etc.), graphic violence, gore, death, murder, foul language, cursing, and more. **Your mental health matters—reader discretion is strongly advised.**

Visit my website www.ivlgbooks.com and find the extended list of content warnings under *Warnings & Promises*.

Between Devils and Dragons - Hellish Lies is not mainly romance nor a cozy read, although there will be moments which will have you swooning, smirking and laughing. The subplot is a dark love story that is plastered with morally questionable behavior. Yes, there is genuine love but its nature is dark, consuming, obsessive—no knight in shining armor here. Hell's concept and its world are slightly different from what we usually think they are, same goes for the characters' powers and mate bonds. Best go into this story open-minded and you'll be good.

This is the first book in the **Between Devils and Dragons** trilogy, and it ends on a cliffhanger. The ending won't be abrupt or confusing, see it as a prelude into the second book.

Now, let's drag souls and kick ass!

You ready?

“Twisted Nerve” - Kill Bill Vol. 1 (OST)
“Blacked Out Whip” - Bri-C ft. Memoria XI
“Heathens” (slowed+reverb) - Twenty One Pilots
“Wicked Games” - The Weeknd
“New Americana” (remix) - Halsey
“Southside” - Lloyd ft. Ashanti
“Sweet Nothing” - Calvin Harris ft. Florence Welch
“Bad Habits” - Ed Sheeran
“One Step Closer” - Linkin Park
“Bundles” - Kayla
“Seven Nation Army” (cover) - The White Stripes,
Postmodern Jukebox ft. Haley Reinhart
“You Should See Me In A Crown” - Billie Eilish
“Bleed It Out” - Linkin Park
“Vixen” - Miguel
“I Wanna Be Your Slave” - Måneskin
“High For This” - The Weeknd
“Going To Hell” - Bryce Savage
“The Hills” (slowed+reverb) - The Weeknd
“E-GIRLS ARE RUINING MY LIFE!” - Corpse ft. Savage
Ga\$p
“Middle Of The Night” (slowed+reverb) - Elley Duhé
“The Trooper” - Iron Maiden
“Highway to Hell” - AC/DC
“She Wants To Move” - N.E.R.D.
“Bad Guy” (remix) - Billie Eilish
“Miss YOU!” - Corpse

“Pussy Is Mine” - Miguel

“Girl With The Tattoo” - Miguel

“The Worst” - Jhené Aiko

“Sad But True” - Metallica

“Lonely” - ONLAP ft. Halocene

“Challenges” (Extended Edition) - Metal Guitar Stuff

“Make It Rain” (Sons of Anarchy) - Ed Sheeran

“Bad Moon Rising” - Creedence Clearwater

Bonus Chapter

“The Bad Touch” - Bloodhound Gang

“You Shook Me All Night Long” - AC/DC

“Daredevil” - Stellar

If good girls go to Heaven,
then bad girls drag their
psychiatrists to Hell.



“So, Ivangeline. This is our first session together, and your patient record states you like to *hunt souls*,” rasped the voice of the man in his late fifties. Subtle scorn resounded throughout the spacious therapy room with its outdated, sterile white furniture. “Do you want to elaborate on that? It sounds *interesting*, to say the least.”

Dr. Peterson was a human and my psychiatrist. Or, let’s say, he *thought* he was.

“Oh, you’ll find out soon enough,” I mused under my breath, a ghost of devilry lifting my lips.

“I didn’t catch that. Please repeat that for me, Ivangeline.”

“No,” I snapped. “And for fuck’s sake, I go by Ivy.”

I gazed out the oval window beside me, and my mind drifted off as I cherished November’s rainy painting with its baked red-and-marigold accents. Inevitable decay infiltrated the leaves in rusty brown tones, eating away their beauty. Fat raindrops drummed the glass and joined to form wild streams that blurred the view in a hypnotizing way.

Outside was a beautiful disaster—much like me.

Might be the only thing I miss having in the lower realm. Our picnic in the park last week was lovely. Ezra knows how much I love that place up in Riginis.

Part of me didn’t want to be here, but another part needed to be. I guess there wasn’t much of a choice when you were a

succubus and hunting souls was your business. A business that filled me with joy and pride, even if it clashed with my understanding of fidelity. Some might say there are better things to do on a Friday afternoon than drag yourself to see a psychiatrist in the human realm and make him believe you're a fucking mess, an abstract piece of psychological art.

But that doesn't count for me.

As a *hot* mess, I knew flaunting my attractive assets made jobs like these almost effortless—a real quick buck. Like raking my fingers through my hair, causing the honey-blonde waves to cascade to the middle of my back. Or hooding my almond-shaped dark chocolate eyes hinting to my half Asian heritage.

Men loved it—like they loved my petite five-foot-one hourglass frame, and Dr. Peterson was no different.

Back in high school, nobody would've thought this ugly duckling would turn into a badass temptress. Thankfully, when puberty was done cursing me with pimples, it turned my juvenile body into a weapon of seduction. A weapon that granted me success on many missions—so many that, over five years, I'd stopped counting.

I loved my job; it came as naturally to me as breathing, but my human boyfriend and the *construct* of loyalty gave every single dollar I cashed in a foul aftertaste. A few months ago, I'd caught myself looking at our relationship with different eyes—doubtful, stern, maybe even dread.

Ezra thinks I'm on a business trip. Yup, kind of, huh?

I exhaled short and sharp through my nose.

I've lied to him for the past six years. Hell, he doesn't even know I'm a succubus. I'm a shitty girlfriend.

“Ivangeline?”

Ugh...

My little mind bubble burst when Dr. Peterson's hand caressed mine. A bolt of disgust lanced through me, but I'd

mastered my poker face far too well to let my mask slide. If anything, a fragment of a twitch moved an eyebrow.

While others had typical daydreams, mine always went down the deep end.

Lately, they'd started to compromise my ability to focus on my missions—like now, when I'd missed his change of position.

Dr. Peterson's soft taps on my fingers urged me to speak as he sat way too close for comfort. I parted my lips and breathed out, tracing the rim of my incisors with my tongue.

He just can't help it, can he?

Darting my eyes to his, I couldn't have cared less about this human waste of breath to face him properly. Blessing this perverted fucker with my undivided attention would be more than he deserved; though, once I would, it'd be his demise.

“You don't want to do that.” My voice came out dry and lifeless, like the decency he obviously lacked, and I brushed off his hand.

If we make it to Hell's Discovery early, I'll get to grab a beer before I have to return to the human realm. Ezra expects me at the latest by 10 p.m.

“Ivangeline, why are you so dolled up? A *little* provocative for an appointment with your psychiatrist, don't you think?” He pulled his lips into an arrogant smirk. It was subtle yet enough for me to grow excessively aggravated.

Iivangeliine. Fucking Peterson, told you I go by Ivy.

I mentally gagged at how he stretched out my name and abused it with his tongue. My full name was pretty—no doubt—but it made me feel older and less of the spitfire I was.

“Are you trying to impress me with your coiffed hair and that skimpy outfit?” The heat of Dr. Peterson's deranged soul seeped through his hand into my thigh. “And sorry to be blunt, but it's hard to decide whether to look at those glossed lips or

these two.” He made circular gestures at his own chubby chest, eyes fixated on my breasts. “Enlighten me, Ivangeline.”

Shamelessly, he eye-fucked me inch by inch like he was ready to tear off all our clothes. He slid his hand down to playfully caress my knee, drawing circles on my bare skin, while his other hand moved up my arm, eager to *play* with yet another patient.

Little Dr. Peterson visibly grew a big head inside those ironed beige pants.

“Dr. Peterson, you shouldn’t do that.”

If you only knew... C’mon, keep showing your true colors.

“Why shouldn’t I? I know messed-up girls like you. Fucking cockteases, asking for it with their short skirts, shoving their extras up in men’s faces. I know the truth. You still crave Daddy’s love and attention,” he sneered, the look in his narrowed brown eyes cold and calculating. “Compensating for his absence by making men’s cocks swell, desperate for their approval. What a sad classic.”

Needy hand now at the hem of my black leather skirt, he applied firm pressure on my skin with traces of sweat in his palm. The sticky feeling of his touch had me pressing my tongue to my gums, threatening to etch my face with disgust that was nearly impossible to hide.

“No one cares about you. Your family sent you here, sick of dealing with your psychotic ass,” he taunted with a rugged voice, continuing to edge my short skirt farther up my thighs.

With a quick glance up to the wall, I checked if we were within camera sight in this corner of the therapy room. No.

Dammit! Why do I always choose to sit by windows?

My little habit of gazing out made it necessary to invoke my powers earlier than I’d planned to—not that it would change the end result. Dr. Peterson had dug his own grave over the years by abusing dozens of girls; I only helped him dig deeper.

Time to play, motherfucker.

In one swift motion, I swung my legs around the hard wooden edge of the chair and turned to him. Grabbing his right hand, I pressed his fingertips against the red mesh lingerie between my thighs. His sudden sharp intake of breath reached my ears.

With the other hand, I grabbed the nape of his neck and brought his forehead to mine with a dull thud.

Old Spice assaulted my senses with overbearing hints of sweat coming from the wet spots underneath his arms. But if that wasn't torturous enough for my sensitive nose, the foul smell of his breath had me suppressing a gag.

Hell, they should list the hygiene habits of the wanted souls.

He gasped while growing lust stretched his pants. The deep neckline of my black tank top invited his hooded eyes for a peek, compromising his rationality with my soft, round double Ds.

"Shhh, Dr. Peterson," I silenced him with seduction in my smoky murmur and pressed his fingers harder against my pussy, rising thrill dampening my lingerie. With slow rolls, I rocked my hips into his hand, increasing the pressure on my clit.

All of what was about to come made me wet. The fear and panic in the eyes of the wanted souls when their sinful ways exposed themselves and there was nothing for them to do but surrender.

I couldn't wait to drag him to Hell for his Ruling and cash in the bounty.

"Now, look at me, you sick joke of a human being," I ordered between clenched teeth, gripping his greasy gray-blond hair tight at the roots to tilt his head back.

Sparks of gold erupted in my pupils, sharpening my vision as my power flowed through my body.

Dr. Peterson fell into a trance as he became my helpless little puppet. Still able to move, but he couldn't conceal his ugly, rotten soul any longer. Every single word he'd speak would be the full truth and nothing less until I released him.

I'll teach you a lesson.

"Come with me," I crooned and led him by the hand to the table in the middle of the room, right in camera sight. The metal chair screeched as I pulled it out for him to sit down. Coldness welcomed parts of my thighs when I positioned myself on top of the table in front of him and spread my legs open—ready to lure him deeper into his misery.

"Do you like the feeling of my moist lingerie, Dr. Peterson? Do you enjoy touching me as your patient? I bet I'm not the first shattered soul you've taken advantage of. Am I right?" My strings of seduction snaked around his chubby throat, tightening to hang him with the truth.

"Y-Yes, but why should I tell you?" he stammered with fear in his eyes, scanning over my prominent cheekbones down to my mouth. Lower lip quivering, he swept his tongue over it before he directed his fingers with firm pressure to my thong, desperate and needy to abuse me.

This horny bastard just couldn't help himself, given he didn't have a choice but to follow his unleashed, greedy instincts when I used my powers on him.

I placed my right foot on his groin and pressed on his swollen dick screaming *hello* through his pants. "I'm having a *hard* time hearing you, Dr. Peterson."

"Y-Yes, I love the feeling," he exclaimed, panic pitching his voice high. "Yes, I grab those numb girls and keep their panties after fingering them. It's my fetish. Forcefully making them come and cream their panties. I have a big collection and use them to jack off."

That was easier than I expected. Wow, dude is seriously fucked up!

“Tell me, what do you want to do with me? What goes through your sick little mind while we sit here? Show me!” My golden pupils lightened by the second, reflecting in his widened eyes as his rotten soul had my fury spiraling. “Speak loud and clear,” I hissed, spreading my toned legs for him to get a better look at his perverted obsession.

His breathing quickened, and he lowered his face to inhale my scent like a hungry dog.

“I put Xellirium in your water to numb you and have you compliant when I go down on you.” Dr. Peterson followed through and tore at my lingerie, moving the fine mesh aside, eager to part my pussy with his fingers. “I’ll now finger your pathetic little cunt and make you cream my fingers. Your panties? Another souvenir from work.” He zeroed in on my center, pupils dilated—thirsty for my oozing wetness. “After that, Katie comes for her appointment, and I’ll do the same to her. Oh, sweet little Katie—a full-blown junkie slut. She even gives ass for extra Xellirium.”

His eager digits right at my entrance, I gunned for his hand and stopped this disgusting shitshow.

We have enough proof on camera.

I got what I came for. Soon, his recorded confession would be the karma pounding his molesting ass—sans lube. But first, I was set on *sweetening* his day with a short trip to Hell.

Was my conscience around my human boyfriend clean as an angel’s butt? *Hell no*. But was my innermost longing to drag evil souls down to Hell no matter what? *Abso-fucking-lutely*.

One day, I’d have to face the truth I’d buried deep inside me. One day, it would come for me with karma in tow and force me to choose between two worlds.

But not today.

Time to go to Hell, Peterson.

-snap-



“Welcome to Hell’s capital, 3018 Belliz.” My words wrapped with cutting mockery, I dragged stumbling Dr. Peterson behind me on quick feet, entering the lower realm through pompous black gates. Hell existed parallel to the human world, hidden from the mortals but brighter than most of them pictured it.

“H-Hell?” Reeking of fear, his visage turned a shade paler.

Three... Two... One...

The hinges of the massive, steely darkness assaulted my ears with the squawks of a trillion tormented souls before the gates slammed closed behind us; Hell’s captives feted the arrival of yet another soul to join them in their never-ending doom and pain.

My molesting companion’s high-pitched scream ripped through the air as he clawed at my hand, forgetting I was the last person he should hold hands with. An outburst of laughter sat sharp on my tongue, but I stifled it into a smirk and glanced over my shoulder at the gates as they dissolved into clouds of black smoke.

This little bypass was just for you, Peterson.

Could I’ve teleported us straight to our intended destination? *Sure*. But I didn’t want him to miss out on the lullaby his soon-to-be *buddies* would sing him.

Dr. Peterson bounced his bulging eyes between me, the fading gates, and the towering buildings surrounding us on the busy streets of 3018 Belliz. Hell's capital had that Big Apple kind of flair. One couldn't help but gawk at the sheer power and wealth everything here gave off.

“W-What? This must be a dream. I'm about to—”

I silenced his annoying stutter with a heartfelt kick to his nuts, and his quivering knees hit the concrete. “Oh, *believe me*. It's not. The only one who's dreaming here is me! About the nice, shiny things I'll buy when I cash in the bounty for your sorry ass.”

He crumpled like a lifeless potato sack, unwilling to move, so I pulled him up and shot him a withering side-glance. “C'mon, time's money! You don't want to be late for the most important appointment in your pathetic little life.”

Not much affected by his current state of pain and fear, I whistled the notes of “Twisted Nerve.” My little welcome gesture never failed to spiral the fear of the wanted souls to heights of terror, gripping horror of the unknown carving itself into their bones. I loved every second of it.

The sticky, hot aroma of grilled flesh floated through the air and crept up my nose.

Bobby's here.

Every Friday, Bobby's Hell's Kitchen BBQ truck served delicious, juicy burgers. Well, if you happened to be a cannibalism enthusiast or a demon, that is, Bobby was your man. Personally, that was never my taste, and the thought alone had me gagging.

Two suns mingling behind thin layers of clouds painted the sky in warm tangerine; the unfamiliar bundled force of the twin sunbeams chipped away at the resistance of the dragged souls.

Shrill shrieks foreshadowed the arrival of yet another highlight capable of messing with our special guest's sanity—lizovs. The city had way too many of those pigeon-sized flying

plagues. Mutated descendants of lizards with an outstanding affinity for polished cars, lizovs soared above, scoping out targets, trigger happy to land a shit and decorate the hoods and roofs with their splashing white bombs.

But there was one thing they chose over any polished car. Dragged souls.

I had thought Dr. Peterson's scream before was the highest note to ever threaten my eardrums—I was wrong. Thin dark arrows shot through my peripheral view as two lizovs went in for a nosedive and bored their pointy claws into Dr. Peterson's shoulders, crooked beaks eager to snatch delicious eyeballs.

As much as I'd have loved to wait and see how Dr. Peterson would fight off those nasty flying rats, there was an important place to get to on our tour and an even more important office inside said place reminding me to get going.

“Get your nasty claws off him!” I shoed one away and the other raked me with its claws. Reaching behind my back, I grabbed nothing but air.

Ah, right. I left them at work. Ugh!

Annoyed I didn't get to poke that sucker back with one of my kukri blades, I snipped my fingers at its head. The second lizov flew off with a last shriek.

“Thank you,” Dr. Peterson mumbled. I yanked him to his feet and along with me.

“Don't be so quick to thank me.”

A short ten-minute walk later, we arrived at our destination—Hell's Discovery. Workplace to me, house of doom to the mortals. No, they didn't get tortured there—*worse*—they got preregistered for Hell's entry and received a Ruling for their remaining time on Earth, the bits of it shrinking to nothing but ant poop when they discovered their assumed life span would be chopped. They barely got granted more than seven years to turn their lives around.

I crested the top of the impressive dark marble staircase with a panting Dr. Peterson on my tail, and the massive doors swung open, the ancient wood and metal panels whining and nagging until they closed behind us with a loud *bang*.

A broad smile found its way onto my face. Work was like a second home to my Capricorn-heavy astro chart, even though I was born a free-spirited Aquarius. “Those placements make workaholics with a quirky, out-of-the-box mindset,” my adoptive mother used to say when she taught me about astrology.

Life is so damn good. Even better when you get to do what you love with little to no rules!

Hell’s Discovery was a high-towering old building, doom and gloom wrapped in art déco architecture at its finest with dark marble facades and huge windows that wouldn’t reflect anything—old as time, cursed or whatever. I couldn’t recall every detail, but I was kind of busy checking my lipstick when I walked in for my job audition five years ago and got irritated when I walked past one of those windows and couldn’t even see my reflection.

“Beatrix, dear, please give Dr. Peterson a warm welcome.” I wiggled my eyebrows as we walked up to Mrs. Chevers’s reception desk. She handed me my kukri swords, my leather back holster, and lastly, one of the collars us hunters used on the dragged souls. Our boss lived for the extra show effect.

She nodded with her signature warm smile, and in the next second, tongues of wild flames licked around the elevator doors.

Sweet.

“N-No! I don’t belong here! This can’t be real!” His desperate voice was music to my ears. No matter how big and bad these guys were, they all started whining and begging as soon as the fire and brimstone appeared.

Three... Two... One...

“*Please*, Ivangeline, please let me go! You want money? I can pay whatever you want! You got it all wrong. I don’t belong here!” Dr. Peterson dug his fingers into my upper arm in pure tortured desperation.

Ahhh, here we go!

I spun around and twisted his hand in a tight grip, forcing him to the ground once more.

“First of all, I told you to not call me Ivangeline,” I raged, heat prickling my neck. A few bones threatened to break as I tightened the grip gradually. “*Second*, nothing, and I repeat *nothing*, you could offer me would be anything I’d ever want. And *third*, your pathetic pervert ass won’t stay here for long. At least for now.”

For a fleeting moment, hope flashed in his teary brown eyes.

I love that part. Your guilty, fucked-up ass thinks you’ll be saved somehow. Lovely.

“I’ll change, I promise! I won’t touch Katie again, ever —” Dr. Peterson let out a pained scream as I built up the pressure on his hand once more and hissed my promise in his ear.

“Don’t you *ever* put her name in your filthy mouth while I’m around. Yes, you’ll return to the human realm, but I promise you, your life will be as miserable as the ones you have delighted in destroying.”

Keeping him whimpering and whining on the floor beneath me, my little demonstration found an audience. Nicolai Harber, Hell’s Discovery’s gardener, stopped by with a large scarlet-red bouquet of carnivorous tulips in his arms. The flowers occasionally snapped their row of sharp, needle-like teeth, aiming for Nicolai’s hand.

I’ve always loved flowers but not in this realm.

He delivered them to Mrs. Chevers every Friday, earning himself a sweet thank you and a blown kiss from her. His

obvious fancy for her has had me wondering for years, same as why a guy in his thirties retired early from being a top soul hunter only to become a gardener instead.

Peeking at Dr. Peterson between at least two dozen of those flesh-hungry tulips, he mused, “Ah, the fear in the souls’ eyes. Nothing better than the reek of trauma after hours of torturing and shattering them to pieces!”

I grinned at him with my eyebrow cocked. “We don’t do that anymore. We only bring them here and preregister their souls.”

“Indeed, but make no mistake, Ivy, the residing souls still get tortured, just not by soul hunters as they used to. Flowers and souls have much in common, you know? Delicate, easily bruised, and even more easy to squash irreversibly.” He gave Dr. Peterson an up-and-down glance and walked on by us.

Tsk, and I’m called the biggest weirdo here? Nicolai’s ten times weirder than me!

Dr. Peterson started to cry like a little girl, his nose runny with traces of snot reaching his quivering lips.

Ew, an ugly crier.

I released his mildly destroyed hand just to grab and twist it again. “There’s someone waiting for you up on the seventy-fourth floor, and he’s not as nice as I am.” Placing the big collar around his neck, I attached the chain to my hip belt, yanking it before I dragged him with me into the elevator. “Now, stop crying like a bitch. It looks fucking ugly!”

Desperation and fear spread across his distorted face as I pushed for the seventy-fourth floor, and the doors closed before us.

Well, that was fun. Can’t wait for his Ruling.



“Chain him to the slave driver for all I care! Put your damn brain to use, or I’ll have Bobby a new special by next week!” Fury boomed through my large office, and the wooden doors slammed shut after one of my employees hurried out.

These damn temporary half-blood workers. I should pile them up and burn them down with those incompetent temporary offices.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and let out a frustrated growl. It was already November, and there were only 148 souls left to register for their Hell’s entry before the end of the year.

Not enough! Gone are the days when they were uncountable.

The carved scar along the side of my head stung, and a building migraine was pounding against my skull. I leaned back in my chair and picked up the phone, nearly crushing the keypad with my impatient fingers dialing.

“Accounting Department, O’Hara,” a bothered voice answered.

Back in the good old days, people killed to get a job here, and now look at these ungrateful kids. No manners, no ambition. Fucking half bloods, spawn of demons who forgot why they shouldn’t breed outside their race.

“Office 696,” I spat and smashed down the phone.

Loosening my tie, I poured myself a double Fireball Cinnamon Whisky and gave the golden-brown liquor a swirl. Chugging it down in one go, I took delight in the essence warming my cold insides, and I sent the empty bottle flying into the hearth, only to open another right after. And so I waited. With each passing minute stoking up my fury.

Two minutes. O’Hara, you’re about to find out what else tastes like Heaven but burns like Hell.

I couldn’t help but grin and refill the crystal glass up to the rim before I treated my throat to another blazing trail of delicacy.

Fireball’s slogan kicks ass.

A shy knock resounded from outside my office, followed by O’Hara opening the heavy doors with shaky hands and shakier vocal cords. “Mr. Hardin, M-Master, I’m so sorry. I didn’t look at the caller ID, I had no clue that—”

I set the walls on fire, and the low-class filth nearly stopped breathing. Blood pumped into my cock as the fear reflecting in those light-brown eyes made what was about to come even better.

“Come here, you walking cocksucker.”

Impatience was one of my traits, but thankfully, I didn’t give a fuck about how my employees or slaves viewed me.

Pathetic half-blood mutt thinks he can opt for a raise when he also serves as a sex slave.

Almost faltering, my slave rushed to close the distance. “P-Please forgive my rudeness, Master!” Each shake in his high voice made my cock swell in sinful anticipation.

“Shhhh, Brian,” I cooed, gesturing for him to kneel between my legs.

Like a good slave, he followed my instructions without daring to directly look at me. That’s how I’ve instructed my

slaves to be trained—submissive, willing, and discreet. They didn't get to bother me with intimate eye contact while I pumped my cum into one of their holes.

“I have a fucking migraine, Brian. Do something about it,” I ordered and parted my legs farther.

“B-But, M-Master, it's Ryan.” He looked up from between my legs, stammering like a broken record. His lower lip sagged, his face turning a shade paler when he realized he had just violated two rules at once.

Rule one: which counts for all my employees, whether soul hunters, my slaves, or my secretary—never correct me.

Rule two: this only counts for my slaves—

“Never make fucking eye contact with me!” I yelled at my quivering slave from above.

-snap-

Making use of my go-to trick, I set his clothes on fire, so he screamed and tore off the burning fabric. That extra pinch of fear and panic was fucking delightful to watch, and my fat cock seeped from arousal. Sure, it was more of a nice show effect that didn't burn the skin. But to my slave, it felt real, and I loved every second of it.

“I won't get another trained slave until tomorrow. So, you damn cocksucker, *suck!* Or I'll have you as one of Bobby's specials!” I growled my favorite threat with bared fangs, my jagged canine crowns on full display.

Tears pooled in Brian's eyes, but he waggled his head and opened my pants, freeing my massive, veiny cock. With his rosy tongue, he wet his lips before his mouth opened to pleasure me. Losing my patience with his hesitation, I grabbed his light-brown hair and pumped into his mouth, reaching the back of his warm throat with every thrust.

Brian gagged when my length assaulted his uvula, but like any well-trained slave, he adjusted to my size and massaged my shaft with his tongue. My cock glided in and out, and a

satisfied growl rumbled through my chest. I threw my head back and enjoyed the slurping and gargling sounds of his mouth.

Pushing down his head three more times, I conjured a repulsive gag from him, vomit on the verge of spilling from his throat. I pulled out with threads of his saliva dripping on my balls.

Fuck yes.

“That’s enough.” My voice became dark from rising anticipation. Malicious twitches of thrill moved my cock at the thought of ruining his virgin ass.

He straightened up, pushing out labored breaths with his eyes glued to the floor and stretching his aching jaw. Eager to leave the beast’s den, he turned around and put one foot forward. I gunned for his neck and slammed him face down on the granite surface of my desk.

“That’s enough, I said—lubed enough to ram into your tight ass.” My cruel intentions had him sobbing and writhing. I positioned myself at his waxed back door and spat on it, squeezing his ass and pushing up one soft cheek for what was about to come.

Erratic breaths left his bruised throat, and he tried to get away by pulling and scratching at the cold, hard desk.

Whine for me. Beg me to stop.

“Master, please! I’m not trained yet to deliver you proper anal service,” he screeched. “I’ll make up for it, please, stop!”

“*Proper anal service.*” I mocked his pitiful excuses. “Fuck that, and now I’m about to *fuck you*, my boy toy.”

Stupid half blood thinks it matters to me how well trained his hole is. Pathetic.

One strong thrust, I bulldozed into his tight hole and split him in half, leaving him no time to adjust to my fat length as I pumped in with brutal strength. I trapped his pained body with my claws digging into his flesh, and my migraine subsided.

Wonderful.

Loud screams. Pained screams. Thrilling screams.

His beautiful cries for mercy filled the air and resonated from the high dark marble walls of my office, vibrating in my ears. This was better than sitting in one of those dreadful operas my wife used to drag me to.

I kept on pumping into him, almost ready to fill him up. His grip on the desk's edges slipping, Brian's consciousness hung by a thread as he was about to faint from the pain and trauma I caused his virgin ass. Cold beads of sweat built on his back as his body reacted to the shock, failing to cope with it.

“You willingly signed up to be my slave, Brian! Still want that raise?” I grunted with every thrust, and he managed to gargle out a weak *Yes, Master* before he fainted.

The massive doors of my office opened once more, and I snarled. “I'm busy!”

“Knock, knock, Chief! Here's a delivery for you.” The mesmerizing, smoky vocals of my favorite soul hunter resounded through the hall I called my office, and a grin creased my cheeks.

I had a soft spot for Ivangeline. There weren't many who could call me anything but *master* or *Mr. Hardin* and get away with it—unpunished. Sometimes, I caught myself musing how her moist little cunt would feel around my cock if I speared her with its fat length while her beautiful pained cries filled my ears.

Might take that sassy cocktease on a joyride one day.

Chuckling at my thoughts, I turned my face to her and didn't bother to stop fucking my slave as I kept on thrusting—his unconsciousness made no difference to me.

My gaze snapped and burned, spearing the dragged soul next to Ivangeline with flaming amber. His breathing hitched as his wide eyes zeroed in on Brian's limp body and my divine appearance.

Increasing my speed, I felt my balls tighten from the sounds of wet skin slapping wet skin, which made it so much better, and the heart rate of the man was about to skyrocket.

Nothing better than the scent of anxiety.

Brian's body oozed trauma, and it mixed beautifully with the lingering fear in the air.

"Well, somebody seems to be having a good time! Oh, hi, Ryan! Ah, guess that doesn't count for you, at least not right now, buddy." Ivangeline grimaced when she scanned my slave's body as she walked up to me with the dragged soul attached to her hip.

"Brian." I panted between thrusts. "I decided to name him Brian—"

Here it comes.

"—from now"—my juices were ready to shoot—"on!"

I released my hot load into his ass and pulled out immediately, my cum dripping down over his balls onto the floor.

Brutality!

The sight of his playhole's gape was almost enough for me to go in for another round, but business waited for me.

I took off my button-down shirt and wiped my cock somewhat clean. Tossing my shirt on Brian's face, I admired his ass's gape one last time with a sly grin before I pulled up my pants and turned around.

Not much left of that virgin ass.

With a loud, satisfied groan, I sat back in my wide leather chair and poured myself another well-deserved whisky. I pressed the speaker button connected to reception. "Beatrix, get O'Hara out of my office and send someone to clean up this mess. Replacement order, out by 4 p.m. latest. Is there a warranty for this slave? He seems broken." I chuckled. "Never mind the replacement order. A new one just arrived." My

laugh boomed through the room as I narrowed my eyes on the dragged soul in front of me. “My cock needs a polish,” I joked and gestured to my crotch.

He gulped, looking paler than paper. In a desperate attempt to flee, he yanked at his chains, which only granted him two quick kicks to the back of his knees, sending him sprawling onto the ground.

“No? *Too bad.* Well, let’s get back to business, then. *Ivangeline*, you look as enticing as always. My attention is all yours.”



Chief Hardin leaned forward and rested his elbows on the massive granite desk. Not one drop of sweat dared to appear on his perfectly chiseled face or his wide chest. His unnaturally snow-white hair was strictly combed back with one strand falling next to his bright amber eyes. You'd never have known he just fucked one of my coworkers unconscious.

Neither the lingering tang of sex in the air, nor my boss's jacked body with those wide shoulders sent from Heaven—or rather, Hell—helped much to ease my rising sexual frustration.

If anything, it made me wish my boyfriend were just as sinfully hot or that he would at least pound me until my lights went out—but, no.

Forty-one days without any sex. Fuck my life!

Good for me, I wasn't drawn to Chief Hardin per se. I could stay focused and wouldn't get lured into his sex-fueled charisma. I was loyal and efficient; no questions need ever be asked. Raising my hunting score was more than just competition to me—each point I earned reflected my ambition and thus my character. I wasn't joking when I said I'd drag these souls like there's no tomorrow—having an astrological Midheaven, the placement that reflects your idea of self-image, in Taurus meant business!

Part of me wondered, though, every inch of my feminine body should've screamed for his dominating touch, to be used over and over again as his little sex kitten, should've come

naturally. As it did to every other vagina in this building—except for Mrs. Chevers. Instead, the slow, sinister energy I’d witnessed rolling off him on my audition day put him in the *hell no* category from the beginning. And I’ve never wavered. I also couldn’t have cared less about it, since purging the human realm from rotten souls was what I lived for.

I quickly rearranged my inner chaos when I recognized the amusement in Chief Hardin’s eyes.

I would be amused, too, if I heard my thoughts out loud. A succubus turned off by evil—yup, sure. Wait. What?

Clearing my throat, I tossed away the last bits of my thoughts. Chief Hardin cocked his eyebrow and flexed his pumped muscles, baffling me for a fleeting second. As always, it appeared he caught snippets of my thoughts. A mere twitch moved his upper lip, but as fast as it happened, it disappeared.

“Dr. Jeffrey Peterson. Soul category three, dragged him ten weeks prior to the deadline,” I announced, jangling the chains for effect. His sorry ass was still on his knees, head hanging low in resignation.

“Well, *Ivangeline*, you’re one hell of a hunter. I’ve no idea how you operate that fast and efficiently.” My name rolled off Chief Hardin’s tongue with a hint of longing that never failed to send contradicting shivers down my spine. “And I honestly don’t care, as long as you work for me. As long as your loyalty belongs to me—only *me*.”

Why does he always have to be so damn intense? Ten bucks says he’s a Scorpio Rising.

Looking at Ryan, er, Brian’s awful state again, I pursed my lips.

Probably a notorious, lashing-out Scorpio-Mars as well. Yikes!

Chief Hardin stomped twice on the slick marble tiles beneath his desk, and the gigantic soul registration book followed his call when it appeared out of nowhere. He snapped once, and it dropped in front of him with a heavy thud.

“*Jeffrey Peterson*, do you know why you’re here today?” Voice wrapped in an alluring baritone, he flashed his jagged fang crowns and couldn’t help but grin like the known devourer of fear he was.

Dr. Peterson lifted his face and looked at me with glazed eyes.

-snap-

Dr. Peterson’s clothes caught fire, and now, it was my turn to keep up my poker face—I got used to my boss’s little tricks years ago, but they were still quite entertaining. Rolling all over the floor shrieking girly screams that hurt my ears, our molesting friend tried to put out the fire that cloaked his body.

“I dare you to confuse whom your ass belongs to in here!” Chief Hardin barked and bolted up, closing the distance between us with predatory strides. Towering over a whimpering Dr. Peterson, my boss had his pants hanging somewhat loosely, leaving almost nothing to the imagination when his massive cock swelled halfway again inside his boxers.

Delicious testosterone mingled with the brooding sexual heat his body radiated, and I forced my thoughts to not stray.

Forty-one days. For Hell’s sake!

The biting stench of a man’s shitty briefs burning to ashes, coming from right next to me, cleared my thoughts with lightning speed.

“Um, Chief, I think you made your stance clear. He already shit his pants but *thanks* for burning them. Fucking gross.” I scrunched up my nose and fanned myself for fresh air. “Please, let me continue.”

Chief Hardin looked down with a frown, clear as day irritation followed by disgust taking over his features. With one sharp click of his tongue, he walked back to his desk, and slumped in his big chair in front of the sizzling fireplace.

“Soul category three. Not my favorite but still pretty damn interesting!” I beamed.

I love my job!

Soul category three—malicious souls that brought agony upon others. Mostly murderers, rapists, abusers, and traffickers. They almost surely got a one-way ticket to Hell. But since they weren’t as rotten as category fours, they could still turn their lives around, pay back their soul’s debts, and become a category two, which had a slight chance of entering Heaven.

Hell’s concept and its rules of admittance deviated sharply from what humans thought. Not that they needed to know; trying to *live a good life* crumbles in the face of knowing there’s the possibility of a second chance and avoiding eternity in Hell.

Soul category four—the rotten ones. Got their ticket to Hell faster than one could say *Quidditch*. Ritual murderers, cannibals, and pedophiles. There was no Ruling prior, no chance to make it up and change their ways. Once their lifetime on Earth was up and their number was called, us soul hunters made sure to *pick up* the category fours in an extraordinary manner before escorting their souls to Hell.

No, unlike category threes, we didn’t pick up souls *with* bodies. Their physical vessel was free game, and damn me if I’d ever let them keep their heads.

That’s why both my kukri swords always accompanied me. Nothing better than decapitating those bastards with a nice, clean x-slice. From behind, from the side, jumping up, or doing it blindfolded—I could do it all and loved switching it up. For my own entertainment, of course.

It fascinated me every time how their cut-off heads painted masterpieces in Jackson Pollock’s style, adorning the floors they rolled over with long messy lines of scarlet blood.

Snatching souls on Halloween had quickly become my personal favorite.

Each year, before I'd take vacation for the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve in the human realm, I waited in front of the release board like a kid in front of Disneyland, hoping for category fours to expire their lifetime on October 31st of the following year. I never missed that announcement.

My heads roll farther than Marcus's, even that one time when I dressed up as a chili pepper! To be fair, he's not the sword type of guy, but I love that he keeps trying to compete with me. Ha!

Thinking of our little insider competition had me giggling, but the rumble that rattled through Chief Hardin's throat brought my composure back. I continued. "Your confused, useless ass doesn't know what I'm talking about, but here's the deal. You fucked up, Peterson. All those years of abusing shattered girls for your sick perversion at the Langsley Mental Institution, numbing them with drugs like Xellirium, taking away not only their panties, *you sick pervert*, but also their dignity—" I paused with brooding fury tickling my fingers and my widened eyes set on the poor excuse of a human being in front of me. Oh, how I wanted to punch his lights out.

Chief Hardin gestured for me to continue with his hand, doing circular motions.

No sense for drama, huh?

I rolled my eyes, and a low *tzzz* hushed over my lips, but the devilish snarl echoing through the office dared my inner spitfire to disrespect him again.

I flashed Chief Hardin my most innocent smile, and his look softened but not before he sucked in his lower lip, spreading some kind of eerie sensation through my body.

Okay... Keep going, Ivy!

I gulped and wrapped it up. "Granted you a soul category three ticket, which means you'll get preregistered for Hell. You'll return home, living the consequences of your prior sinful ways, but also get granted time to make a hundred-eighty degree change"—I used sloppy air quotes—"and clear

your soul's debt to earn yourself the *chance* of entering Heaven." My voice carried sarcasm I didn't care to hide. "If you fail, we'll see each other sooner rather than later, and trust me—we both don't want that."

Somewhat predictably, ninety-five percent of the category threes failed to pay back their soul's debt and ended up in Hell. At least, they were given a fair chance. Heaven? That place or its feather-flapping citizens I'd never seen. But Hell? I called it my comfort place.

Drifting my gaze to the sizzling fire behind my boss, I mumbled the next part, "I like this category because, even if karma is known to be a bitch, there will always be a chance for redemption if one seeks the right path."

"All right, all right, little poet! You sound like an angel. Fucking gross." Chief Hardin clapped and couldn't have looked more disgusted and bored. Guess that spark of light within me turned him off as much as his evil side turned me off. "Simply put, via the soul radio, we caught your name and your wrongdoings multiple times over the past years. Now, we're here, and you'll place your blood signature right *there*." He pointed to the blank space next to Dr. Peterson's written name and soul category.

Dr. Peterson's brows knitted, and sweat built on his receding hairline. Molesting bastard was visibly disturbed by the mention of a blood signature.

"But before I decide how much time you'll receive to pay back your soul's debt, you get the chance to say a few things that might convince me to give you more time." Resting his face on the back of his hand, my boss cocked a charcoal-black eyebrow with a Cheshire grin spreading over his visage.

He gives zero fucks about the dragged souls and only enjoys toying with their fear. It's all false hope.

Dr. Peterson met his gaze with fear and did what he could do best. Be a ratty little cunt. "Oh, sir, this is more than generous. It's not only me who took advantage of these girls."

His eyes darted between me and Chief Hardin like they played ping-pong. “Let me give you a few names! Please! Maybe we can forget about all that *me going to Hell* stuff, and you let me go in exchange for names? That way, you get more souls, right?”

Pathetic.

He turned his stinking body to me and even had the nerve to touch my leg.

“*Please*, Ivangeline, tell your boss to lower my sentence. I’m not sorry I got to feel your damp lingerie and almost slipped my fingers inside your wet pussy. Oh, I bet it’s tight. I’m only sorry I didn’t put enough Xellirium into your water before.” His eyes almost popped out in shock, and his hand shot up to his mouth. “Why did I say that? Please, just let me go! Oh, god! I don’t understand what’s going on,” he sobbed.

I scoffed, pulling one of my curved blades and sliced a bloody 3 into Dr. Peterson’s chest quicker than his brain could process. Rivulets of blood ran down the wound as he screamed out. I gave my masterpiece a heartfelt kick, and he fell back onto the hard marble floor.

“You piece of shit! You’re still under my control, and therefore you only speak the truth if it’s what I want you to do.”

I detached the chain from my hip belt and stepped on my little piece of art, making him whimper out more pathetic sounds. “You’re only sorry you got caught. There’s no regret, no shame, no remorse. Pay back as much as you like. Deep down, you’ll always be a category three, and you’ll end up in Hell anyway!”

Chief Hardin didn’t bother to look up as he announced the given payback time. “I’ll give you a year. I took away three because it seems you can’t help but be a delicious sinner even if granted a chance to not be.”

Delicious sinner? Interesting choice of words...

Snapping once, he lifted Dr. Peterson's naked body to his desk in front of the registration book. That perverted fucker kept on sobbing with threads of snot and spit smearing the desk when his elbow touched Ryan's naked body. Evident disgust pulled down Chief Hardin's lips, and he pushed Ryan off the desk before he grabbed Dr. Peterson's hand and brought it to the book.

A tiny needle appeared out of the page and pierced his finger, sealing the Ruling with a drop of blood. The book closed with a loud thud and disappeared.

Finally! Earned me a well-deserved beer. Oh, wait...

"One more thing. Once you return to the human realm, you'll face the consequences, but you won't remember me or anything that happened here. You won't remember your given payback time either, so *if* you change for the better, it'll be sincere and not because of your ratty instinct to save yourself. A chance at Heaven must be earned, but I doubt you'll succeed." I paused and scared him with my pupils flashing bright gold. "Oh, and *please*, you never had a chance to numb me with Xellirium. I'm a succubus!"

Dr. Peterson's mouth hung open, and he was about to faint when his eyes rolled back for a second before he gasped for air like a fish on land, so I snapped my jaw at him for that little extra pinch of fear. It worked, and he sagged down to the floor with a dull thud next to Ryan.

"I think we'll see each other in a year, Peterson." Whistling my favorite melody of fear and terror, I made my way out but halted when Chief Hardin's demanding voice reached my ears from across the long hall.

"Ivangeline, I'll tip you three thousand points, but next time, please refrain from decorating the dragged souls!"

But I didn't miss the underlying amusement in it and turned around with my signature million-dollar smile. "Always a pleasure working for you. And, yes, *of course*, sir."

There was something sinful about him rolling and tasting my name every time it left his lips, but I never corrected him and never insisted on him calling me Ivy.

Rule number one.

THE ELEVATOR INCIDENT



IVY

Walking down the aisle between rows of dark wooden benches on my way out of Chief Hardin's office, I let my eyes roam over the bizarre oil paintings to my left. Wide, beautiful landscapes, all on fire. Everything that could possibly ignite burned in an inferno of feral high flames. The tall trees, nothing more than charcoal remains of destruction and the leftovers of the fire's rampant feast.

I guessed the small figures that lay piled up on the burnt grass were supposed to be corpses, though not all seemed to be dead, since some of them reached the sky with their arms aflame. Images of unfamiliar places in a horrible world I'd never seen before and now, never wanted to.

I'd walked in and out of my boss's office innumerable times in the past five years, and still, his choice of interior decoration never failed to raise my eyebrows and label him a man with an obscure background.

Thoughts of my first time at Hell's Discovery flooded my mind all over again, and my cheeks creased up to my ears.

Hell, I'll never forget my first time here when I attended the job audition... Or Stacey Smith. And I certainly won't forget the first time I met the most handsome, lovable idiot gracing this realm. Damn, I'd thought of him as the dumbest creep breathing when he had his face between my legs. Who knew I'd call him my ride-or-die one day? Ha!



Five years ago, the actual day of the “Elevator Incident”

The lower realm’s heat peak arrived around June; the air I breathed in tormented my lungs like fire, and sweat pooled in my sticky palms. Choosing my favorite worn-out leather jacket to wear wasn’t the brightest idea when I picked clothes that morning. Lucky for me, I’d paired it with my favorite AC/DC tank top I’d knotted in the front and leather hot pants.

With my new kukri blades sheathed in the back holster, I was ready to kick ass at the job audition.

Late spring in the human world had bronzed me one shade darker already, and here, I’d tan two more in no time. But even if I didn’t get this job and had to return to the human realm, the winter months wouldn’t change my appearance much. The perk that came with having a medium-deep olive skin tone. I’d always assumed my birth mother must’ve passed down her complexion to me, but I couldn’t know for sure, nor would I ever. There were no records of her or her whereabouts. One of the mysteries that came with being adopted.

Without a plan to find my destination, along with my lack of navigation skills, I found myself lost and running short on time. My eyes darted from one busy person to the next, all of them in a hurry with their snobby suits and little suitcases, topped off with don’t-fucking-bother-me looks on their faces.

Time was an expensive currency in 3018 Belliz, evident in its never-resting-never-sleeping nature. I’d been here once before but already then I found the constant high level of noise irritating; cars, people, lizovs, everything that could make noise did it without pausing.

“Damn me if I don’t get that job! Wish me luck!” The energetic voice of a younger woman caught my attention as she waved goodbye to another girl from across the traffic-packed street.

I have a feeling she knows exactly where I’ll find this building.

Picking up speed as I hurried over to her, she faced me with curious eyes while she blew a large bubble the size of an apple before it popped with a *bang*. That's when I met her, Stacey Smith.

Turns out, we were both attending the same soul hunter audition, so I was happy to tag along. *Yes*, she did know exactly where to go—same as she seemed to know everything I didn't need but was about to learn anyway.

Ten minutes later, and she still had not finished telling me all about how she couldn't sleep the night before and how excited she was to meet Mr. Hardin, the boss of Hell's Discovery.

She wasn't simply excited. The poor girl was on the verge of hyperventilating and fanned herself for air with the intensity of an industrial fan. Her squeaky voice matched the rest of her appearance. Long blonde pigtails complemented her kinky schoolgirl attire, and on both hips, she carried heavy boom sticks. The perfect Harley Quinn double, sans baseball bat.

Humans attended job *interviews*—but not spawn of the darkness. We had to fight for our jobs, especially when the employer was Hell's Discovery. *Auditions* under that roof had a bloody reputation—just up my alley. I didn't underestimate Stacey for a second. After all, she got an invitation to this audition as well. No matter how much I wanted to squeeze the life out of her annoying, squeaky throat, she was my competition and thus skilled to kill.

By the time we reached the old building, she'd told me all about Mr. Hardin.

Bottom line, he was Mr. Steal Your Girl material, mixed with heavy dominant vibes and, apparently, had snow-white hair.

I struggled to imagine how a grandpa could be *so hot and panty dropping*—at least that's how Stacey described him when she couldn't stop drooling.

All I wanted was this job, and I didn't care about how wild everyone with a vagina went over Mr. Hardin.

Stacey still blabbered on about the history of Hell's Discovery when I decided to split ways and excused myself to the restrooms. After fixing my smudged lipstick and covering a nasty blemish between my cute light-brown freckles, I made my way to the reception area with confidence and eager excitement.

The lobby was flooded with light, dipped in a warm atmosphere from the powerful beams of sunlight that broke through the many tall windows. Very inviting, considering the dragged souls faced horrific Rulings here. As far as I'd heard.

Squinting at the name tag of the reception lady, I read *Beatrix Chevers*.

She hummed in a blissful, singsong manner that instantly invoked happy memories of old Disney movies before she lifted her eyes and greeted me with a smile so sweet and warm it could melt icebergs. Her gray-blonde hair carefully pulled into a neat bun underlined her polished outfit, topped with an ironed silk blouse in soft anthracite. Even her nail polish screamed *posh*, with that flawless dark-gray gel coat.

"Ivangeline Lucia Givelle. But please call me Ivy. I'm here for the job audition, 2 p.m."

"Just on time, dear. Take the left elevator and press for the seventy-fourth floor. The audition takes place in office 696," Mrs. Chevers chirped.

She seemed like a lovely older lady, around seventy years old. But in this realm, looks could be deceiving; she could be your granny next door who likes to eat cats for breakfast and flosses her teeth with fairy hair.

"Thank you. On time is my unofficial middle name." I winked and turned around to go.

"Oh, Ivy. One more thing. Mr. Hardin, he can be a little —" She stopped midsentence with a hint of tension wrinkling her elderly face.

“Um, what about Mr. Hardin?” I knitted my brows, but she shook her head and straightened up in her seat.

“Difficult. But never mind! I wish you good luck. Keep your thoughts clear and stay focused.” She gestured to the elevators, smiling at me with such reassurance. I couldn’t wait to kick ass and get this job.

So weird, though... All of them are making a big fuss about him.

I walked away and pondered over her words. Her soft humming continued, and I quirked my brow. The first encounter at Hell’s Discovery was nothing like I’d expected it to be.

Keep my thoughts clear? Whatever.

I nodded to myself and walked up to the elevator. The doors opened, and I was halfway in when a bulky frame overshadowed me and pushed past my short figure, pressing for the seventy-fourth floor.

“Rude fucker,” I muttered through clenched teeth, jaw grinding as I walked in behind the blond man. I decided against putting him in his place—for now. Punching out the lights of someone who worked here didn’t seem like a wise move.

Focus, Ivy, he isn’t worth it.

Indulging in all kinds of snarky curses in my head, I gasped when my back met the elevator walls as strong hands pushed and held me by my waist with a firm grip.

“For you, *gorgeous*, it’s Marcus Ferrow. But if you offer me some of these round goodies, you might get to call me *Master*. Or maybe you’re the kinky kind. Then, it’s *Daddy*.” Rude fucker chuckled with a deep bass rumbling through his chest. Three-day-old stubble highlighted his curved lips, framing his cheeks.

He towered over me, his dark-blond hair carefully combed and tied back into a man bun. Not a single strand dared to

stand out. My throat bobbed when those mesmerizing cerulean blue eyes pinned me down.

Okay, Charlie Hunnam wannabe, you're hot. But you're asking for it.

“Well, *Daddy*,” I lowered my voice and hummed when I let my fingers dance over a landscape of perfection on a broad, rock-hard body.

His edged abs had my fingertips almost bumping on their route down south. His lips creased his cheek, lifting into a lopsided, victorious grin, and I palmed his crotch, the building pressure clearly visible. Poor fucker thought I already soaked my lingerie over his stupid behavior.

I clenched his balls, and blatant devilry twisted my lips. He groaned in pain and let go of my waist. Seizing the moment, I let go of him before I jumped up and wrapped my legs around his throat in one quick motion that brought us to the floor with a loud *bang*.

“For you, *rude fuck*, it's Miss *I Won't Bother You Anymore!* But if you ever touch me again and offer me any of your unwanted sexual disappointments”—I glared from above him and pulled out one of the kukri swords from my back holster to make sure he got the memo—“then, it'll be Miss *Who Sliced My Balls Off.*”

His eyes zeroed in between my legs, and a creepy smirk plastered his stupidly handsome face, small dimples piercing his cheeks. I followed his stare only for my eyebrows to almost join when I groaned in frustration.

Are you serious? Seventeen-and-a-half-inch kukri blade up in your face, and all you think about is pussy?

The elevator doors opened with a *bing*, and I got up, fixing my leather jacket while stepping over him with a careless brush of my gray Converse on my way out.

“Have a nice day, fucker.” I gave him a slow once-over and clicked my tongue as I walked away.

His booming laughter escorted me through the long decadently furnished corridor with its large checkered tiles and oil paintings of Hell's landscapes.

Dude is a ten but his laughter? Fucking annoying. Office 692. Office 694. Ah, office 696.

The death glares of three guys and four other girls sitting scattered on rows of dark wooden benches in the middle of the room met me when I entered the spacious but rather sparsely furnished office that had the dimensions of a long hall. I kept walking and huffed at the sight in front of me; the polished tiles beneath my feet led me through six rows of benches, followed by the rest of the long hall, as if walking down an aisle. I didn't expect to get church vibes when I racked my mind over this audition.

Everything inside this office was ridiculously exaggerated. The ceiling height about seventy feet, the biggest hearth I'd ever seen at the end of the room. A row of floor-to-ceiling tall windows, same as many huge-ass oil paintings of more burning landscapes that were easily thirty feet tall. This was rather a cathedral than an office.

One glance revealed the weapons of my competitors stocked on a small table right before the front-row bench. I didn't bother to put down my babies.

With the high walls echoing my confident steps, I made my way through the rows and crossed the remaining length, positioning myself in front of a massive granite desk. The two Chesterfield leather chairs in front of the desk weren't regular-sized either; they'd swallow me and leave way too much room for my legs to swing back and forth above the slick dark marble tiles.

A crackling fire in the wide-open hearth behind it contributed to the atmosphere the tall oil paintings of burning landscapes set—impressive, with a touch of the bizarre.

My raised eyebrows threatened to meld with my hairline when I inspected the heads of four stuffed dragons hanging on

trophy boards above the large open fireplace. I blew out a breath at the empty board next to them and its inscription, *The Last Dragon*. This was indeed bizarre.

Insane how real these replicas look...

“Ivy!” Stacey’s urgent voice snapped me out of my gawking when she whisper-yelled behind me, and I turned halfway to face her. “Put down your weapons like the rest of us.” She pointed to the small table by the first row of benches where she’d been sitting.

“No, thank you. I feel better when I carry my babies with me.” I patted the two kukri swords residing in my leather back holster and gave her a sly grin.

“This is not just any audition! Most would kill to get a chance here. Mrs. Chevers from the reception desk told me to put down my weapons until instructed otherwise. I’m sure she told you as well.” She pursed her glossy lips with her hands on her hips and glared at me in disbelief.

“Um, she didn’t tell me anything like that. She told me to stay focused and keep my thoughts clear. Whatever that means.” I shrugged and tried to do just that.

This job is mine.

“Mr. Hardin won’t be pleased—” she started to lecture, but I cut in.

“I’m not here to *please* Mr. Hardin, Stacey. I’m here to get what I came for—this job, to be precise. So, please, look out for yourself and keep your advice where it belongs.”

Noticing how her blue eyes held an ounce of frustration, I backpedaled and smoothed my attitude toward her. “Thank you, Stacey, but I just think you should focus on yourself. But, hey, good luck!” Giving her my best awkward Aquarius smile, I turned again.

“Whatever,” she muttered as she walked back to rows of dark wooden benches in the middle of the room.

A loud bang caught us by surprise, and all heads turned.

The large double doors burst open, and an athletically built man barged in with quick strides. His voice was as sharp as his haircut when it sliced through the air, scaring away a shivering guy at the threshold. “I don’t give two shits about my slave’s training! I made my instructions clear, didn’t I?”

And with that, he crossed the room in far fewer steps than me with his unnaturally tall height and halted in front of the big granite desk, facing the fire’s warmth that highlighted his stunning features.

I peeked at him for a second—*okay*, for more than a second.

Just like Stacey had mentioned: snow-white hair, the longer top part combed back. And, *damn*, she was right; he didn’t look ready for checking in to a retirement home but smoking hot. He seemed like one of those men who didn’t need to ask for anything as not catering to him was as hard as not scratching an itch. By his looks, he was in his midfifties, and I began to understand the hype about him.

What’s his true age, though...

A trimmed white beard accentuated his prominent cheekbones, and sharp dark-gray eyebrows gave his rough vibe an elegant touch. The buzzed hair cut revealed a thick long scar and tickled my Aquarian curiosity for all things out of the norm.

As I wondered if his jawline underneath the beard was as sharp as his other features and what he was like as a boss, he caught me staring when his bright amber eyes snapped to mine.

Although his aura oozed pure strength, I held his stare that lasted multiple Mississippis.

I cut through the awkward tension and introduced myself with confidence when I held out my sweaty hand to meet his. “Hard to find good employees nowadays, right? Givelle, Ivangelina Lucia Givelle. But, please, feel free to call me Ivy.”

Best moment to have sweaty palms—dammit!

Mr. Hardin's expression didn't give away anything as he extended his hand and enclosed my small hand with pressure. His handshake almost crushed me, but I returned it with a faint smile lifting my lips, waiting for him to release me.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi...

Releasing my hand, he allowed a hint of amusement to dance over his visage, but it vanished the second he faced the rest of the group. I remained in the same spot and didn't join the others on the benches; envy mixed with hatred in most of the stares I received from my competition.

I'm not a pick-me gal.

"I had one hell of a rough day, and a migraine is building. So, let's get fucking started and don't waste my time!" he shouted. The other candidates shot up as if their asses were on fire.

It revealed that everyone was taller than me, as usual. Since first grade, I'd been the shortest among my peers and had stopped growing when I was around fourteen—could be the cigarettes I'd consumed since the age of twelve, but who knows.

"Mr. Hardin, I can't put into words how honored—" Stacey took two steps forward, but his icy snap silenced her fangirl blabber and drew an echo from the high walls.

"I didn't ask you to speak, did I?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir!" She bowed her head in submission, but instead of shutting her trap, she continued. "That won't happen again, sir. I'm sorry if I displeased you." Her voice carried the obvious fancy she had for him, and I took in a long breath through my nose.

Just shut the fuck up, Stacey! You're making it worse!

She gasped when Mr. Hardin teleported to right in front of her and growled low in his throat, his upper lip exposing shimmering fang crowns.

Easily angered, huh? Oh boy...

He turned to me with a suggestive cocked eyebrow, like my thoughts had been broadcast to the entire room. I shrugged with an innocent smile, and he returned his attention to the quivering fangirl in front of him.

“*And you are?*” His question was a mere dare, but it was enough to send her groupie pussy into overdrive.

“Stacey Smith, sir. I’m here for the soul hunter audition, and I assure you I’ll—”

Mr. Hardin’s temper continued to flare. “I fucking set up this audition today. Do you think *I* don’t know why you’re here?”

“O-Of course, you know,” she said, her face heated by either arousal or embarrassment. Probably both.

Tilting her head back, she peeked up between her long, curved lashes as he inched closer to her, making use of every bit of his towering height—all solid six-foot-eight of it. He oozed alpha aura, clear as day, with strong tenses of his veiny underarms stretching the white fabric of his button-down shirt around his thick biceps.

“You want to *please* me, Miss Smith?” Mr. Hardin’s velvet voice dripped with lust, and I sensed an underlying test that wouldn’t promise Stacey the job she auditioned for.

“Of course, sir. That’s why I’m here.” Her cheeks burned in dark shades of *rouge*, and her big blues zeroed in on his devilish smirk. She wet her lips while her eyes trailed over the tight iron-colored vest hugging his wide muscular chest.

He grabbed her hair, pulling her flush against him, and a quiet moan escaped Stacey’s lips. Her breathing quickened, and a low chuckle thundered through his chest.

“Show us how much you want this job, Miss Smith.” He stared down at her with cold eyes, loosening his belt, and opened the zipper of his pants.

You can’t be serious...

Dropping like a brick, she kneeled, fumbling with his fly to free his cock, and ended up unbuttoning his pants with needy fingers. Her glossy lips parted in awe as she grabbed his massive cock and began to stroke it, sliding the delicate skin over the crown edges of the fat head up and down. A second eager hand joined right after and supported her hold on the meaty shaft.

Mr. Hardin's chilly laughter stopped her as she struggled to meet his leaking tip with her slick mouth, the height difference more than obvious.

Perplexed, like all of us, she looked up, and her expression went blank when his clenched jaw foreshadowed her downfall; if it was possible to sink even deeper. His eyes burned down on her in flashing amber, and before she knew what kind of trouble her thirsty actions brought her, he grabbed her by her throat and lifted her petite body to meet his face.

Well, that escalated quickly...

Stacey clawed at the hand assaulting her windpipe, but it granted her a firmer grip that painted hues of blue on her face. Low gasps of shock went through the group of candidates, but no one dared to intervene.

Gargling, she slowed her movements.

"This is not a slave audition, Miss Smith," Mr. Hardin mocked between gritted teeth.

Just before her lights went out, he released her, and she fell onto the hard floor, gasping for air as she held her tormented throat.

"S-Sorry," she croaked out and sobbed from below, but her desperate sobs only angered him further.

"I have no use for a weak, cock-sucking waste of time like you. Get out of my fucking sight, or I'll have you serving the janitor as his new toy!"

At least she wasn't dumb; she rushed for her boom sticks, leaving the room as fast as her feet could carry her.

Probably not a fan anymore...

I pitied her. She'd been a hardcore groupie, after all, but my empathy for her vanished as quickly as it came up. I wasn't there to make friends. This job was my top priority and nothing else.

When he spoke to everyone, I sensed he directed his next words at me as he darted his eyes to mine for a split second. "So, anyone else still feel the need to please me?"

Looking at the other candidates, I decided to make my stand clear once and for all. "I'm not here to *please* anyone! But if you're looking for someone to drag these souls in like there's no tomorrow, look no further."

Mr. Hardin turned toward me with a smug grin, lifting his lips and narrowing his alluring eyes, daring me with enticing authority to show him respect.

"Sir." I finished my statement with confidence and bowed my head, standing firm and going in for another round of intense eye contact.

Our little staring contest got interrupted when the rude fucker from the elevator incident barged in. "Okay, Chief, who's going to be blessed as my new partner?" Marcus Ferrow's dazzling smile beamed, with cocky amusement dancing all over his punchable, handsome face. When his mischievous blues landed on me, he winked, and I huffed out a breath, with an eye roll building inside of me.

Partner? You gotta be kidding me.

From the moment he barged in, dude gave off that kind of vibe I couldn't fucking stand. He surely thought of himself as the best thing since sliced bread.

"This one right there's a handful, Chief." He let his booming laughter echo through the capacious office with his

thick arms crossed over his even thicker chest as he came to a halt next to the group.

Throughout the whole incident, Mr. Hardin's gaze lingered on me; every fiber of my body tensed from the unfamiliar sensation. When I gave into his magnetic pull and looked back at him, those bright amber eyes struck me as he murmured, "I'd noticed that as well, Ferrow. *Ivangeline* is indeed quite a handful."

Oh, bloody hell...

End of flashback



The brassy beast-tongue-shaped handles of the wooden doors cranked down, and two facilities managers in no-nonsense black uniforms entered the office to escort Peterson back to the human realm. I thanked them with a sweet smile as I slipped through the door ahead of them.

Gotta pay respect to the people taking out the trash!

Outside Office 696, Marcus already waited for me and flashed me a dimple-adorned grin.

"*Man*, Ivy, you increased your hunting score by three thousand points! Why the hell did Chief Hardin tip you *that* much for a category *three*?" he sputtered while I checked my clothes for stains. "Last week, I almost talked my ass into the grave when I suggested he add five hundred to the usual one-thousand-point tip!"

"Aw, Blondie! Don't be jealous. It's called *big-titty bonus*!" I sang and licked my index finger before sizzling it on my breasts.

"That's unfair! Why is there no big-cock bonus, huh?" he whined but stopped when I pulled out a fifty-dollar bill, waving it in front of his face.

"You won. Ryan didn't last a week! *Damn*, you should've seen him—poor guy." Marcus went to snatch it out of my

fingers, but I pulled my hand away. “But, *okay*, keep bitching about the Chief not paying your dick any attention. *Boohoo!*”

My high-pitched yelp echoed back from the walls of the corridor as he poked me in the ribs, grabbing the bill.

I blew loose strands out of my face. “C’mon, I’m dying to grab a beer and get through with this day. First round’s on me!”

Guess Ryan would agree...



Marcus had been a challenge to work with from the start, even though he had earned himself major brownie points right in the beginning but was back to his tough, pushy demeanor soon after. Another three weeks later, he hadn't become any less annoying with his flirts but had given up shoving his ego down my throat. Not that he had a choice when he learned I wouldn't take shit from him. But we became friends and developed our own flirty, lighthearted antics. *Damn*, I loved them.

"I'll catch up later. See ya there!" Marcus chuckled and smacked my firm, round ass before he started jogging down the corridor.

My hit had missed him, so I shouted, "Argh, Blondie!"

The heartfelt laughter that begged to escape me didn't wait long to erupt.

This little teasing game had crept its way into our partnership over the years. It was kind of fun, though, and I didn't mind it one bit. There was never more than fun teasing; the encounter in the elevator on the day of my job audition was the only time we had ever gotten physical.

Hmm... He seemed comfortable as a bottom. Who would've thought that from a badass, dominant Aries Venus?

Marcus was more than just a friend, however. He was my partner. Now and then, we went on hunts alone, but most of the time, we teamed up. Sometimes, there was a category-four

hunt order for a couple or even a group, and by working as a team, we were more efficient and shared our earned tip points.

That's how we aimed for the top of Hell's Discovery's soul hunter billboard. At the end of the year, the hunter—or, in our case, the team—with the highest score received a bonus check, or the Chief himself granted them a favor.

As I walked past Mrs. Chevers's desk, she stopped me with her elderly face forming her signature warm smile. "Ivy, wait a second!"

I couldn't wait to finally get through with this workday, but I'd always make time to chat a little with our sweet and lovable Mrs. Chevers.

"What's up?"

Her smile turned into a dazzling one as she dangled something black, small, and rectangular, holding it in the air by two black leather strips affixed to it. "Thought you'd be happy to have your car back before the weekend."

In two leaps, I stood at her desk and beamed down at her. "*Hell yes!* The last three days were *torturous* without my baby. Your connections are gold, Beatrix!"

"They sure are. Well, they're my son's connections. He's good friends with the owner of the repair shop, but I'm happy to be of assistance. One hand washes the other, right?"

Tiptoe-dancing on the spot like a little kid in a toy store, I reached for the transponder key and tapped the countertop of the reception desk three times with eager excitement before I spun around and hurried out of the lobby, shouting back at her, "I owe you! Thanks!"

Quick and agile, I dodged raging Demon Resources people who were deep into their usual Friday end-of-work bickering about the rising percentage of temporary workers. I slipped through the nearly closed doors under the arch of the lobby's pompous wooden entrance, hearing the cusses of my colleagues behind me as I did.

It didn't take long for me to lay eyes on the perfectly polished surface of the car I called the love of my life—my Guido, as I referred to him most of the time. Talking to my car came as naturally to me as breathing.

My ever-black sunshine stood out between the many cars in HD's parking area. Most of them, regular cars—nothing fancy, nothing adrenaline-inducing. But mine? He was the *Black Pearl* in a sea of cockleshells.

The hood and the front grill were brute, raw, with hints of savage; the beautiful landscape of edges and curves along the car's body, nothing less than the Italian art of perfection. Guido would've been the perfect ride for Batman, but for that, Batman would've had to claw the key out of my cold, dead hands.

I exhaled a breath of relief and hurried over to my midnight-black Alfa Romeo 159. The look he gave me, with his triple headlights on each side, was as dark and dangerous as before he got vandalized by whoever held a grudge against me—the list too long to conclude who'd be missing both hands soon.

Crouching, I glided my fingers with a delicate touch over the dark rims of his headlights.

“*Dammit, Guido, I fucking missed you!*” I smiled like a 1000-watt light bulb and patted the Alfa Romeo emblem on top of the sharp, V-shaped grill. “You'll get a garage spot soon, promise. Now let's get going. I need a beer and you, baby, need to mingle with cars in your own league.”

Giving the cars on the left and right of him pitiful glances, I pursed my lips but shook my head right after and chuckled.

If anyone heard me! None of them would understand. Okay, Marcus does to some extent, but he labeled me a weirdo a long time ago. Yeah, rightfully.

I started the engine of my black Italian beauty, and it roared to life with the double exhaust pipes, releasing one deep, hellish growl. Giving the tiny gremlin figure under the

rearview mirror a soft flick, I bit my lip in amusement. The vibrations flowed through the seat, up my body, and I was eager to speed all the way to my favorite go-to spot. Cloud9.

It was early evening when I arrived and parked next to the usual lineup of cars, their worth easily topping the majority of cars cruising through 3018 Belliz.

Guido wasn't a luxurious accessory like most of them but was 4500 pounds of steamy Italian passion.

Demons had the power to teleport, unlike most of the other inhuman creatures lurking among us. Driving a car wasn't about getting from *A* to *B*; it was about passion. The passion many demons in our realm shared with me, but I doubted they went as far as giving their rides names, let alone talking to them. Besides, *here*, speed limits didn't exist, something I definitely missed whenever I had to return to the human world.

I got out and inspected every inch of the doorframes with hawklike precision on my way to the wide trunk. Skating my fingertips over the spoiler on top, I admired the garage's professional work.

I'll gift Beatrix an appointment at my go-to salon. She'll love Danielle's exceptional affinity for style.

My fingers clutched the underside of the heavy trunk to open it, and I looked for my secret pack of cigarettes.

Somewhere... Somewhere. Ugh! Where are my freakin' cigs?

"You were right when you said the Alfa was made for you. *Beauty and her Beast!*"

A low whistle and heavy footsteps sounded from behind me. I bet he didn't mind the view that blessed his hungry eyes as I bent my short frame over to search the back corners of the trunk. I knew exactly who stood behind me, gawking at my ass like the tool he was. And I didn't mind it one bit either.

Marcus leaned over from behind, his unapologetic rude ways evident as always, waving a green Vogue cigarette box in front of my face.

“You forgot these on our last hunt. Bekka went nuts about why I had lady sticks in my car.” He chuckled and wiggled the package between his fingers.

“You’re my hero!” I spun around and beamed. “I probably left my other secret pack at the office.” I bit my lip, kind of aware of how my last sentence ratted out my anything-but-mature habit of hiding from my boyfriend.

Marcus snorted and stepped back. “C’mon! Are you still hiding? How old are you? Sixteen? Just tell him already and fuck what he thinks.”

“Now, listen, Blondie. Ezra can’t know I started smoking again! He’d be so disappointed. He hates secrets.” My voice grew quiet at the end, and a rush of guilt spread through me.

“*Yeah, right.* Twenty-four-year-old spitfire Ivy fears the anger of her *human boyfriend!* That’s ridiculous!” he blurted, and I hated how right he was. “Well, imagine if he knew about your demon nature! Bet he wouldn’t mind the cigarettes.”

He doesn’t know a lot of things. Numero uno, me being a succubus. Numero due, me hunting souls for a living Monday to Friday.

Faint rain alighted on the tip of my nose and brushed my face, and I clasped my hands together. “This hottie right here cashed in a total of two thousand dollars *and* a three-thousand-point tip. For one soul! Either you hand me over my cigs, stop bugging me with the truth, and join me inside”—I tilted my chin when I challenged him with my brows wagging up and down—“*or* you get your ass whipped *again* and *then* join me inside.”

He held up his hands and playfully took a timid step backward but quickly changed back to his promiscuous ways. “Oh, Ivy. From you, I’d take a nice punishment any day. When

and where?” He hummed with that signature unapologetic, dirty grin and gestured for me to come closer.

“You don’t say?” I deadpanned, but my facade slipped, a sly cackle bursting out of me. “C’mon, let’s get inside. I’m thirsty and have to leave soon.”

The place was crowded, as it was every Friday. Demons, vampires, werewolves, soul hunters, hitmen, and all kinds of other creatures met there and enjoyed whatever rocked their boat.

Cloud9 was more than your typical club. Whatever you needed, you’d find there. It’s a place where lovers became sinners and anything could be arranged on one of the six floors, each floor offering different services to cater to the different species’ needs. The club’s cozy tavern allure clashed with 3018 Belliz’s Big Apple vibes. It was special, yes. Some snobby citizens would even dare to say misplaced—doesn’t mean they wouldn’t indulge in Cloud9’s exclusive gentlemen’s club membership and its *exotic benefits*. Hypocrisy was another big thing 3018 Belliz had going for itself.

On a Friday afternoon, this was my go-to spot for my much-needed beer before returning to the human realm.

The neutral floor, ground zero, was no-fighting-no-fucking terrain with dark wooden booths, rustic timber beams, and a spacious floor in the middle that functioned as a dance floor on weekends. Just what I needed from time to time, as my job required a lot of physical and mental work.

As we weaved our way to the bar, a very familiar voice shouted from the far left, “Ivy! This day couldn’t get any better!” Smooth and joyful, this voice was my favorite, and it belonged to someone who never failed to wrap my heart both in cozy warmth and biting wistfulness.

I couldn’t help but smile from ear to ear and dismissed Marcus’s eye roll with a swat of my hand. Indeed, this was today’s highlight.

Walking up to *our* wooden booth with a pissed-off Marcus on my tail, I sat down and didn't even mind that the window seat was already taken. Facing the source of my favorite voice, I basked in the electrifying excitement that met me in those bluish-green eyes before flashes of copper took over the irises; short flashes, yet they didn't go unnoticed.

"Adrion! I didn't expect to see you before December. What about your plan to take some time off after the cartel disaster in Mexico?" My voice carried relief as I slung my arms around him, and he returned the gesture, squeezing the air out of my lungs.

His face dipped into the juncture of my neck and shoulder as he almost crushed me in his hug; to others, this was nothing more than a loving gesture between close friends, but under my skin, it ignited brooding nostalgia for the intimacy we once shared.

Adrion's tanned half Armenian features paired with striking eyes made him a stunner of a man. He wasn't the tallest among lower realm folks with his five-foot-eleven height, but that did zero to his confidence. I've always liked the subtle crooked nose, as it balanced his overall smooth vibes.

Marcus's anything-but-decent aversion didn't need an extra invitation before it peeked its head out—as it did every time they met. "*Yes, Gregori, tell us why you weren't killed on your last mission!*"

I let go and turned to him, shooting sharp daggers with my eyes. Marcus raised both hands in defense but eventually settled his annoying ass opposite us in the booth.

Adrion flipped open and closed his Zippo twice and jerked his chin at him. "Getting paid horrendous amounts of money to stitch up people—or, in this case, amputate someone's leg—comes with the price of being on call twenty-four seven. Not that someone lazy like you could ever do the work I do."

“Careful, Gregori.” Marcus cocked his head, and a muscle in his jaw ticked.

It wasn’t a secret that they didn’t like each other. I might’ve been the cause for their differences, but I was also the reason they ever sat together.

Adrion gave me a soft side-glance when he ordered from Xavier, who worked the bar. “Xav, a banana crystal wheat beer for the loveliest soul hunter in this realm”—he paused and looked over at Marcus with a blank stare before shouting the rest of his order—“and her tagalong!”

Ah, great, here we go again.

Adrion had known me since eighth grade, since we grew up in the same small town of Blocksville in the human realm. He was not only my best friend but happened to be half werewolf, half human. But now, at the age of twenty-four, he earned his living as a surgeon and hitman in the lower realm. We became best friends in our early teenage years, and he was the one who had introduced me to my succubus nature and taught me how to invoke my powers.

Heck, my eyes threatened to pop out of my skull when he lifted the veil on the surreal reality that hit me like a train. I grew up believing I was a plain Jane, whose parents rarely said no, when, in fact, it was my succubus powers subconsciously working.

Once we were fourteen, when Adrion’s father wasn’t at the family’s second residence in France, he would take us on easy contract killings in the lower realm. I learned a lot about the realms in those five years before I moved across the country. The two of them were skilled fighters, although Adrion preferred guns and knives, as he wasn’t able to shift into a wolf, unlike his father.

For the record—my adoptive parents got the innocent version of sleepovers and were okay with it. They fully trusted Adrion. Him being Catholic definitely helped with that, plus,

my mom was Team Adrion from the start. I knew she hoped for us to start dating, but that never happened.

I'd seen it in his eyes back then, he'd wished for that, too. But I had my reasons to not cross the line of our friendship. A line that got blurrier over time.

We shared not only a special bond but also some semi-innocent history. What started as two teenagers kissing in the cellar—well, surprise—ended there and didn't evolve into more than strong friendship. *Okay*, cuddling in bed surely wasn't what most friends did, but we didn't take things further, even when he'd tried to charm his way not only into my heart but also my underwear over the years. Teenage problems.

What grew instead was an unspoken kind of love between us that ached to bloom, the truth I'd buried for the sake of our friendship. I'd wished to find the courage to give us a try, but as much as I wanted to, I kept our shared longing in shallow waters.

His inner wolf, Amos, was what kept me from giving us a chance—I couldn't stand that arrogant fucker with his blown-out-of-proportion ego. His rude, beastly traits seeped into Adrion's behavior whenever he boozed, and it was never hard to tell when he switched.

Adrion was an attractive guy, no doubts about that. Charisma wrapped every word, every step of his, and he made use of that—no matter what realm he was in. I used to relentlessly tease him about going after every vagina with a pulse.

Everything about Adrion was polished, from his perfect teeth to his designer clothes—except his hair. The soft and shiny dark-brown hair embodied Wolverine's messy perfection. And it still called to me to comb through it, although not with the same intentions as when we were sixteen.

I used to play with his hair while we would lie next to each other, all cuddled up as we walked a fine line with our

casual strokes and touches, coping with our juvenile problems when we shared our thoughts and worries. Two years later, I met my boyfriend online, and our intimate bubble burst—but old habits die hard, don't they?

I want to touch it so badly and let my fingers run through it, pulling it...

Someone poked me in the side, and I snapped out of my walk down memory lane.

“Stop! I *hate* that,” I yelled and playfully glared but couldn't help to glance back at what caused warmth to spread through me.

Adrion had caught me staring at his hair, a wide smile spreading over his darn beautiful face as copper took over his irises. As much as I hated Amos, he had an affinity to sense my thoughts and didn't mind ratting me out. Even if six years had passed since the last time I'd stroked his hair, that mannerism still itched my fingers.

“You still love it, huh?”

“Nah, I was just thinking about what to cook this weekend,” I straight-up lied to cover my girly thoughts, but the red tint that slowly prickled my face betrayed me. A short glance at Marcus further spiraled the uneasiness that spread through my body as he zeroed in on Adrion with crimson swirling in his eyes.

Our beers got served, and I gladly let the cold blonde ale wet my lips.

To be caught staring by Adrion was uncomfortable enough, but Marcus contributed when he stirred the damn pot. “How about a three-course menu for your *boyfriend*? First, as a tiny appetizer, the fact that you started smoking again. Followed by the spicy truth that you're a succubus and then the ice-cold dessert, you getting rid of his weak human ass.”

Coughing, I almost spewed my beer all over the booth. “What? Ezra is a loving and caring man. I owe him after all he's done for me. He helped me when booze and cigs were my

only nutrients. I love him, and I've heard of a few successful human-succubus relationships before! This can work." I weakly defended my so-called love life.

My ears heated, and I desperately wished to shift the focus to anything but my relationship or my best friend's hair. But I sure as fuck didn't miss Adrion's throaty grumble when I dropped Ezra's name.

"You're a lost cause, Ivy." Marcus sighed. "You're wasting your best years on that dipshit."

To Marcus, both Adrion and Ezra were red flags, and he never let a chance slide to shove it in my face.

Adrion, on the other hand, wasn't much better, not one bit. He never admitted it, but *I knew* deep down that he disapproved of my relationship with Ezra, even if he was half human himself. But we never discussed it—I guess we both knew it was better for the sake of our friendship.

I finished my beer, somewhat hoping to find the solution at the bottom of my glass.

The hell is Marcus's problem? He has a girlfriend—a succubus girlfriend who hates me. Ugh.

Marcus turned to the bar, shouting for the next round as he'd finished his beer as well and started to rant with Xavier about the overpopulation of lizovs in 3018 Belliz.

A spread hand squeezed my bare thigh under the table, and Adrion's warm breath next to my ear triggered an army of goose bumps along my arms. He buried his nose in my wavy hair, sending sparks of forbidden longing on a chase through my body.

The sudden proximity had me tightening my grip on the beer glass, threatening to break it into pieces.

"*Liar,*" he whispered in a singsong tone, pressing his fingertips into my skin, and at last, cracks splintered through my glass.



A drion leaned farther into me, lowering his lips to the crook of my neck, hovering above it. “Love, your red ears give it away.”

My body subconsciously reacted by craning my throat, welcoming the forbidden sensation.

“Every damn time you lie.” He chuckled against my skin, sending heat straight between my legs. “The only question is, which lie made your ears glow? That you’re not thinking of the feeling of my hair between your fingers as you run them through it—over and over again—while I hold you tight?” His warm hand squeezed my thigh, and my knee jerked up, hitting the table. The lingering intimacy in his hoarse whisper had me holding my breath, yearning to catch every little ache, every delicious need. “Or that you love your boyfriend?”

Interrogation had never been so sweet yet so cruel.

Closing my eyes, my body remembered how essential oxygen was, and I filled my lungs with a sharp intake of breath between my teeth. He scooted back to his place when Marcus turned to face us again.

Why does it feel so good when it’s so bad?

Heat not only dampened my lingerie but also flushed my face, all the way down to my chest. The damn telltale signs prickled my skin, rattling me out for everyone to see.

Adrion's eyes held an unhealthy ounce of satisfaction as he leaned against the backrest of the wooden booth, showcasing a cheeky grin. I mouthed a loving *fuck off*, too caught up in the feels to register the seeping cracks in my beer glass, and directed my attention back to Marcus, who eyed us with suspicion.

Quick, Ivy!

“For your information, my relationship has been going strong for six years now. What about you and Bekka”—I speed-wiggled my brows—“didn't she kick you out for, like, the... fourth time?”

C'mon, Blondie, take the bait and let me be!

He waved me off. “Fifth time! But that's not relevant anymore. You know the process of making up is always worth it. My chick is a fighter!”

And with that, he stood and pulled up his shirt, presenting us with several nine-inch scratches across his muscular landscape. Either he really loved her, or he was a damn idiot who needed the pain and drama to feel somewhat alive.

Kinda jealous, though... My last time was weeks ago and a total disaster.

“*Man*, let me tell you one thing I've learned about this magnificent but dangerous species of yours.” He leaned over the table and fixed me with those mischievous cerulean blues. “The more furious they get, the more they'll let you pound forgiveness *into* them. A succubus's anger turns into heated desire”—Marcus paused and let his eyes wander over my lips down to my cleavage—“if you know the right buttons to press.”

Sucking in his bottom lip, he ignored all decency and kept on staring at my boobs—decency wasn't part of this annoyingly lovable fucker's nature.

I clenched my knees together, desperately trying to build pressure on my needy clit. *Hell*, Marcus knew which buttons to press.

Pull yourself together, Ivy! ASAP!

Adrion's deep snarl from next to me brought my countenance back, and I patted his bleach-white knuckles. His bouncing knees matched the rhythmical drums playing in the background.

Blondie, you're such a nasty, teasing little shit.

I risked a wary side-glance; if looks could kill, Marcus's head would've been a sieve by now.

"Ferrow, see that?" Adrion pulled down the neckline of his shirt, and I gasped at the fresh stitches stretching diagonally across his chest. "Put some baby butt cream on your little scratches. I stitched myself back together last night after a fight."

"Rion! What fight—"

Marcus grunted and held up his hands. "Dude, what's the problem? I was talking about Bekka. Chill!" He cocked his head, jerking his chin. "You think you're the only person close to Ivy? That's how we roll."

"*How we roll.*" Adrion scoffed. "She's *my* best friend. Don't think you're anyone special."

Devilry lit up in Marcus's blue eyes. "Might be, but I'm her partner, and I've spent more time with her than you did in the last five years."

"You don't know her like I do—"

"Boys! Please—" My attempt to stop them met two pairs of deaf ears.

"Game on, Gregori! A quirk of hers?"

I darted my wide eyes between them. "You guys realize I'm sitting right here, don't you?" My grip tightened, and the glass scrunched under the pressure, so I let go and wiped off my hands as I grew more irritated.

These idiots kill me...

Adrion nudged my shoulder with his. “Tsk, too easy. She can’t help but swing her legs back and forth whenever she sits on balcony railings, barstools, or any kind of chair.” He smirked, unbothered by the swat the back of my hand delivered to his arm. “Which song gets her in her feels?”

Marcus groaned. “*Man*, you kiddin’ me? I’ve been on the road with her far too fucking long. My ears get abused on the regular. If it’s not “Adorn” by Miguel, then it’s “Paradise City” by Guns N’ Roses.” He chugged his beer until almost empty, and the table quivered from his palm smashing on top. “And if it’s *that* time of the month again, then it’s “Given Up” by Linkin Park. Girl gets fucking scary, knows all the lyrics. You want me to get started on Metallica and Iron Maiden?”

“Avada Kefuckya, Blondie.” I stuck out my tongue.

“Yeah, love you, too.” Marcus winked at me, and I rolled my eyes as I leaned back with my arms crossed. “Now, for real —”

Adrion cut in. “Better than sex?” He gave me a quick side-glance, and I swear, *sweetest hell*, my heart drummed up my throat.

“Rion!”

“No, no. Let him answer.” My best friend was enjoying every damn second of their big-dick competition.

“Payday!” Marcus huffed. “That gleam she has when she counts them notes. Greedy like a fucking dragon.”

“Marcus Ferrow! Remember that time I helped you in 4005 Albis?” I pointed at him. “Next time, you call Bekka to pay off your debts! If you find your balls again and can explain to her why she has to pay off brothel bills. C’mon, a damn *witch* brothel?”

A deep chuckle to my right had me averting my glare. Adrion chugged his beer and leaned back, bringing his arm behind me on the wooden backrest.

I subconsciously arched my lower back, torn between enjoying the undertones of this intimate gesture and guarding myself not to drown in the familiar longing still burning in my chest.

“Seems like I *do* know her better than you.” He turned his face to me, bluish-green eyes losing themselves in mine. “No. The feeling she has whenever she sits too damn close for my comfort by the cliff’s edge of Mount Rizar. Together with me whenever I’m back in 3018 Belliz. Smoking and sipping beer to Queen songs while we share stories of our teenage years. Years we’d spent together. Years she’d been happier than she ever was after she left our hometown.”

Indeed... love it.

He glanced over to Marcus for a moment. “Her laugh, so loud and merry”—my skin prickled as his ego-flex scorched me from the inside—“happiness she experiences when she’s with the one who can make her forget about everything else.”

Swooned to death! I bet he’s passionate in bed... Wait. What?

Silence hung in the air, dense and tangible.

Marcus countered in a low voice, pinning Adrion down with a smug grin. “Fucking softie! That’s because she never had sex with a real man. Not that you’d ever change that.”

Knuckles cracked; the silence became smothering.

Fuck, he really said that!

After far too many dreadful seconds, Adrion countered, “My father sent her profile to Hell’s Discovery when he learned about an upcoming soul hunter audition. If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t be blessed with her presence. Better be thankful, Ferrow.”

True. What he and his father taught me went beyond combat training, and I’ll be forever thankful, as the hunting experiences with them motivated me to embrace my longing to

become a soul hunter. Without them, I wouldn't be where I was now.

Was it uncommon for a succubus to hunt souls instead of draining them? *Yup*. Was there an enigmatic pull in me to purge the streets of evil? *Abso-fucking-lutely*.

The heat in the booth almost reached its peak as they glared like two lions ready to jump at each other's throats, fighting for territory.

Both men pushed my buttons, but I couldn't let either of them know that—cheers to my chosen disaster of a life.

The lights went low with Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir" winding up in the background as I decided to put an end to this. But Adrion's phone rang, and he sprang up, leaving me alone with Marcus and my irritated thoughts. At least it meant I didn't have to hammer sense into them.

Thanks to whoever just called!

Marcus switched sides and brought the cool blonde of his second beer to his lips. The dimples piercing his cheeks gave away what he was up to, and I sighed at the familiar bullshit sure to be sitting on his tongue.

Snatching the beer out of his hands, I took a big sip. "What?"

"Our short Armenian friend is a bit sensitive, isn't he?"

I punched his arm multiple times, but he didn't even flinch. "Marcus. Stop. Being. Such—"

He poked my ribs. "You know I'm right."

I huffed, running the tip of my tongue over my upper incisors' edge—I was about to lose my shit.

"First of all, Rion's not short! Not everyone can be a towering six-feet-four wall of muscles, you dickhead. *Second*, he isn't sensitive. He's looking out for me, and you know exactly why he doesn't like you!" I bored my index finger into his chest, and my inner bitch-kraken peeked through.

“Because, *third*, you and *Cockzilla* think and speak at the same time most of the time. And *what the fuck*”—my voice on the verge of overturning—“why the hell do you tease me like that? Didn’t Bekka milk your Willy Wonka today?”

I took deep breaths after my rant and looked at Marcus in outright disbelief. He casually leaned back against the dark wood of our booth and let a sly smile dance over his far-too-attractive face.

Hooking his big hands behind his man bun, he exposed and flexed his massive frame under the tight navy-blue Henley shirt. A few loose strands of that flowing hair fell into his face, framing those alluring blues.

Cocky motherfucker...

“I’m dying to test my theory about angry makeup sex with succubi. You furious enough?” He speed-wiggled his eyebrows.

“Stop! It looks fucking stupid,” I clapped back.

“Says the one who does it on the regular.”

I’m done.

I squeezed my way past him out of the booth, raised my middle finger, put it in my mouth, and slowly pulled out.

“Suck dick and choke on it, Blondie.” I grabbed my car key, chugged down his beer, and waved goodbye.

“I fucking knew it!” Marcus fairly gleamed. Our little cat and mouse game was one of his favorites, and it showed when traces of red excitement swirled in his eyes.

“You knew *what*?” Annoyance wrapped my voice and the deadpan look I shot him.

All just harmless fun between coworkers. Right. Right?

“You *did* think about how massive my cock must be! Cockzilla, huh? When and in what position have you thought of me, sweet Ivangeline, my favorite partner, forever and ever?” His already bloated ego swelled with each word, and

his wide grin made him look like that crazy cat from Alice in whatever-kind-of-land. Cheshire Cat would've been the perfect pet for him.

“Argh! *Un-fucking-believable!*” I exclaimed in both annoyance and embarrassment. The heat crawling up my cheeks once more didn't help one bit to lessen my sudden urge to hide under a rock.

“Yep, I knew it!” he crooned.

“I surrender.” My eyes couldn't help but roll to the back of my head.

With that, I left my annoying sidekick behind and waved goodbye to Xavier as I passed him. Marcus shouted his goodbye from behind, but I waved it off.

One day, his ego will blow his damn head clean off his shoulders!

When I stepped outside, the rain had stopped, and vibrant hues of red adorned the sky. Dusking hours in the lower realm were different from the ones on Earth, not soft lilac gracing our sky but a specter of bloodred colors. Sounds of lizovs gathering in a swarm above me had me wishing I was just as skilled with guns as I was with my kukri swords. Newly repaired and with an extra coat of wax, my Alfa Romeo surely tempted these suckers to shit on him.

I mumbled a few threats, with my upper lip exposing parts of my teeth, but decided to hurry when I saw more lizovs descending on one of the weeping willow trees opposite the bar. The leaves and long hanging branches were drenched in sweet-smelling bright red sap that occasionally dripped on the ground, a beautiful yet eerie contrast to the shimmering white bark. The lower realm's nature had always fascinated me. Everything was as beautiful as in the human world but topped off with a creepy sense of the bizarre.

One look at my watch, and I bit the inside of my cheeks.

This day had been fun and successful, but I was growing tired, and exhaustion compromised my thinking. All I wanted

was to drive home and watch a few cooking videos before Ezra returned from his friend's FIFA party.

Damn, I wish I could just go straight to bed, but he'll be pissed if I don't wait for him. Maybe I'll finally get some sex. Ugh! But last time, he didn't even get me wet enough, and we had to use lube.

The evident downside of being a succubus soul hunter who was in a relationship with a human, only *one* human, drained my powers—sleeping with *only one human* didn't give me enough to fully recharge my energy levels. But a little was better than nothing.

If only he'd fuck me like a naughty little whore and not like a virgin once a month for five minutes, I wouldn't be a leaking mess between Marcus and Adrion.

The familiar feeling of guilt and shame started to drag me down again.

I lit up my second cig of the day before getting inside my car, trying to quiet my buzzing thoughts.

Letting down the window, I leaned my lower arm on the frame, and tracks of menthol smoke swirled through the mild air outside.

My forehead found the leather of the big steering wheel, and I groaned out. "Guido, no one told me how hard it is to be an underfucked succubus with friends like stupid Rion and Blondie." I bumped my head against the wheel multiple times. "Fucking delicious walking headaches, those two," I mumbled, shaking my head.

A deep and amused chuckle resounded from the backseat. "For the record, I'm the more attractive one."

Since I was semistuck in my own sunken place, my instincts took over and had me pulling a short dagger from my ankle strap, and I turned around, facing the ever-handsome features of Adrion, my best friend.

“Whoa, hold up! It’s me! You wouldn’t slice your best friend of ten years, now would you, love?” He held up his hands with coppery amusement swirling in his eyes.

I should lock Guido from now on.

“*Bloody hell*, you scared me!” I sank deep into the seat and let out a relieved breath.

He got out in a smooth manner and walked around to my door, opening it for me. Reaching for my hand, he pulled my tired body into motion.

“Rion, I was on my way home. I’m exhausted and not feeling well. I need to sleep,” I muttered and gazed into his eyes with my tired ones, leaning closer to give him a light goodbye peck on the lips.

That’s how we rolled ever since, even if we did stop our antics in the human realm because of Ezra.

He gathered the blonde waves at the back of my head and pulled me flush against his heaving chest. My hand naturally found its way to his other hand and squeezed.

I’m so tired. Tired of lying, tired of trying to make it work.

“How long will you keep lying to yourself? We both know sleep isn’t what you truly need, love.” Sad and bitter was the taste that rolled off his tongue, and it made my heart sting. A heavy breath left my lips—he was right but there was so much more to it.

“Tummy full of goodness and twelve hours of sleep is all I need. Gonna hit the sack early.” Although I intended to sound lighthearted, I sounded more like I was being held at gunpoint.

Wistfulness spread in my heart, and it weighed me down like a ton of bricks.

I wrapped my arms around him over his coat and held on to the familiar warmth. My feelings started to roll over me like ocean waves, threatening to drown me.

Stupid feelings! As a succubus, I shouldn't be affected that much.

Inhaling Adrion's alluring scent calmed me, so I dug my nose deeper into his shirt.

Only for a short while...

Despite owning a cologne collection to drown in, he mostly went with the one I'd bought for his sixteenth birthday—Armani Code. Knowing he'd chosen it as his signature scent for the past eight years made me proud even I had no damn right.

Adrion's presence was hard to miss. The lingering delicious smell of his divine scent filled the air when he walked by—ladies loved it but not as much as I did.

Without a second thought, I loosened my hold and tucked my arms around his torso, snug beneath his coat. Self-consciousness washed over me after a few moments, and I let go, but my back met the steely surface of my car's doorframe when he gently pushed us against it and tilted my chin up with his finger.

Inside, my heart smashed against my rib cage with ecstatic thrill, rattling the bars that kept it hostage.

Outside, my throat jumped, and I swept my eyes to his coppers.

Pain and love evident in his soft look, my guilt spiraled to unhealthy depths. His and Amos's emotions slipped through his eyes, unable to hide them from me and vice versa.

For a moment, his lips parted, and his gaze lingered on my full lips, sending electric sparks on a run through my body like molecules in Cern.

Please, kiss me. No, don't. Argh!

He put his forehead to mine and faint wisps of Moods cigarillos crawled up my nose. *Sweet hell*, I loved it.

“You’ve gotten weaker over the years. Don’t think I didn’t notice. You *need* more energy, and Ezra can’t give you that.” The outspoken truth sounded crueler than in my hazy mind. “He drains you slowly but surely. *Goddamn*, hurts to see you like this, love.”

“*Adrion*, please. You’re torturing me.” I shut my eyes and needed to put some distance between us, so I loosened my arms and gently pushed him off. Mere thunder rolled in the back of his throat in response, but instead, a sigh spilled.

“If you ever need help, the kind of help you truly *need*, let me be the one to help you.”

Brooding longing hung in the air, the built-up tension perceptible in the way it caused my palms to turn sweaty.

Catching me off guard, he captured my face in his tender hands and pecked my lips, applying a torturous amount of longing to them. I surrendered, catering to the selfish needs of my love-deprived heart.

A low hum vibrated from my lips to his soft ones as I let this peck last longer than ever before. Once meant to be innocent, now it threatened to drag me into the blazing fire of forbidden passion. The devil sitting on my shoulder coaxed me to sacrifice myself to the brooding inferno—skin to bones.

Adrion’s lips parted, and his warm tongue caressed my upper lip, courting me for permission to enter.

Flashing thoughts of Ezra hit me like a train, and I broke the kiss.

Fuck!

But it was too late. The truth I’d buried for the sake of our friendship and my desperate attempt at chasing a *normal* life in the human realm crawled out of its grave. A truth I couldn’t fight any longer—I yearned for Adrion’s touch, his smell, his kiss, everything. I yearned for us to bloom. Sharing this sizzling moment of intimacy with him after so many years did something to me.

I don't deserve to live an illusion.

He kept my face in his warm hands, bringing our lips dangerously close once more when he brushed my cheek with the tip of his crooked nose. I leaned into him, welcoming his thumb's strokes on my lips with delicate pushes against it.

But neither does Ezra... Shit!

I cursed my selfish, shortsighted actions with my life of lies.

I chose this life... A life I have to return to. Now!

"Good night, Rion," I whispered and withdrew from his warmth to make my way to my apartment where I'd leave Guido before I'd teleport to Bearno in the human realm.

A place that had started to feel less like home over the years. A place my heart was starting to reject, now more than ever.



“Tummy full of goodness and twelve hours of sleep is all I need. Gonna hit the sack early.” Ivy’s voice came out lifeless, much like her eyes bore zero spark whenever she spoke of returning to the human realm.

Fooling herself might’ve worked for her or Ezra, but she couldn’t fool me.

She wrapped her short arms around me, petite body flush against mine, and I held her tight, like back in our teenage days. Snuggling the tip of her nose into my shirt, she inhaled my scent with long, deep breaths, easing whatever thoughts swirled in that pretty head.

I tensed with aroused sensation from head to toe when she snaked her arms underneath my coat, entwined her fingers behind my back, and molded her body to mine.

If you only knew what power you hold over me...

But then she put distance between us, and my inner wolf, Amos, urged me to make a move. Frustration flickered up, and Amos corrupted my actions as sepia tinged my vision, and I pushed us against her car.

My fingers skated along her prominent jawline and settled under her chin, tilting up her beautiful face. Bright light from the club’s sign behind us reflected in those striking widened eyes. Her small frame looked achingly vulnerable, trapped and in need.

Ivy's dark pupils shifted, fine golden lines swirling in them, but she averted them from mine, noticing the tearing pain in my gaze.

If only I could open her eyes to the right choice—me.

My lips parted while I thought about all the things that would change for the better if I'd only gather up the courage to reveal my deepest feelings for her. The feelings that hadn't faded after ten years but had grown into a hazy maze of consuming longing.

I'd free her from her chained life and make her see that she loves me just as much. But she's not ready yet.

I leaned against her forehead. The pain it caused to not have her my way nearly killed me.

“You've gotten weaker over the years. Don't think I didn't notice. You *need* more energy, and Ezra can't give you that. He drains you slowly but surely.” I took in a deep breath, brushing over the tip of her nose with mine. “*Goddamn*, hurts to see you like this, love.”

“*Adrion*, please. You're torturing me.” The mere whisper of my full name from her lips was almost enough for me to lose it.

Images I've had of us for years, but no one knew of flashed through my mind. Images of her petite frame beneath me while I cherished every inch of that godly body.

Her beautiful eyes pouring out devotion and love while I... Fuck, it hurts so badly! As a full-blood werewolf, I'd simply kill the guy, take the girl, end of story. Fucking human genetics.

Amos growled at the mental barrier when I pushed him back, but I knew better than to give in to him again. A throaty growl dared to escape me, but I suppressed it.

There's nothing I can do about us. For now.

I sighed. “If you ever need help, the kind of help you truly *need*, let me be the one to help you.” My chest tightened with

jealousy, desperation pumping through my veins.

*Any other man touching her, loving her, having her...
Goddammit!*

Longing and angst directed my hands to her face, cupping it with tenderness. I placed a peck on her lips, different from the ones we shared as friends over the past years. She allowed it to linger, with a soft hum vibrating on my lips.

Each second she let me reside in the sweet Heaven of our kiss stoked up heated passion within me, burning the last bits of innocence between us to ashes. Deep-rooted desire flickered up, brushing over her upper lip, as I let my tongue beg for yet another blissful moment in Heaven. But my life in Hell laughed at me when she pulled away.

I refused to let go of her warmth just yet and caressed her cheek with my nose, grazing over her lip with my thumb. My cock strained against my pants when she welcomed my gesture with a soft push of her gorgeous lips.

Gosh, it feels so right.

All good things come to an end. Isn't that what life teaches us? It sure as hell lectured me when Ivy put distance between us and took all warmth with her as she got in the car.

"Good night, Rion," she said in one last soft whisper before she closed the door.

Instead of cornering her with my selfish feelings, I let her go and watched as she drove off, heading to her everyday lie she called home.

"Fuck!" I shouted up to the dusky red scenery.

Leaning against the gray brick wall outside the club, I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. The taste of her minty lip balm lingered on my lips, and notes of her addictive perfume stuck to my clothes. Those two notes that enhanced the heart of jasmine and rose in the most beautiful way—apples and Sicilian lemons.

She doesn't even realize that she wears the only claim I'm able to gift her...

This perfume had been her signature scent since her teenage years; I'd picked it for her, and knowing she chose it over every other fragrance her boyfriend had gifted her brought a smile to my lips—on the *inside*.

Outside, my nails dug into my palms, and I frowned when the pressure on my skin began to sting.

She has no fucking clue how much I ache to call her mine. When will she see me for who I am? For who I was always meant to be? Her fated mate...

Ivy's powers had become weaker over the years; the obvious side effect of sticking with that human wrecked me.

Did she kick ass on her missions? Yes, but nowhere near her full potential, and by now, the effects of her lack of energy showed. As a succubus, she should heal within minutes, but that wasn't the case.

Three years ago, it took her a couple of hours. Now, it took her days to heal.

It wasn't long ago when she was on one of those side missions for her boss and nearly bled out after *collecting debts from two demons* turned out to be *collecting debts from two demons with a gang of eleven trigger-happy muchachos*.

Go figure how hard my damn face slipped when I arrived at the scene: Ivy kneeling in a lake of blood, surrounded by chopped-off arms, two demons speared through the head with her kukri swords, and god knows what hanging down from her blood-drenched hair and face. But that broad smile she gave me when I barged in, I'd never forget. She loved her job, and I'd always admired her passion.

Ivy took them all down, but the aftermath of her chosen life caused her to nearly bleed out because she was unable to heal fast enough. Lucky for her, I had my phone with me and arrived on time.

Not only did I almost slap her for bringing this on herself but because her only concern was what would happen when she didn't heal before she had to return to her stupid human four days later.

I'd never lay hands on her unless she begged me. But, *goddamn*, how could someone be so sophisticated yet so blind?

Caring for her like I did took a toll on me. Not as much as it took on Ivy because she'd tied herself to *that human* for the past six years. They became a couple four years after we became friends, and neither Amos nor I ever liked her weak tagalong.

My chest tightened whenever I thought of them together—deep down I wished she'd chosen me instead. Guess my moves weren't serious enough. I never told her about my feelings, though. Instead, I'd hoped for her to sense them whenever we lay curled up in bed.

Those lips...

The memory of our first kiss was still vivid. Unlike our pecks, this kiss at the very beginning was pure bliss. Sure, we were only two confused teenagers, barely fourteen years old, but I'd never forget it. If it hadn't had been for my teenage hormones going wild over every breathing girl I encountered. I was so damn stupid.

Ivy had denied any attempts to take things further than cuddling. But instead of trying harder or tossing her, we became best friends.

Many women have had many things to say about me over the years: charismatic, handsome, a great catch. No matter how many of them I'd been with or how many nights had blurred into a mix of bodies, none of their compliments held the same weight as Ivy's when she told me I embodied home to her.

A home she'd given up, a home she yearned to belong to again. She might've thought she made the right decision to

protect her adoptive family when she left, but deep down, the wound still bled from grief and remorse.

But if I were home to her, why did she return to a place where she pretended to be someone she wasn't?

A deep growl reverberated through my chest.

She should've chosen me!

After that human became her boyfriend, she asked me to not kiss her, but that was how we rolled ever since. Innocent pecks when we greeted each other and same for saying goodbye. Nothing sexual behind that. It was a common thing among best friends in our hometown—except for bromances.

I loved it. It proved how close we were and how different our friendship was. How special we were to each other.

All I wanted for her was to be happy, so I respected her wishes, although I knew that it wasn't hers but one of Ezra's stupid demands.

Throughout the years, our little pecks snuck their way back into our friendship, but only to be exchanged in this realm when we were alone. I cherished them even more now.

Did I screw up? No. She let it linger. She wants me!

Fidgeting with my Moods pack, I pulled out a cigarillo and let the sweet blend of smoke fill my senses.

But she'll be home soon, cooking dinner or whatever—for him.

I puffed another one right after the first one was halfway through. My mind filled with vicious jealousy and consuming hatred for her boyfriend, *Ezra*. God how I hated hearing that name on her lips. Like the smoke curling around my head, my thoughts wrapped around my temper, choking and dragging it to unhealthy depths.

My conscience kept me from barging back inside the club again, seeking the only available remedy that never failed to work.

With my earphones plugged in, I suppressed the urge to get my *fix*—a fix Amos hated me for, but he wasn't in charge.

The cellphone chose a playlist by default when I failed to give it any input. I lowered against the wall outside the club, head pitched back to gaze up at the red-washed scenery but not really seeing, puffing away until a specific song started to play. *Dammit*, I thought I'd deleted that song.

When the melodious, slow guitar string notes by Bri-C featuring Memorial XI's "Blacked Out Whip" started to resonate in my ears, I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw. My thoughts got out of hand, and I pounded my head against the wall behind me, ripping out the earphones.

I hate what my love for her does to me! But I can't let others pay for my lack of self-control, not again!

I decided to do the only thing that could lessen the tearing pain inside me, even if only temporarily. If not, then rage would've met whoever or whatever would be insane enough to fight me—being part of a small, exclusive fight club wasn't something I was proud of, but it helped.

As not only hitman but a surgeon, I knew it was stupid to actively risk the condition of my hands. But lurking in the safety of the night and using random people on the street as a rage outlet was something I'd stopped after the second time I wound up with only half my memory of the events along with bloodied hands. So, I sought *fixes* instead.

I shot to my feet and walked back into the loud and crowded Cloud9 with selfish intentions in my strides. I weaved through people dancing to the bass-heavy music, straight to the elevator that would bring me closer to my relief.

The lift's old mechanics screeched when I reached the sixth floor, opening the gates to my addiction with a chipper *bing*. I headed down the long red corridor to the reception area. Dimmed lights and the heavy scent of sin and lust wrapped my senses. All kinds of moans resounded from the many rooms lining the corridor. Loud, pained, or raw—each

and every one of those voices chased the same goal. A goal I went after now as well.

“Room eighteen.” I leaned sideways against the reception desk, rested my elbow on it, and glanced at the female demon, not bothering with chitchat, let alone courtesy.

“Natalia will be with you shortly, Mr. Gregori,” the receptionist replied without looking up from her screen, then picked up the phone to announce my arrival.

It wasn't my first time here, and it wouldn't be my last.

I entered room eighteen but didn't turn on the light—what for? The same old black curtains matched the basic black carpet with the same old whips and chains hanging on the wall.

I had grown tired of using them on Natalia after a few months. Whipping her failed to deliver me the bliss I sought—to love and be loved. And *that* was something only one person could bless me with; too bad I'd had to fuck the wrong one for the last six years.

My heart still ached, thoughts raging, as I laid down my clothes and sat on the massive bed. The same old king-size bed that squeaked in various tones, depending on how hard I pounded out Natalia's senses over countless nights.

Fragments of the music downstairs carried to my ears, my eyes peering through the dim darkness of tonight's moonlit hours. Mind outside my body.

Others pay to get their cocks sucked. Me? I pay to get deceived.

No one knew of our little setup. I made Natalia sign an NDA right in the beginning. Over the years, she had grown on me, but I kept her at arm's length emotionally outside this bedroom.

Fucking her on the regular was one thing but letting her feel special for pretending to be someone she wasn't was

another. Taking my *fix* outside these walls was definitely not an option.

A few minutes later, a knock on the door snapped me out of my thoughts, and I stared at my reflection in the mirror *vis-à-vis* the bed before zeroing in on the door.

Can't believe I'm doing this again.

“Come in!” I barked, and every muscle tensed with contradicting dread and excitement at what was about to come.

Amos snarled with bared fangs behind the barrier, but I blocked him out of my consciousness. This was the only way to *fix me*, and I was overdue for that fix.

Two shimmering red eyes made their way through the dark room with wary strides, light footsteps on the carpet barely making a sound.

Natalia had everything I needed—the same shade of blonde hair, the same height, the same breathtaking figure, and breasts almost as full as Ivy’s. She even looked somewhat similar.

But she wasn’t her and would never be.

“Adrion, aww, you missed me already? I was—” Her sickly sweet voice broke when the tension within me snapped like the neck of my opponent in yesterday’s match at the fight club.

“You’re not here to talk, Natalia!”

Her breathing hitched, and she stood still for a moment.

“Come here.” I toned down my voice. Even though she was there to serve me, she didn’t deserve my anger. “*Please.*”

Natalia brought her naked body on top of mine, straddling me with her smooth legs. The lingering smell of wine crept up my nose as she brushed her lips over my face.

Lately, her old drinking habits had made a comeback—she could drown in it for all I cared. As long as she was able to cater to my needs, I wouldn’t object.

She kissed my temples, slowly running her hands through my hair over and over again. My jaw clenched when she tugged at my roots between strokes, and I grabbed her plump ass, pressing my fingertips into the soft skin. I breathed out and the weight of frustration faded.

I'd visited Natalia at least twice a month for the past six years, and she'd quickly adapted to my wishes. She eased my pain the way I'd demanded from her ever since I'd started seeing her, in a way I'd envisioned Ivy would, to calm the storm within me.

The scent. Your scent. You'll never be more than a substitute. You'll never be her...

Reaching for my coat, I pulled out a small vial and opened it. I'd bought Ivy's perfume for Natalia years ago and used it on her each time, gambling with my frail sanity. But I didn't mind it one bit.

She followed my instruction to never use any perfume when I was in town, as I *needed* her to smell like Ivy. I even demanded she bleach and not cut her hair, keeping it the same length down to the middle of her back. Yes, my request had startled her in the beginning, but my stacked bank account resolved her unease.

Fucking my chosen substitute under my explicit conditions cost more than therapy, but it was worth every damn penny.

"Not one single word, Natalia. Not one single word will leave your lips as long as I'm here tonight. Understood?" I squeezed her round ass, and she hummed in agreement.

Bless this deception, for it is bliss...

Grabbing her long silky hair at the back of her head, *déjà vu* washed over me from the moments before, with Ivy pressed flush against my chest. Amos hated me for doing this, but it was the only available remedy.

Her lips found mine, and I let desperate hunger and desire take the lead. The scent of Ivy's perfume clouded my senses,

and I deepened the kiss, not waiting for signs of reciprocation to ravish Natalia's tongue with mine. She moaned into me, welcoming my needy intensity with ravenous strokes of her tongue.

I grabbed a fistful of hair above the nape of her neck and yanked her head to the side. The heat of her exposed skin lingered under my lips, calling me to scrape my fangs over it until it'd bleed.

My chest heaving, I pushed her down by the hips and let her slick, wet cunt coat my dick with each torturous rock against it.

I'd fuck her senseless, like the other countless nights in the past *seventy-fucking-two* months, but not yet.

Sliding her pussy back and forth over my swollen cock, she aligned her wet core with my tip, but I refrained from catering to her unspoken plea.

"No." Spiked with authority, my voice didn't leave room for disobedience.

You know the deal, little demon.

Main reason I spent most of my money on her was because of delicate additions to my list of demands; to mark her neck before I'd fuck her and her not healing until I left.

She molded to me, body heated, as she craned her neck to give us both what we needed.

I gave in to my selfish needs and sank my canines into her velvet skin, tensing at the rush of unleashed lust blazing through our bodies. My tongue pressed against the wound; every throb in her vein transferred her hunger for me. Long familiar to the emotional high whenever I graced her skin with fresh wounds, it still hit me all over again—intense, binding, consuming.

Whatever trick she used to keep me bound to her, it never failed to have its effect on me, stoking up insatiable hunger for more of her *fixes*.

I despised being an addict to my chosen drug but, *goddamn*, she was the canvas for my wildest fantasies, and I painted her in every fucking way I wanted.

Clawing at me, she pierced the skin on my back and moaned out her own feral craving. Her smooth pussy oozed, aching for my cock to mold it with every one of its eight damn inches.

Natalia didn't wait another second. She pushed herself up and slid her hand down in one smooth motion, wrapping around my hard length with dainty fingers. Whimpering for my permission between panting breaths, she pressed her pulsating tight pussy on my swollen tip.

One of those booze-fueled nights again, huh? So impatient, little demon.

I dared her with a deep growl into her bitten-through skin but ultimately let her reign over me. The first clamp down of her wet walls around the tip of my cock triggered a raw snarl in me, and I slammed myself all the way into her.

Her pained outcry echoed through the night, but that didn't hold me back. I brought her petite frame up by a couple of inches just to slam into her again. She held on to me and writhed out of my grasp to press her face to mine, but I denied her the comfort. Gunning for her hair, I yanked her head to the side, the bruised part of her neck bared beneath my mouth.

Her drumming pulse called to me to finish what I'd started.

Panting, I pressed my digits into her plump ass cheek and increased the movements of her rocking hips. Each push of her pussy loosened my grip on reality, and I stretched my jaw, sinking my fangs deep into the vulnerable part of her neck again.

Warm metallic flavors with mineral notes of Sauvignon Blanc seeped into my mouth, her favorite white wine complementing each drop that engulfed my taste buds—enticing my wine-loving palate.

I groaned at the sensation wrapping my senses and pushed her down until her drenched cunt touched down on my base. Buried in the depths of my fantasies, literally.

When I hit her sensitive cervix, she screamed out in pained pleasure.

I opened my eyes to gawk at her petite frame riding me, my hooded look fixated on the mirror *vis-à-vis* the bed. My low shimmering coppers stared back over her tensed shoulders.

Amos hates me for fucking her but doesn't mind watching. Wicked bastard.

November's waxing moon hung in the sky outside the window, low, heavy, and just as eager as I to fully blow; to let loose all the pent-up energy we held. It cast enough light through the window to wrap our silhouettes in illuminated, fleshed-out lust.

I took it all in, eyes trained on the mirror. Every fucking curve of that perfect body consuming my cock with each up-and-down motion.

Soft shadows contoured the gorgeous outlines of her moving shoulder blades as she roamed her hands over my broad back. Her dimples of Venus nothing but deep hollows piercing that pretty lower back.

Nature proved to be an artist with its own vision when twigs from trees outside plastered shadowy art on her back like it was a canvas, drawing illusions of tattoo outlines on her skin.

Gods, this is to die for.

But Zeus blew the illusion away like sand from paper and yanked me out of my dive into the bottomless depth of my darkest mind games. Natalia's back, adorned moments before, now bare like the Atacama desert, unable to gift more than a mirage to our union.

The blank skin assaulted my eyes. It laughed at me for believing it was supposed to be graced with the fine lines of a mandala tattoo. But it wasn't *her* back—just like the screams and moans filling the air weren't *hers*.

The reflection staring back at me ignited in flashing copper. Frustration thundered through my rib cage, outraged growls rolling in the very depths of me.

I pushed Natalia's lightweight frame off me, and she steadied herself with a cuss. I got up and walked to the window. The weather's temper changed—much like mine when thoughts of Ivy in the human realm flooded my mind.

Is that human home by now? Taking what's mine?

Cutting anger blew out of my nose.

While I've got to fuck a damn substitute...

“Adrion, wha—” Natalia's voice carried to me through the room, but I crushed the soft tones with nothing but icy sharpness.

“Not. One. Word.” I pulled the curtains together and shut out any light, hindering it from jeopardizing my plan. “Lay down.”

The carpet devoured my predatory strides as I approached Natalia on the bed. Her breathing uneven, she obeyed and lay down in the middle of the rumpled expanse.

Even without much to see, I knew exactly how heavenly her perfect body looked on those dark silk sheets—eager for me to place my claim. Years ago, I captured every inch of her with my eyes, but now, I preferred to get high on my illusions in complete darkness.

Impatient to get another *fix*, I spread her toned legs, positioning myself in between, and kissed my way down her inner thigh. Soft moans escaped her lips with every flick of my tongue against her heated skin. My right hand wandered past her small waist and found her heaving chest above. Perky nipples aching for the attention my fingers delivered with soft

rubs and tweaks. The closer I got to her shaved cunt, the more her scent of arousal toyed with my senses.

Gripping her thighs with eager hands, I hiked up her legs, her oozing sex fully exposed for me to feast on. Encouraging me, her hands brought her legs closer to her body, and I closed my eyes as I pressed my nose into her plump pussy.

I'd die a thousand deaths to feast on Ivy until she faints.

Natalia moaned with hunger for more, and I paused for a second; no matter how deep I was buried in her wetness, all I could think about was Ivy.

She pushed up her hips and pulled me back into the moment we shared, bringing her slickness to my mouth. My low growl sent vibrations to her clit, and I dove right in, tasting and ravishing her smeared cunt with deep licks.

The sudden sensation left her gasping and screaming. My tongue wide, I took her all in with my mind solely set on having Ivy all to myself. I groped her full breasts, her nipples stiffening with every eager squeeze between slick tongue strokes. With my lips pressed to her clit, I sucked and licked myself into a trance and let my blazing longing consume me.

Perfect in every fucking imperfect way; illusions never felt more real.

Just when she started to pant and grip my hair, I flipped her over and pushed down on her neck. Moaning, she presented her ass right in front of me. I let my hand roam over her perfect curves. *Gosh*, that ass was a ten. The way it gave in with every squeeze—soft velvet.

Stroking my length, I brought my semihard cock back to life and placed the leaking tip at her wet entrance. She squirmed with the impatient need to be filled again, and I gladly catered to that. My other hand still on her ass, I glided into her warmth with one forward jerk. Her walls welcomed my cock, strangling it as I began to thrust.

This wasn't lovemaking, this was my bitterness seeking selfish redemption.

Her pussy clenched around my shaft, and I kept on digging my sanity's grave with every thrust, assaulting her tight pussy. My hips collided with her ass, skin slapping hers, until delicious, stinging sensations spread. Pained screams spewed out of her mouth, and I picked up speed, destroying her small frame.

I pictured Ivy's gorgeous, tight body in front of me. Bruised. Heated. Owned by me.

That human could never make her scream like I could!

Anger gripped my mind again, and my claws extended, piercing the fleshed-out mirage beneath me.

"*Fuck, Adrion, yes!*" Loud primal lust resonated from the walls and shattered my construct of delusions. The needy touch of delicate fingers gripping my hand stung like a branding iron, and my chest tightened in outright disgust.

I pulled out of Natalia and yanked her over. My claws gunned for her throat, assaulting it with a crushing vise grip as I forced my weight onto her.

"Told you not to fucking talk, didn't I?" I bellowed, with sepia tinging my vision as Amos's raging influence washed over me, and I fucking lost it.

My cock went limp, lust erased like any control over my beast.

Natalia gargled and went for my face with her claws, wide red eyes full of panic, but her short arms didn't help much, so she went for my grip. "My instructions were clear—shut up and let me fuck you!" I kept on choking her throat with bitter tears pooling in my eyes.

Her strained breathing got irregular, and her hands lost touch with my wrists when they sank to the soft sheets. Lacking oxygen pulled the curtains of her consciousness, and I almost missed the moment.

I let go.

Her body in survival mode, she gasped for air, holding her bruised throat with her lungs heaving out dry, racking coughs.

“W-What the actual fuck, Adrion!” She slowly collected herself before she roared with horror in her wide eyes, “You could’ve killed me! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“You’ll never be her.” Nothing more than a low murmur, the cruel reality crawled out of my mouth.

“*Her,*” she spat back, tone spiteful and cutting.

“Leave, Natalia.” Coldness coated my voice like icy mist on a frozen lake, and her hip brushed me on her way out of the bed. “Thanks for nothing,” I whispered into the thick air.

I’m not even granted the goddamn illusion...

Natalia whipped around and threw a crushing punch at my face. Warm blood dripped over my lips, down to my chest. My broken nose didn’t hurt as much as the blissful illusion inside me she’d shattered to nothing but shards.

“Ivy will *never* be yours, you deranged fool,” Natalia hissed and left me alone in complete darkness with my hateful thoughts burning my insides.



“Well, okay, then... don't worry, Rion. We're good. I'll be fine. And, hey, hugs to your family, okay?” I hung up, snapped my phone closed, and threw it between the many mismatched pillows on the ecru-colored sofa by the window.

It was a little past 10 p.m. when I gave in to the urge to check up on Adrion after our *incident*.

Does it count as a kiss? Just a longer peck that caught me off guard. Meh.

I was back in the human realm, in the apartment Ezra and I'd moved into five years ago. It was a rather small but comfy place in a suburb of Bearno. He wasn't home from his friend's FIFA tournament yet, but I didn't mind.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, seeking a little pressure release.

Good. I need a couple minutes to get my shit together.

Sipping on jasmine tea with one tablespoon of honey, I let tiredness direct my body onto the sagging sofa. I treated my eyes to a rather gloomy view through the window, since it was pouring outside. The rain danced in brutal whirls of freezing wind, and homesickness crawled up within me when I thought of the warmth in the lower realm.

Both Adrion's and Marcus's words had me thinking. I hated how right they were, but they didn't walk in my shoes.

Nobody did but me, even though I'd grown tired of it over the years.

Ezra was my first serious relationship—a relationship I'd always wished for.

When I met him online, at eighteen years old, I still lived with my human adoptive family, and beside nearing the end of the spectrum of being a confused teenager, I was still relatively new to my powers as a succubus.

No doubt, my family was loving and caring, but I never quite fit in. *Heck*, my parents were Catholic.

Even before I discovered my succubus nature, I felt trapped and caged in the human realm; my morality struggled to keep my premature powers and needs in check. I'd even say I was misplaced, like graffiti chilling and puffing on a smoke next to *Mona Lisa* in a fancy gallery.

I thought of myself as the ugly spot in my family, a stain on my mom's perfectly ironed white tablecloth. Seeking thrills in the comfort of living a secret life that was drenched in danger, killings, and obscenities didn't suit the ordinary life you get to live in small towns or the families you meet there.

My adoptive parents had told me I was left at the hospital as a baby—of course, none of them knew about my demonic heritage. *Hell*, I even got baptized and made my Communion.

You might think a succubus getting baptized would somehow set the priest aflame or some other crazy stuff would happen, but no—nothing. *Okay*, not entirely true. The water in the font magically ran out when it was my turn. Not one time, four times.

There was a video of my mom shouting prayers up to the ceiling next to an understandably irritated priest. "Accept this child, oh Lord! She is one of us, and she shall receive this baptism!" The water stopped running out, and I got baptized. Hooray.

But my *true* background was a mystery to me. The only clue I had was a note that my birth mother had placed into the

basket where I was tucked in tight, wrapped up like a lumpia spring roll. That was the only thing she gave me before I was left at the hospital. “My lovely Ivangeline, one day, you’ll understand. My path and its dangers aren’t supposed to be yours. Have faith that you’ll be safe and loved. I love you, anak ko—*my child*.”

So, it wasn’t hard to figure, I was at least half Filipina. Other features showed I was mixed, though. We didn’t know the other half, so we just went with part Filipina.

In the human realm, peers asked why I had honey-beige blonde hair instead of dark hair. And in the lower realm, demons sneered at my inability to switch to bright red eyes. My power-invoked golden pupils had been the topic of a lot of discussions. Everyone asked for reasons. How the hell was I supposed to know?

Too many questions and no satisfying answers. I could’ve piled up all the burning questions so high it would make Mr. Eiffel mad jealous.

I kept my human family a secret in the lower realm. Exposing our ties would mean danger to them as they’d turn into targets for the countless enemies I’d gather over the years.

My boss wasn’t playing games when it came to his money, so he hired soul hunters from time to time to collect debts from all kinds of folks in the lower realm. Over the years, my kukri swords and I made sure everyone got the memo. They always did, and it wasn’t pretty.

So, yes, it was clear from the day I’d accepted the invitation to the soul hunter audition and got the job that I’d have to kiss my old life goodbye.

I could’ve never forgiven myself if something had happened to my parents or my four siblings. So, I did the only thing I could to protect them when I used my powers and wiped their memories. That was on my last day at school, when I graduated. Guess my loaded astrological fifth house had a sense for heart-wrenching drama.

On that day, June had darkened the heavy overcast sky when I came home after school. A sticky note placed on the front door let me know my family would come home later—at least there was lasagna in the oven. For a moment, sadness weighed me down. I knew this would be our last evening together as a family, but I'd hoped to spend every second of it with them.

Silence hung in the air when I made my way into the kitchen with dread in each step. I'd wondered why the blinds were closed. But guess what? They shouted a loud and merry *Congratulations!* and surprised me with the best cake ever—my stepdad's famous meatloaf decorated with candles. The warmth they cast in the dark kitchen caused my insides to freeze from dread. They didn't understand why I'd started crying once I blew out the last candle, but they didn't need to—this burden was mine to carry.

And I'd followed through with my plan once they were in bed, erasing every little shred of memory of me out of their minds. It had crushed me, never returning home, never hearing their bickering or laughter ever again, but it became inevitable once I'd embraced my calling as a soul hunter.

It was more than a *job*. Everything inside me screamed to purge the human realm of rotten souls walking the streets, disguised as neighbors, teachers, bankers—evil didn't come with a warning sign.

I'd do it all over again, though, even if losing my family scarred me for life.

Mama, Papa, Alex, Lucas, Mina, and Lila—I recited their names like prayers inside my head over and over again each night when I lay in bed. They might've forgotten me, but I'd never forget them, and this was one of the prices I had to pay to claim my chosen path.

It was cruel. More than often, I woke up at night after seeing their faces in my dreams with cold sweat pooling in my palms and dampness between my back and the mattress, only to remember I'd never see them again.

Unlike Adrion, who still went home occasionally. Spending time with Adrion always pulled me back to my past life in that small town I loved so much—he was truly home to me.

My ties to the human realm turned into the actual secret life. How ironic.

Life can play out in the funniest ways since Ezra was of Southeastern Asian heritage as well *and* Catholic, too.

After I'd left my family and had bawled my eyes out on the roof, I teleported straight to Bearno in front of Ezra's apartment building and *surprised* him with my puffy eyes and my small suitcase. I'd told him I ran off from home, as my family didn't approve of our relationship, and I made it clear that there was no way back for me.

I desperately wanted this new beginning with him but made sure only a few trusted ones knew about him in the lower realm—covering the safety of only one person was less tricky than for a family.

If only I'd known the old bars of isolation would be replaced by new ones. Whereas I'd more freedom but felt like an outcast, now I couldn't cut the ties that bound me when I convinced myself that being in a relationship with him would make me happy.

When I'd started working for Hell's Discovery at the age of nineteen, I'd told him I got accepted to a trainee program by the government, some kind of national security training, and that I'd signed an NDA. That was five years ago, and up until now, I'd convinced him to not investigate further; always kept it as superficial as possible, sharing no more than boring breadcrumbs here and there.

Choosing this lie made it easier to shut down any discussions when I returned home with several bruises or smaller cuts.

Hunting souls, especially category fours, or collecting debts from all kinds of lower realm folks didn't resemble a

walk in the park.

My workplace was supposed to be across the country, and that's why I only returned to Bearno on weekends.

Another lie. As a succubus, I could just switch to the lower realm by just thinking of it.

"Nothing but lies," I mumbled, staring at my unhappy reflection in the window.

"Let me be the one to help you."

The ache and the undeniable urge to be there for me, evident in every syllable of Adrion's earlier words, echoed in my mind until they turned into ringing. A hot, stinging sensation triggered a gasp from me, and I looked down to the source on my left leg.

With frustration etching my face, I rubbed with my sleeve over the spot where I'd accidentally spilled hot tea on my leg.

I needed a friend to talk to, a friend without a dick. Because out of all the mysterious riddles in my life, my love life shouldn't be the hardest to decode—apparently, it was.

Have to catch up with Lani next week.

I slipped even deeper into my emotional dilemma when I bent the constructs of loyalty and its rules by reliving the events of earlier this evening; the scorching heat that had burned between Adrion and me. That and the piercing pain of missing my family reminded me how much I'd neglected my own feelings lately.

But the reminiscence was short lived.

The door opened, and my boyfriend's tired voice pulled me back into the present when he walked in. "Babe, I'm home."

Ezra threw his red leather jacket on a hook of the tiny wardrobe next to the door and placed his keys on the counter.

The days of my initial excitement were long gone, but I greeted him like a good girlfriend should when I slung my

arms around him and gave him a quick kiss. Loosening my hold, I stepped back.

It feels so different than when Rion kissed me...

“You okay, Ivy?” Dark brows furrowed as he gave me a wary once-over.

He’d asked me a simple question, and here I was, struggling to find a simple answer that wouldn’t reveal the truth about my wandering thoughts. So, I went with what always worked, lying.

“Ah, you know... same shit, different week! No worries!” Giving him a half smile, I shifted my weight from foot to foot because indeed there was a lot to worry about—like *a lot* a lot.

What a fluent liar I am. Scary!

Ezra reached for my hand and pulled me in for a hug, sinking his nose into my long wavy hair. I leaned into his athletic five-foot-five frame, his signature Acqua di Gio scent tickled my nose and a sneeze built. But when he pushed me away, glaring at me, my irritated nose no longer concerned me.

“Did you smoke?” Disbelief and annoyance met me in his dark eyes, and I breathed in between my teeth like whenever shit was about to hit the fan.

Fuck me up, down, and sideways! I forgot to wash my hair.

Like the skilled liar I was, I brushed it off casually. “No, but I was out for a beer with coworkers. Told you they all smoke.” That, of course, didn’t sit well with him either.

“With whom? Guys? At a bar? Were they all over you, or why the fuck do you smell like an ashtray?” he spat out through gritted teeth, eyes full of disapproval. This evening was going to be a long one.

I didn’t understand how smoking two cigarettes would make me smell like an ashtray, but it wasn’t a secret that he hated the smell of cigarettes.

Nice. Here we go again...

“No! I mean, yes.” I paused, trying my hardest to keep my expression straight. “Told you I have mostly male colleagues, but there were also two girls.”

Another lie on top of a bunch of other lies. Great.

When the forbidden *torture* of my best friend crept back into my bones, my cheeks heated up, warmth rattling me out when it crept up my ears.

Lying to him with a poker face but blushing when I think of Rion. I'm fucked up.

“Fine! Next time I’ll go out with chicks from my work.” Jealousy and spite flew my way, and his dark, prominent eyebrows lifted with that familiar coldness in his glare.

Years ago, the sweet glances he threw me while holding hands were enough for excitement to prickle my skin. Same as the many hours we’d spent talking about our plans and wishes for our future were enough for hope to keep me wrapped up.

Wrapped and tied to the idea of getting to live a normal, happy family life—far away from the lurking dangers of the lower realm once I’d quit my job. Raising kids in that kind of environment was a no-go to me; our world held dangers far more sinister than whatever deranged soul walked the human realm.

Could my yearning for something I was denied as a teenager prevail over my innermost longing to go after what I called my life’s purpose? A purpose to hunt evil souls rooted so mysteriously deep I couldn’t fight it, not even if I wanted to. Even if it would mean giving up the idea of building a fulfilling family life, bearing children, and cradling them in nothing but love and safety?

The divorce of my adoptive parents still carved deeply into my bones; it kept on haunting me from time to time.

Ezra and I had gone through a small breakup one year ago. It lasted four days until I came crawling back to him. The

memory, anchored deep within me, still stung, no matter how many times he'd assured me that he'd deleted any dubious dating apps.

I never checked, though, too afraid to find a reason to give up on my desperate plan to live a normal life with him. I'd been torn for the longest time, but lately, the scales I'd been struggling to balance had developed a mind of their own, and I'd stopped adjusting them. Guess that reflected in the way I'd distanced myself from Ezra, emotionally and physically.

But he didn't give up on us. He'd always been more of a fighter for what he believed was lasting love between us. In the beginning, I'd believed that, too.

Less than two months ago, the fear of giving up my delusional yearning for a normal life had changed into something different—confidence. Confidence in my destined life path as a soul hunter and that *it* would be what will bring me fulfillment and not the *promised* life in the human realm I'd chased for so long.

But I wasn't ready to take the risk that came with breaking off everything just yet. I needed more time. What if I was wrong?

Fights like the one we had now made it easier to embrace my new confidence, though.

“Ah, yeah? With whom? The one you texted saying she was *smoking hot* or with the one whose birthday you even noted in your phone?” I clenched my hands into fists.

Jealousy became a nasty trait of mine after Ezra's dating app *faux pas*. We'd both agreed to move on, but you'll always see the crack in the mirror after it's damaged. Since then, homesickness choked me more than ever and spending time with Adrion, feeling close to him, was like a remedy to fix it.

Why's everything so damn complicated?

“You're making shit up again, Ivy!” Snapping me out of my inner pity party, Ezra stormed off into the kitchen just to continue his rant, “When was the last time you didn't return

late from work or hung out with me and our friends together? You don't fucking care about our life here anymore!"

"I'm tired and not in the mood to discuss this now."

He yelled with thunder, "You know what I'm not in the mood for? Talking to my girlfriend after she spent a week smoking and whoring around with other dicks at work!"

Wow...

With that, he took his jacket and left the apartment. Tears of sadness and frustration started to run down my cheeks between loud sobs. Our fights had gotten more frequent over the past few years. At least he didn't throw a toilet roll at me—*again*.

I sank to the floor, seeking comfort with my back against the wall, as more tears of bitterness streamed out of my eyes. Part of me was hurt and wanted him to come back. I yearned to be in a happy relationship—at least I thought so. Maybe I just desperately wanted to be in love, to the point where I was more in love with the idea of being cradled in love than actually loving *him*.

Part of me was angry, angry at myself for lying that much. Lying to him, lying to Adrion, and lying to myself. Was I that much of a coward or simply afraid of being—what—*alone*?

After what felt like an eternity, I gathered up some strength and walked into our bedroom, blowing my runny nose on my way there. Long gone were the days when I'd storm after him, begging him to just love me and keep pretending this is where I should be.

I let myself fall onto the queen-sized bed, face buried in the pillows. But I quickly shot up and brought my legs over the edge of the bed to sit up straight. With frustration narrowing my eyes, I looked around me. Somehow, everything irritated me like a nasty mosquito bite. The red wall paint Ezra had picked wasn't what I liked anymore, same as the futon bed and its beige cotton sheets failing to comfort me.

Everything in me pushed against this life I'd chosen all those years ago. I suppressed the urge to trash the whole place, to just replace everything with whatever was needed to give me the false feeling of reassurance that this here, indeed, was still what I wanted.

This is what I signed up for. What the hell is wrong with me?

A stable relationship with a normal guy who loved me and who I was safe with. A guaranteed seat, first row on the safe side—relationship, marriage, family. End of story.

However, it turned out I'd blindly slapped organs together, inserted them in my chaotic life, and expected them to work on their own. Here I was, six years into my love life, and it was giving me serious transplant-rejection vibes.

I took off my clothes and sloppily threw them in the drawer before I made my way to the small bathroom next to our bedroom and reached for the shower curtain.

I didn't bother to turn on the lights, merely leaving the door to the corridor open.

All I wanted was some peace and to scrub myself clean. If only my troubles could be washed away that easily. Disappearing down the drain, in a slow, clockwise swirl, like *bye-bye motherfuckers*—but, no.

I flipped the light switch after stepping out of the shower and looked at my reflection in the long mirror in front of me. The lights flickered, reminding me that this place received as much care as my neglected feelings—not enough.

How much longer will I hold back the inevitable?

No spark in my eyes, I looked how I felt. Tired, worn out, and straight-up miserable.

The small cuts on my upper arm from two days ago were surprisingly gone. The only positive thing my critical eyes were able to register in the mirror's reflection. Usually, wounds needed a few days to disappear.

Maybe Rion's kiss fueled my powers? But how?

With tired arms, I dried myself and brushed my teeth but skipped flossing and body lotion. I went straight to bed with hair still too wet and a heart still too heavy.

Later, when Ezra returned home and joined me in bed, I pretended to be fast asleep, but my restless mind kept me busy until early morning.

I need more. More of everything. I'm starving for intimacy but not with him—not anymore. How much longer until we fall apart?

And these thoughts alone made me feel bad and guilty. Quiet tears ran down my face, soaking the soft pillow.

This is what I've wanted for years.

Restless, I switched positions for the tenth, maybe even twentieth time.

That was until Ezra glided his hand over and brushed my arm, softly stroking my skin as he murmured in a sleepy voice, "Come here." He lifted his arm and pulled me in against his chest. "I'm sorry, babe."

Darkness was all my eyes registered. I stared at his chest and couldn't disregard the sprouting betrayal inside me.

If only Rion was here instead. Wait. What? This is so wrong...

The groan slipping past my lips came out louder than I'd expected, and Ezra squeezed my shoulder. "You okay? I know your job can get pretty tough and tiring."

It was the second time he'd asked since I'd been back from my secret other life, and I lied to him—like so many countless times before—when I mumbled back, absolute exhaustion in my voice, "Don't worry. I'm fine. Feels good to be back home. I missed you so much this week."

Hell, when did I become such a fluent liar?

I tensed, head to toe, when the past snuck its way back into the present and reminded me that I'd *trained* myself to become a skilled liar. Even though it wasn't for my benefit but my siblings' and our mom's.

The divorce nightmare of my adoptive parents sure as fuck contributed to my struggle to end my relationship, same as it had trained me to hide the truth.

Adrian, Lani, and Marcus were the only ones who knew of the trauma I'd experienced when my adoptive parents got divorced.

Thirteen, and too young to fully grasp the complexity of marriage or the human psyche and its selfish urge to get its needs fulfilled. Too old to overlook the depression eating away at my mom or overhearing her late-night sobs and the clinking of the cheap booze bottles she hid under her bed.

Only for her to wake up next morning and parade her bravest fake smile in front of my younger siblings. She couldn't fool me, and she'd honestly never tried.

For fuck's sake, I wished she did. But then she would've lost her only emotional crutch—me.

I'd been there, longer than what could've been considered good for any teenage girl.

By sunrise, I'd been in between hiding our mom's nightly slipups and soothing scared, screaming kids who begged for our father to come home until their throats were sore and blue tinted their small angry faces. By sunset, I'd been in the same heart-wrenching agony my siblings suffered but had to hold my mom's hand until she fell into a boozy sleep.

I'd cried in the beginning, but she never got to see one single tear.

Usually, around 2 a.m., with the lurking shadows from the tree outside as my only company, I pressed my duvet into my face and bit into it to muffle my sobs. No one saw me crying, nor heard me. When I was asked about how I felt, I lied and pretended to be strong.

That was as much love and strength as I could give to my family or what was left of us.

But here I was, living another lie of a life with a man who believed me, even though most of my words were spoken in *cursive*.

Karma doesn't give out cookies for doing the wrong thing when you think it's right, and I would find that out myself time and time again.



The next day began like the day before had ended—with a total disaster.

I cracked my puffy eyes open and looked over at Ezra. His deep-bronze chest heaved slowly and peacefully, while I found myself clinging to the far edge of my side. Even in my sleep, I somehow sought distance from my chosen life of lies.

He's sleeping peacefully... At least one of us seems to be getting rest.

Rubbing my eyes, I checked my phone and opened a message from Marcus.

Big job ahead! I'd rather get a good head job but hey, money doesn't grow on trees, right? There's a hunting order for a group of three men. Your skills would come in handy ;) if you know what I mean haha more details on Monday. See ya!

Is there a day of the year Marcus doesn't think with his dick?

Well, he was a horny demon. So, the answer was no.

I groaned at Marcus's flirty antics but held my breath when my boyfriend muttered something in his sleep. If he saw any of those texts, then shit would hit the fan. But he kept on sleeping, so I turned around and deleted the text, putting my phone away.

My feet brushed the floor as I sat up, and when my phone buzzed again, I glanced at the message preview.

Adrion: Good morning, love. Sorry again, I shouldn't have kissed you like that. Let's grab something to eat next—

There it was again, the horrible feeling of guilt gripping my insides. Yes, Adrion had initiated the kiss, but I'd let it linger.

I brushed over my lips, bringing back the memory of yesterday evening.

The way his tongue caressed my upper lip... Like he courted me for a deeper kiss. Fuck, it felt so right when it wasn't.

Adrion's longing and need for me gave my body quite an energy boost just by how strong his emotions mixed with mine. A theory I came up with.

If his kiss alone can boost me up like that, what if we had sex?

Heat began to flush my face, and a rush of arousal whined for relief as it raked through me. But life played me other cards: me lying next to a handsome man I didn't want as much as I should. It was like complaining about being hungry with food in the fridge, just not the *right* food. Spoiled bitch.

What began as slight arousal now turned into major frustration. Why didn't dopamine come in bottles?

I hid my phone under the pillow and sneaked into the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

Rice and fried eggs with Spam was Ezra's favorite, and that's what I cooked while I ignored my messy feelings and pressured myself into becoming a better girlfriend until I made up my mind about what to do with *us*.

Let's have a nice, normal Saturday...

Delicious, mouthwatering goodness hung in the air, accompanied by sizzles and occasional oil splattering.

I flipped over the Spam slices when the handle of the bedroom door slammed against the wall. Ezra crossed the apartment into the kitchen with anger-fueled stomps and stopped behind me.

“Babe, what’s wrong? Hey, do you want ketchup or sriracha? Or—”

My phone hit the wall next to me, and I gasped in shock. I turned around to see him fuming in anger, millimeter-short pitch-black hair worsening the aggressive vibes as a deep crease grew between his eyebrows.

“Why the hell does Adrion text you an apology about kissing you?” he boomed, and spit left his lips when he quoted Adrion, “*Good morning, love!*”

Oh, fuck my life! Damn previews stay visible until you unlock.

“Show me his texts, or we’re done, Ivy.” He stepped closer, jealousy triggering a vein on his forehead—this time he meant it.

“I’m sorry... And it wasn’t a kiss! He just pecked me. You know? Like we always did as friends!” I tried to somehow sneak my head out of the rope, but again, I piled another lie onto the teetering pile of other lies. I fucking loathed myself for it. My voice trembled with anxiety rising in my body. “You’re all I have.”

“Then, *why the fuck* do you hang out with him? Why the fuck does he still peck you? I told you to quit that shit a long time ago! You know what? Go and have him instead!” His patience was almost nonexistent at this point as he rushed into the bedroom, packing his stuff between cusses.

I followed him with panic washing over me and held his arm when he reached for the zipper of his suitcase.

“Stop, Ezra! Please! Don’t go!” Hot tears ran down my cheeks once more. My eyes were still puffy from yesterday’s disaster, just like my nose was still red from the trillion tissues I’d used.

“Then, show me the damn text messages! Now!” he shouted in my face and yanked his arm out of my grasp.

I hurried out to the kitchen and picked up my phone with shaky hands.

Dammit, I need to check if I’ve to delete more before I can show him. Okay, okay, the messages before look normal... Maybe I should delete this one as well.

I deleted Marcus’s entire chat, sweat building in my palms as I walked back into the bedroom, handing over my slightly damaged phone with a racing heart.

Did I forget something? What if one of them texts again while he holds my phone?

He scanned through the chats and threw my phone on the bed while I waited anxiously for him to say something. It seemed I’d deleted everything that could blow my construct of lies.

Ezra sighed. “I’ll be spending some time at my brother’s.”

I stood there with silent tears making their way down my cheeks, their trails carving my heart with bitterness. I nodded and walked back into a smoky kitchen. If there had been a fire detector, it would’ve screamed at me as well. The eggs with the Spam in the pan were *fifty shades of bricks and coal*.

Ezra left without another word, and I sank to the floor when the harsh slam of the door cut through the air.

My shitshow of a weekend was halfway through, and my knees trembled, fingers twitching. Completely worn out from unhappiness. My mouth was dry, starved from hunger for both nutrients and intimacy.

Lani would cheer me up and help me see clearer.

I dialed her number, and she picked up after the second ring, her voice cheery with those euphonious vocals. “Hey, babe! Now this’s a surprise. How’s it going in Bearno?”

“If you only knew!” I groaned. “How ’bout some serious girl talk? I need an outsider’s view.”

“Uh, uh... sure thing. Fifteen minutes?”

“Yep.”

I closed my phone and took deep breaths. Lani had known me for years, and we became friends after we met at a weapons fair. She happened to be a succubus as well, so she understood me better than most.

Searching through my makeup drawer to find the right lipstick for my kind of mood, my fingers picked the soft brownish shades of my MAC lipstick in “Stone.”

I absolutely believed in matching your mood with the right shade of lipstick.

Lani pulled up in her black Mercedes G-class, looking hot and polished as always. She had an extraordinary sense for outfits, and I often asked myself how she found time for all that extra, next to running her blooming arms and weaponry shop Bombshell in the lower realm.

She got out and pulled down her Gucci shades, revealing more of her stunning face with those model-like Croatian features. “Pinay!” A wide smile greeted me, followed by a tight squeeze, and that alone made my day ten times better. “I missed you!”

“Missed you too, *draga!*” I returned the squeeze and gave her an admiring once-over.

Her long dark-brown hair was beautiful with those on-point coiffed layers as the beams of this Saturday morning sun glinted on it.

We got into the car, and I sank into the comfy white leather seats that looked perfectly clean as always.

Yah, I loved how over-the-top it looked, but it also made me fucking wary.

I still remember when she had that new boo on her arm and then he took her car one time and returned it with pink lipstick stains on the headrest—well, *new boo* quickly became *you killed who?*

She was extremely fussy when it came to her car. I could relate, to some extent, even if my Guido wasn't as luxurious.

"Nice choice of lipstick," she teased, and I grinned.

The laugh I stifled brooded within me, and it only worsened when I glanced over at Lani, who was already eyeing me. We both laughed, sensing the other one's train of thought.

"No worries, babe. I won't stain your seats!" My heart felt lighter just by laughing with her.

We switched to the lower realm and drove straight to our go-to spot, Cloud9. It was only 10 a.m. when we knocked on the still-closed club door.

Xavier opened the door with a rather tired look on his face, brown hair with lots of grays, messy—like all Cloud9 parties on Fridays. "Who do we have here?" His face, with his soft brown eyes, brightened up when he saw us, age-earned wrinkles deepening from joy. "For you two lovely ladies, our doors are always open. Come on in!"

Xavier was a demon and such a sweetheart, and over the years, we had become not only customers but friends.

Even though Cloud9 was usually filled with all kinds of folks, it was a very cozy spot. The old grayish-brown stone walls vibed quite well with the dark wooden booths and the matching dark timber beams. What I liked most were the little floating candles at every table.

"Tough-girl talk ahead, Xav! May you please pour us some *inspiration?*" I winked, and we sat in our favorite wooden booth in the far-left corner of the club.

Cocking my eyebrow, I picked with my nails at what looked like a heart next to my initials I'd carved into the wooden table edge four years ago.

Weird.

"Thanks for making time, Lani." I lit up a cigarette and took two drags before a cloud of smoke swirled above us.

"Hey, I'll always make time for you." She smiled and gave my hand a squeeze. Judgment wasn't in her vocabulary, and I could always keep it real with her. And for that, I loved her even more.

Xavier came with our drinks and placed them in front of us. He knew I always went for crystal banana wheat beer, and for Lani, he served a good Senza Parole Primitivo Puglia.

I brought the cool blonde to my lips and sighed.

"Shoot!" Lani's eyebrows furrowed behind her voluptuous wine glass.

"My life feels like a lie. No, my life *is* a big fat lie. Ezra and I... think we expired, and we keep all of this"—I let my hands swirl through the air and hit a floating candle by accident—"up just for the sake of keeping it up." I took another big sip of my beer and absentmindedly nibbled off the wax from the table.

This was the first time I'd spoken about these little bugging thoughts that had lived rent-free inside my mind for the past few months.

She narrowed her soft brown eyes at me and gave her glass a good swirl. "You want the truth?"

"Always."

"First of all, tell me something new!" she half shouted at me, eye corners creasing from the grin she didn't care to hide. "Second, that's where you got it twisted. *You* keep it up for the sake of keeping it up." Lani leaned her perfect chin on the back of her hand and shot me a cheeky smile.

I closed my eyes and groaned.

She knew she was right—*hell*, even *I* knew she was right, and it sucked.

“What do I do now?” I held my confused head in both hands and groaned once more. “I’m scared to leave him. What if I regret it, and it shows it was all a mistake? He’s all I’ve ever known relationship-wise, and I owe him for everything he did for me in times when I had nothing but alcohol and cigs to handle the grief after leaving my family. He even broke off his relationship with his sister when I moved in with him. She fucking hated me from the start.”

Lani leaned back and gestured for me to give her a smoke.

“I’ll tell you the only thing that makes sense to me—a fellow succubus—all right?” Dragging on the glowing lady stick, she lifted her eyebrows and had that *now listen* expression all over her face, including the pursed lips. This woman meant business, and I knew it would be accurate and maybe even a little shocking to me.

I grinned, semimotivated, but still, whatever advice she would bestow upon me, at least it would be fun to listen to.

Please tell me to end the relationship. Wait. What?

“Your sexy ass knows you should’ve ended this disaster of a relationship a long time ago. *Anyhoo*, you somehow—and not even Hell knows why—haven’t ended things yet. That’s why you’re an underfucked, whiny, weak mess.” She enjoyed whipping my ass with the truth, and I let her. No offense taken.

Toying with the flames of the small candles, her naughty side flashed in her altered red eyes. “An underfucked, whiny, weak mess who needs my help to pull her out of this situation.”

I couldn’t help but smile. She delivered the truth with sass and humor.

“Today’s your lucky day, Ivy! Because I’ve got a solution for you.”

I giggled and shook my head. “*Okay, draga*, bring it on!”

“It’s simple. Fuck Adrion. He’s on your tail like a stray dog and would jump off a cliff to have you once. He’d be loyal and willing to fulfill all your desires. Desires Ezra hasn’t even heard of. Prude human.” She whisper-coughed the last part. “You want a stable relationship, and all that ish?” She couldn’t help but gag. She just wasn’t the type for that. “*Fine*, Adrion will give you that in the lower realm, Monday to Friday. You stick to Ezra in the meantime until you feel ready to leave him. Then you marry Adrion, have a horde of booger-eating spawn, everyone’s happy, end of story. Boom! Genius, huh?”

She slammed her flat hand onto the table, which had me gripping my beer securely, and batted her perfect lashes. My mouth hung open, the ash of my cig on the verge of falling right into my beer as I sat there, dumbfounded.

“For fuck’s sake, Lani! No! That’s a horrible idea!” I fell back and covered my eyes. “Why is it with us succubi that sex and deceiving seem to be the go-to solution?” I threw my hands in the air, and my heart rate was about to go through the roof. “It’s not that wanting to be a wife and mom is what makes my world go round. I’m halfway kissing that idea goodbye anyway.”

She laughed. “Good to hear. I think you should still bang Adrion. *Okay*, he wouldn’t be my choice. He’s hot, I sign that, but a damn half-human softie. Why do you act like you haven’t thought of choosing him? I thought you two had something going on, no? Even a blind beggar could see that you’ve got love for each other. It’s gross.” She scrunched up her nose and pursed her glossy lips.

Yup, he’s a big softie with a tender heart... Cancer moon energy is so lovable.

I let my hands sink to the table and fumbled with the promise ring Ezra gave me when I was nineteen—he was twenty-three at the time. I frowned. It had started out resembling the *idea of love* I’d chased so desperately.

Even my jewelry screams “coward liar.”

“You think so? I’ve always thought our feelings were pretty low-key on the outside,” I mumbled with a pained smile, and Lani’s eyebrows were about to disappear into her hairline.

I couldn’t bullshit her, and that wasn’t my intention, so I laid down all my cards. “You’re right. I love him. He feels like home. *Shit*, the chemistry is *insane* between us. But Amos? He’s a fucking jerk! Rude, arrogant, and don’t get me started on his toxic ego.” Silence hung in the air as I bit the inside of my cheeks. “It’s never hard to tell when Amos takes over whenever Rion is boozing. Not much left of the soft and caring side I love so much...”

“*Rude and arrogant* might be the remedy to fuck your troubles away but, *please*, no babies anytime soon!” Lani grinned behind her glass but shrugged when she caught my irritated look. “Just saying.”

“No worries. My implant is still good for another three years.” I huffed, a ghost of a smile lifting my lips.

Tilting my head back against the headboard of the booth, I hooded my gaze to meet Lani’s eyes. “I’ve loved Rion for years, you know? Even when I was with Ezra. My thoughts always found a way to drown both in memories and possible *what-ifs* with him. I fucking loathe myself for cheating emotionally, but I can’t change it—I love Rion.” I paused and knitted my brows. “My brain screams at me to give him a chance. But there’s that *tiny voice* in my heart that tells me I won’t love Amos as much as I love Rion, and since they can’t be separated, I’ll end up losing my best friend.”

I shifted my gaze to outside the window, my voice carrying a soft whisper. “So, I stay on the safe side and force myself to live my de facto chosen life, with a loving boyfriend *and* a best friend.”

Lani looked at me in outright disbelief. “A *tiny voice* in your heart? *Ew!* Sure you’re a succubus? Must be a side effect

of being underfucked, I tell ya.” She grabbed my hands and squeezed. “Sweetie, I’m worried. Little lovebugs eating away your last common sense. Better if you leave Ezra and the human realm—you feel more at home here anyway.” She clicked her tongue.

Damn, she has a point. I’m awful!

“I know... I’m wasting Ezra’s time.”

“Okay, listen, no one said you need to fuck Adrion *forever*,” Lani continued with sloppy air quotes. “Use him as some kind of buffer after you end things with that human. Gosh, he’ll be the happiest wolf alive if you send him on a slippery-wet mission,” she said matter-of-factly with zero hints of decency, but her hilarious wording lifted my lips anyway.

A badass succubus through and through.

I leaned forward with my arms crossed on the table and buried my head into them, mumbling, “Ugh... can’t do this to Rion, Lani. You don’t see what I see whenever he’s around me. He’d think he had a chance when I know there’s none. I can’t lose my best friend.”

She huffed and made a face. “Believe me, I see it every time when you guys visit me at my store.”

My voice came out hollow from the little space between my arms. “Even if I did start all over with Rion, what if it turns out years later that I do want to start a family? Raising kids in the lower realm is a hard pass for me, and he doesn’t want to live in the human world. I want my family to be safe and sound, nothing this place here could ever offer. Ezra is my only chance.”

Her warm, dainty fingers enclosed my wrist, and I lifted my head to look at her. “Babe, monsters come in all kinds of forms—non-human or human. You, as a soul hunter, should know that best, right?”

“True.” I bit the inside of my cheeks. The obvious revelation seeped into my mind, chunks of it descending until they hit the bottom in common sense.

The definition of monsters and their appearances are a construct of relativity. “Ours” never pretend to be anything but that—monsters. Can’t be said about humans.

“C’mon, Ivy. Being smart doesn’t mean you always make the right decision, but instead, you learn from your mistakes. Do you want Ezra and the life you *think* you’ll get with him because you really want it, *or* is there a possibility you only chase after what was ripped away from you when you were younger?”

How can she shed light whereas I drown in shadows?

Lani kept her touch on my wrist and squeezed harder. “You want to listen to that creepy tiny voice in your heart? Go ahead!”

I observed her with wariness when she fiddled in her purse while mumbling *whatevers* and turned back to me with a quarter between her fingers.

Before I got to ask what she was up to, dim light from the floating candles reflected on the copper-nickel coin as she gave it a hard flip and exclaimed, “Family with Ezra or hunting souls?”

Heart rate on steroids, I darted my eyes up to the flipping coin in midair before it met the table with a pointy *clang*. Lani leaped forward and covered the upside before I located it.

I craned my neck in curiosity and irritation. “This is stupid. We didn’t even define which side—”

She shook her head. “Which side is Ezra, which hunting souls? Just fucking answer.”

“Ugh. Fine. Heads for Ezra.”

Like I’d depend on a damn coin to make a decision...

“Okay, I’ll have a look.” She glimpsed under her palm and nonchalantly put the coin back into her purse.

“Whoa! Why didn’t you show me?” My ever-nosy Aquarius sun couldn’t handle being teased and then left

hanging. “Which side was up? Oh, *come the fuck on!*”

Lani pursed her lips in a mix of amusement and badassery, deep red Primitivo sloshing inside the voluptuous glass when she gave it an elegant twist. “Would it matter?”

“You know I’m the epitome of curiosity!” I pouted. *Dammit, I needed to know which side had been up. “Tell me. Please!”*

“Okay, but *imagine* for a second this coin would actually seal the deal for you,” she said. I nodded, unmotivated, eyes darting to the ceiling in disbelief we actually played pretend before I nodded again, so she continued. “Don’t forget. This will seal the deal. Now, listen, I’ll tell you—”

A life with Ezra would mean I’d sacrifice what brings me fulfillment, brings me joy... Happiness and contentment whenever I know there’s one less rotten soul walking the streets, and I’m the reason for it.

I’d missed her answer. “W-What? Sorry, come again?” Blinking my eyes repeatedly, my lashes fluttered and brows dipped before I lifted them.

“Heads.” Drumming her manicured nails against the wine glass, she reached for my cigarettes with the other hand and dragged one out, tugging at the filter with her teeth.

Disappointment exploded inside me before it turned back inward, imploding in the deepest corners of my gut. A pang of nausea coursed through me, and I couldn’t shake it off.

“Ha,” I huffed out after a few seconds, tone flatter than a damn *crêpe*, and I wiggled two fingers when I gestured for her to give me back my cigs.

She flipped the pack at me, and when I failed to catch it and bent down to pick it up, her musing hum reached my ears. “So thrown off by the decision you can’t catch a damn pack of cigs?”

Silence rang louder than any denial that brooded inside of me. The words I failed to form told enough.

Flicking my lighter, I let the biting mint engulf my taste buds as a small flame burned the tip of my cigarette. Smoke ribboned up my cheeks, and I cracked my tensed neck. “Not a decision. We just fooled around.”

Another drag, harder than the one before; a river of smoke crept up my nose as I pushed out the thick cloud with my tongue, welcoming the dense menthol flavors before releasing them out through my nose.

I allowed myself to ponder my train of thought between sips of beer.

Lani’s light-brown eyes fixated on me, she watched for my reaction. “Make no mistake, there’s been a decision made.” She pulled out the coin again and slid it toward me. “Fuck the coin. But the moment I flipped it—be honest—you instinctively knew which outcome you’d regret forever. And it wasn’t hunting souls, right?”

Taking off the promise ring, I ran my fingers over the smooth silver material and gazed at it with struggle evident in my voice. “I do love Ezra but not enough. For years, I tried to make it work, even to the point where, five months ago, I suggested getting married—”

Lani coughed, and drops of deep red vino ran down her chin. “No shit! You did *what?*”

“See? I’m a lost cause! Instead of letting *us* die, I suggested attaching us to a life support system. Ezra seemed to like the idea, though, and even told his parents about it. I’m so fucking stupid.”

I didn’t think it was possible to ever witness Lani losing her cool, but she did when her voice became screechy. “Wait a second! So, you’re engaged?”

“I guess? But we don’t really talk about it anymore, plus, no sight of the ring he wanted to get me. I don’t know. Fuck, fuck, fuck!” My eyes tightly shut, not daring to look at the expression that must be on her face. “I’m so fucked up! I don’t

wanna be engaged to Ezra, but all my damn stupid choices paved the way, and I dug my own grave.”

“*Hell*, all these contradicting feelings! Honey, you gotta pull the plug, like ASAP. Adrion’s human side makes him delusional and weak just like Ezra, but what’s your excuse?” She grimaced like she had stepped on ogre poop.

“Girl, I have no idea!” I shook my head and bit my lip. “Rion doesn’t even know about it. *Hell*, I didn’t even consider myself engaged until you asked. Best if I go back to my apartment here and make up my mind about how to handle my shitshow of a life.”

“Girl, you should! If you need an escape plan, then—”

I puffed out a breath. “No thanks. No more crazy plans. Gotta figure out how to get out of my not-engagement-engagement grave all by my damn self.”

We both laughed and emptied our glasses.

“When did you get that wise? For real, Lani. You’re better than Marcus and his little notebook full of crappy hookup lines.”

She winked and straightened her back. “Thanks, lovely. Guess I had my fair share of downs in the past couple of years and was lucky to rely on my mom for advice.”

“I’m happy for you,” I said while poking at one of the floating candles. “I wish I could talk to mine. On the other hand, I’m glad she doesn’t get to see how badly I fucked up.”

“I know you miss your fam.” Lips thin, she gave me a half smile. But I waved her off and asked Xavier for another round of Primitivo and beer.

Consequences are like herpes—not always visible but still there, waiting to plague you. Ugh!

We decided to switch to a happier topic and spent the next hour eating antipasti and olive bread before she dropped me off in Bearno.

“Ivy, when was the last time you got laid?”

“Forty-two days ago.” I cringed at how fast my reply slipped past my lips, faster than Lucky Luke pulling his gun.

“*Hell*, help this girl!” Lani exclaimed. “Just get Ezra and Adrion fucked outta your system, and you’ll be good. If you need any A-class dick, let me know, and I’ll hook you up with men that will traumatize your pussy in the best way possible.” She beamed and blew me a kiss before I got out.

Unbelievable, but I loved her for that. “Love ya, crazy-ass lady! Thanks again!”

“For sure. Let me know if you need help moving out.” She winked and gave her soft hair a flip.

“I didn’t say I’d break up with Ezra just yet.” Calm and collected after our girl talk, I cocked my head and grinned. The burden weighing me down had been lifted, if only a little, but I was grateful for every pound she’d helped me with.

Lani jerked her chin. “Take your time to consider what you truly desire and then grab it by its balls! It’s your life, babe!” One last mischievous look, followed by her dazzling, bright smile, and she drove off.

My life, indeed... The life I’m about to choose without guarantee it won’t come with regrets. Tsk. Why am I that scared? The last few years of my life with Ezra were filled with regrets! Time to pack my stuff and make up my mind somewhere I truly feel at home.



Back in our apartment, I opened my suitcase and blindly threw in clothes from my drawer and closet.

Can't believe I'm doing this...

I needed some distance from the pile of lies that slowly started to kick my delusional ass. My forehead creased, I hoped Ezra wouldn't return before I had the chance to leave and that I'd get away with my sloppily written note—stating we should talk about *us* next weekend and that we both needed some time off. Looking at my watch, my hands started shoving even quicker.

One week should be enough to come up with a plan to let him down slow.

The snapping sound of the key lock and the apartment door screaming for WD-40 crushed my cowardly hopes.

Go to Hell, Murphy...

“Ivy, where are you? I came back because we need to—” Ezra opened the bedroom door, and I grimaced, movements freezing in midair. “What are you doing?” he asked with irritation evident in his voice, which made the moment even more uncomfortable and awkward.

Okay, no need for a note on the bedside table.

Quickly hiding my poor excuse of a letter beneath the pillow, I breathed out and turned to him with uneasiness. “You're angry because of what happened, and you have every

right to be. I'll fly back today to give us both some time to reconsider our relationship.”

I wasn't ready to pull the plug yet. My heart ached, but I needed to set things into a new perspective and gather some courage.

Deep down, my conscience sneered at me for buying more time.

He crossed his arms, leaning on the doorframe, and huffed. “For real? So, it'll be another long week of you smoking behind my back and spending time with *him* and god knows how many other guys? *Nice!*”

I closed my eyes, my lower lip trembling with rising anger. He stepped closer, but I instinctively put distance between us.

“No, Ezra, I won't be spending time with *him*! But even if I did, he's a friend—*my best friend*—and you won't tell me to not see him. And, *yes*, I started smoking again, and I'll do so when you're not around to not bother you. Now, isn't that *nice?*” I clapped back and pushed past him to open my side of the closet.

Seriously, Murphy, go to Hell!

Ezra grabbed my wrist and pulled me close to him. “Who do you think you're talking to, huh?” He tightened his grip, glaring at me. “For fuck's sake, Ivy, what's wrong with you lately?”

A daring growl went through my chest, and golden sparks erupted in my pupils, anger invoking my powers.

“What the—” There wasn't much fury left in his dark-brown eyes as he loosened his grip and stepped back with wariness. I regained control over myself and gave him a slow but challenging once-over.

“I'm talking to my *boyfriend*. And for *now*”—I paused to make sure he got the memo—“that's you. Might consider that fact if you touch me like this ever again!”

I freed my arm and opened the closet, taking out my black Superdry trench coat and folded it in a calm manner before placing it into the suitcase.

Shit, that was close...

He scoffed and slammed the door shut when he walked out.

“Fuck this shit!” he yelled and, by the sound of it, smashed the vase on the sideboard in the narrow corridor. It was one of his mother’s ugly collections of shit no one needed, so I shrugged with a tired smile.

I hated that vase anyway...

I packed a last few things and was about to leave when he shouted out of the kitchen, “Have fun!”

Two happy faces looked up at me from between the many shards on the floor, and I picked up the frame that held one of our first pictures together. That day, he’d taken me to his favorite Thai restaurant, and it became our go-to spot. What started as weekly visits turned into monthly, and over the years, it dwindled to us only going there for our anniversary.

When did we start taking each other as a given? Maybe, I turned into a given thing much like he turned into one for me?

The seconds I spent staring at the picture felt like hours, and when footsteps resounded from behind me, the urge to flee took over, and I didn’t waste another moment. Placing the broken frame on the sideboard, I didn’t bother to look back when I walked out of my pile-of-lies life, closing the door behind me with a *bang*.

-snap-

Way better...

My apartment in the lower realm welcomed me with warm hues of orange and peach shining through the long window. I placed down my suitcase and stepped outside on the balcony to smell the warm air of my newly chosen life. One

glimpse down to the parking area had me releasing a loud groan—lizovs had *repainted* Guido's hood and roof.

Louis greeted me with a purr and brushed my legs, little white flames dancing over his long tail. I'd adopted my little furball last year after I found him as a kitten next to the trash bins at Cloud9.

“At least you don't hate me.” I sighed.

Louis craned his neck, fixing me with those depthless blue eyes, and meowed.

“Got the memo. The girl who feeds you premium tuna in sauce, that's all I am to you, right?” I mumbled to myself with a tired smile and went inside to open a fresh can for him. “You should hunt more lizovs! Damn fuckers bombarded Guido last night.” Mashing the tuna in the bowl, I clicked my tongue. “For real, Louis. He was all polished and waxed when I got him back!”

The apartment I lived in was on the twenty-fourth floor. At first, I'd worried about keeping Louis locked up in there, but he surprised me when he demonstrated he was just as able to teleport as any other demon.

Adopting this funny little creature came with surprises, like when he brought home occasional *souvenirs*.

3018 Belliz was contaminated with an enormous population of those flying lizard-like pests. As a car lover, I was glad when Louis killed off a few lizovs but scrubbing dried blood from expensive acacia flooring after the weekend? Awful.

I chose this apartment because of the amazing sight of the twinkling city lights bewitching my eyes and mind. The never-sleeping traffic on the main road reminded me of the Milky Way, same as it reminded me of my hometown.

Our realm was one of a kind, beautiful with a gory twist, an eerie yet intriguing contrast. Trees and plants bled out sticky red fluids that attracted all kinds of large insects. Most plants had an affinity to eat whatever touched them; picking

flowers wasn't a thing around here. Our nature demanded to be admired but never touched.

Right at the city border, there was another spot I held dear—Mount Rizar.

From my balcony, I had a magnificent view of the mountain and could easily lose myself in admiring the quiet strength its sheer size radiated in the landscape. If I were lucky enough, I could spot mutated deer-like creatures, stagions, that managed to live in the mountain's habitat, feeding off its sparse vegetation. Mostly, they came out at night. The males and females had different-colored glowing tails, and the males were distinctive, with their large antlers that glowed to match their tails.

More often than not, I retreated to my balcony with a beer and my cigs, enjoying not only the view of creatures running at high speed but also the comforting feeling of sitting somewhere up high out of their reach.

Height never scared me. I've always loved it, especially when I got to sit on the edge of my balcony and swung my short legs back and forth through the mild air, high above the thrilling abyss. Sitting there like that was the closest I ever got to diving into my feelings, or like whenever I spent time with Adrion, reminiscing about the days before I turned into a fluent liar.

I began to unpack my suitcase, but tiredness overcame me. The tumultuous events of the past day were too much for my emotional state, so I called it a day.



The next morning, I woke up to the screechy sounds of lizovs flying around outside, chasing each other. I rolled around and stretched my legs—*oh, yes*, this was *much* better. I grinned from ear to ear with my eyes closed. Not fully rested, but waking up where I felt at home was undeniably better than waking up *there*.

Everything about *my* place down here was different from the apartment I shared with Ezra in Bearno. I couldn't exactly put my finger on it, but here, I never had to think about how to *act*. No. *Here*, I didn't need to act at all.

Whereas, in the human realm, I'd had to hide the growing chasm in my heart. In this realm, the pep in my step whenever I left my place to dive into my next adventure threatened to send me flying. *Okay*, I worked Monday to Friday, but working as a soul hunter fulfilled me.

Leaving Ezra's and my apartment to put our relationship on the back burner had initially stirred up doubts and insecurities, but I wouldn't chicken out. This was a chance, my chance, to regain control over the mess I'd made of my life up to now.

Reevaluating my heart's desires promised to be a challenge, the outcome of that hazy, like fog creeping over the landscape on a cold, autumn morning.

After treating myself to a few bites of Italian Heaven with prosciutto crudo and cantaloupe melon, I sashayed into the bathroom I loved to call my little oasis.

"I missed you already!" Even my fancy walk-in shower made me happier than whatever I owned in the other realm. It was obvious, my life here was where I felt at home, given I spent about seventy percent of my time here.

But Ezra's words still moved me into an uncertain emotional terrain. As much as I hated how easily I gave in to rejecting my life with him, I needed a break—no, change.

Is this just a break? We didn't actually define it... Ugh!

I needed a distraction, so I thought about what to do on a lovely Sunday, and what could be better than sunbathing? Digging in the dirt of my fucked-up mind and heart would have to wait a little longer.

The seasons in the lower realm weren't like the ones in the human world. Here it was warm and sunny, twelve months a year—exactly like I preferred it.

I changed into my bikini and grabbed a towel with my Clubmaster shades, my mind set on kidnapping myself to a little escape on the rooftop.

I sauntered out of my apartment and made my way to the elevator. Walking past the big mirror in the corridor, I halted and grinned.

Dang, Dita's new collection is hot!

Five sets of bikinis I called my own from Dita Von Teese's Hell collection. My black lace bikini with titanium chain straps surely didn't leave much to the imagination. My shades hid my tired eyes, and with quick fingers, I pulled my long wavy hair up into my favorite J. Lo style.

Rooftop, here I come!

The elevator took me up to the fiftieth floor, and I stepped out into the luxurious pool area. The heat of two suns hit me, and I took it all in, tilting my head back and welcoming the warmth on my skin.

Quickly scanning the scene, I was pleased to note not too many demons were around. I wasn't in the mood for chitchat.

I walked up to my usual sunbathing spot while fumbling with the side area of my bikini top that was slightly too small for my bouncy sisters and lay on the lounge. Closing my eyes, I angled my legs and put my hands over my head, releasing the tension inside me with a long sigh.

This is it. Heaven.

"Hello, *neighbor*." A masculine voice raspy with hints of foreign heritage enticed me to keep listening, but the delight quickly vanished.

Cold drops hit my breasts, and I gasped, my eyes going wide as I tore off my shades to glare at whoever dared to bother me.

A disarming smile reaching espresso-colored eyes had me instantly thinking of Giorgio Armani commercials. Whoever he was, he could easily pass as one of those Italian models

with those thick, dark eyebrows and that striking bone structure. He leaned above me, cold water dripping from his dark medium-length hair onto my body.

I let my eyes wander over his broad stature, water trailing down the V-shaped road to Sinnersville. At least that's what came to mind as his prominent bulge begged for attention through the tight, wet fabric.

"Listen, I came here to chill and not be bothered. So, take your steroid-loving ass somewhere else, and I'll let it slide this time," I sassed once I silenced my hungry thoughts. "Now, shoo, shoo!"

"Feisty, huh? *Sorry* for disturbing you, but your body"—he bit his lip in a way that probably had any girl squirming and smirked—"screamed for it."

I got up and was surprised when I faced his rock-hard chest, curly dark hair gracing his deeply tanned skin. Although I never considered myself a chest hair enthusiast, he had the right amount to stir my interest.

"Up here, *bella*." *Mister Italy* was clearly amused as he caught me gazing for more than one Mississippi.

He was a solid 8.5 with his six-foot height and didn't even bother to step back to give me room. Any other day, I would've welcomed a fresh breeze of *avances*, but not today.

"Move. Or I'll have you screaming for something I don't serve today, *Mister*," I hissed and tried to push past him, but he didn't budge. My pupils turned golden, and his interest grew brighter.

Big-dick energy right there, huh?

"So, it's true. You're not like the other demons." He traced the outline of my bikini top and shamelessly let his fingers dance over my side boob, tugging at the lace fabric.

I grabbed his hand and pulled up my knee to serve scrambled eggs, but he was faster when he twisted me around,

holding me flush against his chest. One smooth push of his other hand, and he had me face down on the lounge.

He leaned over my back, strong thighs brushing mine. “I heard a few *interesting* things about you, Ivy. Do you mind if I investigate a little in private?” Inappropriate heat flushed my pussy with every husky syllable of his.

Forty-three days... Dammit!

My ass was neatly presented to him on a silver platter, and he didn't hesitate to take advantage of that when he gave me a suggestive push with his engorged dick. My needy pussy begged to be fucked, and the involuntary quiet whimper escaping my lips exposed me.

“I'm curious. Does your boyfriend satisfy your succubus needs? Because, by the way I got you bent down without much effort”—he pressed his lips to the spot under my ear and had me releasing a mellow hum I instantly cursed myself for—“and by the scent of your arousal that lingers in the air”—he inhaled and let go—“I'd guess the answer is *no*.”

Still flustered, I straightened up and pushed off his hands, which, until this point, refused to lose touch with my body. This guy's got a nerve, and, *fuck*, it was both hot and annoying.

Does everyone around me know I'm an underfucked mess? At least he doesn't know my boyfriend is a human.

Lacing my voice with a promise I'd no intention to fulfill, I gestured for him to come closer and snaked my hands around his thick neck. “Let me tell you something.”

He bent down to my level, curved lips close enough to kiss me when I leaned sideways and whispered into his ear, “My pussy hasn't seen dick in forty-three days.”

He took in a sharp breath. “Well, *bella*, that's a damn shame.”

You don't say...

I teased him further, playing with the wet strands touching his neck. “I could take you to my apartment and jump on your dick, milking it for the rest of the day.” His twitching cock showed how much the idea pleased him, and I mentally rolled my eyes. “But here’s the thing, so listen closely.”

He traced my jawline with kisses, cool fingertips skating in circles down my back until they reached my ass.

“No gentleman? No lust, no trust, no love. So, get your shameless hands off me, now!”

He chuckled and groped my ass. “I’m just trying to be a helpful neighbor. C’mon, don’t play hard to get. I know you’re down to fuck.”

Can’t take a no, huh?

And with that, I brought my forehead to his nose, breaking it. He let go and cursed something in Italian, blood dripping from his nose and my forehead.

“*Donnaccia!*” He growled and slammed me to the ground with one strong hand gripping my throat. The air got pressed out of my lungs, and something within me gave way with a *crack*.

My collarbone.

I kicked and tried to free myself from his strong grip. Writhing, I moved us both to the nearby pool edge. The hard ground scratched my back open, and my tormented collarbone screamed at me. He brought my head over the edge above the cool water and kept pushing down.

Just a little closer...

I hooked my ankles behind his back, freed my hands, and reached back into the pool, grabbing a part of the ladder to flip us into the water. It took all the power I’d left to lift us both—but it was worth it.

Because what he surely didn’t know was that I could hold my breath longer than the average demon. Plus, I could swim faster than the average demon.

Weird and *uncommon* were things that peppered my life more than often, so I'd stopped wondering why water helped me heal faster a long time ago, even though it didn't work every time. My body's healing was far from what other demons would describe as normal.

As a fast swimmer with the advantage of holding my breath longer than five minutes, these abilities had already saved my life once when I was eight and almost drowned in a river.

Mister Italy wouldn't make it past three minutes, and I'd let him discover his limit. When the cool water hit us, he let go and tried to swim to the surface, but I untied my bikini top and chained his ankle to pull him deeper into the pool. Keeping him trapped, I dragged him to the bottom of the ten-foot-deep pool.

You're not going anywhere, fucker.

He came for me with his claws, eyes bright red with panic evident as he tried to pull at the titanium chain straps of my bikini, hectically trying to free himself.

Wow, Dita's swimwear is indeed worth every penny.

The sunbeams danced beautifully under water, drawing shimmery patterns on the bottom of the pool. I appreciated the stunning view with crystal clear vision when I let myself sink onto the pool's white tiles, sitting there crisscross as I held *Mister Italy* above me like a balloon.

His erratic movements caught my attention, and I watched him panic more and more with large bubbles escaping his mouth. My hair shimmered around my face in *nuances* of light blonde, and knowing the dazzling shade of my golden pupils whenever they shone, it surely matched my vibe.

I could pass as the evil but way hotter sister of Ariel.

Shortly, his movements slowed, and he reached for me with desperation in his pleading red eyes.

Ah, just a little longer...

I gestured a *can't hear ya* with a finger on my earlobe, and he begged with folded hands.

So blasphemous. All right, all right, enough.

With strong leg jerks, I pulled him up with me to the surface. He gasped for air, and I gave him a more-than-generous push that sent him flying out of the pool where he landed on the deck, spitting and coughing out water.

I crossed my arms on the edge of the pool and rested my face on one cheek with a lazy smile tugging on my lips. He cursed me soundly in Italian between coughs, which made it so much funnier.

Taking my sweet time, I got out of the pool. Water dripped from my bare nipples as I stepped toward him, rolling him on his back with my foot on his muscular abdomen. I gave my wet hair a good twist and wrung it out over his face. “Guess we’re even.”

I was about to leave when he moved his hand up my toned calf and a half smirk decorated his godly face.

“By the way, my name’s Ricardo. Am I dead? I must be because this sight right here”—his hand caressed my skin, wandering up my leg, with his eyes roaming over my exposed breasts from beneath—“surely is to die for.” Ricardo’s voice trailed off as the lack of oxygen wrapped him in dizziness.

I freed my leg with a huff and walked over his body. My featherlight weight didn’t even bother him as I stepped on his chiseled six-pack on purpose.

“Okay, *Ricardo*. That was all nice and fun, but I’m not in the mood to play. Maybe another time.” I turned around halfway. “And next time, do yourself a favor and practice some chivalry. That shit’s not dead.”

I picked up my stuff from the lounge and left for the elevator. Shocked and heated looks from the few demons around us followed me, and thrills shot through my body. I made every step of my small feet count, swaying my hips,

knowing damn well my free-bouncing boobs were everyone's highlight of the weekend.

“Ivy, your bikini top!” Ricardo yelled from behind, waving it.

Walking into the elevator, I peeked over my shoulder and shouted back at him, “Keep it as a reminder to step up your wack-ass game!”

That was fun, though.



Monday morning dawned, and I woke up, wrapped in my favorite oversize blanket like a sushi roll between many pillows. The smell of delicate jasmine and heavenly laundry detergent welcomed me to a new day, and somewhere from beneath the bed a nagging *meow* resounded.

Wonderful.

The warm hues of this morning matched the feeling spreading in me when I took in the empty bedside on my right. Indeed, I was alone, but my large bedroom, with its accents of sage green visible in the countless candles alongside the windowsill, same as the wall paint, brought me comfort. The décor reflected my delight in the privilege of making choices, the evidence depicted in everything I'd picked on my own. *Okay*, the sword- and knife-plastered wall opposite my bed surely contributed to that as well.

This day—scratch that—this week was the beginning of something big, and anticipation tickled my feet.

I sat up on the side of my queen-sized bed, swinging my legs back and forth, and couldn't help but smile. It was the same smile stretching my cheeks in the many pictures pinned to the wall everywhere around my vanity desk.

Walking over to it, I brushed my wild mane, cursing myself for going to bed with damp hair yesterday. While I struggled to untangle it with delicate tweaks and pulls, my

eyes roamed over the pinned pictures, and I reached for one of Ezra and me.

That time, he surprised me with a skiing holiday trip for my birthday...

Winter had smothered the landscape around us with layers of snow, frost covering not only the windows of our rented cabin but also the many Christmas roses alongside of it.

What the camera had captured was sincere—the gratefulness in my eyes. Grateful for being with someone who intended to stay. Same as it had captured Ezra's proud grin when he thought I'd be happy to freeze my ass off on skis.

Needless to say, I'd longed for the day I could return to the ever-warmth of the lower realm.

Despite his sincere efforts to surprise me, we ended up arguing that night. Petty fights were our go-to discipline. If there had been medals to win, we'd surely call a few our own. More often than not, discussions turned into arguments and, lastly, into battles of juvenile egos.

Outside's biting iciness hadn't matched the coldness seeping into my heart when he'd blamed me for the rift with his sister he'd cut out of his life since she wouldn't stop running her mouth about how I was a mistake.

He'd started to believe that, too, when he learned about my ongoing friendship with Adrion and my unwillingness to cut him off.

None of that evident in the tiny moment the camera had captured. Our framed smiles would remain the same, frozen in time forever, no matter what was to follow that night.

Why did people hang onto photos? Was it solely out of nostalgia or because snapshots functioned as some kind of proof? Proof that, indeed, good times had existed, even though bad times kept returning like herpes.

My gaze drifted to the rest of the pictures, as a Leo Rising, I had many of myself. I huffed, noticing the dazzling smile and

confident aura surrounding me in each and every one of them.

The lower realm brings out the best in me.

A joyful shriek escaped me when my eyes bounced between three pictures of Marcus and me. I covered my mouth but couldn't stop the giggles from spilling out.

All three had been taken on Halloween, in different years, when we followed our tradition and dressed up as crazy as we liked to hunt the worst of rotten souls—category fours. We would always take a picture of us with a self-timer before hunting. *Dang*, I loved that!

My all-time favorite costume on Marcus was from this particular year when he went as Cher. He'd spent the whole night whining about how bras were nothing but torture devices. Poor Blondie was stressed out about how to fight with forty-inch-long hair.

My smile in that specific shot was different: broad, real, and accentuated by teary eyes from almost hyperventilating from laughing my soul out when Marcus wouldn't stop fingering the fake nipples of his strap-on boobs while dancing behind me to Bloodhound Gang's "The Bad Touch."

Why can't I be that happy with Ezra? I wanted a normal life so badly, didn't I?

Drums of forbidden longing hammered against my rib cage when my eyes landed on a picture of Adrion and me. I never looked at it the way I did now.

The look in his eyes, solely set on me, with that beautiful grin gracing his face—I couldn't unsee it. I remembered that moment like it was yesterday.

My mom took this photo of us when she invited him over to one of my stepdad's BBQs; we were young, sixteen years old, and thought the summer would never end.

I smiled and glanced at the other five pictures of us. The Polaroid was my absolute favorite. The quality was crappy, everything a bit blurry, but that didn't matter.

Last year, I'd surprised Adrion on his twenty-third birthday, which he'd celebrated at Cloud9.

First, I'd canceled on him, since I'd had to take vacation time for a two-week trip to Austria with Ezra and his family. *Hell*, those long-ass sight-seeing excursions and coffee afternoons at his Aunty Lynn's house bored me to no end. I even had to drive the rental car—a fucking housewife minivan.

Lucky for me, we'd had to rebook our flight back, returning one day earlier, and all I wanted was to surprise Adrion—so I did.

Still vivid in my memory, that moment his eyes met mine. He stood, puffing one of his Moods cigarillos outside the club, and a thick cloud of smoke swirled around him and Xavier before my loud catcall whistle caught their attention. He dropped the glowing rest of it and stalked toward me, beaming like a freaking light bulb.

Our bodies collided with a thud as he slung his arms around my waist and spun us around.

Xavier must've captured this moment with his old Polaroid camera. He was as obsessed with pictures as I was. Blurred but priceless, this picture would forever be my favorite of us.

I took it off the wall and brushed my thumb over our faces—two happy people, grinning madly at each other with their noses touching.

Even a blind person could see the love we have for each other... What if I could love Amos the same way?

My phone rang with my ho anthem, "My Neck, My Back" by Khia, yanking me out of my nostalgic bubble.

"Shit!" Startled, I laughed but then froze when I saw the display—Ezra.

Dang, that emotional karma is a quick motherfucker!

I pressed the button on the left, rejecting his call, and made my way into the bathroom. Indecision on how to end *us* still gripped me, and my earlier straying thoughts highlighted the appeal of running from my life of lies a little longer.

I can't keep pushing it away forever. Just not today...

Jumping into the shower, I treated myself to a five-star routine when I gently scrubbed my body with a soap-soaked peeling glove before continuing with a second round of foamy bubbles and a washcloth. This routine was a true game changer, and I followed it religiously. I treasured my huge washcloth collection, and it pleased my inner clean freak to no end.

I turned my back to the spray as I massaged my scalp, hoping the warm streams would rinse away the tension lodged there, but the bruises and my collarbone hadn't fully healed yet, and the heat stung. Relying on water to heal me proved to be a hit-or-miss thing; I held no control over that. It seemed the endorphin boost from my recollected moments with Adrion had already worn off. Exhaling, I let my head hang and allowed the warmth to kidnap my thoughts to happier grounds.

Right before the end, I turned the water to cold and breathed in between my teeth. Looking down at my chipped red nail polish, I pursed my lips in distaste.

Ugh. I'm so overdue. Overdue for a mani-pedi, overdue for a raise, and most of all, overdue for a good portion of courage to come clean in my relationship.

I hated to admit it, but it was true—Ezra wasn't good for me, but neither was I for him.

My phone rang again as I got out of the shower. The caller ID flashed Marcus's name, and the corners of my lips twitched as I decided to give him a little show and spice up both our Monday mornings.

A little teasing never hurt nobody. Right. Right?

Was it a good idea? *No*. Was it the distraction I needed? *Abso-fucking-lutely.*

I wrapped my hair in a towel and changed into my teal silk robe, revealing a generous amount of my boobies. Declining his call, I pressed the video call button instead and placed the phone on the sink to face me.

I sat *vis-à-vis* on the edge of the bathtub with one leg crossed, working in my favorite peppermint body lotion as I waited.

Marcus accepted the video call and showed himself—much to my liking—shirtless in bed, with one arm resting behind his head of unruly blond hair. He flexed his veiny arm, and his eyebrows shot up in surprise, suddenly giving him a not-so-tired look.

“*Good morning* to you, gorgeous. *Man*, Ivy, for those legs you need a gun license!” He narrowed his eyes at the screen to get a better look.

“Good morning, Marcus,” I purred in my smoothest voice and gave him a cheeky smile while I worked in the lotion extra slow. I got up and placed one foot on the edge of the bathtub, taking my sweet time bending forward to reach my ankle, exposing more of my olive-bronzed skin.

A muffled *Damn* resounded from my phone, and I almost burst out in laughter.

Hooking him is just too easy.

I walked up to my phone, bending down to the screen, so Marcus could get a closer look at my cleavage and prove once more how easily distracted he was.

“Tell me about that job you texted me about on Friday.” As expected, he kept on staring like the tool he was. “Blondie?”

“Hold up! Someone else wants to say *hello* first.” He angled his phone down to his bare, jacked body, blindsiding my curious eyes with a good amount of his morning wood.

Cockzilla!

I clapped my clammy hands together, hoping my face wouldn't give away how flustered and embarrassed I was. "Okay, show's over! I'll hang up now."

"Fucking tease!" He laughed and showed his face again. "Let's talk about it over coffee, okay? I'll pick you up in ten."

"Twenty! I know I'm a blessed looker, but this"—I gestured over my face, running my fingers painfully slow over my lower lip—"deserves a little extra love."

Marcus's hooded eyes fixated on the screen; he took in every little move I showcased for him. "I'd give that mouth some extra good love every single day." His husky voice had my head spinning and my pussy tripping on hormones, but identifying his latest hookup quote from his cringy notebook had me shaking my head in disbelief. "If my job was to ravish your lips in all kinds of ways, I'd proudly claim myself a workaholic."

Ha! I wonder how many lays that book granted him? Tsk. Badass charmer.

"Yah, yah. I'd heard that one before." I grinned and arched my right brow. "One day, I'll steal your notebook and then we'll see how far you'll get with the ladies."

For a moment, I contemplated if I really wanted to know his body count, but he interrupted my train of thought.

"Wanna see you try it! Gotta rip it out my dead hands! Hey, I'm on my way in five minutes. And, *please*, for once—don't make me wait that long, little diva!"

I stuck out my tongue, and thankfully, he ended the call before he got to drench my pussy even more with that flirty mouth of his. Tracing my lips once more, I enjoyed the sizzling sensation Marcus had caused down under. It became ridiculously tempting to ride my silicone fuck buddy and stock up my secret fantasy box with the newest addition—Marcus feasting on my *eau de joie* drenched slit when he'd lap up every single drop.

Forty-four days, and I'm almost ready to jump on any dick. Get yourself together!

I towel-dried my hair and scanned through my packed makeup drawer.

Setting things into a new perspective...

A seductive cat-eye look, topped with razor-sharp lined lips and my MAC lipstick in the shade “Diva” would do it as a first attempt, thanks to Marcus’s earlier words.

My favorite low-rise jeans begged to hug my hips, so I put them on and went for a mocha-colored turtleneck tank top. The hem showed a little skin above the jeans, enough to spice it up without overdoing it. I obsessed over low-rise jeans and rarely betrayed them with skirts or dresses.

Bloody hell, I'm more loyal to my jeans than to Ezra.

Usually, I’d have picked my Converse. But since this was all about experiencing life in new ways, I finished my outfit with black patent-leather heels and my medium-length Superdry trench coat that accentuated my waist.

Sounds of distant honking carried in through the open window, and I gave my damp hair a good shake before I worked in some foam. As I was about to leave, I halted at the large mirror by the door. The woman in the reflection looked healthy, and I admired her glow of strength and confidence.

Nice! Hundred-and-eighty-degree change to what stared at me three nights ago.

I swiped a rebellious strand behind my ear and halted the motion midsweep as my eyes zeroed in on the promise ring Ezra gave me. Yes, we parted on bad terms, but the words *time-out* were never spoken. But my fingers itched to take off the ring—so I did.

A rush of relief went through my body as I placed it on the sideboard. The weight of the burden lifted from my shoulders, even if only a bit. But mixed feelings of guilt and loyalty bickered in the back of my mind.

That doesn't mean I'll cross lines. Right. Right?

My phone rang out in the bedroom. Surely, it was Marcus. I ignored it as I was about to go down anyway and decided to leave it at home. Even if only for a short while, I wanted to fly under the radar from the human realm and my ties there.

Opting for heels instead of Converse poured that extra dose of savage into each of my confident strides across the parking area. *Oh, yes*, I made it my runway and had every right to do so as I oozed nothing but killer vibes. Being in the lower realm brought out the uninhibited confidence and playfulness I denied myself in Bearno, and I lived for every second of it.

Marcus leaned on the hood of his Dodge Challenger Hellcat. The San Marino Blue sparkled flawlessly. He must've polished it like he did every Monday—I loved it.

He was typing away on his phone when I walked up to him. His gaze averted from the screen for a second when he registered the clicking sounds of my heels, dropping back to his phone once more, only to shoot up again. Those cerulean blues devoured me from head to toe with shameless hunger, and I allowed myself to bask in it.

“Now, this was worth the wait. Look at you!” He bit down on his fist. “Dammit, Ivy!”

“Tell me something I don't know, Blondie.” I twirled around and teased him with my million-dollar smile. Sass eager on my tongue, I winked at him and jerked my chin up. “When you're done eye-fucking me, buy me some coffee and breakfast, okay?”

He rolled his eyes and said something under his breath.

“Pardon?” I grinned at him, sauntering to the other side of the car with swaying hips.

“Be a good girl and get your bratty ass inside. Now!” Marcus donned his daddy-dominant pants, complete with a stern face, and a new wave of arousal hit me sideways.

“Yes, Daddy.” I batted my curled lashes at him, giggling to myself before I lowered my fine ass onto the leather seat.

“Fucking tease!”

At the push of a button, ignition fired through the 6.2 liter V8 engine, and the hot breath of its 717 horses spewed through the exhaust pipes. His beast of a car exhaled in hellish, deep burbles, triggering an army of goose bumps along my arms.

Oh, baby...

“Where do you—”

“Shhh.” I put up my finger to silence him and indulge in this beautiful composition a little longer. Music poured from the speakers just then, ending my trip to car lover’s paradise. “Hasselhoff? Blondie, you still walking on dark paths of”—I swirled my finger right before his face and through the air, struggling to find the right words—“whatever *that* is?”

“He’s the Hoff, baby. And for fuck’s sake, get that finger out of my face!” Marcus shot me a look. “My car, my music.”

But before I could bicker any further, he turned up the volume, and my protests drowned in the ear-drumming beat of the ’90s. I sank deeper into the wide leather seat with a shake of my head.

One of the reasons why I’ll never test drive you.

We reached the inner-city part of 3018 Belliz, and I became aware I was fumbling with my bare ring finger. The ring’s absence was odd but not unwelcome. I felt good. I felt different, but mostly, I felt more like myself.

After a while, he pulled up at a diner, and we got out.

“Good choice. Cindy’s serves the best bacon in town that’s not human.” I beamed as we walked in and sat by the window.

We ordered our usual, which, for him, was a double espresso with white sugar and, for me, a cappuccino with

brown sugar. Being Monday and all, we began the week the best way possible with two orders of fried eggs, crispy, salty bacon, toast grilled to the perfect shade of golden brown, and extra ketchup for me.

Marcus hummed in a satisfied manner as he gave me a quick once-over. “So, before we get down to business. What’s up with the new look and attitude? Don’t get me wrong, we enjoyed your little show in the bathroom—”

“Um... *we?*”

He flashed a Cheshire grin and pointed under the table, making up-and-down motions with his other hand. My eyebrows shot up, and specifically, I did not ask if he had jacked off because, hey, this was Marcus, so it was a given.

“Marcus Ferrow, you’re *un-fucking-believable!*”

He put up his finger to continue. “Thank you. I hear that a lot. As I said, *we* enjoyed the show. But who are you and what’s up with the new attitude?”

“Let’s keep it simple. I returned early. Saturday, to be precise. Why? Gotta figure out what I truly want and need out of life and if that’s still with Ezra or not. Period.”

That’s as much truth as I can give you for now. Sorry.

“It’s about time!” He seemed a little too happy. *Good hell*, the only thing his brain down under heard was *green light, green light*, like the call of a hunting horn before the hunt officially started.

The waitress placed down our orders, and Marcus brought the cup under his nose, indulging in the delicious aroma of the perfectly brewed coffee.

If he had any addictions besides drooling over pretty women or his car, then it was espresso coffee.

He lowered the cup and traced the rim of it with his thumb while he stirred the sugar until it dissolved, slow and zoned out. “Have you ever been to Italy?”

Taken aback by his sudden mood change, I shot him a quick glance with a raised eyebrow before I sipped on my coffee. “The only times I’ve been overseas have been with Ezra. Skiing in Austria! *Ugh*, he and his family never go anywhere else on holidays—so, no.”

Marcus grunted. “*Yeah*, right, your easily freezing ass on skis? No wonder you take another two days off from work each time you return to go sunbathing on your rooftop.”

A tired smile lifted my cheek.

He brought the hot goodness to his lips again and leaned back casually, one arm behind the backrest. “Italy is on my list when I take my next vacation. Eating, drinking, and overindulging in *la dolce vita*, even if only for a week. My grandmother used to tell me a lot about the Liguria region. She’d spent a good amount of time there in her twenties.”

Sadness tugged at my heart, and I reached out for his hand to squeeze it. His beloved grandmother had died three and half years ago.

“Next year, I’ll rent a small house located on the coast of Liguria. One with a terracotta roof, like most of the old houses there have, and I’ll push open slim glass double doors leading to a lovely rustic balcony that overlooks the wide Mediterranean Sea. A house like the ones my grandmother told me about in many of her stories when I was younger.”

This little daydream creased the corners of his eyes with genuine happiness instead of his usual mischief. Seeing him like this was a rare spectacle, but I loved that about him.

Hot espresso on the outside but white chocolate mocha on the inside.

Giving the espresso a swirl with his wrist, he leaned forward to hold the tiny cup with both hands. His cerulean blues gleamed with anticipation. “I’ll sit there, soak up the warmth of the Italian sun, and drink authentic Italian espresso with one or two models spreading oil over my back and chest. Mark my words!”

“Let’s make a deal.” I chuckled, resting my elbow on the table between us, and lifted my pinky finger. “If we make it to the top of HD’s billboard by the end of the year, we’ll go there together.”

“What about your obligatory vacations with your human?” He jerked his chin at me but raised his finger to meet mine regardless.

“Who knows what the next year holds for me, but one thing’s for sure—I’m overdue for changes!”

And with that, Marcus hooked his pinky finger with mine, our ear-to-ear grins the same. “*Deal*. We’ll take a swim in the waves of the Mediterranean Sea as the sun sets. *Man*, I can’t wait! Now, let’s eat. I’m starving!”

I treated my toast to a generous squeeze of ketchup, followed by eggs, and topped it all off with extra bacon. Like any artist would do, I gave my breakfast the last master touch—another generous squeeze of ketchup.

Marcus grimaced at my masterpiece and shook his head, shoving a way-too-large portion of eggs into his mouth. “Shhee? Dads da wreason whuy whe woad nevaa woak out!”

I looked at him from my high horse and rolled my eyes playfully. “No, Blondie, that’s not the reason. But, *yah*, whatever makes you sleep tight at night!” I laughed. “C’mon, would you *please* enlighten me on this new mission?”

I cut off quite a large piece of layered breakfast Heaven and let my lips engulf the fork, humming in delight. This new job had me on my toes, to say the least. New me wanted to dive right in and experience life with all its challenges and thrills.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and fumbled in his bag, taking out documents and placing them between us. Three younger men stared back at me, none too bad looking, but that was about it.

“Category threes. These guys lure young virgins into their home, drug, and rape them.” He explained with a jerk of his

chin.

“*Nice*. Anything more? How long have they been doing that? Any deaths?” I asked between bites, covering my chewing mouth with a hand.

“Yup, that’s why we could cash in a total of thirty-two thousand dollars. They’ve been doing this for years, but last week, one of their victims died of an overdose, and they dumped her body in a nearby river. Jackpot!” He took another big bite and gave me a smeared smile.

“*Dammit*, Marcus. Could you at least act a little sorry for the victims?” I deadpanned. “And, *please*, you still have some egg on your chin. *Good hell*, use a napkin for once.”

“What? That’s our business, Ivy. Children, category-one souls, make up around twenty-seven percent of the human world’s population. If those *and* the more or less good-natured category-two souls were the only living souls, we’d both be useless administration heads, just like sweet Mrs. Chevers. Fact, if it weren’t for category-three or -four souls to hunt, most soul hunters would be jobless—*no bueno*.” He pointed to the corners of his lips. “And you, *madame*, have ketchup right there.”

I quickly wiped my mouth with a napkin and scoffed, but he did have a point.

“You in or not?” He gulped down the rest of his double espresso.

As a succubus, my role would be to seduce these fuckers and make it easier for us to drag them to Hell. But what made me suspicious was the high bounty.

“There needs to be more to it, don’t you think? Why’s their bounty so high? I mean, c’mon, drugging and raping virgins—one died, *okay*. But still, it’s ridiculously high,” I wondered out loud as I took a closer look at the pictures. They didn’t look any more sinister than any other psychopaths we’d hunted down before.

Marcus rubbed the back of his head hesitantly, and I knew I was onto something. “Does the name Corvina ring a bell?”

“My ex-bff bitch of a witch? We haven’t talked in four years.” I narrowed my eyes at him, suddenly feeling vulnerable and angry. “What does she have to do with this?”

He leaned on one elbow and chewed on a toothpick with a smug grin, knowing damn well I would take his bait, regardless of the details.

“This bitch of a witch—who’s so fucking hot by the way! —too bad you won’t introduce me to her. That skinny body, those tits... Argh, I could just bang—” There he was again, my ever-horny demon coworker with zero standards.

I groaned aloud, and my eyeballs threatened to roll back completely before I intervened with a finger up. “Stop, or you’ll make my breakfast say *hi* again. She’s evil, and don’t get me started on her gel nails, hideous like bird claws.” I shuddered. “Do you know how much dirt gets under them? Would you still bang her when her place constantly looks and smells like a rotting dump? That shit’s nasty, Marcus!”

“I don’t want to wife her, Ivy. I want to bang her. I’d even bang her on a burning, rotten dump, so that’s that.” He shrugged it off but shot me a daring look. “And for fuck’s sake, get that finger out of my face. You know I hate that!”

“You have no standards, Blondie.”

Sometimes, I wondered how we were able to work together so well, but I guess it was the chaotic mix of both of our wild personalities.

“I’d wife you, if that makes you happy. No burning dumps, promise.” Marcus leaned forward with curved lips and playfully drew circles on the back of my hand.

“Cut the bullshit! No fucking on burning dumps, and no wifing, either.” I slapped his hand away and almost spilled my cappuccino when I couldn’t help but laugh at his stupid ways. “C’mon, what’s the deal?” I asked but wasn’t truly ready for the bomb he dropped on me.

“Miss Corvina, who is quite a powerful witch as we both know, pulls the strings behind the scenes with these guys. She uses the virgins for sex magick rituals. In exchange, she makes the guys successful. A true classic,” he said, and my eyebrows shot up.

Wow, she lets humans do the dirty work.

“Now we get to the part where things get a little risky. The last soul hunter who tried to drag them, our friend Devlen, didn’t know about our hot witch.” He paused for a moment and sighed, pulling out another picture.

A twitch went over my face when I looked down at it. Devlen’s eyes were burned out, and violet streaks from his altered veins plastered his skin.

Typical death by witchcraft. Poor Devlen. I hadn’t seen him in weeks... Now I know why.

“Corvina killed him. I got a hold of one of the victims, a girl named Sofie, and found out that Corvina was there when the guys raped her. She’d thrown up after gulping down the spiked drink before things got messy. That’s why she wasn’t fully drugged and still remembers.”

“Poor thing,” I mumbled.

“She saw a woman who she believed was a witch because she performed a ritual with chanting, smoke, and all that shit. When the men were done banging her, a guy wearing a hooded coat and carrying two axes—unmistakably Devlen—stormed in and tried to kill the witch. He failed, but guess what kind of tattoo burned itself into Sofie’s pretty head?”

“The phoenix. Corvina has a large tattoo on her left leg, a phoenix.”

“Bingo! That’s how I knew it was her.” Marcus smacked his palms together.

The puzzle in my head slowly came together.

“But how do you know? You never saw her legs?”

“Insta, Ivy, Insta. Seriously, why aren’t you on any platforms? It’s fun.” He clicked his tongue, grinning. “Oh, right, I forgot. Ezra forbids social media.”

“Fuck him and fuck you!” I stuck out my tongue.

“The bounty is so high because Chief Hardin himself wants Corvina’s head, preferably alive. He didn’t take the news of one of his favorite hunter’s death easily.” He put the papers back, and I drummed my fingers on the table.

“Okay, okay. I can see myself slaying at my job, but what’s *your* part in all of this? You wanna be my male virgin sidekick?” I couldn’t help but tease him; it lifted me and helped me forget about the drama with Ezra.

Marcus got up from his side of the table and walked around to me. Bending down to my level, he had me dumbfounded by his sudden proximity. Swift notes of musk and Creed’s Aventus cologne hit my nose, and I caught myself taking in slow, deep breaths. He was pure male allure when he wanted to be, and right now, he didn’t hold back.

He inched closer and brought his face down right in front of mine, eyeing me with lust in his red-washed eyes. “My job is to take care of Corvina before she realizes it’s you and tries to get you *fucked* in all kinds of ways”—he paused, zeroing in on my parted lips—“and *holes*.”

A court jester by day but a puppet master of sinful lust by night, cutting the strings of my morality, only to make me crawl by pulling at my primal ones. I’d crawl until my knees bleed. Wait. What?

I mentally saluted, volunteering as a tribute to the sixty-ninth hunger games of wicked lust, waving my soaked thong.

The air got stuck in my lungs. This was too much for a Monday morning.

“Because, if you look at the bigger picture, then you might see I present us with three glorious opportunities.” Hell’s fire brooded in his feral eyes as he locked them with mine.

“I didn’t consider to actually fuck them but tell me,” I whispered, holding eye contact too intimate and piercing to escape from.

“We get to cash in big time. You get your powers recharged by finally getting banged by not only one dick but three in total. *Plus*, you can mark this as cheating only once, since you only fuck one time instead of three. And, last but not least, this opportunity is just for personal pleasure,” he mused, “seeing you naked on all fours. Front-row seat.” The dripping lust in his voice echoed through my neglected pussy, and my clit whined, desperate for friction.

Marcus Ferrow, you could make a saint a sinner, and he’d thank you.

He finally stepped back and released me out of the torturous corner he’d pushed me into. “So, let’s get started, huh?” He grinned like the teasing little dipshit he was and gestured for the waitress to bring the bill.

I need to change my thong... Soaked!



After we left the diner, I'd asked Marcus to drop me off at home. We'd meet up again at Hell's Discovery later.

Lingerie soaked, my succubus nature started to kick in. For too long, I'd caged in my natural needs and desires to live my *normal*, pathetic life of lies, primal needs ready to tear down those bars and burn down the whole fucking cage.

"We've known each other for five years, right? You kicked my ass. I rescued you twice. We work together, kick ass together, became friends, blah, blah, blah." Marcus made circular motions with his right hand while navigating through the packed traffic.

"Once. You saved me once, but okay, continue," I said matter-of-factly, gazing out the window with a small smile tugging at my lips as we navigated the main road back to my place.

"Whatever. So, since we're friends, and I think, for my part, we're *very good* friends—why don't we become *more than friends*?"

He meant it, unapologetic through and through, and I loved that about him. If it wasn't for his desperate scheming to get in those jeans—my jeans.

"Only to help you charge up your energy since, you know... let's be honest, you're starting to rust down under, and with that frame, it would be a damn shame." His heated glance

met my doubtful look. “What do you say? Wanna be more than friends?”

Crushing his horny *avances*, I fluttered my lashes and dug out my most annoying girly voice. “Aw, Blondie, I’ve waited five years to hear you ask me that! *Of course*, I’d love to be cousins!”

Releasing a long sigh, he played along and grabbed his chest in a theatrical way, pouting. “Only cousins? Okay, but at least can we be cousins who fuck?”

And with that, his San Marino Blue Hellcat came to a halt in front of my apartment building. I held my belly, laughing tears spilling from my eyes. I hadn’t laughed that wholeheartedly in a long while. My eyeliner smudged from wiping away my tears, but I didn’t give a damn. With Marcus, I could be real, and I never had to worry about how he perceived me.

“Um... good to see you laughing. Didn’t know I was telling a joke.” He shot me a *how dare you* look.

A few loose strands fell into my face as I collected myself. “You kicked off my week in the best way! Thanks.” But as soon as my breaths became steadier, I whipped my face toward him, my eyebrows almost joining my damn hairline. “Hold up! I’m rusting down under? I didn’t know you were the coochie whisperer, but *okay*, Dr. Drew!”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.” He clicked his tongue and tried again. “Back to hot cousins who fuck—” But I jumped out before he could even finish.

I shook my head in amusement and walked away without looking back. I’d catch up at Hell’s Discovery after I took care of *something* of my own.

Once inside the elevator, I pressed the button for the twenty-fourth floor and tilted my head back, leaning against the wall. My eyes closed, memories of heated moments with both Adrion and Marcus crept into my mind and turned up the heat.

Liquid need drenched my lingerie, and I grabbed the railing behind me, arched my back while clenching my thighs together for the fifth time. I couldn't wait to get home and do what was best to gain back control over my primal needs and prevent me from cheating on Ezra.

The doors opened. I took a quick step forward, already fumbling with my keys, but my short frame bumped into someone, his fragrance an homage to summer's heat and boozy coconut cocktails.

"Now, look who we have here. What a coincidence! I'd thought about you earlier this morning." The smooth voice with distant traces of Italian upbringing had me snapping my eyes up.

I'd run into someone I shouldn't have in my current state—Ricardo.

Another wave of arousal hit me when I thought back to the pool area, when his thick, needy bulge pressed against my ass. Those memories alone made me blush madly and sent tingles up my ears.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I need to get away before... Fuck, this isn't even my floor!

"Wait a minute. What's that scent?" Ricardo grinned down at me with his prominent brow bones casting a shadow over his hooded eyes and blocked my way out with his hands on both sides of the elevator door. "Someone seems to be wound up quite a bit. I'd love to be a helping neighbor if you'd allow me." He bit his lip and eyed me with intensity. "Just offering some chivalry, you know?"

What a douchebag move, but it's hot, though. Wait. What? Ugh, my brain is between my legs just like Marcus's.

His gaze held lustful hunger, and the way he bit his lower lip had my insides squirming. Given he was a demon, his nose was already healed. He looked delicious in the navy sweatpants he'd paired with a white tank top, complementing his bronzed complexion.

Helplessness washed over me like an ocean of dark lust, and desire overflowed the tiny bathtub I'd tried to cage it in.

"How's your nose, Ricardo? Listen, do yourself a favor and get out of my way. *Déjà vu* much? I *need* to go. Now!" My voice grew louder, and he held up his hands in surrender, a smug grin creasing his cheeks as he stepped aside.

"I'm coming for you, Ivangeline!"

Stopping in my tracks midmovement, I whipped around. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. You okay?" Ricardo frowned and gave me a wary once-over.

Without another word, I sprinted to the stairway and made my way up to my apartment, skipping as many stairs as I dared.

My chest heaving and blood thrumming in my ears, I unlocked the door and slammed it shut behind me.

Great. I'm a walking, horny mess, and now, I hear voices in my head. Maybe Lani was right. Being underfucked slowly makes me all gaga.

The voice in my head didn't speak again, and I chalked it up to the emotional chaos eating away at my mental stability.

I strode into my bedroom and rummaged through my toy drawer to find my favorite remedy to this spiraling dilemma.

"Hi, Winston!" I held up my *secret lover* who never disappointed me, always ready to please with his semisoft flexible tip and the hellish girth of his six-inch tongue. Yes, the one and only oral expert—Winston's tongue in medium by Bad Dragon.

"Please, please," I whispered as I searched for the lube somewhere behind my large collection of sinful pleasure assistants in various sizes.

My fingers alighted on the small bottle of water-based lube, and I grinned from ear to ear, knowing who was about to

come so freaking good. The thought of my juices mixing with extra lube caused my pussy to throb in anticipation.

The soft emerald sheets welcomed me with their heavenly clean scent, and I unbuttoned my jeans with eager fingers before snaking my way out of the tight fabric, throwing my thong on the ground.

My secret dragon lover begged to be sent on a mission of kinky pleasure in the depths of me, and I moaned when I sucked the naughty tip of his midnight-blue tongue.

Humming in delight, I spread my thighs. The first encounter of the soft wet silicone with my moist clit pushed my head back into the pillows, followed by a long and relieved groan rolling over my lips. Treating myself to gentle caresses and velvet tongue strokes, I spread my legs farther.

Forty-four days...

Opening the lube bottle with one hand, I gave it a good squeeze and saturated my pussy with lukewarm assistance. The soft tip of Winston's tongue had me arching my back with a hunger for more. I let him slide through my juicy pussy over and over again, teasing my tight hole with short, taunting thrusts. I rolled my eyes back at the way-too-realistic sensation.

With my other hand, I rubbed a hardened nipple in a circular motion and thought of all the moments that had brought me here.

Marcus's sinful whispers, Ricardo's swollen cock pressed against my plump butt, begging for entrance. But lastly, thinking of Adrion's aching love for me catapulted my lust to delirious heights.

My pussy was drenched before, but now, I was a leaking mess.

I rolled over and positioned myself ass-up and face down. Holding Winston by his muzzle, I led his tongue between my legs and further teased my clit and twitching core with wiggling and thrusting movements.

My moans grew louder, and I chased that climax like I chased category-four souls. Wet and needy, my pussy yearned to be stretched and fucked, so I pushed myself up on one hand and placed Winston's tongue beneath me between my thighs.

This is gonna be so good... Nothing better than his firm muzzle pressed against me.

I lowered onto the gradually fatter length of my smeared lover, feeling the deep ripples of the back of his tongue, and let myself sink fully until my slit touched his soft blue dragon muzzle.

With each hot inch, I belted out my pleasure with my mouth open wide. The tongue stretched me, and I clamped down on it with the plump bundle of nerves pressed against the muzzle of the beast I rode.

I fucked him in small circling motions, treating my needy clit to hot friction while leaning on the mattress with one hand. Throaty groans and panting left my lips. I was about to come *hard*.

Primal need took over, and I rode Winston like a jockey on steroids, rubbing my nipple faster with delightful squeezes in between as my voice climbed higher.

My pussy made obscene wet noises whenever the thick tongue pushed inside—I loved it and my heavenly moans showed just how much.

When images of Marcus watching me naked on all fours at our next job flashed in my mind, I came in waves, drowning in this epic orgasm. Soft pillows caught my heated face as I collapsed onto them, and I stretched out my tired legs, thighs smeared with arousal and lubricant.

Each and every day without an orgasm is a wasted day!

Mentally, I stored my newest fantasy in a see-you-later box and swore to myself that Marcus would never find out about his support in today's climax hunt.

“Thanks, buddy!” I winked at Winston and took him with me as I slumped out of bed with my knees weak. We both needed a shower.

I used my Bad Dragon buddy and his friends almost daily when I was in my lower realm apartment. Although each time I felt guilty after our filthy sessions, they made me sing beautiful symphonies Ezra was never blessed to hear. Plus, being on a short-lived oxytocin high from orgasming recharged my succubus energy, but it was really nothing more than a fleeting boost. I took what I could get.

Any attempts to bring toys into our sexual encounters had Ezra’s insecurity rearing its ugly head, and so I was left with his less-than-average cock and its less-than-average performance.

Not in this realm.

Warm streams of water hit my body as I quickly freshened up before heading out to work. The orgasmic energy boost sped up the healing process of my bruised collarbone and scratched back. Quickly flossing the last bits of my breakfast and finishing my sacred oral hygiene ritual by brushing my teeth and tongue with extra squeezes of toothpaste, I was ready to take over the world.

Dressed and with one orgasm ticked off my to-do list for today, I grabbed my kukri swords and made my way out to the parking lot and my precious Guido.

I hummed to a badass remix of Halsey’s “New Americana” while cruising down Whippers Street, heading for the highway, and let my mind wander to uncertain territory.

Do I sexually desire my guys, or do I desire their desire for me? What made me wetter, Rion’s longing or Marcus’s and Ricardo’s raw lust?

I sighed and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. If that new mission hadn’t been first on my priority list, I would’ve gone back for two or three more rounds with Winston and his monster friends.

“One, two... I’m coming for you. Three, four... I’ll shatter your soul’s core.”

The chilling voice from before ripped through my mind, whispering in an evil-soaked tone, and it didn’t stop.

“Five, six... their bones will break like sticks. Seven, eight... once they see me, it will be too late.”

I yanked the steering wheel to pull over and stomped on the brake pedal like I intended to permanently plant my heel in the floorboard. Guido skidded to a halt in a hailstorm of pebbles and dust.

“Nine, ten... you will never see again!”

Grabbing one of my blades from the passenger seat, I turned around to face whoever was playing these sick games with me. The empty seats assaulted my paranoia-widened eyes, and I let out a frustrated yell that resounded clearly over the enraged honking from other cars on the road.

“Yeah, you have a nice day, too, idiot!” I yelled out the window.

The soft leather seat squeaked as I threw myself back into it with a dozen thoughts racing through my mind. Whatever was going on wasn’t good, even for our realm, and I decided to keep it to myself—for now, at least.

I let the engine of my Alfa Romeo roar back to life and stepped on the gas, merging into traffic and speeding down the highway.

When I arrived at the Hell’s Discovery parking lot, Marcus and his girlfriend stood by his car, seemingly arguing.

Uhh, uhh. Hopefully, she won’t see me. I’m not in the mood to juggle her psycho ass.

I drove by and parked a couple of spots away. I tried to sneak around to the other side of the building, but it wasn’t my lucky day.

Clicking stiletto sounds from behind foreshadowed an awful encounter, and Bekka's annoying voice rang in my ears.

I'd be a useless ninja...

"Isn't that my man's prude coworker? Heard there's trouble in paradise with your *human* boyfriend," she sneered. "Forty-two days without any sex, I heard? You must be desperate for some dick action. Not that I have any of those problems!" She snorted with that ugly personality shining through the tons of makeup on her heart-shaped face.

Blondie, you little bitch.

I faced her and jerked my chin at her.

This is going to hurt, but it's so worth it.

"Not as desperate as Marcus, who's dying to go on our next hunt so he can see me naked on all fours or let me repeat his eloquent words"—I stretched my low blow beautifully—"watching me getting fucked in all kinds of *ways and holes*, front-row seat!"

Bekka's eyes flashed bright red as she went for my throat with her claws.

I didn't even bother to fight back. The truth already hit that bitch's pride hard enough, and that alone gave me enough satisfaction.

"Enough, Bekka!" Marcus spat, walking up to us. He shot me a quick, reproachful look, like it must've been my fault his psycho girlfriend went for me.

"You heard *your man*," I gritted out with a lopsided grin as she gave my throat a last squeeze and let go. I rubbed my throat, and my grin grew into a wide smile that surely made her fists buzz with the need to punch my lights out. "So, go ahead and take it out on him! But once you're done making my partner's life hard instead of his cock, send him inside so he and I can go over the final details of that spicy job I mentioned."

And with that, I left, keenly aware of her death glare boring two tunnels into the back of my head.

“Marcus, what is she talking about?” she bellowed.

“Not now, Bekka! I’ll be home a bit late today. See ya, babe,” he shouted back at her, catching up to me.

She continued throwing death threats after me, but I didn’t care to listen and neither did I care to hide the bright smile plastering my face as Marcus and I walked into the foyer.

“You might be okay with your nonexistent sex life, but that doesn’t count for me, Ivy. After your little scene, I won’t get pussy today, that’s for sure,” he ranted next to me.

“That was for talking about my personal life, and by the way, it’s forty-four days,” I lectured and gave him a hooded side-glance. “Already tossed the idea of cousins fucking in the closet?”

“Never!” He grinned down at me as we waited for the elevator.

“Of course you didn’t!” I rolled my eyes and punched his thick arm.

Up on the thirteenth floor, the long checkered corridor led us to our office. We shared the open-spaced room with two other soul hunters, Finneas and Steven.

Walking up to my desk by the window, I watered my succulent, Herbert, and readjusted the many One Piece and Dragon Ball anime figures next to it. Voldemort didn’t look too happy hanging out between Son Goku and Luffy, so I placed him back on the far right where Frieza kept him company.

Our cleaning team was thorough, but they never managed to place my precious buddies back the way they were.

The big leathery chair welcomed my butt, and I let myself sink in a little. “Way better!”

“What do we have in our files about witches?” Marcus asked, switching on his computer opposite me. He’d stopped making snarky remarks about my figurines three months into working with me after I’d started waving Voldemort around to deliver my favorite fuck-off line: *Avada Kefuckya*.

“Okay, let me check.” I turned the chair and bent down to the physical files I kept in file cabinets behind my desk, starting with W. *Yup*, I liked it old school.

Marcus threw a paper clip at me and landed a hit on the exposed skin above my jeans.

“Knew it!” He beamed with pride.

“What the hell? You’re so annoying today!” I groaned, frustrated, and whipped halfway around to throw a crumpled ball of paper after him. I fully turned around in my chair, my feet barely reaching the checkered tiles. “You knew *what*, Mr. Nerve-Racking?”

“I knew you only went back to your place to go down on yourself! Your arousal was like a big, fat neon sign. I’d wondered how long you’d last after I pushed your buttons,” he teased and leaned back in his chair, flexing both arms behind his head, seemingly satisfied with his achievement.

Finneas and Steven exchanged confused looks. They were new and didn’t know about our antics and frequent banter. The last two colleagues had requested another office after one week. Guess the final straw was when I’d chased Marcus through the office, throwing paper clips at him after he hid my precious ketchup bottle I usually stored in my drawer. Nothing beats munching on pizza at 9:30 a.m. with ketchup!

“By the way, I love the red lace on you. Better than that boring gray one this morning!” he whisper-yelled and gave me a thumbs up. “I love your low-rise jeans!”

“Un-fucking-believable!” I deadpanned at him, but when heat crept up my ears, I got up to get a cup of fresh coffee before he noticed my telltale sign.

His head will grow to the size of this building if he ever finds out about my newest fantasy while riding solo.

I was set on keeping my lips sealed for my own sake. He'd never let me forget that he made it into my head *again*. But he'd never get to know this spicy little secret.

That would take away all the fun, right?



The delicious aroma of fresh coffee with a good splash of nougat and heavy cream had my toes curling as I sat down at my desk again.

“Okay, listen, here’s the thing. I resent Corvina, but I don’t want her dead either. She just can’t sit with me ever again.” I bit my lip. Thinking about what she and I had gone through filled me with both sadness and remorse. “Our friendship ended with bad blood between us. For too long, I’d ignored her beyond-evil negativity and how she sucked out the happiness in my life. But that doesn’t make me wish for her death. Let’s leave it at that.”

In the beginning, Corvina and I had bonded over empathy for each other’s rough adolescence, both of us being kiddos who’d suffered and been awarded the role of the missing parent, which we had no obligation to take but still did.

But instead of healing together, she’d dragged me into the darkness of that sunken mental hole she loved to live in. Sometimes, it seemed my misery and deplorable situation uplifted her and made her feel less of a shitty, rotten person. Now, if those weren’t great requirements for a healthy friendship.

One day, her questionable empathy turned into snide remarks that included my tiniest flaws and the accomplishments I’d been so proud of. When I’d started to leave sadness and remorse behind and instead chose to see

light where she saw darkness, we fell apart. It took me a few weeks to realize we'd drifted in different directions. Different galaxies, even.

It was for the best. At least that's what I told myself when I kissed our friendship of eight months goodbye.

Marcus held up his hands and flashed a boyish grin. "I don't want her dead, either. Might ask her for some *nicey-spicy* before she gets sentenced by Chief Hardin. Witches are known to use dope-ass magick."

"And you still wonder why we'll never be a thing," I muttered in a singsong voice as I looked through the files. "Now, for real, Blondie. We'll need special munitions or an elixir that's strong enough to bind her powers but won't kill her."

He nodded along.

I pointed my finger at a promising section of the yellowed paper. "Here! The last hunter who successfully caught a witch alive was Wilfried Bentovic and—" I read aloud, but my shoulders slumped. "He died twelve years ago, and he didn't care to share his little secret about what he used."

"Killing her would be way easier, though." Marcus took one of my kukris I'd placed on the desk and swung it through the air, even uttering his best sound effects as Corvina's imaginary head hit the ground, imaginary blood spraying as it rolled over the ground way too far.

Aries Mars people typically possessed some funny humor, and Marcus embodied it perfectly most of the time, my beloved sidekick.

"I said no! No Kill Bill'ing this time. That has to be our last option." I chewed on my lower lip and thought about a solution. "Do you know any witches who'd be willing to help us?"

"I stay away as far as I can from those folks since 4005 Albis. The last one I met gave my dick nasty warts!" He shivered and cupped his crotch.

“What the hell?”

“Well, she wasn’t too happy when she found out I also had something going on with a nymph. Plus, my credit card was overdrawn. Besides, these witches and their covens stick together like superglue. No way they’d help us bring down one of them,” he said, casually coming over to my desk and looking through the files, patting my head. “Ivy, you should start wearing your sexy glasses again.”

“Enough flirting for today! You’re so annoying. You know that, right?” Shooing away his hand, I tried my best to stay focused.

“No, for real. Look.” He held up a document and waved it in front of my face. “Right there.” He pointed at a scribbled word.

“Let me see.” I held the paper against the light and took a closer look, squinting my eyes into barely visible slits.

“*Hell*, gimme that! You’ll get wrinkles on that pretty face.” He snatched it away and looked for himself. “Looks like *Aconitax*. Isn’t that a gas?”

“Nope. It’s actually a tincture made with saliva from Cerberus—you know, Chief Hardin’s old hellhound. *Ew*, his breath was disgusting, and his fur reeked of decay!” I scrunched my nose and cursed my exceptional memory for smells. “They used to mix purple monkshood with the beast’s slobber, extremely poisonous. But Cerberus is dead, so that’s that.”

Maybe we should just kill her. But Chief Hardin’s punishment will be way worse than death.

I shook my head and looked at him. “Never mind. We’ll take care of that later. What about the other three? Where do they pick their victims?”

Marcus straightened up and crossed his arms over his wide chest, his—in my opinion—way too tight gray Henley threatening to tear. He usually altered between Henleys and flannel shirts. They gave him a somewhat casual vibe that

went well with his man bun, but his thick, veiny arms exuded the right amount of sexiness.

Can't believe I'm getting worked up again. Dammit.

“Sofie told me she met them at a club, Suga&Spice in LA.”

I groaned. I hated Los Angeles. Its big-ass pit of evil, aka *Hollywood*, was filled with category-four souls.

As a succubus, this would be my ideal playground... No. Big no!

“Okay, listen, you take care of our Corvina problem, and I’ll make up my mind how I’ll disguise myself so she won’t know it’s me.” Twisting my ballpoint pen like the blades of a helicopter, I wiggled my lips.

“Don’t forget, they look out for virgins. So, nothing too provocative,” he added.

“Must be the first and last time I hear something like that out of *your* mouth!” I huffed, leaning back in my chair, a surprised look wrinkling my forehead.

Marcus leaned down on both armrests of my chair; he had a striking talent for blindsiding me with sudden proximity. “Fact! You can dress up and act as innocent as you want, but I’ll always see the hidden sinner in you.” His mischievous cerulean blues pinned me down. “One day, I’ll drag that sinner of yours into one of the many rooms on the sixth floor of Cloud9, and we’ll live on room service and orgasms.”

Ahhh, one of his first written lines. I’ll never forget the look on his face when he received a kick to his balls from that vampire chick.

I chuckled to myself and then let out a long sigh, but the way he carried himself and how shamelessly he spoke his desires was crazy alluring, though.

Dodging another steamy temptation before it would be too late, I got up and pushed past him. “Fucking caveman hookup lines.” I laughed for a moment, but doubt wrapped its fingers

around my belly. “I’m still not fully convinced I need to actually fuck the wanted souls. I could just use my powers and have them under my control.”

I tried hard to sound determined, but my succubus nature craved sexual interaction, especially if it would result in a foursome.

I’ve never gone that far on a mission. What about Ezra? Technically, we’re still together.

“Of course you could. But I already told you at the diner why I think you should go all in.” His eyes not only held lust but devilry when I faced him again. “*Plus*, Gregori will go *insane* when I tell him I got to see you like that and he realizes he’ll never be in that position.”

His dark intentions made me wet, and a soft groan rumbled through my chest.

You have no idea how much this scenario turns me on... I’m so fucked up!

“You sound pretty sure about that last part,” I mumbled, avoiding any eye contact that could give away my thoughts.

Both of them watching me. One goes insane lusting after me, while the other one’s jealousy nearly kills him. Wait. What?

“You bet,” Marcus clapped back, arrogance thick in his voice. “No, wait. Scratch that! I wouldn’t mind him watching as *I’m* buried inside you—doggy style. *Man*, that would kill him!” He was way too enthusiastic about this, like he was talking about visiting an adults-only Disneyland.

“You’re such an asshat! I’ll never understand your dislike for Rion. He’s my best friend. He’s a great guy.”

Their rivalry is fucking ridiculous.

“Great guy, huh? I don’t trust him around you, and my gut feeling never fails me. There’s just something about him giving off bad vibes. He’s half human. He’s fucking weak by

nature.” A deep crease formed between his eyes when he narrowed them at me.

Why’s he so worried about me?

“Rion’s been my best friend since our early teenage years, and he’s never failed me. He’s a gentleman with manners, unlike you, Marcus Ferrow!” I stepped closer and poked his chest with each syllable of his name for greater effect.

“*Of course*, he is.” He scoffed, distaste twisting his features, and slapped my hand away. “Turn up to HD for my briefing. Friday, 9 a.m.”

“Shit,” I grumbled.

Naturally, we’d go hunting on Friday, since the targets chose their victims at parties. De facto, I wouldn’t be returning to the human realm, at least not before Saturday afternoon.

“Ivy?” he asked.

I was staring out of the big window, letting my mind drift as bleeding twigs from the weeping willow opposite the street darted back and forth to spear a lizov.

“*Yah*, got it. Don’t know what to tell Ezra, though. We were supposed to—” I paused and shook my head. “Friday, 9 a.m.”

Marcus sighed. “Ivy, tell him you need more time or whatever bullshit you do in so-called relationships with humans.”

I side-eyed him with uneasiness spreading through my body.

“You’ll leave his weak-ass anyway. I give you another month, max! Might end things right away.”

The truth held in what he said bugged me, but I wasn’t ready to spill my intention of breaking up with Ezra.

Why couldn’t I confide in him? Maybe I didn’t trust myself to go through with it. I’d have to come clean with

myself first before I'd drag others into my relationship miasma.

“Whatever. I got no pending hunts these next few days, so I'm out. See ya on Friday.” Anger permeated my voice more than I wanted as I strode back to my desk and closed the file drawer harder than necessary.

“It's *that* time of the month again, huh?” he chided.

“Hm?” I frowned but gave him a tired nod right after. “*Bingo*. Yesterday's full moon was in Libra. Fucker squared my Capricorn moon, making me a bit cranky. Sorry.”

“For fuck's sake! No, little Eso Babe. Your period!” His signature annoying laughter boomed through our office. “Moons, asteroids—esoteric is your go-to excuse!”

I breathed in through my teeth and didn't say another word when I turned my back on him and shot down Finneas's and Steven's curious looks with a daring glare.

Esoteric. Tsk! It's astrology, not that hard to understand, dumbo.

With that, I stomped out of the office and took the elevator down the corridor.

Might roll over to Lani's. Maybe she has an idea what to do with Corvina.



I drove all the way out to 3270 Aarbrook and pulled up in front of Bombshell, Lani's store. It was *the go-to spot* if you needed all kinds of firearms, blades, knives, or anything explosive. One couldn't help but feel like a kid in a candy store, and I was no different.

The electronic doorbell welcomed me with the booming sound of a fired shotgun, and I mimicked using one. Couldn't help it, not even after five years.

I sauntered through the aisles and stopped at the display of the newest Ox Head machete. Eighteen-and-a-half inches of

perfectly welded 5160 high-carbon steel—sharp, deadly, everything I liked. I imagined myself slicing category fours—or any target—and how beautifully their decapitated heads would fly through the air before they’d hit the ground and roll farther, perfectly neat and clean cut through.

Splattering blood was an artist with its own wicked vision, and I’d always admired that.

This little daydream invoked an army of goose bumps, but the horrendous price of a whopping twenty-five thousand brought me out of it in an instant.

Maybe after we finish this job.

Lani wasn’t behind the counter, so I searched for her in the office. Dull thuds and feral moans foreboded what I was about to walk in on, but I was about to be surprised, nevertheless.

“Harder!” Lani boomed and shot me a sly grin as I walked through the door.

I gulped at the sight in front of me. Blatantly displayed on the large desk, Lani rode dick like a maniac with a cougar tail plug buried in her ass. Hot rivulets of sweat made their way down her face and occasionally dripped on the massive body beneath her.

She held up her hand, steadying herself with the other hand on the thick chest below her. “One moment, Pinay,” she gritted through her teeth as her trained body pushed back and forth on an impressive dick, belonging to an even more impressive torso with tensed, rock-hard biceps and an overall Hulk-like stature.

Her dark hair framed her face with loose strands; her expression graced with her determination to get to that blazing climax we all craved.

Both jealous and flustered, I turned as my face flushed in deep *rouge* shades. Looking out of the office windows didn’t help much to distract me as the hot reflection of her getting down dirty caught my eyes—so jealous.

Her moans and his heavy breathing were a symphony of raw lust. *Fuck*, I'd be a willing second player.

Have to ask her which studio waxed her coochie as smooth as an angel's butt, though.

I peeked over my shoulder, risking a tiny glimpse to sate my hunger for anything smutty. She grabbed his throat and, by the sound of his strained breaths, squeezed his windpipe with her strong hands. He didn't stop her, though, grunting in pleasure.

Fuck, I could never do such things with Ezra...

Curiosity won, and I fully turned around. The guy beneath Lani just lay there, his arms restrained on each side of the desk. On closer inspection, a metal collar around his muscular neck chained him to the desk.

He was massive. At this point, I wasn't even sure what kind of demon he was, as a bull's mask hid his face.

So damn kinky! Argh, I love it!

The desk was on the verge of breaking from the guy's weight, and all kinds of dildos lay around the floor next to it. I couldn't help but give in to another pang of jealousy when I thought about the few failed attempts to coax Ezra into using toys.

Ah, Lani, you're so lucky!

"Fill me up!" she ordered, and he moaned out his obedience, tensing as he shot his cum inside her. Big gushes of it spewing out of her pussy moments later, he still jerked his hips to give her every last drop.

Wow, what a ridiculous amount of cum! Not a demon, that's for sure. Forty-four days. Fuck my life... for real!

Pleasure and joy carried her throaty moan, and she released his windpipe, coming on his large dick with one final, strained outcry.

He gasped for air and murmured, "Thank you, Mistress."

I quickly turned around again, trying to cover my involuntary partaking as voyeur. Maybe it also served to quiet my needy thoughts that had turned into daily fantasies of Adrion fucking me until I couldn't walk straight.

"Hell, Ivy, turn around! You act like a prude virgin. Nothing you haven't seen before!" She laughed while gliding off her guy, giving his mask a rough kiss and an even rougher slap before she undid his restraints. Traces of cum ran down her legs in streams, but she didn't bother to wipe it off when she walked over to me.

"Draga, you're a fucking show-off," I said and tried to not look too closely at his still-swollen dick, glistening from both their juices.

I'm scared but fascinated at the same damn time. He unloaded like crazy! Hot!

Lani flashed me a wide grin but waved me off. "Fabrizio's my new sex slave. He might get *busy* with you, too, if you want to." She cocked her perfectly plucked eyebrow with a hum and finally reached for a box of tissues, wiping off his dripping cum.

A kitchen roll might do better...

I whisper-yelled like a flustered high school girl, "His *ding-dong* must be at least nine inches! Are. You. Crazy?"

"Ten-and-a-half pussy-traumatizing inches, in fact, babe. He's half Minnotaurus, half demon. He can jackhammer and spurt all night!" She grinned proudly and changed back into her clothes with the elegance of a feline. "Clean up this mess while we have something to discuss and don't bother to put on your clothes. We'll go for another round later," she instructed with a tilt of her chin.

"Eh... think we should talk somewhere private," I suggested, with sweat pooling in my palms. A naked slave wearing a bull mask, cleaning up smeared surfaces and dildos in all kinds of sizes, distracted me far too much.

“Fabrizio, leave.” She snapped her fingers, and he walked out with his head bowed.

I went straight in. “Do you have anything that could bind a witch’s powers without killing her?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, Pinay. Always about business. You just saw the biggest cock in your life—and I’m sure that’s a fact—but you’re all about business. Wow!” Lani shook her head and tamed her messy hair with her long fingers, pulling it up in a high ponytail.

She thought hard for a moment and sighed. “I have several demon traps, but they would most likely be too weak for witches, I’d guess. To be honest, I’ve never heard of anything that could manually bind their powers, but I would give it a try with a demon trap, level four.”

This will be tougher than we’d expected.

“I take two of them. You can bill Hell’s Discovery for it. Might work with whatever solution Marcus comes up with.”

“You’re teaming up with *Marcus Farrow* for this job?” She purred his name like a lovesick kitten. She had a thing for him; I mean, who didn’t? “Tell him to come over when he’s free. He might like to *team up* with us, too.”

Lani was as unapologetic and vocal about her kinky ways as Marcus was. Sure, as a succubus, I was just as kinky but had never been as outspoken about it. Ezra’s disapproval *helped* with that a lot, and that was another reason I never got to enjoy sex with him as much as I wanted to.

Hell, all I wanted was to be choked like he hated me and fucked like a whore he’d empty his cards for. Not that he was capable of either.

I rolled my eyes and blew her a kiss. “Thanks, babe. And yes, I’ll tell him. His thirsty ass will make backflips.”

This wasn’t news to me, as every female that saw me with Marcus tried to have a bite. Even sweet Mrs. Chevers got all flustered when he brought her a piece of cake on his last

birthday when he turned twenty-seven and asked her to join his birthday party at Cloud9.

Flirty-ass Libras. Charming everything with a pulse.

When we first met, I thought he had a bold but fickle Gemini Venus. Wrong. Over time, it showed, his Aries Venus was spicier yet just as flirty.

I drove back to my apartment and made up my mind about what to wear.

A special kind of job, with me feeling a special kind of way, required a special kind of drink. A cool bottle of sparkling Clairette de Die accompanied me back into my large bedroom, where I scanned through my closet with critical eyes as Lloyd featuring Ashanti's "Southside" played in the background.

Forgot how much I love this song! Mom always thought Adrion was the perfect knight in shining armor. And Dad? He saw a teenage boy with way too much charm working for him. Sweet.

I thought back to my teenage years, when Adrion used to walk me home late in the evening. He always insisted, and I loved it, even though I never feared walking alone in the dark.

Then my thoughts shifted to my juvenile wardrobe choices, and I grunted.

Jeans, crop top, paired with Converse, and let's not forget the black choker and hair scrunchies. How were black chokers a thing for teenagers?

The semidry prosecco fizzed on my lips as I took a sip and tasted the remaining muscat flavors with hints of peach. I laughed to myself. We all had those chokers and wore them with pride.

I imagined Marcus's annoying voice ringing in the back of my mind. "*Blowjob black belts!*"

Even when he wasn't around, his notorious brain farts found a way into my thoughts and made me laugh. After five

years, I knew him through and through.

I wanted to succeed on this mission more than ever. Not only because it'd give both of us a few nice bundles of cash and would boost our position on the HD billboard, no. Marcus was a good partner. I fully trusted him, and I wanted him to succeed just as much—he deserved it.

Without him, who knows if my career as soul hunter would've happened? My heart filled with warmth and contentment as I thought about our friendship and how much I'd grown to love my annoying sidekick over the years. Silly ass made me laugh, and he often got on my last nerve, but that was him—real and hilariously flirty. He had a special place in my heart and vice versa. There was no doubt about it.

Bringing the cool bubbles to my lips once more, I walked over to my stereo and skipped over a few tracks. The acacia flooring welcomed me as I lay on my back and closed my eyes for a few moments.

I was happy, and I didn't care to conclude why I felt that way. I simply was.

My playlist continued in the background, and when it switched to Calvin Harris featuring Florence Welch's "Sweet Nothing," a chain reaction of bottled-up energy surged through me, thrilling me with newfound clarity.

Grinning with my eyes closed, I began to undress down to my lingerie. Shedding my clothes resembled shedding from whatever bugged me. I needed it.

This track vibed with my relationship with Ezra, and it was liberating to sing along about how we both gave each other sweet nothings. The difference was that I no longer cared as much as I used to.

The beat picked up rhythm and speed, and skin met wood when I started to move my half-naked body on the floor. My hands touched my thighs and swirled over my stomach, up to my fanned out honey-blonde mane. I mimicked holding a

microphone and sang into it like I used to when I was twelve, minus the seductive dancing.

I rolled over the floor and let my body take the lead, arching my back and going through my wavy hair with both hands. Back on all fours, I crawled feline-like to the large mirror opposite my bed, my confident reflection smirking back at me just before the beat went rampant, and I let loose.

Thrilled by the empowerment rushing through me, I danced like my life depended on it, sweat building on my neck.

I let myself fall onto the softness of my bed when the song came to an end with my lungs screaming for oxygen.

“*Dang!* That was fun!” I rolled onto my belly and reached over to my phone. My breathing hitched and came to a halt when the dreadful push notifications on my flip screen spun me into the depths of anxiety.

Seventeen missed calls and eleven messages from Ezra.

The phone lost touch with my instantly clammy hands; I dropped it like a hot potato. Familiar cowardice etched my face, and I grimaced as my thoughts raced at lightning speed.

The last time we’d spoken was on Saturday, when I left in the morning. *Okay*, we’d parted ways after a fight, but since then, I hadn’t bothered to text back, let alone call. Unlike my mannerisms of the past years.

Maybe he just ended things over text so I don’t have to. Wait. What? Ugh, I’m such a coward.

My angsty feelings mingled with foolish hope that he’d done something I wasn’t ready for, at least not before this new mission.

I filled up my flute with prosecco once more and emptied it right away.

Okay, woosah, open the chat and get it over with.

I threw on my silky teal robe, grabbed the prosecco bottle, and let Ed Sheeran's "Bad Habits" escort me out onto the balcony. I huffed and shook my head.

Yah, Ed, you don't say? Keep swearing this will be the last time—I know someone who's also a fluent liar. Me.

I swung my legs over the wide stone railing to sit on it and pushed down the spark wheel on my lighter, lighting up a cigarette.

The mesmerizing lights of the city looked like twinkling stars in the darkness of this evening. By the foot of Mount Rizar, a group of stagions mingled, the males courting the females with ardent bellows and purrs that came with entering mating season. Their sparkly tails and the equally bright gleaming antlers of the males were the perfect additions to the city lights.

Warm air gently caressed my legs as I swung them back and forth above the emptiness below.

Who needs Netflix when you can sit up here and have this?

It was one of my favorite things to do when I needed time to myself. Taking in the incredible height, sitting here in silence or with music playing, smoking, and breathing out big clouds of smoke into the night sky.

The Capricorn moon and Mercury in my astro chart made it hard for me to relax mentally and let loose. My mind defaulted to a never-sleeping maze of ambitious, strategic, responsible thoughts that continued in the background no matter what I was doing, but sitting up here always relaxed me. Even so, my drumming pulse proved I was on edge like I've rarely been. How else was I supposed to calm down?

Distant car horns honking and the busy sounds of 3018 Belliz's active nightlife carried to me, and I closed my eyes.

Taking a long drag from my cigarette, I trapped the smoke in my mouth and pushed it out with my tongue, inhaling the cloud back through my nose. French inhales usually never

failed to quiet my turbulent thoughts—they didn't do the trick this time, though.

Okay, I've avoided this long enough.

I flipped my phone open and braced myself for what was to come.

First text, today, 10:13 a.m.: Hi babe, first let me start off by saying I'm sorry things got out of hand. I was angry and yes, I'm still mad. When I saw Adrion's text, jealousy got the better of me. Call me back.

Second text, today, 2 p.m.: I tried to call you several times! Pick up the phone, Ivy!

Third text, today, 2:25 p.m.: Helloooooo

Fourth text, today, 5:39 p.m.: Where are you???
I've called you 12 times by now!

Fifth text, today, 7 p.m.: Are you ignoring me?! Really?! You know what? I won't be around this weekend so don't bother turning up at home. Stay there for all I care.

Ugh... if only he had never seen that text from Adrion about kissing me. Tsk, and all that time Ezra thought I'd cut off my best friend. I'm awful...

I brought the bottle to my lips and chugged down the rest of the carbonated sweetness. My worst habit of lying had poisoned my life, and I released the echo of guilt in my mind with a big cloud of menthol smoke.

My head hanging low, I snipped away my cigarette. The glowing remainder fell into the darkness of this evening, twenty-four floors down, with the hope that I'd bought more time to come up with the courage to end things after my next mission.

At least that's one less lie I've to fabricate for Friday.

“Gotta look on the bright side, huh?” I mumbled a weak excuse of optimism and went back inside without reading the rest of his texts, turning up the volume for Linkin Park’s “One Step Closer.”



A knot in my shoulder, a stiff neck, and a pounding migraine decided to enter the scene the next morning—Mr. Hangover and his friends hadn't left the party in my head yet.

“Fuck my life,” I grumbled when I switched positions in bed for the dozenth time. Searching for my phone with closed eyes, I clawed at nothing but soft pillows and something furry.

My cat's small paws armed with needle-like claws landed on my pounding head, piercing my skin in a few places, before it took off with a screechy *meow* straight from Hell.

I winced, and my hands shot up to the burning stings on my face. “Argh, Louis! It's me!” Rolling over in pain, I didn't expect for gravity and its damn physics to send me hitting the floor with a loud thud when I fell out of bed.

What. The. Hell.

“Ugh!” I rubbed my lower back and mumbled to my little furball, “Woke you up, huh?” Louis gave me a tired yawn and curled up on the bed like nothing happened. I huffed. “Yah, *thanks*. No worries, I'm fine!”

My phone rang, and I flinched when the vibrations buzzed beneath my bum. I lifted my aching body and accepted the call, not even bothering to check the caller ID.

A low, grumpy hum delivered my “*Hello? Who's there, and what the fuck do you want from me?*”

“I’ll pick you up. Chief Hardin ordered us in!” Marcus said over music blasting in the background.

“Blondie, cut me some slack... *Damn*, it’s early in the morning!” I rested my head against the mattress, and my digits touched something sticky when I leaned sideways on the floor. “*Ew!* What the fuck is that?”

“Bloodhound Gang!” he exclaimed and sang along to his favorite ratchet chorus.

“No! I wasn’t talking about—” I grumbled and inspected the sticky spot on the floor next to my bed. “Ugh... whatever.”

“By the way, it’s noon, and I’m almost there.”

“What?” Scrambling over to the window, I ripped away the curtains to peek out between them.

Yup, suns at their zeniths... need to stop drinking prosecco like it’s soda.

“Marcus, I’ve got a hangover straight from—” The other end of the line dead, and I stared at the screen of my cell and threw it on the mountain of clothes gathered next to my bed. “Ya’ll can’t be fucking serious!”

I kicked an empty prosecco bottle as I stumbled toward the bathroom; with a *clink*, it toppled over, and a trickle of liquid swooshed out of it onto the floor. *Great*, more sticky spots. I’d been a drunk mess, belting out one karaoke song after the other—including costume changes—after I’d finished reading Ezra’s text messages.

One, two... five. Oh boy!

Not only were there two empty prosecco bottles, but five beer cans proved I’d had a blast last night. The bill for a few hours of fun was expensive, though, and my throbbing head protested my dumb decisions with another slam dance behind my left eye.

Four aspirin and a full bottle of water later, the doorbell rang, startling me, as I was on all fours scrubbing off the old and new sticky spots from the expensive acacia floorboards. I

staggered through the corridor like a slalom racer on Valium and aimed a hand for the door handle with a grumble in my unhappy, empty tummy.

My hungover appearance would surely bleach another person's eyesight, so I opened the door only by a few inches.

Marcus's cheeky grin beamed at me through the small crack, with spicy whiffs of Creed Aventus snuggling up my nose. He scanned my half-naked body—up, down and then again—and his grin widened.

“Shoo! In this house we don't buy from horny demons!” I joked, closing the door.

A staccato drumming of knocks followed, and I opened it a bit farther.

“Heard here lives a hot, lonely virgin who has a weakness for pizza and ketchup,” he coaxed in a ridiculously high elf-like voice and held a bag from my favorite pizzeria, Elf-Twelve, through the door.

Dang, he was too damn funny.

“Thanks, bud.” I snatched the paper bag and grinned when I glimpsed the slice of beef spinach pizza, neatly rolled and stuffed with feta cheese—two packets of ketchup included. My stomach growled emphatically and turned a couple of happy cartwheels in response.

He's the best!

“Little pizza elf, usually I'd ask you to come in, but I'm afraid I don't like small elf peen for dessert.” The bursting cackle rumbling in my chest forced my lips into a wide mischievous grin, and I started grunting with closed-mouth laughter.

His husky bass resounded from the other side. “And what about a fat *salami*?”

I bent over with the intense waves of laughter bursting out of me and ripped the door open. “Fat salami? For real?”

He came in and turned to inspect my barely covered legs like what I'd accused him of being moments before—a horny demon. “Does massive *mortadella* sound better?”

I grabbed both my kukri swords from the sideboard next to me and jerked my wrists down to give them nice forward spins. Putting on my scariest psycho grin, I approached him with slow strides.

“Sounds yummy! I like my sammies with chunky slices of sausage and extra ketchup.”

Marcus grabbed his crotch and winced. “Why do you always have to be so weird?”

My evil laugh boomed through the corridor as I walked past him and back into the bedroom. I dropped my babies on the bed and sat down next to them.

“Listen, I’m still not fully sober yet, and, ugh”—I massaged my stiff neck—“any chance you can go without me?”

He sauntered through the mess of clothes on the floor and picked up a black leather jumpsuit. His eyes darted between the attached long fluffy red tail and me. The dimples on both sides of his face pierced his cheeks—*yah*, he loved anything kinky.

“Oh, I remember this one! Halloween, two years ago—a group of category fours in Vacaville. But the tail is new, isn’t it?”

I lay back on the sheets and held my pounding head. “Yep, it’s new, and, yep, I wore the costume on our mission in Vacaville. That *one* time you saved my ass.”

“You think you still fit in this?” He threw it onto the bed. “Lately, you enjoy pizza way too often.”

“Avada Kefuckya!” I exclaimed wide-eyed and steadied myself on both elbows to shift into a half-lying position.

His annoying laughter only worsened my headache. He pulled out a tiny bottle and opened the screw cap. “Thirty

drops of this, and you'll be good in less than ten minutes. C'mon, I need my sidekick!"

Studying the small bottle with appropriate skepticism, I cocked an eyebrow. "You wanna drug me?"

"Had that thought a hundred times." He smirked. "Either that or a ball gag to silence your bratty trap." Walking over to me, he grabbed the nearly empty glass on my nightstand and let tiny clear drops of *whatever* drip into it. Counting under his breath, he looked at me. "No, weirdo, this is Novalin."

When the last drop sank into the water—I'd silently counted with him—he handed me the glass. "It's my damn lifesaver after long nights at Cloud9. No drugs. Just good old-fashioned medicine."

"For the record, I still fit in that costume." I threw my head back and chugged the bitter-tasting mixture.

Believe me, I crawled over the floor in it last night.

A naughty glow of red lit up in his cerulean blues. "Prove it!"

I rolled my eyes and playfully kicked at him, but he grabbed my ankle midair.

"Go shower. We have some debts to collect. Edgard—" he said before hyped blabber shot out of me.

"*Stratov?* Chief Hardin's former slave handler?" Thrilled, I almost forgot about the headache.

"*Aye.* Edgard Stratov." A throaty chuckle came from him. "The one we hoped he wouldn't pay back in time so we can cash in the—"

"Debt interest!" I crooned as I got on my knees, bouncing on my bed. The pounding in my head reminded me that Mr. Hangover and his friends still hadn't left the party yet, so I groaned.

Marcus glared and pointed at me—he hated to be interrupted, especially by me. "Stop interrupting me all the

time, damn gold digger!”

I laughed and jerked my chin at his raised finger. “Guilty! Sorry. But, see? I’m rubbing off on you.”

“I’ll buy a ball gag for your next birthday to shut your trap.” His eyes darkened with devilry. “Your muffled screams will be fucking hot to listen to when I punish your ass, bratty girl.”

Patting my blades, I tilted my head and flashed him a sultry grin. “Go ahead but just keep remembering who loves their sammie with thick slices of sausage and extra ketchup.” I got up and made my way into the bathroom with a wide smile on my face, absolutely ignoring Marcus’s rant about how I was a scary cock block.

This job is just what I need!

Ten years ago, Chief Hardin didn’t only buy slaves from Edgard Stratov, but he also gave him a hefty loan when he started building his filthy little business. By now, his name was well known in the under realm, and he wasn’t short on money nor slaves to trade.

Contracting both Marcus and me to cash in the debt could only mean one thing: our boss has gotten impatient. And an impatient Chief Hardin wasn’t one to mess with.

Hence, he would send a *friendly reminder* with his *best wishes*—us.

One speedy clean-freak routine later and minus a migraine, I waltzed back into my bedroom only to find it empty.

He’s probably waiting outside. Still so finicky about cat hair on his clothes.

Smirking, I started my stereo and went through my closet but paused when Kayla’s badass-bitch anthem “Bundles” started blasting.

Are we going to be a bad bitch today? Abso-fucking-lutely!

With the intention to not only turn heads but break necks, I let the tight-fitting leather jumpsuit hug my hourglass figure. The exposed tanned skin of my décolletage and pushed-up boobies were a big plus, sure, but who needs to flash nudity when you're a wet dream on two legs?

With the ensemble fitting like a second skin, nothing was left to the imagination.

Since the last time I'd worn this outfit on a mission—true to my tradition to hunt category-four souls in costume on Halloween—I'd bought matching red-and-white fox ears and ditched the black feline mask. Halle Berry might've been my all-time favorite Catwoman but giving the costume my own twist by turning myself into a vixen was so me, and I loved it. I couldn't walk past the fox accessories when I'd found them in a kink store in 3006 Vallan.

With skilled fingers and brushes, I used a combination of smoky red-brown shades to create my own version of a fox goddess.

Oh, and you'll make every breathing male weak to his knees.

After finishing the look with MAC's provocative lipstick in "Russian Red," I put on my back holster and let the twin blades glide in.

"We're going to have some fun today!" I whistled my signature "Twisted Nerve" melody and skimmed over my reflection in the mirror with nothing but excitement sparkling in my eyes. Tying my two-and-a-half-inch heeled boots, I shouted Louis my goodbye and grabbed my iPod as I strode out of my apartment.

On the elevator ride down, I plugged in my earphones and skimmed through my playlists. I wanted the full experience of basking in this moment of badassery.

Smooth, drumming, bass notes vibrated through me, before the silky voice of a femme fatale stroked my ears, and I swayed along to the beat.

“Seven Nation Army” vintage version killed it!

Menthol smoke swirled through the air just outside the building as I took two drags and exhaled; the first cigarette of the day always hits differently. Mild air carried the intoxicating smell of premium 100 gasoline exhaust gases, and I savored it with deep breaths.

Can't beat that!

Hips swaying, heels clicking on the concrete with each precise stride, I took one last drag of my cigarette and snipped it into a nearby ash receptacle before I popped gum into my mouth.

I gave my loose beach wave curls a shake. *Hell*, this was one of those days to fight seven armies at once. Or, at least The White Stripes's lyrics and the roar of the lady singing the cover version gave me that kind of invincible thrill as the song boomed in my earphones.

I caught a glimpse of Marcus in the wing mirror of his car, and I tapped my fingers over the roof, down to the long hood of his Hellcat as I made my way around it—slow, confident, oozing with sexy attitude.

I halted in front of his burbling San Marino Blue beauty, resting my palms on my hips, and jerked my chin toward him, totally feeling the song.

He locked eyes with my tightly wrapped body, Evian bottle resting on his lips as water spewed out of his mouth like a fountain. I managed to keep a straight face; Marcus and his ever-horny Aries Venus were mad suckers for anything wild and sexy.

I gave him a nice 360-degree presentation and reached for the long red fox tail, twisting my wrist. A chuckle fluttered my chest when he mouthed a clear *fuck me* and let the engine roar up once—I'd never grow tired of teasing him, much like he'd never stop being a lover of anything kinky.

Putting an end to my little show with a low bow that threatened to liberate my boobs, I settled my fine ass on the

Hellcat's smooth leather passenger seat and pulled out my earphones.

"You're welcome, Blondie."

"*Fuck, Ivy!*" He drank in my appearance, tip of his tongue wetting his lips. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." When his look settled on the fox ears on my head, he closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. "Just one last time—*fuck!* Hot as hell!"

I opened the passenger makeup mirror and checked my lipstick, amusement lifting my cheeks. "Knowing our boss's greedy ass, the debt's interest won't be less than twenty percent. Given how big Stratov's name is by now, the loan must've been quite big." Closing the mirror, I met his heated stare, mischief twisting my lips. "On top of that, I smell a generous tip. Go figure why I chose this outfit!"

He stepped on the gas, and the beast's engine roared as he drove off and muttered something, most likely ranting about my big-titty bonus.

I patted his shoulder and started drying off parts of the dashboard with a tissue. "You'd make one hot gargoyle. Feel better now?"

His flat hand delivered a loud smack onto my thigh, the stinging sensation prickling my skin beneath the leather. "*Now, I feel better!*"

Twenty minutes later, my knee-high boots clicked with each step on the cold checkered tiles as Marcus and I strolled down the corridor leading to office 696.

"Ten dollars says he won't talk to me," he grumbled as he gave me a hungry once-over for the thirteenth time and tugged at my long fluffy tail. "Twenty dollars, he'll not even look at me for more than a second. Why did you have to dress up as a sexy vixen? So unfair..."

"Tsk." I shot him a quick side-glance and smoothed over the fox tail, a cheeky grin stretching my bright red lips. "Keep your hands to yourself, Marcus Ferrow."

“Can’t promise anything!” He winked back.

Standing in front of Chief Hardin’s office, I leaned over to him and teased. “Fifty dollars says he won’t pay you any attention in the first two minutes. Seems like I’ll be eighty dollars richer by the time we walk out.”

He gave my ass in the tight jumpsuit a smack, the black second skin granting a nice cracking sound. “Greedy like a fucking dragon! Damn gold digger.”

Was it Halloween? No, that was a week and a half ago. But did I dance to the beat of my own drum? *Hell yes!* Life’s too short; wear the sultry outfit, give zero fucks, have fun!

Three knocks, and we walked inside.

Delivering nothing but killer vibes with each stride, the long red tail brushed my calves as it swooshed from side to side. I approached our boss at his massive desk with my signature smile. Leo Rising people like me had a thing for grand entrances, and I was a mad sucker for them.

Sitting in his broad Chesterfield chair, Chief Hardin lifted an overly full whisky glass to his lips but stopped it in its tracks, the golden-brown liquor matching the color of his eyes as it sloshed over the rim onto his hand.

“*Ivangeline.*” He tasted my name on his tongue instead of the drink. Voice so velvety, I couldn’t remember my name being enjoyed like that ever before. “What’s the occasion?”

I sashayed up to his desk and lowered into one of the Chesterfield leather chairs *vis-à-vis* from him, crossing my legs and tapping my left foot in the air to underline the playfulness in my purr. “Can’t a girl have some fun from time to time?”

Marcus situated himself next to me and puffed out a breath.

Aw, Blondie, fix your face.

Chief Hardin hummed before he chugged down his whisky in one go, vertically slit pupils solely fixated on me

behind the glass. Giving the rim a subtle lick, he mused, “What kind of *fun* were you thinking of when you decided to come into *my office*”—he paused and let his gaze roam over every inch of my leather-clad legs—“dressed like *that*?”

If my arms hadn’t been covered up to my wrists, goose bumps would have exposed the effect his intense stare had on me. But the jumpsuit only allowed a deep peek at my pushed-up double D sisters.

Despite the thrill rushing through me, I kept my cool and subtly cocked my head. “That kind of *green-colored fun* I can roll around in after we return from Edgard Stratov’s!”

Chief Hardin poured himself another glass and got up from his chair. Rounding the desk, he cracked his neck when he halted in front of me. “I can help with that.”

What else could that body help with? Shit! Seriously? I’m going crazy...

A ghost of a twitch moved his right hand, and he brought it up to comb through his unnaturally snow-white hair.

“*Ivangeline*, you have a certain way with those words coming from that pretty mouth. Women like you are a threat to every male’s coronary condition.” Circling me with slow steps, my boss’s intense aura stirred a mix of nervousness and inappropriate arousal in me. “Thankfully, for me, I don’t have a heart.”

Forty-five days without any dick... Why me?

He handed me his glass, and I latched my fingers around it with a cocked eyebrow. “Have a taste. It’s the newest addition to my whisky collection.”

“No, thank you, sir.”

I looked over at a grumpy Marcus but peeled my eyes off him when Chief Hardin’s subtle snarl echoed through the office.

“That wasn’t an offer. Taste it!” Intense amber blazed down at me, waves of testosterone lurking through the air as I

brought the spicy brown liquor to my full red lips and sipped.

“It burns. Guess that means it’s good?” I held out the glass with a shiver trailing down my spine. Whisky was not what rocked my boat.

“Pleasure needs to burn.” Reaching for it, Chief Hardin’s index finger stroked mine, for nothing more than a fragment of a second. He inspected the red lipstick stain on the rim and lowered it right onto his lips to chug down a big gulp of his whisky.

Humming in delight, his wide throat bobbed as the warmth slid down. “So fucking delicious.”

I tensed and dug my nails into the armrest. He sucked in his lips and fucking enjoyed whatever thrill he got from his little move. Wiping off the leftover stain with the back of his big hand, he looked down at me—one quick wink from him and my clit throbbed.

Shit, he’d make a good dom. Wait. What?

“Chief, we still need the loan conditions.” Marcus couldn’t keep quiet any longer, most likely pissed because he owed me fifty by now *and* because he had been ignored in the last couple of minutes, just like I’d predicted.

Steadying my elbow on the armrest, I leaned my head against my fist and whisper-yelled to Marcus. “*Careful*, your skin is turning unhealthy green.”

He clicked his tongue and, obviously, didn’t find it as amusing as I did.

Oh, c’mon! Let me have my five minutes.

His demand was met with a short icy glance from our boss before he was back to eye-fucking me.

Poor Marcus, so many blows to his ego, and it was only a little after 2 p.m. In my head, another twenty dollars was added to the fifty with a nice *ca-ching* sound.

“Stratov owes me five hundred thousand dollars. It was due yesterday,” Chief Hardin said and paced back to his chair. The sizzling flames behind him licked alongside the edges of the hearth. “Six hundred thousand with debt interest. I expect you to return my money by this evening.”

I stirred. “Consider it done.”

One hundred thousand was music to my security-loving Capricorn Venus, and even if I’d share it with Marcus, I’d never earned that much money on a mission.

Looking over at still-grumpy Marcus, I beamed and got up. “C’mon, time to cash in!”

Chief Hardin poured his third drink since we’d arrived and gave the aromatic liquor a swirl before he brought it under his nose. Dark amusement seeped into his voice, eyes pinning me down on the spot.

“*Ivangeline?*”

I smoothed the fluffy red tail and shifted my weight from side to side on my heels. “Chief?” *Hell*, I was impatient to get going.

“Watch out for *Rufus*.” He took a generous sip and jerked his chin at my sultry accessories. “He has a thing for *tasty kittens*.”

I’m a vixen... But who am I to correct him when he eye-fucks me like that? Remember rule number one, Ivy.



“Rock, paper, scissors—shoot!” Confident to beat Marcus with *rock*, I launched my balled fist forward with victory creasing the corners of my narrowed eyes.

“Ha!” His big flat palm smashed down on my hand and proved me wrong.

“Best of three!” I challenged. “Rock, paper, scissors—shoot!” But again, he beat me when I tried my luck with *paper*, and his two spread fingers countered.

“Argh! You beat me every damn time!” Pouting, I walked out on him and made my way to his car on quick feet.

He caught up to me and teased, “Your steps sound like a Morse code message when you’re angry. Fucking cute.”

We got inside, and I crossed my arms with annoyance twisting my lips—this promised to be a long ride.

“I’ll teleport instead. Can’t handle another greatest hits album!” I grabbed the door handle, but Marcus held me by my arm.

“You know the rules, Eso Babe! Winner gets to choose the music and the loser”—he turned up the volume—“shuts the fuck up.”

Both of us were car lovers, much like both of us were too stubborn when it came to choosing tracks for our drive.

One Hasselhoff album and two failed attempts to play Metallica later, Marcus's car halted in the darkness of Gordon Street, about a hundred yards away from Stratov's mansion.

As we walked toward the property, the impression I had of Stratov only worsened—too much money in the wrong hands. Ostentatious fit quite well, considering the half-dozen spotlighted ornate pillars and carved angels and demons feting a damn orgy on a ten-foot square fountain.

Wait. Are they... No... Wow, that li'l saint is flexible! Respect!

Tuesday evening presented us with a thick overcast, clouds hanging ghostly above the snowy ground of the ridiculously wide front yard.

“Snow? What the—” I placed both hands on the passenger window, and my eyes rounded in wonder.

Red spotlights dipped the house facade in gloomy allure, complementing its owner's reputation of being a cruel asshole.

This was the perfect horror set; several ideas for movie titles came to mind.

Santa Baby in the Slave Factory, Santa and His Ho Ho Hoes, Elves Gone Bad—focus, Ivy!

I got out of the car and slid both my kukri swords into the back holster as I walked toward the fenced property.

“Good ol' Eddie likes the finer things in life, doesn't he?” Tilting my head back, I gawked at the view. “Filthy rich but fucking dumb. Who lets Chief Hardin wait?”

The tall driveway gate wasn't any less impressive. Moonlight knifing through the cloudy sky highlighted the dark, gleaming ornaments that slung around thick golden bars like Eastern Indigo snakes. Snow covered the seemingly endless rows of thorny vines along the fence.

There was no easy way in, nor out, unless you made use of good bait. *Me.*

Marcus inserted a new .475 Magnum magazine into his large Wildey handgun, clutched the slide with his left hand, and held the grip in his right hand to execute one smooth forward push. “That’s why he’ll be bloody interested to buy you off from me. Dude loves the finer things in life, especially when they have a pussy.”

“Tsk! Men are pros at digging their own graves.”

“Fact.”

Our game plan promised a helluva lot of fun.

Taking up the inconspicuous black duffle bag stuffed with ammo and other rifles beneath a false bottom, Marcus was ready, and so was I.

He strode past me, all golden confidence and arrogance, to take the power position of the lead to begin our master-slave charade. As he stepped in front of me, he stuffed his gun in the back of his pants and pressed a button on the intercom. A distorted beep resounded before a female voice asked for our names.

“Benjamin Becker,” Marcus replied and yanked me closer to the tiny camera in the intercom, squishing my cheeks together. “And my slave, Victoria. Mr. Stratov is expecting me.”

A beep cut off the connection, and I slapped his hand off my face with a hiss. “You enjoy pretending to own me, huh?”

“It’s a rare occasion to have you beholden to my whims. Gotta seize it while I can.” He threw the bag over his broad shoulder and patted my head with his signature grin that never failed to make him look even more attractive than he had any right to be.

“Careful, don’t get too used to it,” I said and playfully snapped my teeth after him.

The gate swung open, its hinges whining out one long foreboding note. Foggy lights from the markers on each side

of the curvy gravel road created a gloomy atmosphere as we made our way to the mansion.

The dense layer of snow beneath us crunched with every step, instantly pulling me back to my childhood days in the human realm. I halted and reached down with a smile when I scooped up a handful.

Artificial snow!

“Blondie,” I called out, and he turned. A packed round little snowball hit him right between the eyes. “Booyah!”

The next second, red washed over his ocean eyes, and he jumped forward in my direction. Arms wrapped around my waist; the air *whooshed* out of my lungs as he brought us down into the snow with a thud.

“Who’s your daddy?” His hands shoving fistfuls of white flakes into my deep neckline, he could barely contain his sly laughter. I writhed beneath him and spat out a few flakes that had landed in my mouth when I couldn’t help but laugh, too.

“Certainly not you and neither is Ezra!” I exclaimed before my hands shot up to make a mess of his man bun.

He pinned my hands next to my face in the snow and gazed down at me. “I don’t get why you chain yourself to that human. You’re so much happier when you’re here in our realm. Let go of your past already, cut your ties, and get on with your life.”

Whoa! Marcus and dramatic mood swings?

It took me a moment to come up with some words. “You wouldn’t understand.” I turned my head to take in the fog creeping through the air around us and swallowed a big, fat lump clogging my throat.

“Help me understand!” His voice loaded with sharpness, fingers roughly intertwining with mine.

I pulled against his grasp, trying to sneak my head out of this emotional interrogation, but he didn’t let go. “Ivy, when

was the last time you were truly happy? Can't you see how much you're still a victim of your past?"

"Marcus Ferrow, you surprise me. All emotional underneath that tough exterior, huh?" I huffed. "Your Aries—" He didn't let me finish and cut me off with a tighter grip, lowering his face to mine.

"Cut the bullshit! I've known you for five years. *Fuck*, you're my sidekick. My partner!"

The sudden proximity triggered a gasp out of me, and I stilled. "We should go."

"No. Not until you give me *one* valid reason why you put yourself through that farce."

"What the hell got into you? Let me go!" I glared at him, a rush of anger prickling my cheeks as heat flushed up to the tips of my ears. "It's not funny anymore!"

Gold erupted in my eyes, flooding my pupils, evident in the reflection that stared back at me in his cerulean blue eyes.

His warm breath fanned against my face when he scoffed. "Seeing you miserable whenever you return to Bearno is *not funny*, believe me. Hearing you vent about how that human restricts you in every way possible or your latest fights is *not funny*. Worrying about you on every mission since your injuries need *days* to heal? Not fucking funny!"

"M-Marcus..." A mere stutter was all I managed to let out. This was just too much truth for me, and the mirrored storm of gold vanished when I lowered my gaze in defeat.

Was he right? *Yes*. Would he understand something I vaguely understood myself and was about to uncover piece by piece? Probably not. Besides, I was still struggling to come up with a plan on how to let Ezra down as slow as possible in a few days.

Since I'd talked to Lani last Saturday, ninety-nine puzzling thoughts buzzed through my mind like bees in a nest, but not one of them was helpful, let alone a solution.

Though, Marcus's statement brought a new connectivity to them.

I had wanted this relationship with Ezra so badly up to the point that I suggested marriage. Why? I didn't love him like I should; I hadn't been happy since the sixteenth monthsiversary of our relationship.

The promise of a perfectly *normal* life had poisoned my mind, much like it had compromised my ability to apply common sense. A life my mom, four siblings, and I were denied after the divorce tragedy. That was until my stepdad entered our life and changed it for the better, but the painful memories would forever be imprinted.

So, here I was, with a boyfriend who'd promised me I'd never have to worry about divorce, and I'd swallowed the little blue pill *oh-so-fucking* willingly.

I'm the villain in my own story, much like my father.

My decision to reside in the human world matrix gave me serious aggravation vibes. The system rejected me and vice versa, like a parasite eating its host from the inside until there's nothing left to live in but a hollow shell.

No system can survive like that forever. Time to press CTRL+ALT+DEL and shut down the infected program. Or, in other words, I was on the verge of erasing myself from Ezra's life so he could have a normal one. Normal wasn't my fated path and, most likely, would never be.

The acceptance of that didn't hurt as much as I thought. No. I needed this breakup, and I wanted to get over with it as soon as possible. Now more than ever.

Hunting souls was what I was destined to do, and choosing my innermost need over something I'd thought I desired was the greatest gift I ever gave myself. But I wouldn't go about it the same way I had with my family when I invoked my powers to erase every little second they'd spent with me.

No. I wanted to carry the burden of doing the right thing, breaking up in person, no matter how hard it would be. This

was something I had to do, to come clean and cut my ties. Even if it meant starting from scratch and walking alone. But was I completely alone? No.

“Ivy.” Marcus’s mumble interrupted my little pity party. *Shit*, I’d been deep in the sunken place ’cause his voice was like a beacon. A wake-up call to resurface from the depths of my hazed mind since it didn’t do me much good the longer I resided there.

“Come again. Sorry...”

He huffed. “You still haven’t come up with even *one* damn reason.”

I bit my lip and breathed out. “Listen, there’s no valid reason but a *hundred* made-up excuses to keep living a comfortable life of lies.” Tears wet my lashes, and I blinked them away. Not because I was sad—because, for the first time in years, I allowed myself to loosen my grip on the toxic past and move on. “I’m done with it. I’m done hiding what I truly am, what I truly need. I’m done with my life *there*.”

Can’t take it back now. I said it out loud. I’m done with Ezra.

“Finally.” Zeroing in on my lips, Marcus’s smile bore unfamiliar softness. “You’re the weirdest succubus ever, but like every other succubus, you need—”

“What? What do you think I *need*?” I bit off the words through clenched teeth.

Slamming the final nail into the coffin of my relationship with Ezra—even if only *unofficially* for now—was enough pain for one day, and thinking of jumping other dicks was something I wouldn’t do easily. I wasn’t promiscuous like Marcus, *officially*.

“You need energy, Ivy. You need sex.”

Whatever Marcus was doing, it was like he was poking me with a sharp stick. Didn’t he know to never poke a wounded beast with a sharp stick?

“Don’t fucking tell me what I need!”

What a damn hypocrite I am. I’d fantasized about sleeping with Rion a million times—with him, at least five times. Bloody hell.

“Trust me and shut up for a second.” Deep thunder rolled through his chest, and he shook his head before he pressed his lips to mine.

I writhed and thrashed against him, but his heavy frame weighed on me. Not backing down, he kept my lips hostage with his, moving against them with odd tenderness—*wow*, it felt good.

“This might work as well.” He broke the kiss and darted his eyes between mine before he lowered himself for a much shorter peck. “And there’s many more of those where that came from. Better now?”

“Yes.” I closed my eyes at the electric sparks racing through my every vein, every nerve; renewed power flowed through me. Warmth spread inside me, head to toe, and the crusty scratches across my cheek were gone when I reached up. “H-How did you know?”

“Bekka told me that succubi can also feed from feelings. Usually, they don’t have to rely on that. It’s an uncommon way to keep your head above the water. Not as effective, nor long-lasting, but *yeah*.”

Weird.

I huffed, mentally scoffing at my decreasing ability to heal over the years. It went down the drain much like Ezra’s and my feelings for one another. I wondered what else I didn’t know about my powers.

My wrists still held captive in his tight grip, two questions popped up in my mind.

Do Marcus’s feelings bear more than friendship, or is his platonic love for me strong enough to sustain my powers?

Whatever anomaly separated me from other succubi, I wouldn't find out today.

The only certainties I had was that his kiss provided CPR to my enfeebled powers and that I found myself wanting more of these little boosts.

I lifted my head and kissed him. A pleased hum vibrated on his lips, and he returned the pressure—another wave of energy pumped through me.

One last push and I lowered my head into the snow. “Sorry, I guess I am running low. What about Bekka, though?”

“For fuck’s sake, Ivy! Why do you worry so much about others when it’s you you should be worried about?”

Did I miss some astrological transit today? Since when is he so emotionally invasive?

“You sound like Rion,” I countered with a snarky tone. Marcus had managed to get a foot in the door to my deranged emotional mess, but I wasn't ready to strip bare for him.

His jaw tensed at my little nudge. I hit a nerve there.

“I’m nothing like him! He has his own interests in mind because he’s obsessed with you. Me? I’m looking out for you because I fucking love you.”

Eyes widening and brows melding with my hairline, I shook my head. “Marcus, your mate is somewhere out there. You’ll—”

Loose strands of his hair tickled my nose as he flashed me a sheepish smile. “No worries, Eso Babe. I’m not *in love* with you, but I do love you. You’re family. Only family I have left.”

I closed my eyes and puffed out a breath. “*Bloody hell*, I thought for a moment you had feelings for me. You scared me!” Shooting him a wary look, I sneered, “So, you kiss family like *that*?”

He rolled his eyes. “No, and the only thing I catch are colds in March and November. Imagine how disappointed the

female population would be if I were ultimately off the market.” Cocky bastard’s ego was bigger than the mansion we were hired to fuck up if Stratov wouldn’t pay. “What a damn shame we’re not mates. I’d send you on a constant energy high you wouldn’t be able to come down from, even if you wanted to.”

Ah, the Marcus I know and love is back...

“Un-fucking-believable, Marcus Ferrow.” Heartfelt laughter moved my entire upper body, and I pushed a handful of snow in his ridiculously handsome face. “C’mon. I know you’re dying to flaunt me as your devoted little slave who hangs on your every whim. Today’s your lucky day. But first, wipe off the lipstick! Makes you look like a clown.” I pursed my lips and swept my eyes over his broad shoulders and muscular arms. “A hot daddy clown!”

He got up and pulled me with him. “The day you stop being weird and shut your sassy trap will be the day I’ll give you a high-five with a chair.”

“Aw... that was hella cute! Love you, too, Blondie!” I brushed loose snowflakes from his hair and gave him a warm smile.

“See? I threatened to smack you with a chair, and you *awww* me.” He tapped his forehead with hilarious speed. “Weirdo. But you’re my weirdo!”

I stuck out my tongue and gave him a push with my hip as I continued up the gravel path.

After all I’ve done wrong, Karma doesn’t seem to be too angry with me. Couldn’t have asked for a better partner than him.

His kisses still sent sparks racing through my body like molecules in Cern, and I was ready to kick ass. “Eddie, you ain’t ready for us!”

Don’t they say you should be careful what you wish for? Maybe I was a little high on oxytocin when I hoped Stratov would put up a good fight.



Blown-out black pupils taking up space in frosty blue eyes, Stratov hummed in delight as I gave his cock something to poke at through his pants with my rolling hips. His calloused hand began to test the strength of my poker face when he groped my chin for the third time.

Greedy, cheap motherfucker was hooked from the second I climbed into his lap.

Thick, biting, cigar smoke, with muted sounds of classical music from the ballroom festivities downstairs, filled the air around us. What he called his office was rather a cramped room he'd stuffed with his nonexistent understanding of morality. Seemed he'd tossed together random mafia movies and had given them to his interior designer for inspiration.

Black drenched the walls, adding to the unsettling vibe the many wrought-iron lamps lined along the sides emitted. Stratov's low opinion on his slaves' rights for freedom evident in the bronze sculptures of naked women with chains around their throats—faces etched with agony included.

Sick motherfucker...

Endless rows of books, pressed next to each other like terrified prisoners in high metal shelves, indicated that he'd traded thousands of slaves. He flaunted the epitome of power and slavery along three walls of his office. It assaulted my every moral streak. A range of numbers and short time periods

in glittering gold script decorated each book's spine—he was known as the master of numbered slaves.

Edgard Stratov was no kind man, and he went about his business in the same manner—calculating, unfeeling, and barbaric, with big dollar signs in his eyes. In his world, slaves had no names, only numbers.

Marcus and I'd been putting on our little show for the past ten minutes to make him believe I was a pricey sex slave—a gorgeous, kinky sex slave he needed to buy and number, like the rest of his cash cows.

“Insensitive to pain, flexible, and lacking a gag reflex. Sounds good to me and my clients, but no way in hell will I pay more than two hundred thousand dollars for pussy. She might be worth around one hundred thirty thousand.” Stratov's rich voice was calm and collected in negotiations—a businessman, no doubt.

Brushing the fluffy end of my long fox tail over his cheek, I rocked my hips against his crotch, which I'd been straddling far longer than I'd ever do if it wasn't for the mission. The way he wheedled and bargained for me sickened me to no end.

Right after stacks of dollars, slaves are his favorite currency...

“Last week, you paid three hundred fifty thousand for a slave with less than half her benefits. She's also trained for blood play and combat.” Marcus weighed in and pointed to the curved, death-bringing kukri swords I carried. “Think bigger. Heard there's a new trend on the horizon—sex slave fight clubs—heard southern folks have quite an appetite for anything gory and kinky.”

Getting creative, huh, Marcus? I'd die to look up your Pornhub search history.

Blondish grays infiltrated the short ginger curls my fingers stroked, and I pulled a few strands lightly to watch them bounce back into place above the nape of the slave dealer's neck.

My voice matching the white smoke swirling around me, I whispered against his stubble-graced skin as I dragged my teeth along his jaw, “Thirteen fights, and I’m unbeaten, sir.”

Stratov’s cheeks hollowed, and he puffed out another thick cloud before he put out the cigar on my left ass cheek. The merciless heat of the quarter-sized cigar butt burned through my jumpsuit, right onto my skin, when the ultra-thin leather gave way.

His booming laughter swallowed the short hiss slipping out of me, and I disguised the branding pain with a throaty moan, digging my nails into his scalp between the thick curls. I moaned so loud I hoped it would wreck his ear drum. The smell of burnt leather and flesh mingled with the sharp cigar smoke.

Testing my so-called benefits, huh? Motherfucker just branded me like a Hanoverian mare!

Arching my spine and rolling my hips against Stratov’s growing bulge, I craned my neck all the way back until Marcus’s towering features appeared upside down in my vision. Brooding anger evident in my eyes, I narrowed them at him and purred, “*Thank you, sir.*”

“You seem to hear a lot of things, son.” Stratov hummed into me when I brought my tits flush against his chest again. His sour breath taunted my sensitive nose, and I bit my lips, suppressing a gag.

No gag reflex, remember, Ivy!

Rough grip on my ass, he pushed me harder against his cock, which had pitched a respectable tent in his pants. “You’re better off not believing everything you hear.”

Switching positions, I got up and settled my ass onto his crotch again, facing Marcus. My pissed-off glare delivered all the colorful curses that came to mind, for it was his fault Stratov had extinguished his cigar on my ass cheek. At least the burnt skin had started to heal right away, but my jumpsuit was ruined.

Just you wait until this job is finished...

“We’d talked about the price prior.” Marcus’s lips curved as he locked eyes with me before he averted them to challenge Stratov. “Time’s money. You wouldn’t have invited me here if you weren’t interested in our little Victoria. She’s worth every penny.”

Stratov cut in with sharpness. “Then, why sell her?”

I cocked my head with a naughty grin, curious how Marcus would manage that query.

“If you’re not interested, fine. I’ve scheduled seven other meetings with potential buyers. You were the third, and I’m expected to be in 2540 Greenitch in forty minutes.” Marcus signaled for me to get up with two beckoning fingers, and I stood.

Grabbing me by my waist, Stratov pulled me back on his lap, and I touched down with an *oomph*. “Whoa! Easy there, son. Don’t mistake my questions for disinterest.” Roaming his hands over my breasts, he pinched my nipples through the skintight costume. “Combat training, huh? So, you mean this little kitten can put up a good fight? *Interesting*.” Hot breath washed against the skin under my ears as he rasped, “I’m a sucker for fiery sluts, and I’d like to see what that mouth can do before I invest.”

Hell nah! And for fuck’s sake, I’m a vixen!

“Understandable. But first, I gotta see some money.” Marcus placed the duffle bag on the desk and opened it. “Six hundred thousand. Doubt that a businessman of your caliber doesn’t have enough money stacked nearby.”

“You’re persistent, aren’t you?” Stratov snorted, and drops of moisture hit parts of my exposed back. I closed my eyes as I traced my upper incisors with my tongue. *Hell*, he disgusted me. “I got enough money to buy ten sluts like her—cash. Now, give me a little show.”

Marcus followed Stratov’s glance to a massive cabinet located on the right side of the office.

Good, that's all we need to know.

Reaching back, I pulled out my high-carbon steel babies and lowered them next to us on either side, giving them quick forward spins with my wrists. His cock strained against my ass, and I smiled at Marcus. “*Master*, may I serve a tiny appetizer and demonstrate what Ingalls and Bennett can do?”

Blazing red took over his cerulean blues when the word *master* rolled off my tongue, and Marcus jerked his chin at me. “The stage is yours.”

I spun my kukris as I jumped off Stratov’s lap and turned to him, gold blooming in my pupils as power surged through me, and my vision sharpened. Excitement met me in his hooded icy eyes, and he leaned back into the soft cushion of his chair.

“Go ahead, slut. We’ll have our little one-on-one time later.” The old man in front of me smirked, the wrinkles around his mouth deepening.

One smooth backspin of my left blade, I placed my boot on his crotch and brought the blunt spine to his jugular vein. “*Ingalls*. She makes my opponents sing like choir kids.” Another harsh dip with my right wrist, the other blade spun and swooshed a mere inch away from Stratov’s ear. “*Bennett*. He arranges my opponent’s trip to the other side more or less quick”—I increased the pressure on his cock with the heel of my boot—“depending how *generous* I feel that day.”

Decades of cigar consumption evident in his scratchy, rough chuckle, Stratov craned his throat, pushing his wrinkled skin more firmly against the blade. “Tell me, slut. How *generous* do you feel today?”

A smug, lopsided grin stretched over my face. “Depends how fast your hands shove six hundred thousand into our bag.” I flipped the left blade and brought the razor-sharp cutting edge to his stubbled jawline, tilting his face up to get a better look at him. “Do you know what *William Hardin and my babies* have in common?”

“Hardin? That son of a—” Stratov jerked his head away, but I curtailed his movements when I brought my other blade up under his chin, its pointy tip piercing his skin.

“Careful there, old man. You broke the contract when you failed to pay back your debts,” Marcus said and drew out his gun.

I narrowed my eyes at Stratov, increasing the pressure on his cock beneath my heel, and a groan crept over his lips. “All three of my *friends* are known to be impatient and hot-tempered. We better see fat green bundles in the next minute or—” But his low chuckle irritated me, and I paused. “What’s so fucking funny?”

“You kiddos think you can come here—to my *goddamn* house—and fool me? Fuck Hardin! You won’t make it out alive.” He wet his lips and shot a deadpan stare at Marcus behind me. “Neither did the last of his little puppets. I kept her red Maserati as compensation for the trouble she’d caused me. Business.”

Chief Hardin didn’t mention he’d sent someone else before us... And this someone died here? Jenna?

My eyes widened when I thought of the conversation I had with Mrs. Chevers two weeks ago, when I’d asked her if Jenna was on vacation, since I hadn’t seen her in a while. She’d told me Jenna quit her job.

I’d thought it odd, since Jenna had been working for HD for more than twelve years, but I didn’t ask any further questions. I wasn’t friends with Jenna, but her ambition had always impressed me, same as her car she’d bought from her last hefty bonus check—a fire-red Maserati Grancabrio.

Why would Mrs. Chevers disguise Jenna’s death with a lie?

A jarring, distorted sound buzzed through the air, and I looked down at the movement in my peripheral view. Stratov’s fingers tapped a small button on the side of his armrest, a button I hadn’t noticed before.

A quick turn of my head revealed Marcus was as tensed and alarmed as I was.

“Shit!” Marcus hissed, and I faced Stratov just in time to block the dagger he had aimed at my abdomen. The clanging sounds of our blades clashing rang out, and my lower arm quivered from the force pressing against my sword. I put all the strength I could summon into my leg and sent him flying backward in his chair. Gravity kicked in, and Stratov fell out of the chair when the backrest hit the floor.

Stratov rolled to the side, furious anger spitting out of his mouth. “You won’t make it down to the lobby before your brains decorate my walls, kiddos!” He gunned for the small pistol in his ankle holster and aimed at me. I’d pushed him out of my blades’ reach and was left with little time to react.

Twisting around, I planted my palm on the large wooden desk and slid over it to land on the ground next to Marcus with a *thud*. The impact of bullets riddling the office door proved I’d ducked just in time.

Shit, that escalated quickly!

Seconds later, the door flew open and smashed against the wall before two masked men wearing suits barged in. “Boss!”

“Wake up Rufus!” Stratov bellowed from behind us, and I only managed to shoot Marcus a quick glance before he aimed his massive Wildey gun and brought the security guards down with two precise eye shots. But like cutting off a Hydra’s head, the shouts of more bodies rushing up from the lobby foreshadowed a not-so-easy-way out.

“A dozen security guards on each floor.” Booming laughter resounded from behind the desk. “Plus, it’s been a week since Rufus had fresh limbs to chew on. Let’s see how fast that kitty can run!”

“Plan B,” Marcus shouted and twisted as he jumped up, sending a fat Magnum bullet in Stratov’s direction. “This floor is yours. I’ll take care of him.”

Not waiting another second, and hushing the spreading uneasiness inside me, I launched forward and hurried out the door, jumping over the corpses. I turned my head to both sides, checking from which direction the first flood of security guards would come. Stomps thundered on the stairs to my right before they altered to wary steps. I backed up and hid behind the corner of the corridor next to Stratov's office.

By the sound of it, Marcus and his Wildey put up one hell of a fight.

My breathing calm and controlled, I was ready to clear the way. The tiles beneath their feet echoed with the guards' heels, slow and quiet. They waited for their target to blow its cover, much like me.

At the first glimpse of a black satin suit, I whipped around the corner and rammed Ingalls right into the man's waist. Sharp enough to cut a single flying hair, the blade sank into his body effortlessly. With Bennett in my other hand, I smashed my weight against the guy's chest with my forearm, and he fell back, taking two others behind him to the ground.

Seizing the moment as he fell, I'd pulled Ingalls out of his torso and closed the distance with two quick steps. Left foot planted, I took a lunge with my right, bending my knee as I spun both blades, slashing all three of their throats open with precise, deep slices.

Fresh crimson not only flowed out of the wounds but the pressure in their carotid arteries turned them into small blood fountains, cut throats uttering wet, rattling breaths. Bleeding out in a matter of seconds was less merciful than being decapitated, but it still fascinated me every time.

I crouched down while the third guy took his last gurgling breath and snatched the earpiece of the first guy I'd killed.

Will make things easier if I know what they're up to.

Leaving three more corpses behind me and wearing the stolen earpiece, I snuck down the corridor on light feet. My stinging conscience knitted my brows, knowing I'd killed not

only minions but maybe fathers or lovers—sons to three women who'd face grief after tonight because of me.

All of us were spawn of the darkness, and still, they only executed Stratov's orders.

Now was not the moment for remorse, but I'd wondered a lot of times in the past five years why my conscience clashed with my affinity to kill my targets with such efficiency.

Several alarmed voices caught my attention as they took turns talking over the communication line when I neared the gigantic curved staircase.

“No response!”

“Should we evacuate the ballroom, Mr. Myers?”

“No. Archer and Prescott, go and finish them off. Rest of the team stays here.”

I pressed my back against the wall and craned my neck to get a peek at the weapons of the security duo speeding up to my floor—handguns. Sheathing my kukris, I flexed my hands and balled them into fists.

Attacking them head-on with my babies isn't the best idea... They'll spot me before I can get close enough. C'mon, think!

I pushed out two quick breaths and jumped up onto the flat stair railing, which was wide enough to balance on one foot. My other leg angled beneath me, I made use of gravity when I launched forward and took the guards by surprise when I crashed into them.

Given the angle, the impact of our crash was intense, and we rolled down the broad, curving staircase together. Bundles of feet, arms, and legs spinning, I grabbed one of the guards and hung on to him as tight as I could. We approached the bend, and I managed to let go in time before we hit the wall. The hard stone edges of the stairs doled out bruises liberally, but the pain spreading in my limbs subsided quickly.

So, it's true. Sincere feelings can also boost my powers.

Goddess Fortuna was generous today—well, depending how you looked at it. One of the security guys remained unmoving; the way his neck bent didn't look healthy.

Uhhh, it's not supposed to look like that, buddy!

It didn't take the second guy long to steady himself on trembling legs. Our eyes locked, and we both stilled for a moment, pushing out sharp breaths. His hair was a mess, and bruises and a seeping cut graced his forehead. With all the loose strands in my face and over my eyes, never mind my crumpled fox tail, I couldn't look any better than he did.

His eyes darted to a weapon on the floor three feet away, and he dove for it. Invoking the strength and speed of my powers, I closed the ten-foot distance between us by teleporting and pulled out my right-hand blade midair.

The pointy death bringer pierced right through the crinkled black suit, satin fabric giving way to the sharpness as I steadied my right arm and buried Bennett in the man's chest. I pulled out immediately and sliced his throat with a fierce swing. A mix of red rivulets and thick splashes adorned the wallpaper next to his head, thin streaks seeking their way down until they touched the baseboards.

Blood gushed out from his throat, the fresh, iron river running over his chest and down his suit. I looked into his eyes until they rolled back. It took less than ten seconds before he sank to his knees and fell over.

Deep, rich crimson saturated the floor next to my boots, and I stepped back.

What the hell?

I hadn't been able to teleport midfight for years. Whereas, before, I'd had to actively focus. Now, I had subconsciously pulled it off somehow.

Blondie, your energy is fire!

Thrilled, I pulled out my other blade and gave both kukris quick forward and backward twists. Excitement pumped

through my veins, and for a moment, I forgot what still awaited me as my conscience hushed.

Catching a pissed-off hiss on the comms frequency, from who I believed to be Mr. Myers, I looked down to where the staircase ended.

“Archer. Prescott. What’s the situation up there? No response! Team R, you heard the boss, get going!”

Twelve guards on each floor. Five left for me.

A hand clutched my shoulder, sending a jolt of adrenaline through me, and I spun around, blades scything up, ready to end more enemies.

“Easy there!” Marcus frowned and looked down at the two dead men next to us. “You’ve been quite busy, huh? Sorry it took me so long.” He dangled the stuffed bag, holding a submachine gun in his other hand, and flashed me a wide grin.

“Let’s get out of here! What happened to Stratov?”

He gave me a nervous smile and urged me to get going with a jerk of his chin. “Gonna tell you later. Let’s leave it at we better get the fuck going. Now!”

I didn’t poke around further; if Marcus was nervous, then I’d every reason to listen to him. “Okay, let’s teleport!”

“They still have my damn car keys! Down to the lobby! C’mon!”

Cussing while rushing down the stairs, we halfway swung around the banister of the staircase leading to the first floor when bullets soared past our ears. A small team of four men were lined up in the corridor.

“Go!” He threw the bag at me and shouted over the sonic booms of countless fired guns as he gave me cover, firing back. I managed to catch it and secured one blade back in its holster. Clutching the heavy bag in front of me, I sprinted down the stairs.

More bullets came flying from behind me, pieces of concrete hitting my face sideways, dust swirling in the air as I jumped down several stairs at once.

-boom-

I flew back, hitting my spine on the cold stone beneath me. Groaning in pain, I scrambled up as quickly as I could, and my eyes widened at the hole in the bag. *Dammit*, I couldn't decide whether to hoot or cuss. The fucker just made a couple thousand bucks worthless, but I was sans crater in my abdomen.

"Not our money, asshole!" I narrowed my eyes at a silhouette through the cloud of dust about ten feet away. Another *boom* and splinters of stone grazed my legs. Looking down to my left, I gawked at the tangerine-sized hole in the stairs—six damn inches from me.

"The word you were looking for is *bitch*." A young female's voice carried to me—arrogance sharp on her tongue. "Your little tour ends here."

"Don't think so, *bitch*!" I pressed the bag against my chest and launched forward, dodging another shotgun bullet on my way down to her, and swung my blade for a deadly strike. Cutting edge hitting steel, her barrel parried my slash.

With clearer sight, I took in the wall of muscles in front of me. Two heads above my height, the woman was built like She-Hulk. Brown curls cascading over her muscular shoulders moved with every push against me, and her eyes gleamed with determination.

Shit, she's strong!

Spit flew over my parted lips as she scored a quick shin hit into my side, right at my liver. Faltering, I threw the bag on the floor, heart rate rising. A rush of impulses directed my knee up to hit her crotch, aiming at the ultra-sensitive clit.

That shit hurt no matter whether you had a dong—she experienced that firsthand.

Bending over, she cried out in agony—much like me moments before.

Grunting, we exchanged more hits and took turns in parrying. I picked up speed and dipped low before her fist was able to smash into my head. Crouching down in front of her, I delivered a sharp side kick to her ankle that sent her stumbling backward. If I couldn't match her strength, I'd rely on technique.

I seized the moment when I jumped forward and rammed my full weight into her, wrapping my arms around her torso, and tripped her up with the back of my knee hooked behind hers. Following her crash to the ground, I straddled her chest.

Quick and precise, I let my fists rain down on her face and throat—dedicating extra attention to her fragile windpipe. She gunned her hands to the top part between my shoulders and neck to bury her fingers into my trapezius muscles, and I screamed.

Delivering a brutal hit above her temple, I was granted a release from her agonizing grip as her movements stilled and her eyes closed. Heaving in deep breaths, I wiped the back of my hand over my forehead.

One thing I'd learned the hard way—finish what you've started, or it will finish you. And the lectures I'd attended right in the beginning of my soul hunter career proved to be true because her eyes flew open, and she snatched my blades to slice me.

I gripped both her head and the tip of her chin hard, pressed down, and yanked her chin upwards to break her neck. A sickening *snap* followed. She went slack at once, and my kukris touched down with a *clink*—no coming back this time.

Inspecting my blades, I noticed fine hairline cracks that spread over both blades, superficial but visible enough to enrage me.

“Don't fucking touch my babies!” I shouted as I slid them home once again.

Snatching the bag from the floor, I turned back to the staircase and searched through the wild, dusty cloud for any evidence of Marcus.

He appeared seconds later, red-washed eyes framed by bloody strands of his dirty-blond hair.

“You okay?” I heaved out breaths, the energy boost from our kiss already wearing off a tad.

“Yep. Let’s get the fuck outta here! Better hope my keys are still by the entryway table!”

“What about the spare key in the glove compartment?” I hissed. “Don’t be stupid—”

“No!”

We sped down the corridor, the front door around the next corner. The reason we didn’t teleport came back to bite our asses—heavily armed guards stood in position, their loaded machine guns ready to sieve us.

Wouldn’t have left Guido’s original key behind either. But fuck!

Turning right, we burst through double doors and crashed the decadent party. Dazzling light from pompous chandeliers shone onto the crowd, the reflection of the many hanging crystals cast shimmering spots all around the ballroom.

Heads turned, and gasps escaped from all directions. Wide eyes from at least a hundred fifty guests and dozens of naked slaves gawked at us. The violin quartet and the harpist ceased playing altogether.

Silence.

“Window to the left!” Marcus’s shout cut through the fear-laden atmosphere, and he fired a storm of bullets with his submachine gun before all hell broke loose. Screams ripped through the air, drowning out the sound of the shards of the ten-foot arched window crashing to the parquet floor.

The lights died all at once.

Darkness.

Frightened like a herd of sheep, the crowd rushed to the exit—right at us. Swimming against the current was as hard as trying not to be run over when shoulders and elbows rammed us on our way to the window.

We reached the shattered window frame as red laser beams from outside found their targets. One look at Marcus, his body covered with several laser points, and I gripped his arm, stopping him in his tracks.

“Down!” I boomed and yanked him with me before a merciless horde of bullets missed us by only a few inches. The wall underneath the windowsill was barely high enough to give us cover, but we cowered there and waited. “Shit! That was close.”

I scanned the ballroom. Moments before, it had been filled with elegant long dresses and tuxedos donned by high-society bodies. Now, it was empty. Darting my eyes to the double doors, I clenched my jaw—a security team armed to the teeth blocked the doorway.

Why do they stand on both sides of the doors and leave room in the middle? Weird.

“Not good... Not good!” My voice quiet as I stated the obvious. “Marcus, we need to teleport. We have the money—”

But he cut in with a groan. “Ah... about that. We can’t.”

I glared at him, keeping the strange formation by the door in my peripheral view. “Listen, Blondie, I understand. I wouldn’t leave my Alfa Romeo behind, either, but—”

He turned to me, a feral storm of red in his eyes. “No! We *can’t*! The fucking mansion is under a spell. No one can teleport *out* of it.”

“What? And when did you plan to fill me in on this?” I whisper-yelled at him, not that it mattered if anyone heard us.

“Um, I just did now.” He flashed a crooked smile and checked the ammo of his gun when the doors slammed shut.

“Sorry—”

Simultaneously, our heads snapped to the doors, irritated by the unexpected twist of events. The storm of bullets had stopped. Suspicion raked its fingers through both our minds, evident in the way we glanced at each other.

I risked a peek, bringing my upper body high enough for my eyes to scan the situation outside. Fog hung low and thick above the fenced property; a small team of five to eight snipers kept their distance behind large stone sculptures.

Unmoving, they were, but their distant exchange of orders carried to us.

“What the hell are they waiting for?” Marcus’s worry clear in his low-octave hiss, and he clutched his submachine gun as he brought it up with him.

Something heavy met the floor with a startling, dull crash. Swinging vibrations of strings resonated from what I identified as the harp I’d seen earlier—but no one to blame for the noise.

One shot and splinters of the window’s frame with tiny shards sprinkled down on me as Marcus ducked again. I looked him over for any injuries, but he was fine.

“*Man*, that was fucking close!”

Wood cracked from where the quartet had abandoned their violins, and we whipped our heads toward the source across the room. In the darkness, nothing moved besides the ornately draped floor-length curtains next to us. Currents of wind entering from outside the only sound, it was deathly quiet—too quiet.

I pressed against the wall behind me as I craned my neck to risk another peek out the window. A hot, damp stench fanned me from the side, making my eyes widen in horror. The foul smell ripped my breath away, and I turned my head toward the middle of the room—nothing.

Freezing in place, I stammered, “M-Marcus. Did you feel that, too?”

“Feel *what*, too?” He steadied the shaft of the submachine gun on the window frame and darted his look over to the stone sculptures.

Another moist cloud of fetid reek fanned into my face, closer than before.

A deep, deadly snarl drummed in the immediate air around us. I instinctively smashed Marcus and me to the floor before a thunderous growl initiated the assault of snapping teeth, which missed us by mere luck.

The wall above us gaped with an impressive, deep hole; invisible grinding noises rained crumbles of wet concrete over us.

Not waiting for the next attack, I turned and yanked both blades out, slashing blindly through the air, aiming killing sharpness at the invisible *thing* above us. Marcus didn't need an extra invitation and joined. The submachine gun's muzzle flashed in the darkness as he fired at whatever was poised to bite our heads off.

Short agonized yowling followed our salvo, and we glimpsed the enormous frame of some sort of beast. Its appearance flickered repeatedly, at last revealing the entirety of its presence when the glitching stopped.

“What in *good hell* is that? How was it able to hide its presence?” I exclaimed.

Marcus and I scrambled away, far enough to see what had attacked us; for my part, I had never seen anything like *this* before.

Three long muscular legs on each side belonged to what could only be described as a hellhound-gargoyle mix on steroids. Blood seeping from a slice across its left front leg, the beast's neon-green stare found us—no, found *me*.

A vicious snarl rattling me down to my marrow set my body on hyperalert.

Marcus fired another round of bullets, but the beast leaped forward and nearly bit off his hand, sharp teeth buried into the submachine gun. Its sheer biting force crushed the gun like it was a damn toy.

“Remember why I said we better get out of here ASAP?” Marcus’s voice shook with a telling tremble as he jumped up to his feet. “Stratov wasn’t too happy when I shot off three of his fingers, so he yelled something about letting Robby off the leash. Guess, that’s Robby!”

I stared over at him with wide eyes. “Rufus!”

“Watch out for Rufus... He has a thing for tasty kittens.”

Chief Hardin’s warning crashed down on me, and every hair on my body lifted.

Oh... Fucking... Hell!

“Bag. Weapons. You take down the team outside. Go!” I urged, attention never straying from the beast in front of us that kept on chewing on the gun like it was a tasty bone.

Like a dog...

Marcus bit out, “What are you—” But he stopped when I disregarded him with a finger up. I shot him a quick glance before I stepped sideways, slow and ready to lure the beast away from him.

“*Rufus*,” I crooned, and when the monster’s blazing green eyes snapped to me, it let go of the gun or what was left of it. Heavy steps paced toward me, its clawed paws scratching the parquet. “C’mon. Get the *tasty kitten!*”

“Ivy, no!”

Turning on my heels and with a million curses of my common sense screaming at me, I sprinted.

Bad idea! Bad idea!

My adoptive mother had always warned me not to run from dogs, but when I reached the doors, I’d already shaken off the memories and stilled. Nothing followed me.

A shiver rippled through my body as I turned around and didn't have to fight off this scary creature from Hell.

Where is it?

I yanked at the door handles with both hands, but the doors remained closed.

Shit! There goes my plan...

A snarl vibrated from behind me, hot gusts of fetid breath enveloping me, and loose strands of my hair danced and stuck to my face.

I bent my knees, hands finding my two sword hilts, but I lost balance and hit the floor. Adrenaline flooded my system, and I let the sharpness of Ingalls and Bennett slice through the beast's flesh. Teeth snapped in the air above me, failing to bite off my right arm but still nicking my underarm.

A throaty scream bubbled on the verge of my lips, and I released parts of it in an agonizing grunt but swallowed the rest to bundle my energy for the next attack. The open scratches stung and burned, and I guessed it was not only because of Rufus's razor-sharp teeth but also his slimy saliva.

Blanking out the pain in my mind, I focused on my options and shot my arms forward to aim at the wide thorax with precise stabs. Fighting more than five enemies in a row had taken a toll on the sharpness of my blades—the cold, high-carbon steel was unable to penetrate deeper than a couple of inches. I hadn't forgotten about the hairline cracks, either.

Fuck, how much longer until they break?

A monstrous, earth-shattering roar straight from the darkest corners of Hell blew at me in response. Neon-green eyes burned with feral rage.

What's worse than a wild beast? An angry, wounded, wild beast!

Infuriated, it jumped and threw itself on me. I managed, last second, to jerk my head away before its clawed paw turned my skull into bony tomato mush. Both blades crossed

over my face, Ingalls and Bennett the only things stopping this nightmare of a monster from chewing off my damn face.

Pinned to the floor, I had no range for movement besides digging one heel into the beast's chest from beneath. Blood leaked from my underarm, and threads of Rufus's filthy saliva trickled onto me. Carbon steel against teeth, the sound rattled me down to my marrow. But that wasn't the only thing. If I wasn't going to be slain by double rows of dagger-like teeth, then the rotten breath would do it.

"Marcus!" I yelled, but a new blizzard of fired bullets drowned me out. Not daring to let the death-bringing mouth out of sight, I strained against the sheer force bearing down from above.

Grinding my teeth, on the verge of breaking my jaw, I held my breath and redirected all my energy when I pushed both swords out sideways in a X motion, slicing through the beast's mouth's corners. I jerked my hands forward right after, quick and fierce, to deliver deep stabs into its wide maw. The soft tissue of its throat gave way for half the length of my blades as soon as my pointy death bringers pierced it.

The beast yowled and threatened to bury me beneath its massive body when its legs started to tremble. My powers surging in an instinctual response, the next second, I found myself standing next to Marcus, who still cowered beneath the window's frame, loading ammo into a heavy gun.

Lucky for me, the wall on the right side of the window gave me cover from the countless bullets zinging through the air. The parquet and the walls behind us were littered with debris and spent ammunition, irreparably destroyed.

"Did you see that?" I exclaimed, totally consumed by the surprise of teleporting midfight for the second time. "I did it! I did it again!"

I'd been so immersed in my half-ass life with Ezra that I'd totally forgotten how much I missed doing that! Ha... had missed out on a lot of things.

I focused back on the darkness of the hall and tensed when my eyes landed on the spot by the doors where I'd left the beast to die—no Rufus.

Not good... Where the hell is Stratov's little monstrosity?

Clutching Marcus's upper arm, I urged, "Let's get the fuck out of here!"

Narrowed crimson eyes darted to me for a split second. "Sorry, I'm still kind of busy—" He gave up his cover and steadied a grenade launcher at his shoulder before he fired it with a dull *thunk*. The recoil shoved his shoulder back, and he yelled, "Best wishes from *William fucking Hardin!*"

A second and third *thunk* later and the outside security team was met with more explosions. Their screams resounded from far away until there were none.

Silence.

Marcus climbed outside and motioned for me to give him the bag.

Wherever Rufus is, I'm not waiting to find out!

I snatched it up and leveled my boot on the broken windowsill when fast, heavy stomps paired with a screechy outcry resounded from behind—Rufus.

"Car!" I boomed and instinctively dive-rolled over the sill and ducked right beside the house facade before I teleported straight into Marcus's car.

Groaning from exhaustion, I kept my eyes closed and hugged the money-stuffed bag.

Fuck, that was close...

"For *that*, I'll coax Chief Hardin to give us more than just the debt interest. You okay, Blondie?"

No response.

I turned my head and opened my eyes to look to my left.

No Marcus.



There I was, sitting in Marcus's Hellcat; panting, bleeding, and quivering from one hour in Stratov's mansion, but all my eyes were treated to was the black leather of the empty driver's seat.

Panic prickled my skin, and I hectically jumped out of the car, my gaze slicing through the darkness of Gordon Street. He hadn't teleported with me, and a scary possibility carved its way into my thoughts.

Rufus isn't dead. What if he caught Marcus before he was able to teleport?

"Marcus!" I shouted into the dark night and looked over to the mansion a hundred yards away, checking to see if he was by the gates. From the outside, nothing indicated what had just gone down minutes before. Sight wiped from any proof of life.

Only one way to find out, but I'll lose too much energy if I teleport all the way back.

Marcus's earlier kisses might have bolstered my powers but only temporarily and not fully. I couldn't risk losing too much of it by teleporting farther than necessary, as Rufus was still around somewhere, and who knew how many more of Stratov's security team.

I pulled out my kukris and sprinted forward. As I ran, my chest tightened when I couldn't shake off the thoughts of what could have happened to Marcus.

Please, Blondie, please be alive!

The gates towered in front of me as I reached the front fence line. I didn't waste time and closed the remaining short distance by teleporting right to where I saw Marcus last—beneath the window outside the ballroom.

My breathing elevated, muscles trembling. The amount of energy it cost me to invoke my powers to teleport *and* heal my scraped arm had taken a toll on me. I scanned my surroundings with my heart banging up my throat.

Blood's affinity for art was omnipresent in the artificial snow sprinkled with countless drops and streaks of crimson. I widened my eyes in horror at the track of deepest red, leading to the back of the house in sloppy curves.

Something or someone had been dragged.

If Marcus was alive, he'd have escaped already...

Eerie silence accompanied me when I took slow steps and followed the gory track, my thoughts spiraling with nightmarish scenarios.

Fucking hell, why can't I hear him?

My lower lip quivered, and tears ran down my cheeks. I couldn't take this.

The faux snow gave way under my weight with crunches filling the air around me. Once one of my favorite sounds from childhood, it now branded a feeling of sheer fear and hopelessness into my brain.

Strained breathing and grunting resounded from somewhere behind the mansion, and when I recognized the source, I leaped forward.

“Marcus!” I screamed, sprinting around the corner of the house, but what presented itself in front of me had my heart rate speeding up to unhealthy heights.

There he was, the world's most stupid, handsome fucker, chopping off Rufus's head from its beastly body with an ax.

“W-What...” My voice climbed with infuriated heat. “Are. You. Doing?”

Marcus beamed at me when he crouched to pull at Rufus’s head, his cerulean blues full of anticipation. “You know Chief Hardin has a thing for—” But he didn’t get to finish whatever nonsense wanted to escape him.

I slung my arms around him, not minding the warm wetness soaking me when I crashed down to my knees into the puddle of blood next to him.

“Dumbshit!” I sobbed, squeezing him as tight as I could. “Thought you were dead! I’ll kill you!”

“Damn weirdo.” He chuckled into me and pushed me off with a dazzling grin. “Babe, one does not easily kill off *Marcus fucking Ferrow*.”

I couldn’t contain the relief and started ugly crying between even uglier sobs. “Don’t make fun of me! *Fuck*, I thought—” But I stopped to sling my arms around him all over again.

“For fuck’s sake, Ivy!” He laughed and let go of the ax to pat my shoulder. “It has to be strawberry week this time. You’re so emotional it’s scary!”

I let my right hand deliver a heartfelt smack to the back of his head. “Avada Kefuckya!” A stifled laugh burst over my lips. “I hate you!”

“No, you don’t.” Marcus snickered as he squeezed me and returned his attention to Stratov’s monster, chopping the last tendons. “Chief will love his newest trophy!”

When the adrenaline subsided, I couldn’t help but voice my doubts about Stratov’s whereabouts.

Marcus shook his head and bragged. “Let’s leave it at that he teleported when I bluffed and threatened to blow up the whole fucking place with the dynamite I claimed to have placed in every corner of this damn mansion.”



One Linkin Park album and two failed attempts to play Hasselhoff later, we turned up at Hell's Discovery with a stuffed bag and Rufus's head in tow—not with the expected six hundred thousand dollars because of She-Hulk but still enough to satisfy the Chief.

That night, Marcus and I drove back to our apartments, both insanely richer, him with a blown-out-of-proportion ego and a blood-smearred backseat, me with a dozen hair roots threatening to turn white *and* some slowly healing injuries. But the bonus tip I got made up for all of it.

Knowing we left a hell of an impression on our boss and Marcus receiving his first and probably last *thank you* from Chief Hardin, I couldn't help but smile as the coziness of my bed engulfed me after a long, hot, thorough shower.

My body ached, head to toe, but thinking about the need for the inevitable change kept me awake longer than I thought it would. It didn't feel as frightening as it used to.

I could've died today. If I had, though, I'd have died full of regrets.

Adrion's words from our last encounter swirled in my mind.

"Let me be the one to help you."

Thrill and longing pumped through me as I thought of giving in to my feelings for him. To let him *help* me when I'd allow him to give both of us what I'd denied us for far too long.

If only he could be here...

I sat up in bed, took my phone from the nightstand, and when I dialed Adrion's number, a pang of nervousness rushed through me, but he picked up right before I made up my mind to hang up.

“It’s been a few years since you called me late at night, love.” His cheeky, smooth voice caused my insides to warm, and I could picture his face that was surely adorned with his signature stunner of a grin.

“No worries, I’m not bleeding out in a shabby warehouse this time,” I said and bit my lip as I thought of the way his canines flash when he grins. Whatever made-up reason led me to call him vanished as my mind went blank.

He huffed. “You better not put me through that again. Back then, I’d thought I wouldn’t make it in time! *Goddamn*, losing you would’ve killed me.”

Adrion’s words caused a contradicting sensation of sorrow and brooding longing to grip me.

“Sorry...”

Dulled intakes of breaths and faraway honking came from the other end of the line.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“I’m in town, but I’ll return home tonight. Will be back in three weeks.” He exhaled a long, sharp breath, and I guessed he puffed one of his Moods cigarillos.

I lay back into the softness of my bed and mused lightheartedly, “Remember how you taught me to do French inhales and the faces I made? I tried and tried but couldn’t pull it off like you.”

“As if I would forget.” He laughed at first but blindsided me with a throatier voice than usual. “Never seen someone push out smoke in such a sensuous way. *Gods*, I love when you do that.”

I put down my phone, pressing it to my chest, and hissed a low *Damn*. Here I was, lying in bed, talking to my best friend, who I shouldn’t want more than my next breath—but I did. His notorious smooth way with words prickled my skin, head to toe, and it didn’t fail to ignite heat between my legs.

Un-fucking-believable...

His dulled voice from my chest reached my ears, and I brought the phone back up.

“Rion—” Pausing, I knitted my brows. *Dammit*, selfish desire to lose myself in him brooded inside me, but I didn’t want to, not yet. “It’s late. We’ll talk another time. I’ll let you go.”

“It’s almost midnight, love. You didn’t call me to remind me of the times when I taught you how to smoke, did you?”

I opened my mouth, ready to tell him some dumb excuse that wouldn’t rat out the true reason. But instead, I breathed out and swallowed the lie, making room for sincerity. A sincere reason that crept out of my subconscious and revealed itself as the truth I’d denied far too long.

“Adrion, I need you. Needed to hear your voice...”

Three beats of silence followed, and when I cursed myself for pushing the envelope in my current *still-in-a-relationship* situation, he spoke up.

“I feel you. Today was a rough one, but I’m good now. It ended just fine. Your voice is the best thing I’ve heard today.” By the sound of it, he took another deep drag before he continued with evident layers of dense smoke in his voice. “How bad do you need me?”

My whisper was low and breathy as my chest began to heave from rising desire. “More than you’ll ever know.”

“I’m right here, love.”

Heart in an absolute free fall, I gulped as I closed my eyes. *Shit*. Flashes of last Friday’s parking lot moments flushed my mind.

The way he pushed me against the car. How soft and tender his tongue caressed my upper lip... Sweetest hell!

“Do you want me to come over?” Adrion snapped me back into the present when he further corrupted my remaining willpower to stay loyal until I’d cut my ties.

My eyes flew open as the words shot out of me faster than I'd intended them to. "No! Don't come over." I clenched my eyes shut again and reached up to my hair, hauling at the roots.

Fuck, what am I doing?

"Your choice."

I took a deep breath and let a soft whisper carry my unspoken feelings. "I'd love if you would, just not tonight."

"Too bad because I think spending the night with someone who makes every wrong a bit more right is exactly what you need."

"And what *wrong* do you have in mind?" I didn't manage to bring out more than a low-octave murmur, but it was packed with undeniable ache. The ache for him in his entirety. "What *wrong* would you make right?"

His breath left his lips, quiet yet strained, almost like a groan but equally loaded with bone-deep longing, and my body reacted with more heat prickling in all the right spots.

"Something that's long overdue."

Sucking in my lower lip, I bit down before I acted on my consuming need for him. "Sounds like you've been thinking about me more than I'd thought."

"Better fucking believe it, love."

A voice in the background called out Adrion's name, and he audibly tensed as his voice bared layers of unfamiliar reservation. "I'll be back in three weeks. Gotta go now."

"Oh. Sure, didn't mean to hold you up."

"You never do," he murmured with reassuring tenderness. "Good night, love."

"Good night."

Flipping my phone closed, I threw it next to me on the bed and covered my eyes with my hands. A long groan filled my bedroom.

I shouldn't enjoy playing with fire this much. But with him? I'm a moth that seeks the blaze of the flame... Even if it'll burn me alive.

I was done lying. I was done being a victim of my past. I needed change, and I was set on bringing change upon Ezra, Adrion, and me once the job in LA was over.

If it meant giving up on everything I'd thought was right for me for something I believed *could* be instead, then I was ready to go all in.

Seeking a path far away from the human world was undeniably what lay ahead: my path that waited for me to claim it. If it would be with Adrion, though? That was something I still had to figure out.

The least I could do for Ezra was to leave my cowardly ways behind and face this overdue breakup talk in person before I took a leap of faith.

Little did I know that following my heart's needs would bring death upon one of us.



One day after Marcus and I'd survived one of our coolest side missions ever, it was Thursday, 5 p.m.—the day before our big job in the sinner's pit of Los Angeles. I sat in one of the styling chairs at the extravagant Golden Hour salon, waiting for my stylist and friend, Danielle Doubain.

My back still nagged, and my limbs were tired, but the scratches I'd received from Rufus's dagger-like teeth on my right forearm were almost gone.

Danielle sashayed to me with a glass of her finest champagne and a doubtful look on her pretty, symmetrical face. She was half fae, half skinwalker. One couldn't help but admire her beauty and wonder if that was her true self or just a facade.

"Dear, your locks are begging for a trim! Why don't you let me try out something new for once? A lovely shade of chocolate brown would suit you, honey." For years, she'd tried to convince me to dye my hair another color, but I waved her off with a sigh.

"You can dye my hair all you want. The next day, it'll be back to blonde."

I'd dyed my hair a dark chocolate brown when I was sixteen and almost jumped back at the reflection the next morning when my hair was back to honey-beige.

"You're the weirdest succubus I ever came across, darling." Danielle eyed my wavy hair with suspicion, as if it

would jump at her at any second.

“Thank you!” I beamed. As an Aquarius, this was one of my favorite compliments. “Let’s go for an Olaplex treatment. Happy now?”

“Kind of.” She sighed and started working in Olaplex 1.

Readjusting my sitting position for the third time, I tapped my fingers on the armrest. “This job will be on another level. I can’t go much into detail, but one thing is for sure—it’s the first time I have doubts.”

She scoffed. “Oh, *please!*” Leaning down to my level, she squished my cheeks together and met my eyes in the mirror. “Look at this face. No man could resist you.”

I mumbled through squished lips, “No, that’s not the reason.” She let go of my cheeks, and I stretched my jaw. “Thanks.”

Balling my hands into tight fists in my lap, I lowered my eyes. “No, for real. My boundaries will get tested. I might regret it in the end. It doesn’t feel right this time.”

Three more days... Breaking up with Ezra seems damn far away. I should hold off on going too far with the wanted souls. But how far will I go? I wished it was Rion who’d get to lay his hands on me and not these psychos.

Feeling vulnerable and somehow hoping for a piece of helpful advice, I looked up at her. Danielle’s warm personality shone when she smiled back at me and laid her hands on both my shoulders.

“You’re truly one of a kind, Ivy. And no matter what the outcome will—” She stopped and lowered her gaze to her hands residing on my shoulders, digits tapping in an irregular Morse code rhythm.

“Danielle?”

Her brows knitted, she shook her head as if she tossed out whatever crossed her mind before she looked back at me in the mirror. “Everything will fall into place for you.”

This would've sounded more like a fortune cookie line if her voice wouldn't have been so breathy and shaky.

Meeting her eyes that held unfamiliar tension, I couldn't decipher what had thrown her off that much. "You think so? Because I have a feeling this time that my luck might fail me." I once again fumbled with my bare ring finger and thought about the doubts that had found their way into the open.

If I push through with Marcus's plan and cheat on Ezra, karma might pound my ass sooner or later—sans lube. But at the same time, all I can think of is Rion and how bad I want him to use me until I can't walk straight.

My truest desires huddled and brooded under my skin, laughing at me. Neglecting the darkness within me only stoked them up, every fiber aching for Adrion to unleash Hell's fire of rawest lust.

I closed my eyes as she massaged my scalp and pondered the importance of tomorrow's job. It'd be on another level, since Chief Hardin, Marcus, and I all held a personal interest in it.



Later, I looked at my freshly styled locks in the mirror and thought about how I could deceive Corvina. She knew me too well. Plus, my tattoo would give me away in an instant. Half of my back covered in ink, a beautiful wing-shaped mandala graced it from the middle up to my shoulders, and a bright red birthmark that reminded of Aquarian double waves adorned the skin above my left ankle.

Chewing my lower lip, I looked at Danielle. "I need a favor. Well, two, maybe. Please cover my tattoo and birthmark. Plus, I'll need one of your wigs."

A wig and a tattooless body would hopefully leave Corvina in the dark, at least long enough so Marcus could trap her.

“First off, I won’t let you walk around in a *wig*,” she sneered before a bright smile lit up her face. “And second, let me be your fairy godmother!” Danielle rubbed both hands together and spun my chair around. “I’m half skinwalker, so I have a few tricks up my sleeve. They’ll be temporary because of your succubus nature but will last about thirty-six hours. Or so.”

“Or so?” A doubtful expression etched my face.

“Well, I’ve never used my powers on a succubus before, but I’m sure it’ll work. Sweetheart, let me do my job, and I’ll help you do yours,” she sassed and pursed her lips.

“Okay, but nothing too wild! I need to look innocent and, most importantly, like a cute, harmless girl.” I wasn’t sure if this wouldn’t result in a disaster.

“Quiet now!” she silenced me with authority and laid her right hand on my head, pointing with her left hand up to the ceiling. I closed my eyes and prepared to feel something happening—but nothing did.

Blinking through one squeezed eyelid, I risked a peek at her.

Gone was the sun-kissed beige complexion; gone was the grace she exuded with every expression on her flawless face. Danielle was washed from all warmth and instead etched by something I could only guess was shock.

I turned in my chair and clamped my fingers around her wrist, shaking her.

“Danielle! You good?”

Gasping for air, she escaped whatever nightmare had spat her back out in the middle of the day. I’d never seen her eyes glaze over like that before.

“Twin... Fire... Fated!”

“Easy there, Danielle.” But she kept on sputtering out words I could hardly make sense of.

“You met him already... No. Soon. Ugh! It’s all blurry. There’s fire everywhere. He’s your mirror, your fated twin... Scars, so many scars he’ll carve into you!”

I got up and enclosed her quivering body with both my arms around her. The smell of endless flower fields that usually surrounded her was gone and replaced with the sour stench of fear.

“I’m here, and I’m okay. Nobody’s hurt me, I’m fine! Now, take a deep breath.” Her chest movements slowed, and she wrapped her arms around me as well. “Now, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were talking about twin flames.”

Next second, she put distance between us when she pushed me off by my shoulders and stared at me wide-eyed. “Yes, yes! Ugh”—she let go of me and brought her left hand up to her temple, massaging it—“it’s been a while since my fae powers got triggered. It’s hard to see through the storm of visions that rain down on me when that happens. They are blurry and not always accurate. Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I handed her a glass of water and guided her to a styling chair, where she slumped down.

“I’ve been having visions since I was a kid, but the last one was years ago. Nasty little gift, these visions. No worries, I’m all good again. So, your tattoo—” she said as she got up, but I shook my head.

“Honey, is there *anything* I should know about this vision?” I cocked an expectant brow at her and tilted my chin. “I know about twin flames, and let me assure you, I don’t want one.”

“Oh, Ivy...” She guided me back to my chair and looked at me in the mirror with a pitiful expression. “Twin flames aren’t about what you want but what you *need*. The attraction is consuming, too strong to deny forever. It will eat you up if you won’t give in. The mirror you can’t run from, the fated

match you can't withdraw from until—" She trailed off but that didn't matter. Now I knew exactly what had caused her face to slip. The reason for the uneasiness seeping into her expression earlier.

"Until you surrender and it burns down your whole fucking being, only for you to rise again like a phoenix. If—and that's a big if—you accept your fate and surrender to the lesson the universe has given to you." I puffed out a sharp breath. "Trust me, I have enough shit going on in my life, and as tempting as a twin flame might be with all that mystical attraction and stuff—no, thanks! Same goes for my fated mate. I'm not thrilled to bend under a forced bond, so he better not show up any time soon. My life, my decisions, my choices."

That should have been the case all along!

Leaning back in the chair, I flashed her a cheeky grin and reached back to squeeze her hand. "No worries, Danielle. As you said, your visions aren't always accurate. Guess my emotional chaos transferred onto you. *Dang*, I'm a freaking mess on legs! No wonder your sensitive fae side got triggered."

A small smile found its way back onto her beautiful face. "I have no idea what the universe has in store for you, dear. But whether it's your soulmate or your twin flame, both will knock the breath out of you. Only one is fated to stay, and although I couldn't make out his face with all that fire around him, his presence was powerful!"

"Usually, I'd be all for that kind of stuff"—I pointed my index finger at my head—"you know, astro geek! But I've got way too much shit to handle to even think about meeting my soulmate. Or twin flame." I blew her a kiss and jerked my head toward the window. "C'mon, let's get this over with. I don't want you doing overtime."

Danielle mumbled something, but I didn't miss how she pursed her lips as if she thought I'd find out myself how far I'd make it before fate came for me.

Getting back in position, she laid her hand on my head and pointed up with the other. I closed my eyes once more and exhaled.

She's thrown off. Ugh... should've gone for the wig instead.

When I opened my eyes, a sixteen-year-old version of me sat in the chair. My hair, now dark chocolate brown and cut into a long, layered bob with subtle highlights, and—what I really liked about this look—bangs. My soft waves were replaced by straight smoothness, and every inch looked on point.

I jumped up from my seat and moved closer to the mirror. “The bangs are perfect. Everything’s perfect! I forgot how much I loved wearing bangs. With wavy hair, it’s a pain in the ass. *Hell*, I look cute! Okay, I feel kind of naked without my freckles, but aw... love it!”

The disguise was superb, and nobody would recognize me with this new look. Only my family, my friends at the time in the human realm, and Adrion had seen my one-day-show as a brunette, and that was eight years ago. I’d shown Ezra a picture of it, but I doubted he’d be able to recall it if asked.

“Hold up. You even changed my eye color?” I beamed and almost hit my nose when I tried to move closer to the mirror.

“Yes! I always wanted to try out this look on you. The rich brown with the soft gray eyes... They have vanilla sex with your complexion.” Danielle was in awe of her work and kept on praising herself.

I thanked her a dozen times and gave her a more-than-generous tip.

“Ivy!” she called after me when I was almost out of the salon.

Turning back to her, I hummed and flipped a cigarette between my fingers.

“Whatever you do, take care, all right?” She bit her lip, and usually, I’d have stayed to talk through whatever she saw in that vision, but not today. My plate was stacked, too fucking stacked, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep it upright.

“Sure thing.” I nodded and blew her another kiss before I left.



The door closed behind me as I walked into my apartment about half an hour later. It was around 8:30 p.m., and I needed some rest before my big day, so I made up my mind to hit the sack early.

Louis greeted me with a low purr, snuggling against my legs.

“I didn’t forget you, buddy. Sorry, I’ve been so busy the last few days.”

My fingers groomed his beige-brown fur, and he threw himself on the floor in delight, little white flames dancing over his fluffy tail. I took him in my arms and walked into the kitchen to feed him. As he ate, I opened the fridge and sighed as I perused the sparse contents. No beer.

Sauntering into my bedroom, I pressed play on my stereo. Song after song got rejected when none of them fit my mood, and my guilt-driven doubts started to spiral.

How far will I go to seduce the wanted souls? I’d fantasized about a foursome before. Heck, I hadn’t even had a threesome yet. I’m not even officially done with Ezra. What about Rion? What the hell is wrong with me? Argh, fuck it, I need a beer!

After a shower-quickie sans shampoo, I changed into another pair of jeans and my favorite *Parental Advisory* shirt, knotting it in the front, and put on my old gray Converse Daintys.

A quick ten-minute walk later, I stood in front of Cloud9.

But the sight of many demons lined up in a queue in front of the club and loud music booming had me rethinking my craving for beer. A crowded party was the last thing I needed, and I contemplated whether to go in or call it a day.

No. I'm not fully recharged, and I've got to rest... But I also need to calm the fuck down!

Concentrating, I wiggled my lips from side to side and checked my watch but turned on my heels, ready to go back home.

A warm, earthy voice with dense layers of smoke and charm evident in every vocal note stopped me in my tracks, an instant smile stretching my cheeks. “Already leaving? Hurts not to be recognized by you, love.”

“Rion!” I exclaimed with surprise and spun around.

His blue-green gaze pinned me down on the spot with its striking intensity. A thick cloud of smoke escaped his lips before he sucked it back in with a harsh inhale, thin streaks ribboning up his face and into the air right after he lowered his bottom lip.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you! How did you know—”

Before I could say anything further, he put out the cigarillo to sweep me off my feet and swing me around. Head buried in the side of my neck, his warm breath caressed my skin as a low, satisfied growl rattled his throat.

Amos, his wolf side, came on strong every time we met, so touchy-feely. That, at least, was one thing I adored him for. His ecstatic joy seeped into Adrion’s actions whenever we met, and it never failed to draw a cheeky grin on my face.

“Whoa! Hello, I guess? Thought you’d be gone for three weeks?” I poked his chest as he placed me back on the ground, his hands coming to rest on my waist.

“Got called back for a hit last minute, but I’m free until tomorrow.” He shrugged and rubbed his thumbs over my shirt.

Sparks of forbidden longing had the sparse hair on my arms standing straight, and self-consciousness washed over me when my lips parted to make room for a pleased, low moan, so I stifled it. But putting a leash on my brooding appetite for Adrion only stoked it up further. What a damn fool I was.

Adrion's appearance was a blessing to my eyes. I traced them over each delicious part of his five-feet-eleven stature and bit the inside of my cheeks. His dark-brown hair lay rather messy, the full top part finger-combed sideways to the back. Perfection. My fingers itched with my old habit, and his blue-green eyes held excitement when he looked down at me.

Shit. I should leave!

I swept my gaze over his chest wrapped in a tight-fitting black shirt beneath his gray coat before I checked the queue in front of the club again. "To be honest, I'm not in the mood for a crowded party. I have a big mission tomorrow, wanted to grab a beer, but—"

With lingering need in his voice, coaxing me, he said, "One, and I'll walk you home. Like back in the day. C'mon! One beer, and we're out. I swear."

The three-day stubble framing his alluring face gave him a raw look, complementing his beautiful, crooked nose. But what corrupted my conscience was his addictive scent, choking me in the best way. Once more, I caught myself drifting back to the moment he kissed me six days ago.

Hottest hell, I wanted to go back and do it all over again.

What Ezra's eyes cannot see, his heart cannot grieve over. I'm leaving him anyway. Ugh, why am I so fucked up?

With treacherous heat rising in my body, I couldn't shake off the need to go inside Cloud9 with Adrion.

The suns hadn't fully set yet; the dusky, cloudy sky with its stunning scarlet and bordeaux hues not only soft-washed the light around us but also every reason why I shouldn't accept.

My earlier resistance crumbled, and I watched it fly out the window, taking a generous amount of my common sense with it.

I sighed.

“That’s a yes!” Copper flashed in Adrion’s irises as he grabbed my hand and pulled me along into the club.

Just one beer... Right. Right?



Sultry, dimmed red painted the club as we stepped in. The ceiling elegantly draped with silky fabrics, and Miguel's homage to the delights of sexual playfulness, "Vixen," fueled the seductive, dangerous vibe of this evening.

Ha... what a weird coincidence. Universe, you got something to say?

After we weaved through the many people dancing closely together, Xavier greeted Adrion at the bar. He didn't pay me any attention besides an acknowledging jerk of his chin, and I was quite satisfied he didn't recognize me.

"Packed club on a Thursday?" I asked Xavier and ordered two banana crystal wheat beers.

"Yep!" He popped the *p* with zero enjoyment. "Usually, I don't rent this place out, but some millionaire's daughter is holding her bachelorette party. Her rich friends bring in more money than I can cash in over a month, so that's that," Xavier grumbled, pouring himself a shot before a smug gleam lit up in his eyes, a smugger grin stretching his face. "Taking photos of all the lovely ladies will be tonight's highlight, though."

Old pervert. We both know you hope to get good shots from beneath their dresses when everyone's fucked up.

I chuckled at his secret pervy hobby; he and his Polaroid were inseparable. He thought Ms. Brown Hair didn't know about his *wall of coochies*, but *Miss Ivy* certainly did.

Turning around, I leaned back on the bar with my elbows, taking in the snobby gathering with their fancy dresses in front of us.

Adrion turned to me, his look wandering over my altered appearance. “Brings back memories.” He hummed, twirling one of my chocolate locks with timid fingers but pulled back.

“Go ahead. I know you’re dying to ask about my look,” I teased, dismissing the warmth spreading in my gut and continued anyway. “This look won’t be permanent. It’s all part of my new approach, finding out what I truly want out of life. If Ezra and I still have a future, or if I’ve outgrown this relationship. Maybe I’ll realize the old Ivy no longer exists?” I tapped my fingers on the glass, my chest tightening from the sour aftertaste of another half truth passing over my lips.

I didn’t miss the twitch in Adrion’s eyebrows, though.

Filling him in on my plans to break up with Ezra felt wrong, so I kept my trap shut. *Hell*, my soon-to-be ex deserved better than that.

“It’s like being a different person for the next twenty-four hours. No records of past mistakes, no ties binding me—like a blank page, yearning to be adorned with fresh ink,” I blabbered more to myself as my voice grew quieter at the end.

Technically, the construct of loyalty and its rules still apply, though.

My cheeks flushed with soft tints of *rouge* when I caught Adrion staring at my naked ring finger that I fumbled with once more. It had become a habit I couldn’t quit.

“Um, mostly, though, it’s part of an important mission I’m off on tomorrow. Gotta stay incognito until Saturday. I’ll team up with Marcus.” My cheeks gradually burned in richer shades of *rouge*, and I tried to switch the topic to something less awkward. “How’s your family?”

“Like a blank page, yearning to be adorned with fresh ink, huh? How poetic.” Dismissing my question, Adrion let his soft look roam over my hair, down to my button nose, and settled it

on my parted lips. “Aren’t you curious how I recognized you?” he asked while not averting his gaze from my voluptuous lips, seemingly caressing every inch of the delicate skin.

Self-consciousness washed over me, and I faced the crowd. “True. What gave me away?” I worried at my bottom lip.

Fuck, not even five minutes in, and I want him all over me.

He mirrored me and turned toward the crowd. “Your lips, love. You purse and wiggle them when you’re unsure about what you want, like when you have to decide whether you want another slice of your stepdad’s good classic meatloaf or stop after your second plate. It’s damn adorable.”

Tilting my chin, I looked over at him sideways, absolutely in love with the fact that he knew me and my old life.

“Another telltale sign? You wear the watch on the right wrist. It’s supposed to be on the left. You know that, don’t you?” He tapped my watch, and the corners of his eyes creased from the grin he failed to suppress. “Who wears Casio these days, anyway?”

I looked at my old golden Casio and sassed, “It does just fine there.”

“*And*, last but not least, the *Parental Advisory* shirt I got you for your fifteenth birthday. It’s gotten so loose over the years from the way you always knot it.” He paused with slyness dancing over his face but didn’t hold back for long. “Should I get started on the worn-out Converse you refuse to dump?”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise, and my stomach dropped with warmth spreading in my guts. “Now that you mention it, it’s true. Can’t help it. I’m a nostalgic sucker for the stuff I’ve owned since my teenage years.”

I brought the cool beer to my lips, hoping it would lessen the heat of exposure within me.

“But do you like it? My new look?” I smiled to myself and tried to sound nonchalant, but as soon as the words left me, I cursed my Aquarius sun and Sagittarius Mars for *blessing* me with a hasty mouth.

Hell... why did I ask that?

“Do you want me to like it?”

Adrion’s smooth question almost had me spewing out my beer. I coughed and fanned myself with much-needed air.

“What? No! I mean, I simply wanted your opinion on this, since you usually know me as a blonde with dark-brown eyes and freckles.” My voice betrayed me, high-pitched and shaky. My fingers traced the naked skin on my left ring finger, but I stopped the moment I sensed my new habit and focused on the packed dance floor.

I sound incredibly stupid.

He followed my look, but even without eye contact, the air around us sizzled, ready to strike me with more sparks of forbidden longing.

“Your bare ring finger is a plus,” he teased at first, which didn’t surprise me, but his tone dropped to a raspy one, causing my heart to jackhammer. “Yes, I like it. It’s like my favorite book got a new cover, looking enticing, intriguing me. But, in the end, I crave the original cover. It gives me a unique feeling of home and belonging whenever I lay my *fingers* on it. Wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

Adrion’s response left me speechless, and I faced him, searching his eyes for something that yearned to be spoken aloud. My heart raced, and surely, my cheeks were as bright red as the spotlights setting the mood in the club.

“I didn’t know you liked *books* that much.” I stared at him, the copper glowing in his irises calling for me to speak out my part of the truth. But as quick as it flashed, it was gone.

“Imagine, there are things you don’t know about me, love,” he murmured and brought the beer to his lips, pinning

me with his bluish-green eyes behind the tall glass.

Sweetest hell...

The tension between us lingered thick, like a giant cloud of temptation ready to burst and drench both of us. *Damn*, I yearned for every last drop of it.

But it vanished into nothing but thin air when a blonde demon walked up to us and greeted Adrion with a kiss on each cheek. I had to look twice because she looked like me—like my usual blonde me. The same height, the same figure, the same blonde hair color, although bleached with hints of outgrowth at her roots. *Heck*, even her face was awfully similar to mine, with its hints of Asian heritage shaping her eyes—minus the freckles.

He seemed to know her quite well, since she leaned into him with a casualness that surprised me, snaking her arms around his neck with the same given attitude. His posture stiffened and screamed *awkward* when he looked over at me, lips pressed into a thin line with his eyes delivering a silent *sorry*.

I couldn't help but stare.

When her red eyes noticed my curious look, she extended her hand to me with cocky confidence. "Natalia. And you are? I haven't seen you around before, but your face looks familiar." She subtly sized me up, and I sensed her dislike for me from the get-go.

Her hand resided on his chest, but he backed off, just enough for her hand to lose touch. Natalia's lips twitched for a split second in response.

So fucking awkward.

"I'm"—remembering the importance of staying incognito for the upcoming job, I paused to make up a name—"Juno."

"Nice to meet you, *Juno*. Are you a friend of Adrion's?" Her investigative ways irked me, and the way *my name* rolled off her tongue didn't help, either. Natalia's smile didn't reach

her eyes, and it cemented my guess that she held an interest in him.

“Um, we just met,” I said and Adrion’s confused look from beside bored holes into me. “Excuse me, I need to go to the little demons’ room.”

I hurried to the restroom and closed the door behind me with a sigh resounding through the light-green tiled space. Brushing through my smooth bob in front of the mirror, I couldn’t help but wonder.

Why is she giving off possessive girlfriend vibes?

I didn’t know Adrion was seeing someone, and the last thing I needed was another female harboring hard feelings for me.

It felt *different*, though, now that it looked like he had something going on with that demon girl. Of course, a good-looking and charming man like him had many women drooling over him, but it was different now that I saw it for myself. Whenever we met, it was just us.

He’s got company now. As if the universe shot me a last chance to escape. But, damn, the way she subtly tried to place claim on him. Ugh...

One look at my watch, and I was set on going home, as it was already 9:30 p.m. I applied a thin coat of minty lip balm and glanced over my new look one last time.

Fake it until you make it!

When I went back to the bar, Natalia raked her fingers through Adrion’s hair, whispering sweet whatevers into his ear. Watching how she did something I used to *love* back in another life tightened a knot in my stomach and had me clenching my molars.

Who was I to feel jealous? My racing heart didn’t get the memo, though.

Noticing my return, Adrion’s eyes darted from me to Natalia, and he put distance between them. My palms pooled

with sweat, and I gulped down my beer before I told them goodbye.

“Wait! I’ll walk you home,” he urged and abruptly put down Natalia’s arms, which granted me irritated looks from her.

“No. I’ll be fine.” I frantically waved him off, trying not to stir any suspicion, then shouted to Xavier, “Another beer for him and whatever she wants!” And with that, I tossed down my last notes on the bar.

Leaving my emotional dilemma halfway behind me, the bride-to-be and her friends walked up to us.

“Hi, guys! That’s Stephanie, and she’s getting married tomorrow!” The girl gang screamed a loud *Hell yeah*, and each of them took a good sip from their tiny liquor glasses.

“Congratulations! I’m about to leave. Great party. Have fun!” The words rushed out of my mouth faster than one could say *Quidditch*. I *needed* to leave before the effect of Adrion’s earlier words could corrupt my loyalty more than I already did myself.

But my plan crumbled when a tall brunette pulled me back by my hand.

“No, please stay! We’re playing *Truth or Dare* and collecting some cash for her. C’mon! Don’t be a Debby Downer.” Her cringy, alcohol-fueled voice hurt my ears, and I shot Adrion a quick glance, shifting my weight from side to side.

“Sorry, I *have* to go!”

“I’ll play for her!” Adrion intervened with oozing confidence as he stepped ahead of me and jerked his chin at the girls. Turning his face to the side, he asked over his shoulder, “Sure you can’t stay another minute?”

I settled onto the barstool next to me, my short legs swinging back and forth—too nosy not to stay and watch. One

of the girls gazed at him with hooded eyes and asked what kind of cologne he used.

Armani. Different ones but each and every one of them perfectly reflects the many facets of his character. I know exactly why your pussy throbs, girl. He's wearing the one I picked for him. He smells divine.

“That will cost you something—a beer, at least.” He toyed with her, and I had to admit, it was kind of amusing to see how she melted next to him, gawking at him like he was the next best thing since olives and feta cheese topped with sticky balsamic dressing.

Yup, my charismatic best friend had that effect, and I was no stranger to it either.

“Okay, handsome! So, truth or dare? Truth will cost you twenty dollars. If you pick dare, we’ll choose, and you *have* to do whatever we tell you.” A short girl with a dress at least a size too small for her snickered and held up a basket. “Or you pay fifty to skip.”

Adrion turned to me and flashed the sexiest lopsided smile before he walked closer to the bride-to-be and her tipsy girl group. “Dare. Bring it on, ladies.”

Oh, oh... careful, Rion. These girls won't ask for cuddles.

Bliss lifted my lips as the teenage memories living up in my head sent both warmth and excitement through my body.

The girl gang exchanged whispers and turned to him with their chosen dare. Stephanie, the bride-to-be, inched closer to him with a smug grin on her glossy lips. “Kiss a stranger.” She brushed his face with the back of her index finger and smiled at him, confident he’d choose her. “Might be my last night as a free girl.”

Barf... Natalia might scratch out your eyes, hun!

“I hope your *fiancé* and you are on the same page when it comes to your *last night as free people*,” Adrion clapped back

with anything-but-decent sarcasm and crushed Stephanie's needy plans when he walked past her to the girl gang.

He took his sweet time, looking at each of the girls, who surely soaked their panties in excitement. Dread and jealousy coiled up inside me like barbed wire. These little *pick-me* gals waited for him to decide, while Natalia stared him down with building anger. The furious expression distorting her face reminded me of plastic exposed to heat; envy looked ugly on everyone.

Slow and thoughtful in his steps, he walked up and down between them and shot me glances here and there. Not more than a fleeting fraction of a second, his inconspicuous glances hit me, and furious pangs of jealousy clashed with my remaining bits of loyalty to Ezra. My waging war of messy emotions got the better of me and invoked my powers as my vision sharpened and my pupils fired up in gold.

Who will he choose? Maybe the tall one in the skimpy yellow dress? She's pretty, though. Fuck, I don't want him to pick.

Copper seeking gold in the hazy light, his eyes found mine when he turned around and killed the distance between us in four smooth strides.

What...

Adrian opened my legs with a soft nudge to stand between them. Stunned, my body obeyed him without hesitation, much to my surprise and dislike at the same time.

"Rion, what—" My nervous stammering died when the intensity of his gaze bore down on me.

"Since we just met, *Juno*, I think one could describe us as strangers, don't you think?" He subtly mocked me, with his copper eyes glinting, brushing over my cheek with the back of his fingers. Prickling sensations crawled over every part he just touched.

Amos's influence unmistakably drenched each word; he basked in the effect he had on me. As much as I wanted to

deny it, it was true—he did affect me.

I gulped and looked over to the disappointed girl gang and felt Natalia's death glare deep in my chest and forehead.

Yup, made it onto another shitlist. Not good.

Adrion demanded my attention with alluring confidence, turning my face back to his with his thumb and index finger lightly grasping my chin.

Måneskin's "I Wanna Be Your Slave" started to play and initiated a dangerous walk on a fine line that got thinner by the second. Beat punchy, the male singer's voice thick with layers of dirt that imprinted those filthy lyrics into my bones as if he played devil's advocate for Adrion.

The air got stuck in my lungs, desire burning me from the inside. *Hell*, I cursed the man in front of me, for it was every ounce of his damn charisma that made me weak in the knees.

"A blank page yearning to be adorned with fresh ink," he mused, gazing over my face with a look so tender yet aroused, like it was the first time he had laid his eyes on me. "I'm a lucky fucker indeed." Deep, husky bass thundered through his throat, making love to my ears, as the addictive Armani Code cologne toyed with my senses, triggering goose bumps all over my body.

I clawed my nails into the barstool when he leaned into me, brushing my cheek with his stubble.

"For your information, I don't *like* books." He traced my jawline with soft kisses, and my hands instinctively found their way onto his chest.

Dammit... Why does it feel so good when it's so bad?

I couldn't look at him. "You don't?" I breathed out with a tremble in my lower lip, gradually putting the obvious pieces of his little word game together. His kisses made my heart hiccup, and my pulse was almost the only thing I was able to hear at that moment.

My lingerie moist from the fire igniting within me, Adrion took in deeper breaths like he was savoring it all. He shook his head and tilted my chin with a gentle touch.

“Look at me, love,” he ordered with subtle authority, sending more lustful tingles to my core, before capturing my eyes with his again—copper burned into gold.

There it was, the forsaken love between us, creeping out into the open but only for us to feel and see.

“I should leave,” a pleading low whisper drowning in the heavy song was all I managed to get out. Placing my clammy hand over his drumming heart beneath his heaving chest, he ran his other hand aching slow over my thighs up to my waist and pulled me closer with his fingers spread wide.

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“Rion, *I can’t.*”

“Yes, you can, Ivy. We’ll find a place and start all over—just you and I.” His fingertips pressed into me with firmness, and my back arched.

“It’s complicated.” Sorrow washed over me when I searched his eyes, my altered gray ones darting left to right.

Ignoring my last weak attempt to fight the desire to drown in him, he cupped the nape of my neck and pressed his lips to mine, making the final decision and sealing the deal for both of us.

Everything around me faded as our love and desire burst from our hearts into this kiss. Like never before, our lips started to move together, deepening the kiss, but when his tongue caressed my upper lip, I pulled back. The built-up emotions and neglected longing had us both breathing shakily, our eyes reflecting the storms raging within us.

Adrion squeezed and pulled on my waist with need and brought my left leg around him, gripping my thigh with his other hand. I clutched his shirt’s collar as I gave in to his touch

and brought my parted lips close to his, inviting him for another dance in Hell's fire.

“Making my wrongs right, huh?”

Our lips collided once more as the electric guitar screamed, and I obeyed my instincts, granting his tongue entrance.

This time, our kiss was filled with hunger, and I lost myself in him as he kissed me with raw passion I'd never experienced before. Moaning aloud in pleasure, I gripped his shirt tighter.

“Better fucking believe it, love.” He smirked against my wet lips before diving back in with confidence, lapping at my lips with his tongue between careful nibbles and pulls.

The feeling of his hard cock pressed against me made my pussy throb with need, and my fantasies got the better of me.

How good would it hurt if he carved his name into my skin with the precision of the surgeon he is? Heaven meets Hell.

I tasted him like he did me, and when his other hand found its way through my chocolate-brown mane with possessiveness, my boundaries no longer existed. We devoured each other, and I gave in to the desire to run my fingers through his thick, shiny, dark hair, pulling him further into me with tugs on the roots, knowing damn well what it did to him.

Deep, masculine moans vibrated on my lips in response, and I couldn't help but wrap my other leg around him as well, rocking against him with my hips until the barstool moved along.

“I craved you all these years,” I whispered against his lips, with ache in my shaky voice.

“Not as much as I've craved you since the day you left our hometown.” He sucked in my lower lip, releasing it only to ravish me all over again. Every tongue flick stoked up the need to feel him inside my drenched pussy.

Each breath we shared gripped my soul; granting him complete ownership was the sanity my heart longed for.

I tightened my hold on his hair and broke the kiss—my heart on my sleeve. “I’m sick of running from you. Sick of running from *us*.”

“I’m right here, love. And I’m yours to take.” Adrion’s words cut through the threads holding the last bits of my morality together, and I lost myself in the depths of our raw emotions. The lack of oxygen between kisses initiated another kind of *high*, pumping through my veins with thrilling, unleashed desire for him and his beast.

I needed all of him—head to toe, skin to bones, mind to soul.

Our consuming love guided his hands to my face, cupping it to keep me his captive for as long as he pleased. His digits pressing into the skin alongside the nape of my neck triggered a moan out of me, almost pleading with him to end me with yet another confession, granting the sinner within me salvation.

“Erase every minute of my mistakes. Wreck me, Rion, for there’s nothing but regret in me.”

“Making all the wrongs right again.” He tightened his grip on me. “*Gods*, you kill me, love.”

Someone awkwardly cleared their throat next to us, but we didn’t bother to face them, too far gone in this moment that had been overdue for years.

A low growl eventually rumbled through Adrion’s chest and snapped me out of my trance.

Shit... Ezra.

My soon-to-be ex hadn’t been present in my mind until now. Adrion’s confident actions had blocked him out completely, making me trip over the border of the forbidden land I’d crossed into oh-so-fucking willingly.

His lips parted from mine, but he placed a tender kiss on my bangs right after and murmured my sweet demise. “In fact, I *love* books, Ivy. Always have and always will. How could you not know?”

And just like that, he wiped Ezra off my mind once more when the veil on his exposed feelings lifted, imprinting my heart with his love permanently.

“Walk me home,” I whispered with delicate need and gave his hair one last needy pull when I decided to keep dancing in Hell’s fire.



“Walk me home,” she begged with a pull on my hair, and sepia shades infiltrated my vision.

After our encounter last week, Amos’s influence had started to wash over me more frequently, and I didn’t trust him not to pounce on a chance to gain the upper hand again.

Ivy’s body radiated heat as I picked her lightweight body off the barstool and placed her down on her feet in front of me. Her small hands rested on my chest, and she leaned her forehead against me, seeking comfort after I selfishly crossed the line of our friendship and burned its boundaries to ashes.

I didn’t hesitate to wrap my arms around her and placed a kiss on her head. “Let’s get out of here.”

It feels different this time.

The girl crew gawked at us in shock, jealousy clear as day in their longing stares. Li’l pumpkin and her stick-thin bride counterpart looked like sad dogs in the pound who consistently didn’t get picked. But I didn’t give a damn about them or the small crowd that had built around us. Not only my chest swelled in pride at that moment.

Hope you enjoyed the show!

I took Ivy’s hand and pulled her with me, weaving through the bystanders. She squeezed my fingers, and when I glanced down at her, I noticed she was looking anywhere but

at me. A deep frown built on my face as doubts crept into my mind, threatening to destroy my hopes.

Does she regret it already?

“Adrion, what the actual hell?” Natalia’s fury flew after us.

Oh... right.

My shoulders tensed, and I turned, glaring at her. “Not now!”

Amos hated me anyway for engaging with Natalia as some kind of depression remedy, but right now, he was on the verge of losing it over her audacity to come between Ivy and me. Especially now that I was closer than ever before to finally having Ivy where I always wanted her—by my side and giving in to me.

“You’re ditching me for that bitch? You just met her,” she raged, shooting Ivy a loathing look with her bright red eyes. “I didn’t ask you to come here. You did!”

“Watch it, Natalia. You don’t get to speak like that about her—ever!” Amos tore through the mental barrier with copper flashing in my eyes, roaring at her.

She backed off with irritation and fear all over her face, looking frantically between us. For a moment, bitterness washed over her face when her brows lowered, a tremble moving her lips.

But I didn’t give a damn about the substitute when I got to hold hands with the original version of my dreams.

I navigated us out of the club and stopped under the circle of a nearby streetlight, the increasing wind causing the luminaire to sway. Dark clouds and droplets of rain heralded a stormy night, and I took off my coat to hold it above our heads.

Ivy crossed her arms over her chest, still avoiding any eye contact, as she kept on staring at her feet, rocking on her heels. I stepped closer, and her nervous movements stopped when I

placed a kiss on her forehead. Her addictive scent enticed my senses, but I shoved my inner beast's feral needs aside and prepared to apologize for what happened. "Listen, I took it too far."

At this moment, I hated my human nature, but I needed to comfort her. Amos growled with bared fangs at my display of weakness. If it hadn't been for my control over him, he would've killed Ezra and claimed Ivy a long time ago—I'd never be that reckless.

"I won't apologize for what I did. *Goddamn*, it felt right, Ivy! But I'm sorry if my actions made you uncomfortable in front of—" Her gaze snapped to mine, and I paused, almost forgetting what I wanted to say. Fine golden lines built in her altered gray irises with hints of gold swirling in her pupils.

Fucking stunning.

When she stood on her toes, Ivy's hands found their way into my hair once more as she brought her full lips close to mine.

"I was so damn torn," she whispered with delicate layers of strain and longing, her fingers stroking my hair.

Her little habit never failed to affect me, and my fingers itched to return the pleasure. I didn't forget about the *human burden* sitting on her shoulders, though.

"Again, I'm sorry if—"

She cut me off with a shake of her head. "The boundaries, restrictions, and fears that held me back vanished the moment you kissed me. Thank you, Rion."

The way my name rolls off her tongue... God! If she'd only moan it.

I put some distance between us, since I didn't need to rush things, especially not here, out on the street. "I'd gladly do it a hundred times. Now, let's get you home. You seem tired."

She merely nodded, and I took her hand in mine. A few minutes later, we stood in front of her apartment building and

took the elevator up to her floor.

Walking down the corridor in complete silence, I still held her hand—dreading the moment she'd let go. She did at last, when her hands slid into her back pockets, searching for the keys. Unlocking the door of her apartment, she turned to me with her Converse almost touching my shoes.

I loved it for as long as it lasted.

“How can you even look at me? I'm such a horrible person.” Ivy's sad eyes were back to a medium gray when she looked up from underneath her lashes, completely pulling me out of my selfish thoughts.

Fuck, she regrets it.

With tender strokes, I brushed her brown hair behind her ear and kissed her forehead once more. “Don't worry, love. Our secret is safe with me. I went all in when I saw you weren't wearing his ring. I took advantage of the situation and got carried away when you talked about being a blank page for the next twenty-four hours.” I sighed and shook my head. “Guess I better go now.”

Ivy caught me off guard when she took my hands and placed them on her waist, a mere whisper rolling off her tongue. “*Please, Rion, do it again.*”

I tensed at the sensations racing through my body and lower brain. My digits pressed into her softness, pulling her against me. With closed eyes, I took a deep breath, squeezing her waist.

“Do *what* again?” The desperate question left my lips quietly, with pain in each syllable as my eyes remained closed. Aching longing tightened my chest, but excitement and foolish hope rushed through my veins at the same damn time. *Gods*, she wrecked me in the best way without even trying.

Looking back down at her, I watched how her full lips formed the words I craved—the same words haunting me in my dreams.

“K-Kiss me. Kiss me like it’s the last time.” It was a shaky mumble, but it resonated loud and clear in my ears.

I didn’t hesitate for a second and cupped her beautiful face to ravish her lips with mine, pushing us gently inside. I kissed her with all the built-up passion I’d carried for her ever since we were teenagers. After all these years, I had the chance to prove my love to her, and I wouldn’t hold back.

This might be my only chance.

Closing the door with my foot, we got rid of our shoes, and I picked up her petite frame, steadying her with both hands gripping her gorgeous ass. She wrapped her legs around my hips and hooked her ankles behind me. Her body flush against mine with her plump cheeks in my hands—my dreams couldn’t beat reality.

Ivy let her warm touch roam all over my chest, to my shoulders, up to my head; eager fingers buried themselves in my hair, stroking and pulling.

This woman will be the death of me.

She deepened the kiss with her tongue begging for attention. I gladly gave in and tasted her sweetness over and over again. I could’ve carried her like this, leaving her in full control over me until the crack of dawn, but that was inarguable with my need to get my hands on every damn inch of her body. Tonight, she was mine to take.

And I followed through when I walked us into her dark bedroom. Sultry sounds of music carried through the air, and I huffed at both her habits of never turning off her stereo and the lyrics of The Weeknd’s “High For This.”

Addicted to her in every fucking way.

Reaching her bed, I contemplated if I should drop us on the sheets already, as I didn’t want her to doubt my intentions. But when I softly flicked my tongue against hers, it triggered a beautiful, quiet moan out of her throat, and I threw all my doubts out the window as I lowered us onto the bed. I broke the kiss to cherish her shadowy silhouette beneath me, the

sparse light from the corridor revealing her hooded look—solely fixated on me.

I'm all yours and yours alone.

Ivy reached behind the nightstand and flipped a switch; a dimmed sea of lights lit up by the headboard, alongside the frame, down to the bottom end of the bed. Cozy warmth spread through the room, setting the mood for a night I never thought I'd get to experience.

The soft emerald-green sheets contrasted her chocolate-brown hair in the most beautiful way. Her flushed cheeks complemented her lips with a deep rosy tint, for it was the result of our love seeping into each kiss.

“*Gods*, you're beyond beautiful, love.” I couldn't help but stare, imprinting every detail of her face into my mind like I feared I'd wake up, realizing it was nothing but a dream.

My intense need for her directed my fingers to the hem of her *Parental Advisory* shirt, and I started to undress her with growing confidence. Ivy moved along, helping me get rid of the unnecessary fabric hindering my eyes from taking in her gorgeous body.

Hues of copper dipped into my gaze, and her breathing hitched, her chest merely heaving—aware of Amos witnessing her exposure as well.

I leveled myself above her on both arms, lowering my face to hers to brush her nose with mine. “Relax, love. I'm right here.”

“Stay with me.” She brushed her fingers through my hair and placed a dozen little kisses on my lips, her longing for me evident in each of them.

“I shall be damned if I ever let you go. Never again.”

My fingers itched for more. I needed to see and feel *all* of her but hesitated for a second to see if she would let me take off her bra as well.

Indeed, this was my lucky day because she steadied herself on both elbows like my thoughts tugged on her ears, her eyes delivering the permission I hoped for to proceed with my hungry intentions. With the skilled fingers of a surgeon, I unhooked her bra and dropped it next to the bed.

I kept her eyes hostage with mine, taking my sweet time before I'd give her breasts the attention they yearned for. The intensity of our gaze was off the charts. I didn't know it was possible to feel soul fucked—until now.

Ivy lay back on the bed, her godly breasts on full display for me. Low cast light painted her beauty more stunningly than Jack when he captured Rose's naked entirety on that decadent sofa. The way *her* body presented itself—*oh my*, she gifted it to me on an altar of soft sheets and pillows.

Perfection.

Taking off my shirt, I returned the favor and guided her palms over my toned body. My abs weren't as jacked as most other werewolves', but that did zero to my confidence, which skyrocketed simply by having her trapped underneath me. She stroked my ego when she trailed her hands up and down on me. Her nails scraped fine streaks on my skin with nothing but arousal and worship in those beautiful eyes of hers, gold bursting inside her dilated pupils.

I took her hands as I leaned down and intertwined our fingers next to her head. She pushed them higher with surprising confidence and brought me back to her lips. The warmth of her body flush against mine felt otherworldly. She hiked up her legs, clinging to my hips, and kept me right where she needed me—close to her pussy.

Unleashed lust pumped blood into my cock, dampening my boxers with drops of precum.

It should've been like this all along.

My tongue took the lead when I couldn't stop tasting her, our kisses heating up with each flick, each stroke—she was a slice of Heaven served in Hell.

I grinded painfully slow against her, and she arched her back, filling my ears with sweet moans between kisses. Her breasts molded to me with such softness. I needed to taste them, and I couldn't hold back any longer.

Breaking our kiss, I went straight to her left nipple with my hungry mouth. My tongue welcomed her perfect bud with tender flicks and even hungrier sucks that had Ivy hissing.

"Fuck, Rion..."

She sucked in her lower lip, biting down on it every time one of her moans vibrated in her throat. I wouldn't allow her to hold back, she was mine, and as that, I wanted all of her in the rawest way.

"Let me hear what I do to you, love. Bless me with each and every moan coming out of that mouth." I guided her, luring out the goddess within her with my words like the Pied Piper—*gods*, it worked. Sucking at her perky nipple again, she squeezed me with her legs around my hips and let out a beautiful, unhinged moan. It hooked me in an instant, and I was set on making her cry out in pleasure.

She had no idea what my fingers and mouth had in store for her.



With a roll of my hips, I gave her an intense measure of my hard cock.

“Feel what you do to me?” I stared at her, groaning both in pleasure and frustration. Her hooded eyes darted to the lust stretching my pants, and I brought my bulge back to her with a soft thud, rocking achingly slow.

“Rion!” Her jaw slacked as she moaned out my name. “Keep going.” Clutching the nape of my neck to steady herself, she gaped down at my rock-hard desire teasing her. For every push, another moan of hers followed.

Fuck. I should record that—running that track on repeat.

“Do you like what you see, love?” I couldn’t help but smirk and basked in the pleasure I brought her, even though we weren’t fully naked yet. My confidence at an all-time high, I gripped her face when I pressed a kiss to her lips before pinning her down with my gaze. “Tell me, have you ever thought about the things I’d do to you?”

She held my stare with stunning gold swirling in her pupils, luring me deeper into depths I never wanted to resurface from. “You have no idea how many times I’ve thought about you—about *us*.” Ivy blessed me with soft tongue strokes and the warmth of her hands when she explored every inch of my back, carving her desire for me into my skin. “Every damn time I lay in my bed, touching myself, with forbidden lust and darkness as my only company.”

She breathed against me, her chest heaving. “Every damn time I had to fake it with—” Her voice broke as she tensed, shame lowering her brows.

Did I waste one thought on her human mistake in the other realm until now? *No*. Did the reminder of him send a rush of loathing jealousy through my veins? *Fuck*, better believe it.

Looking down at her, I gripped the sheets next to her face, hues of sepia trickling into my vision. But the pain washing over her eyes snapped me out of my building anger. I did the only thing I knew would ease her pain and bind her to me until she’d cut her ties with *him*—drowning her in all-consuming love.

“This should be us from now on and forever.” I traced my thumb over each delicate part of her lower lip, dragging it down, and brought my mouth to hers, gliding into her warmth with need.

She relaxed into me and let raw passion fuel her kisses.

Dammit... Ten years had to pass before I got to kiss her like that.

I broke our kiss and put my forehead to hers with my eyes closed, shaking my head. “It feels surreal, you know? After all these years, we’re where we belong.” Our breathing became erratic as our feelings ran amok. “Where we *always fucking belonged*.”

If those feelings wouldn’t be my death, I didn’t know what would.

Our lips swollen, the breath we shared hot and heavy. My sweat on her glistening skin was the perfect addition to her stunning features. This would be our first time tonight. It just had to be.

“Dammit, Rion.” Her voice trembled with sorrow. “I was afraid, so damn afraid to lose you. You’ve had my heart all these years. I’ve always longed for *you* until this day, no matter how much I fooled myself into believing I was happy.”

“I know, love.” I captured her lips with mine again and wished this moment would last for eons. Thinking about how long I’d wished for this to happen, to hear her say those affirmations of love threatened old wounds to burst open again. But reality kicked in, shielding my heart from lurking sorrow, when the blessing of her love for me rushed through my whole body.

Two souls burning for each other in the blazing fire of their unleashed feelings until they become one in the ashes.

Coming up for air, I intertwined our fingers and locked them above her head. The dim light accentuated every subtle curve of her body. I snuggled my nose into her hair and inhaled her addictive scent.

Amos’s nature kicked in as I kissed along her jaw, his feral need leading me to the crook of her neck, where I teased with eager nibbles in the spot my kind sealed the mating bond.

I’d adorn her skin with that mark.

My canines scraped her soft skin while licking and sucking the delicate part of her body. Her flesh smelled and tasted so good. True, I loved her perfume, but I worshipped her natural scent underneath all that. It did things to me I couldn’t put into words.

“Careful,” she chastised with a soft voice and stopped me with an arch of her back. “Marcus will kill me if I put tomorrow’s hunt at risk.”

That fucking bastard’s name is the last thing I needed to hear right now. Why does it matter, anyway?

Amos growled at the mental barrier, and my grip on her hands tightened. Despite the strong block, it started to thin with each and every moment I allowed to lose myself in her.

Why’s she holding back?

“Is it because you still love that human?” A snarl laced the question I didn’t want the answer to. My bright copper eyes darted to her soft grays. Although talking about that waste of

breath was the last thing I wanted to do, I couldn't help myself; Amos's possessiveness gained one hell of a vise grip on me.

Ivy sneaked her fingers out of my grasp and cupped my face. "Yes."

Goddammit!

"Yes, I do. But not like a lover should—not anymore and never again." Her look couldn't have held more softness and regret as she filled me in on her messy feelings.

I searched her altered gray eyes and wished to see the same amount of love I harbored for her. But *this* wasn't her—not one hundred percent. It was a disguise, an act of distraction for tomorrow's job. I pushed Amos back into the corners of our shared mind and forced myself to calm down.

Ivy reached for my belt, but I took her dainty hands, kissing them, and rolled us so her bare back was flush against my heaving chest. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the only thing that didn't change with whatever spell she used—her own scent.

"This won't be our moment, love. Our first time will be when it's a hundred percent you, being nothing less and nothing more than the perfection you are and always have been. Ivy, you're all I've ever wanted, and I want it to be special. Just you and I—no burdens, no other ties, no disguises, no regrets."

Fuck holding back, but we deserve more.

My balls were throbbing and blue as fuck, but what I'd dreamed of for years deserved to come true just as I'd envisioned it since that first time we'd lain in bed cuddled up together. I didn't want our first time to be with her looking different or *him* overshadowing us.

A heavy sigh escaped past Ivy's lips, and I pressed mine against her exposed neck.

“Share your thoughts with me, love. Let me in.” I placed a dozen little kisses on her delicate neck and held her tight. I sure as fuck didn’t miss the reaction when the word *love* rolled off my tongue once more. It had her freezing with goose bumps, same as every time, and I loved what it did to her.

“Rion...” She turned around and faced me with her godly, soft breasts brushing me. She shook her head, wiggling her pursed lips. “I don’t know what to do. I’m lost and confused. Fucking frustrating.”

“Stop that.” I clicked my tongue at her signature gesture with hooded eyes as sepia infiltrated my vision for a split second.

Being a gentleman fucking sucks! Do that again, sweetie, and I’ll kick Mr. Gentle to the curb.

“Am I what you want or what you need?” I bit down on her lower lip and licked off the thin layer of blood with tender flicks of my tongue.

My cock had grown painfully hard, and by the consuming scent of her arousal, her pussy must’ve been drenched. Her torturous silence was pouring oil on the fire I’d stepped in since I’d ravished her lips at the club.

“Tell me you’re mine to take.” Growing impatient, I bit down a second time, harder, with a thin streak of blood escaping from the corners of her mouth. I lapped at it, savoring each drop, and smeared her crimson essence over her lips with my tongue.

She begged with her eyes closed, not even flinching, “Don’t do that to me. *Please.*”

“Do *what?*” I grabbed her leg and wrapped it around my hip, perfectly angling her warm center to my cock beneath the pants we still wore.

Ivy’s eyes opened, and I loosened my grip when I noticed traces of tears.

She writhed out of my arms and sat up. “It’s not that simple, Adrion!” Pain laced her voice, sending stabs into my heart. No one could call me by my name as softly as she could, even if it now crushed me.

She’s not ready to cut her ties with that human. Yet...

“It’s like drowning in an ocean, so deep and dark... Lost all orientation.” Ivy pulled up her knees to her full chest and rested her head on them. “It’s fucking complicated!”

I got up and sat on the edge of her bed, combing back my hair with a shaky hand, right knee bouncing uncontrollably. Frustration was a fucking understatement at this moment.

I looked at my reflection in the wide mirror of her closet. My blood boiled seeing her head buried in her arms, hurt and vulnerable.

We weren’t supposed to look like *this*, not after all these years.

“*Dammit*, Ivy! My gut told me to go after you, and I don’t regret one second of what we had tonight. If anything, it proved we have always loved each other. I couldn’t deny myself from what I yearn after any longer!” My temper flared, and I turned to her with anger in my copper eyes. “But, to me, it seems you’re still in love with that goddamn human!”

I should’ve taken care of him a long time ago.

A deep frown built on her forehead as she gave me a taste of my own poison. “And, to *me*, it seems *Natalia* has an interest in you and that you have either history with her or—I guess, that’s where I’m right—you not only have history but *also* something going on at the same damn time.” She looked me up and down, dimmed shimmer from the light chain reflecting in her piercing eyes. “How come you act all jealous and have the nerve to expect *anything* from me?”

In one smooth motion, I pushed her petite frame underneath me with a firm grip on her waist, trapping her. Ivy’s eyes widened at the dominance I lay on her.

I'd rather have my dick in your pussy only once than to fuck Natalia again, fooling myself it's you I'm unloading in.

“Natalia’s none of your concern. Do I fuck her? *Yes*. Does that mean anything to me? *Fuck no!* So, *excusez-moi* for taking care of my needs as a man”—I took her hand and pressed it to my rock-hard bulge, grinding into her palm —“while you contemplate if I’m *the one* or just the fucking halftime show.”

I sucked at the delicate skin in the crook of her neck once more and wished I could just mark her so she’d forget that useless human and every other man altogether. As a damn half human, I wasn’t blessed with that option.

If I were able to have a mate, it'd be you, my love.

She simmered in the consuming fire of my flex, teasing Amos and me with throaty moans. I walked a fine line, gambling with my luck on how far I could take it before she’d push me off. He growled to take the lead, smashing against the barrier, but I wasn’t ready to go there with her yet. Last time he was in charge, he almost killed Natalia in a fit of rage.

Ivy gripped my jaw and brought my attention back to her face. Her golden pupils bored into my copper eyes, daring me to make a move.

I'll never grow tired of that sight.

“Since you can take care of your needs—*pardon*, I mean, since *Natalia* can take care of your needs”—she gave my cock a rub and squeezed—“why do you mess with me? You know, *technically*, I still have a boyfriend, and I’m not free yet to give you what you want.”

Still have a boyfriend... Not free yet... Her bare ring finger...

I inched closer to her face with a devilish smirk stretching my lips. *Gods*, the way my reflection shone in her eyes—I wasn’t ready to give up on that so easily. And I wouldn’t.

If you only knew, my chosen one. You'd never look at me the same.

“Oh, you got it wrong, love.” Deep vibrations thundered through my chest, and her eyes mirrored the storm of copper flashing in my stare as Amos slowly gained control over me, further tinging my vision in sepia.

Ivy buried her fingers in my hair, biting after my lips in the most seductive way that made my cock jerk. Her legs wrapped around my hips and pulled me harder against her, taunting the inner gentleman I kept around for the sake of holding back my beast.

“She can never take care of me like you could. *Gods*, I have filthy, fucked-up scenarios in my mind of how you would do that.” With one quick shift, I flipped us around and held her down by the hips to straddle me, pressing her onto my precum-leaking dick that begged to thrust inside her. “Things you never did but wished you had *with me*. Be my vixen, and I'll give that pretty pussy what it needs.”

Ivy let out a breathy moan and rocked on my swollen cock, her full tits moving with every torturous roll of her hips.

There you go, love. On the throne, where you belong.

She closed her eyes at the sensation of my hard bulge pressing against her sweet pussy through our pants. My senses drowned in her arousal's scent, erasing the last bits of my sanity.

“*Fuck*, Rion, you feel so good!” Her eyes remained closed, and her nipples visibly hardened.

Music. Fucking music to my ears.

The middle part of my boxers already damp by the flood of juices my cock leaked, I couldn't wait to dip into her slick pussy. My wish for experiencing our first time in a romantic manner was gone, replaced by the primal need to fill her with every drop of my cum to *mark* her from the inside.

I decided to test the waters when I rolled us over once more and unbuttoned her jeans with quick, skilled fingers. She pushed against my chest, a weak attempt to stop me, as her legs parted on their own, opening the gates to my personal Heaven.

I slipped my hand into her jeans in one smooth motion, dying to find out *how wet* I made her. “Let’s see how *good* I make *you* feel.” My fingers naturally found their way to her needy slit, coating me with her slick juices. Validation rushed through my body, and my cock was about to explode. “*Fuck*, love, you’re so wet for me.”

“Rion, wait.” She breathed through her puckered, full lips with closed eyes as I slowly let my fingertips slide through her wetness. Her pleasure-filled moans told a truth Amos and I already knew.

Stop pretending. Your pussy sings a different melody.

And what a sweet melody it was. My pupils blew out to the sounds of Ivy’s wetness synching with her unhinged cry as I stretched her with two thick fingers gliding in. Her face looked otherworldly beautiful when her brows furrowed, and she tilted her chin, sucking in her bruised lower lip.

But I wasn’t satisfied yet, I *had* to taste her. So, I pulled out and sucked off the shimmery coating, savoring the godly taste of her pussy like it was Dom Pérignon champagne. A rampant rush of darkest heat prickled beneath my skin, head to toe.

The mental barrier crashed down, and Amos seized his chance. Bastard didn’t waste a second to prey on that single moment when my control over him loosened.



My veins pumped feral desire, and shades of sepia replaced the vibrant spectrum of colors as Amos took over completely and pushed me into the far corners of our shared consciousness.

At last, that bastard was stronger than me, and it showed when he rebuilt the mental barrier, not wasting a second to sentence me to become a witness to his dark, wicked needs.

I didn't mind it as much as I thought I would. Or should. He sought depths of taboo lust I'd never have the guts to explore.

Right now, his intention was to drown Ivy in her own darkest desires—and I let him.

How long will it take her to realize it's Amos and not me?

“Look at me, Vixen!” Amos demanded her attention with authority. He wanted her all to himself and wouldn't allow her to flee out of this moment.

She obeyed, and her eyes finally locked with his, both his fingers and her plump pussy slicker than anything he had ever felt before.

“Vixen...” Ivy tasted the name on her tongue and reached for his glistening fingers. “I like that.”

“Rightfully.” A ghost of a smug grin lifted his lips.

She guided his fingers to her mouth, and his body tensed when she placed them on her wide tongue, closing her lips with a pleased hum. A moan rolled through her delicate throat, and she directed his hand back to her pussy, licking off the leftover coating on her lips with the tip of her tongue.

Ivy jerked her chin, her pupils glowing in brooding gold, inviting him in for another dive.

Holy fucking shit!

He stretched her tight hole with yet another finger and held her body in place with absolute control in his grip.

“Good girl, keep looking at me,” he praised, and her cunt clamped down on him. “So fucking tight. Squeezing my fingers so well with that perfect pussy.”

Amos’s bold dip into uncertain territory granted him another hard squeeze of her slick walls, and when her face flushed in heated red up to her ears, he knew he was on the right track. He kept on fucking her with three thick fingers and feasted on her responsive moans.

“Tell me, Vixen, will you be a good girl?”

“Fuck being good. I rather be bad!”

She bit down on those perfect lips, arching her back. *Gods*, his words gained a choke hold on her lust, ready to drag her into the darkest depths of taboo desires. Thrill and sick delight coursed through my mind at what Amos was about to do, his intentions loud like thunder in our shared consciousness.

“Then, show Daddy how much you enjoy his fingers.” Amos lifted the veil on his kink and watched for her reaction with hooded coppers.

The look in Ivy’s eyes betrayed her as she looked insecure but so turned on at the same damn time, struggling to maintain the remaining bits of her morality. But her slick pussy? It sang an obscene symphony for us.

She seems to vibe with his daddy kink. Lucky bastard.

“Let me hear it, little Vixen!” He didn’t hold back and pressed with one hand onto the area above her pubic bone, building pressure as his skilled fingers massaged her most sensitive part from inside her pussy. “Moan for Daddy!”

Every word dripped onto her like wax, and her moans spiraled into heavenly heights.

Who needs music when you have this?

At this point, I was high as fuck from seeing my deepest desires come to life. Although I was behind the mental barrier, every touch, every betraying moan of hers buzzed through my senses with thrilling intensity. I didn’t intend to switch back any time soon; even if I wanted to, Amos’s power was at an all-time high, and I knew the *leash* had switched its master.

She kept clenching down on his fingers, pulling him in and begging to be fucked. The sounds of her leaking juices with her divine moans and his beastly growls filled the air.

A fucking symphony.

Thrusting inside her drenched pussy two more times, he pulled out his coated fingers and placed them on his lips. “Taste yourself, Vixen.”

Ivy’s unleashed lust guided her needy mouth to his fingers, and they shared her juices with their tongues, lapping up the sticky essence with wicked hunger. He gripped her face and pushed her head back into the pillows, ravishing her smeared lips.

Gods, the forbidden fruit tastes exquisite.

She brought her hands to his upper arm and neck, moaning into him with need, their tongues stroking each other with lust and undeniable urgency.

“You’re fucking delicious, aren’t you?” Amos kept on infecting her mind with feral lust, and dark desire crawled up his spine when she struggled to get out a word. “Daddy certainly thinks so, and he’s thirsty for more.”

Ivy's breathing hitched when he tore at her jeans and got rid of the remaining fabrics that kept him from feasting on her sweet pussy. Amos didn't give her time to deny him when he lowered himself between her soft thighs and brought his hungry mouth close to her plump slit.

Rolling thunder rumbled through his throat as he spread her legs and took a moment to cherish the sight of his favorite craving. Oozing lust hit his senses, and he pressed his nose to her shaved pussy, savoring her composition of primal need with each inhale.

"Fucking hell, Adrion!" Ivy pressed out between her teeth, arching her back.

Oh, love, it's not me you're submitting yourself to. But after today, you will, each and every day.

"Bless me with that sinful arousal of yours." He brought the tip of his tongue below her tight entrance and smeared her juices on his way up to her clit. An ecstatic cuss of thrill went over her lips, her fingers gripping the sheets with her hips jerking up, pushing him deeper into her wetness.

"Worship me, little Vixen," Amos rasped against her cunt, "for I will make you sin."

His tongue wide, he pushed his mouth forward and feasted on Ivy, flicking, stroking, sucking her arousal-smeared pussy. When he thrust his tongue inside her and sucked, the beautiful cries she belted out filled the night. She squirmed and dug her toes into the sheets, pushing up her pelvis against the force holding her in place—fully at his mercy.

"Worship me, Vixen." He nibbled at her swelling lips and pressed his wide tongue flat against her tight hole before he let it slip in with a teasing thrust. "For I will drag you into my darkness."

Ivy screamed my name, raw, unhinged, and shaky. My chosen one wasn't able to utter a straight sentence, even if her life depended on it. *Goddammit*, I'd never been that high on hormones in my whole life.

Groping her soft thighs and pushing them farther apart, he devoured her perfect, wet pussy like it was his hangman's supper. Each thirsty tongue lap forced more moans of wicked pleasure to escape her throat. Her hips moved with his strokes in unison, baptizing him with her warm slickness.

“Good girl, giving yourself to me, all open and needy. Now, let that tight cunt come for Daddy.” He corrupted her as smoothly as only a sinner could and breathed against her swollen clit.

Ivy panted and lowered her gaze to meet the perversion in his copper eyes from between her legs. A tremble in her lowered bottom lip accentuated the hooded stare she threw him, pleading to orgasm all over him.

Fuck, she looks mad beautiful.

Digging his fingertips into the skin of her hips, he buried his face in her drenched pussy and sucked her swollen clit between flutters of his tongue.

“Rion!” She screamed, and Amos's blood-pumped cock twitched both from feral arousal and sinister anticipation.

“Adrion's not here, little Vixen.” Devilry lowered his eyelids, almost hiding the blazing copper pinning her down. “You teased the beast, you'll come for the beast.”

She gasped, shame widening her eyes. “A-Amos!”

Took a long time, love.

I huffed with a smirk behind the mental barrier.

Writhing, her hand shot between her legs to push him off, and his daring snarl echoed through the dimly lit bedroom. Ivy's resistance only fueled his dark fantasies, ready to unleash the neglected sinner in her. Grabbing her wrist, he kept her from denying him.

“I'm not done with you!” He lowered his mouth to her puffy cunt once more, hovering above it with his hot breath, grinning like the mad fucker he was. “In fact, Adrion doesn't mind watching us. So, give him a show, Vixen!”

Not wasting a second, Amos entered her pussy with three thick fingers, speeding up his thrusts while pleasuring her clit with tongue flutters all over again.

Ivy pushed her head back into the pillows and raked her hands through the sheets, blessing both Amos and me with pure shouts of forbidden lust.

“Good girl,” he praised, face buried in her pussy, and her contracting core initiated the hot climax Amos would bless her with. “Come for Daddy!”

She tore at the sheets, threatening to rip them to shreds. Beads of sweat made their way down her hiked-up thighs as he pushed against her G-spot area from inside, meeting the thrusts with the ball of his thumb pressed on her lower abdomen. Devouring the entirety of her smeared cunt, he switched between hungry tongue flicks and sucking.

Slippery warmth gushed into his mouth as her core spasmed from the rolling waves of her wet orgasm. She blessed us with outcries so gripping they burned themselves into my memory—primal fulfillment has never sounded more enticing.

I was a voyeur behind the barrier, but hints of her divine taste filled my mouth and dulled my conscience.

“My little Vixen is a squirter,” Amos mused, with a smug grin creasing the corners of his eyes as he basked in the twitching after-waves of her release when his fingers remained inside her. A low groan sounded from Ivy when he pulled out and crawled up her body.

He brought his face above hers, beads of feminine cum dripping onto her lips, and she cracked her eyes open. Cheeks flushed with heat and her forehead coated in sweat, Ivy opened her mouth to welcome the taste of her climax.

“Share my blessing with me, Amos.” She grabbed his neck and forced his lips onto hers with an awakened hunger for the darkness of her forbidden desires.

You're such a kinky little sinner, my love.

Lapping off the last bits of wetness from his lips, she broke the kiss and grabbed his face, licking off her sticky juices from his chin.

“Don’t confuse who’s in control here, Vixen,” Amos hissed at her from above but couldn’t hold back the praise that itched to lure Ivy further into his perverted depths. Tracing her mouth with his thumb, he whispered, “Good girl, coming in my mouth so fucking hard. Now, confess to Daddy how much you crave his cock inside you.”

Her brows twitched before they lowered, and I knew deep-rooted guilt had made a comeback and kick-started her conscience.

“W-Wait.” Shallow breaths carried her plea, but he took a fistful of her hair and turned her head to the side, bringing a hoarse dare to her ears.

“Don’t deny me or your own cravings! You deserve to be fucked and loved by me, and you know it, don’t you?” Amos let go and pushed himself up, tearing off the remaining clothes from his body. He presented his veiny cock in its full length and girth, stroking it. “Adrian can have you the next time.”

“Please, I can’t,” Ivy begged but couldn’t help but stare at his cock with hungry eyes, the blatant arousal dilating her golden pupils, betraying her.

Dripping threads and beads of precum anointed her smooth pussy, and when her breath hitched, a jolt went through his hard cock, ready to thrust inside her until she couldn’t walk straight.

Confess to us. Submit yourself to us.

“Be a good girl for Daddy and beg him to fuck you!” Amos grabbed Ivy by her throat, smashing his lips to hers, and dove into her mouth with wide licks. Their kiss fueled with primal need and his sticky arousal smearing her cunt, she wrapped her legs around him. His thumb found her carotid artery and built bittersweet pressure.

Breaking the kiss, he watched for her reaction with bright heat burning in his copper eyes. “Obey me, Vixen!”

Ivy broke under his sinful corruption with a hoarse whisper against his lips, “H-Have me. *Please*, Daddy, fuck me!”

“You’ve always craved my beastly cock inside you, haven’t you?” Satisfaction stretched his mouth into a sinister smirk. He traced her shimmery lips with his tongue and pressed his cock against her slick entrance, triggering another betraying moan from her. “Right there, little Vixen?”

“Yes, Daddy!” She moaned and met his swollen tip with a push of her hips. “Bless me with every fucking inch of it.”

He’ll fuck and erase that human out of your mind. Right here, right now!

Amos gripped her face and forced her mouth open with his thumb dragging her jaw down. His hooded look fixated on that agape pretty mouth.

“Careful what you wish for, little Vixen. My blessing might hurt.”

Ivy snapped her face free, meeting his sinister look with her own wicked lust, and spat in his face. “Make it hurt, Daddy!”



In this room were no saints but two sinners acting on primal lust in the shadows. Dimmed light from above the headboard cast an unholy glow over Amos, toned body tensed and impatient to ruin me.

His viselike grip on my face promised to bruise me, and I opened my mouth, giving in to the force of his thumb lowering my jaw. Wild copper daggers pinned me down, his stare burning into my soul—ready to strip me bare from it.

“Careful what you wish for, little Vixen. My blessing might hurt.”

Disgust and beastly lust clashed and erupted with nuclear power, bursting the last fragments of my common sense into extinction.

I yanked my head out of his control and spat in his face. “Make it hurt, Daddy!”

His primal growl echoing through the night like thunder, Amos spat back and rammed his thick cock into my pussy as he gunned for my throat, trapping and choking my ecstatic screams.

Cruel and reckless, he made sure I’d never confuse him for being anything but a beast when he assaulted my cunt with raw thrusts. His blessing became an out-of-body experience as my slick walls stretched and absorbed the trauma of the fierce invasion.

With zero control over myself, I threw back my head and submitted to every wrecking inch he gifted me.

My mouth gaped, but nothing more than smothered screams got to break free. I couldn't breathe. My lungs, desperate to expand with oxygen, instead tightened, kick-starting my survival instinct. I clawed at his hand around my throat and would tear off his skin if I had to.

Warm spit met my open mouth, and rolling thunder resonated from Amos as his expression bared the sadistic high he got from my fight for breath. He kept on pounding into me and dug his fingers deeper into my throat. My mind threatened to go blank from both ecstatic thrill and the lack of oxygen.

“Is that trepidation or euphoria widening those gorgeous eyes, little Vixen?” He growled and jerked his hips forward one last time before he granted me a sharp intake of air.

Hell, he gave respiration a new meaning.

My lungs expanded with a desperate, noisy inhale, and hate rattled through my chest. I wanted to rip his damn head off and spear it with both my kukri swords. “You're one sick bastard, Amos. Fucking hate you!”

“Lie to yourself all you want.” He brought his lips to mine, and I snapped my teeth down on them, biting down. Hard. At the savage shove of his cock all the way in, my eyes rolled to the back of my head, and I released his bleeding lip with cries of pleasure. Wet traces of blood smeared along my jawline when he brushed his wounded mouth up to my ear, murmuring in dark, shredded bass tones, “But your tight pussy worships me.”

A spray of spit and blood met my face when he let the wickedness within him reign over his actions.

“Filled with my cock and painted with my spit and blood. You'll be a fucking masterpiece once I'm done with you!”

“Then, finish what you've started!” I bit down hard on my lip and offered it to him with a tilt of my chin. “Make me the most fucked-up piece of art you've ever laid eyes on.”

Amos's sharp inhale cut through the air around us, and he shoved himself deeper into me until his base touched my pussy. The copper in his eyes blazed as he zeroed in on my blood-coated lips, and he closed the distance between our mouths achingly slow—not hesitation behind his slow moves but sinister anticipation.

First touch of his lips on mine, a deep moan escaped me, and he lapped my blood off me with his tongue wide. I dove in for the sickest, most thrilling kiss I've ever had in my life. Our warm blood engulfed my taste buds, and I drew more from him when I bit down between kisses. Amos broke our sinful connection and threw his head back with a snarl rattling his throat.

Scarlet rivulets made their way down over his chin when he faced me again, drops of our perverted play hitting my breasts.

“Beautiful,” he whispered when he admired his art. “But *beautiful* doesn't match your divinity.” With that, he lowered his mouth to my jaw and drew long, wet, sloppy crimson lines over my throat, down my chest, and at last, he came to a halt at my left nipple and smeared his coated lips over it in circles.

My breathing came out in quickening pants, and I clenched his thick cock with my pussy. Biting his own lip, more blood gathered, and he spat on my right breast. *Hottest hell*, his face with that smeared mouth, chin, and cheeks was a masterpiece of its own.

“Now, what do good girls say when they get gifted Daddy's devotion?” Amos started to fuck me again, picking up speed and force, just to slow down again for a beat or two. The feral heat in his hooded look was fixated on me, and I couldn't help but meet his thrusts with my own.

I arched my back from the euphoric pleasure his cock ignited within me and moaned out my worship for him. “Thank you, Daddy!”

“That’s Daddy’s good, filthy Vixen!” he praised, and my eyes fell shut from another wave of sickest pleasure rolling over me.

He pounded into me, each pelvic roll rhythmic like he invented rhythm himself, and I silently begged he’d have the stamina of the god Pothos—or whatever deity could fuck until the crack of dawn.

I couldn’t think straight—scratch that, I couldn’t think *at all*; acting on pure sexual longing was all I managed to do.

Hell, fucking with Amos rewired me, and I wanted to hate it, but my raging brain corrupted my mind when it poured out floods of oxytocin, dopamine, and sex hormones into the course of my damn veins like heroin.

Unleashed primal lust invoked a beast of my own, and it craved Amos in his entirety.

Slowing the pace, he rocked his hips, but that did zero to quell the sensation his cock created inside me. I might’ve mistaken it for tenderness, if I didn’t know the beast I lay with was nothing but possessive darkness.

And I *prayed* for him to consume my light, blacking out my conscience, for it was blazing fire burning my insides, and it wouldn’t stop until he’d fucked it out.

“Faster!” I moaned.

His deep chuckle vibrated on my ear lobe, and he pulled out. “Dare to command me one more time, Vixen!”

Gripping a fistful of my hair, he yanked me with him as he straightened up and kneeled in front of me. He spread his thick, strong thighs and hauled my head down to his pulsating cock—eight fat inches glistening from my slickness. I exhaled, and my lower lip sagged in awe, blood dripping over my chin down to the sheets.

Good hell, this cock was the epitome of a sinner’s redemption, and every fiber of my soul screamed to be redeemed by it.

“Open,” Amos hissed, and my blood-smeared lips parted to obey him. Tightening his grip on my roots, he made sure stinging pain prickled my scalp. “Wider.”

I’ll choke on it.

Through mascara-smudged lashes, for surely, it ran in sooty streaks down my face, I met his dangerous gaze and lowered my jaw to fit his size.

“Good girls get to clean Daddy’s cock.” His murmur hoarse and loaded with devilry, it made a shiver of sick anticipation crawl up my spine.

Flavors of iron and creamy nut smothered my taste buds when I welcomed his fat length into my mouth. Traces of my juices topped off the exquisite taste.

Hell, we taste so good together.

He allowed me to work my way down his shaft, my tongue massaging his hard cock. Wicked bastard proved to have a streak of gentleness. Or so I thought.

A sinister hum rose up from the depths of his chest.

“Bad girls get to choke on it.” Molding my head into his taut pelvis, his powerful grip trapped my mouth against his cock’s base. He fucking choked me with that massive dick.

I clawed and scratched at his lower abdomen, digging into his skin until dark-red wetness pooled under my nails.

Four long and deep thrusts. Four long and deep thrusts he used to make an example of what he thought of me commanding him.

I loved it as much as I hated it.

Pulling out of my slick mouth, he stared down at me with wickedness etching his face. Insanity never looked more attractive than in those bright copper eyes. “Command me one more time, and I’ll choke you with that cock until you faint, only to fuck you awake with it again.”

“I hope your threat is a promise.” The words left me without a second thought, and by the way I drank in the dark divinity in front of me, my eyes delivered both my obedience and the hope that he’d stay true to his words.

Right cheek lifting to form a lopsided grin, he hooded his eyes as he combed through my hair. “I always knew you were made for me, Vixen. Tell me how bad you want to choke on Daddy’s cock.”

“So fucking bad.” My breathing picked up, and I dared to tease the beast when I flicked my tongue over the edge of my incisors.

His praise followed right after, sending a wet rush of thrill through my pussy. “Such a good girl, obeying me with that hungry mouth. Now, worship this cock, for it will train you to pleasure Daddy and only Daddy!”

Whatever sound left my mouth at that moment, it was nothing more than a faint rasp. My pupils blew out from the raw perversion choking my conscience, and the darkness crawling through my limbs up to the farthest corners of my mind prickled my insides with renewed desire for him.

I closed my eyes and worshipped his cock, sending a low moan through its thickness as I took in several glorious inches, dedicated to choking myself with his pulsating perfection.

“*Fuck*, she’s perfect!” He groaned and pushed the rest of his beastly cock inside my mouth until his tip hit the back of my throat. I stilled for a second.

Rion...

Blinded by Hell’s sinful fire, I’d been oblivious to the fact Adrion had watched every second of my filthy disgrace from behind the mental barrier.

Amos sensed the gears in my head picking up speed and kept my head in place, rocking his pelvis. “Adrion’s on a fucking high, little Vixen. Hearing how you moaned for *us*.” His unnatural, deep growl vibrated through his cock against my uvula. “When your orgasm spilled in *our* mouth. When

you licked your cum from *our* face.” Another hoarse groan resonated from him when he clenched my hair until the roots stung. “When your tight pussy gripped *us*.”

I squeezed my eyes shut from both unhinged arousal and Amos’s mindfuckery setting my whole body on fire.

His filthy words thrilled me, but knowing Adrion had witnessed all of it drenched my pussy even more, and it pulsed with need to keep the fuckery going.

“Call me a selfish bastard, but I shared every ounce of you with him.”

I couldn’t stop the raw moan from thundering through my throat—mind, body, and soul completely and irreversibly ruined.

Clawing at the sides of his scratched, V-shaped abdomen, I sucked him off like I’d snatch his soul. Hot, sticky wetness spread through my pussy, and I nearly lost my damn mind over the missing friction.

Depthroating Amos’s fat cock one last time, my mouth touched his stubbled base before I pulled away. Choppy breaths left me, making my chest heave like I just finished a ten-mile marathon.

“Do you know how *goddamn* beautiful you are, my Vixen?” He brushed his fingers through my messy hair and brought his hand down to my face, tilting it up. Devilry etched his face, contrasting the soft tones in his murmur. “Ours to *own*. Ours to *share*. Ours to *fuck*.”

No idea what I looked like at that moment, but my swollen lips prickled, jaw hurt, and saliva ran down the corners of my mouth. Amos was ruining me. He loved it as much as I loved the collateral damage he inflicted on my conscience.

Not waiting for him to take charge again, I climbed onto his thick left thigh to straddle it with my soaked pussy. My hunger for another climax was insatiable, and I’d use him like a sex toy if I had to.

The friction on my clit triggered an ecstatic moan out of me. His muscles beneath me tensed as I picked up speed and smeared my arousal over him.

I gripped Amos's hair and brought our sweat-coated faces together. "Too bad, *Rion*, you hide behind that barrier like a fucking coward." Smashing my lips to his, I mocked him between wet, hungry strokes of my tongue. "Stay there for all I care. Amos gets the job done just fine!"

Darkest bass chuckles washed into me, vibrating down to my bones. "That's Daddy's savage Vixen. Now, show him what he's missing out on!"

Picking up speed, I chased that climax with every quick roll of my hips.

His spread hand on my ass supported my movements, and his other hand locked on the nape of my neck, our faces molding to each other.

"Daddy, it feels so good!" A knot of lust tightened within me, desperate to baptize him with yet another flood of relief. His thigh beneath my clit, wet and slick, he moved along.

"*Goddamn* perfection," he cussed and hissed under his breath. "Fucking Daddy's leg like a bitch in heat."

I moaned into him. My throat was flayed raw with the primal arousal sharp in my voice, messing with my ability to form words, so I flicked my tongue against his in a silent plea.

He roamed his hand over my ass until his digits found my wet pussy from behind, two thick fingers pumping into me.

"Come on Daddy's thigh, little Vixen!" he coaxed me like the sin-loving bastard he was.

Fuck, can't hold it back any longer...

Warmth splashed out of me as I cried out in the sweetest ache. I came hard on Amos and selfishly squeezed him with my legs to seize this moment of redemption.

Tensed from ecstatic thrill seconds before, now a puddle of sloppy bliss.

Strong arms hooked behind my back, steadying my body as I slumped from my carnal high.

“I got you, love.”

Love...

All tiredness left my burning muscles in an instant, and I inched away, supporting my body’s weight on trembling arms. “Adrion—”

Eliminating the faintest hints of shame, he grabbed my wobbly legs and hauled me on top of his lap. “Better fucking believe it.” Breathily voice against my lips, he kissed me, and I *knew* it was him—tenderness cradled me with every soft flick of his tongue. “I’m done sharing you.”

I couldn’t decide whether to yell at him for blindly leading me into Amos’s arms in the first place or to slap him for caging in the beast.

But my anger subsided when he wrapped me in the cozy warmth of his hold. Safety dressed my naked body, and I relaxed into him with every caress of his tongue. Tender hands cupped my face like I was made from the thinnest glass.

“Amos set my pussy on fire, but you saw that for yourself, didn’t you?” I smirked against his healed lip. I wouldn’t let him get away with his little stunt that easily. Even though I loved every damn second of it.

Adrion hummed with a smile of his own and sucked in my lower lip. His tongue teased my delicate, bruised skin before he released it. “He might’ve owned your body *tonight*”—bluish-green eyes locked with mine, their intensity chipping away at the last doubts about us being anything but fated—“but I’ve owned your heart for over a *decade*.”

My stomach in a total free fall, I melted right there on the spot. Minutes before, I was cut off from oxygen by force.

Now? Blissful truth choked me and the words that begged to escape my lips.

“I love you, Ivy. I’ve loved you in all these years, and I will love you for as long as there is blood to fill my veins and a beat to move my heart.”

I couldn’t come up with a response, too caught up in this moment we shared.

He moved us to the headboard of my bed, keeping me on top of his lap. The sea of lights dappled our molded bodies in surreal perfection. He tilted his head back and gazed over my blood-smeared, naked canvas—each inch, each curve exposed for him to cherish.

And, *damn*, he did.

Copper lit up in his irises, but not an ounce of Amos was evident in the way he took in my body; hungry, *yes*, but hungry to love instead of possess.

“Rion...”

He loosened his hold on my waist and traced his hands over my collarbone, my sternum, my breasts, and down to my spread thighs—touch as light as a feather.

I shivered, and an army of goose bumps emerged on my skin. Heat pooled between my legs, and I subconsciously rolled my hips. Blood pumped into his dick in response, and he pressed me against his building arousal.

“You loved it when Amos fucked you, didn’t you?”

I rocked my hips again and tipped my head back to give him a hooded look but couldn’t disregard the heat spreading on my face when I whispered, “Kind of.”

His palm settled on the nape of my neck, fingertips urging me to come closer, and our lips met. The breath we shared was warm and damp; it matched our hot centers caressing each other. His undying love for me permeated every ounce of need his lips applied, every ounce of longing his tongue stroked

mine with, and every ounce of consuming passion he sealed into our kiss.

Sweetest hell, this man could snatch my soul with his kisses.

“Be *mine*,” he whispered between kisses. “Be mine after tonight and for the rest of our lives.”

Silence hung in the air—my stereo had run out of songs to play after the deep-voiced, slowed version of Elley Duhé’s “Middle Of The Night” came to an end. My heart hammered inside my chest, threatening to break every rib.

Three days too early... But we’re here, and I can’t change what my heart wants. You.

Adrion had been my most painful *what-if* for a decade, and it felt surreal how he turned into my favorite *why-not*.

“Then, take me.” A delicate whisper synchronized the words my lips formed. “Make me yours, Rion. Tonight, and for the rest of our lives.”

Lifting my body high enough for his length to enter me, he lowered me with tender guidance. “Let me in, love. Take what is yours and yours alone.” His slick tip parted my wet but sensitive pussy before he glided in base-deep. I cried out with pure fulfillment, literally.

This time, he let my body accommodate to the girth stretching my walls. I clamped down around his cock, choking it with each contraction, and moaned out the sweetest notes of redemption.

A hoarse murmur fanned against my skin. “So fucking *beautiful* when you consume my love for you.” His words gripped me like his hand did my hair, and he tilted my head back, heaving breasts exposed to him.

Adrion leaned me farther back, my hips and pussy glued to him, and buried his face between my breasts to lick every inch of skin clean. His palms now supporting my weight

below my shoulder blades, he held me at his mercy as he took turns feasting on my nipples.

All ability to control my body, let alone my face, had forsaken me. I didn't fucking care what I looked like.

"This might be *his* vision of divinity"—destroying the artistic result of Amos's bloody session with wipes of his flat palm, my sweat-glistening skin was now covered in a smeared, thin layer of faint red—"but he can never appreciate your soul's beauty in its entirety like I do."

He made my skin his own canvas and *repainted* me with traces of his warm saliva smearing curving lines, revealing my natural skin tone beneath them. Brushing his eager tongue over every damn inch of my breasts, he created his own version of Mona Lisa.

"I've envisioned you on top of me, holding you like this, loving you like this." He bit down on my nipple and licked over the stinging sensation that spread over the bruised area right after. "Getting off on it every damn time I couldn't have you."

Our bodies moved in perfect synchronicity as we rocked into each other—deeper until completely filled and locked. Grinding slowly, in this position, his cock rubbed against my G-spot area, and I couldn't retain control over my expressions.

"Feel that?" He moved his hands from the middle of my back up to my shoulders from behind and pressed me down against him. His thick base stretched me further when he led me along the fine line between exquisite pain and crazed lust.

"*Fuck, yes!*" My jaw slack, I released a mix of heated sounds with his name, which I couldn't stop verbally worshipping.

Rolling his hips and holding me by my shoulders to meet his movements, he whispered with delicious layers of smoothness, "Good. Because you'll only feel this full with me." His fingers clutched harder on the top of my shoulders as he pumped into me. "You're mine to love, mine to please."

Soon, another bursting climax was on the rise, and I begged for it to come with throaty moans. He molded me to fit his size, meeting my increasing thrusts with his own, and I was on the verge of losing my voice. “Then, fucking love me!”

Shit, his love imprinted on me in every damn way possible.

I slid my hand down until my fingers found my plump clit and started to rub it in circular motions. But Adrion let go of my shoulders and pushed my eager fingers away to take care of me himself.

“Love, this pleasure is mine to give.” His thumb pressed and rubbed right at the top part of my clit’s hood, and he settled his other hand on my ass.

The friction so exquisite, I could only succumb to the consuming sensation tightening within me.

“*Rion*, I’m coming!” I groaned out between pants and looked at him through wet lashes. Darkened bluish-green eyes locked with mine, fucking my heart and soul with unmatched intensity.

“Fall apart for me, right here, around every inch of my love for you.”

Hiding his gaze behind lowered lids, he kept his thumb’s pace steady until I couldn’t handle it any longer. I tossed back my head and shut my eyes while belting out my third orgasm, pussy tensing around his thick cock from the ecstatic high.

Stripped of all mental capacity, his low murmur reached me from far away. “There’s one last thing I want to gift you.” He pulled my upper half back to him until my breasts were flush against his chest.

“Tell me.” I kissed him, body trembling from my trip to heavenly heights.

Adrion’s hands moved my hips back and forth on his cock, compensating for what my tired body couldn’t do any

longer and then he rasped against my lips, “Every drop of my *goddamn* cum.”

I fucking lost it over those six words, and it invoked my last bits of stamina, body heating up anew with ravenous lust, impatient to send him on his own oxytocin high.

The thought of him pumping his cum inside me triggered a craving in my core. A kink I didn’t have before, but with him, it was all I could think of now.

“Coated with my love for you from the inside... Marked and filled with my claim.” He dug his fingers deeper into my skin, the aching sensation spreading over me in all the right places.

I summoned every working muscle in my wobbly legs and rode his cock like I was born to do it. Soreness spread through my lower region, but I wouldn’t back down, not one fucking bit until he’d shoot his cum.

The way his cock thrust into my pussy was otherworldly—fierce, passionate, deep.

“Fill me up, Rion, *please!*” I didn’t beg for it to be over. I begged for him to mark me from the inside. “Claim me!”

His feral growls resonated from all sides of the bedroom and rattled down into my bones. The skin on my hips long since bruised from the impact of his grip, I ached for more of his addictive love. Catering to my unspoken plea, his claws extended, and he pierced my flesh as he kept on fucking my pussy to his desired rhythm.

“You’re mine!” Voice wrapped in darkness and heat, he slammed me onto his cock over and over again. “I’ll fill you up until you understand this is where you belong. Where you’ve always fucking belonged!”

Hoarse cries left my trembling lips, vision blurry before I shut my eyes. I signed myself over to him in every possible way. I didn’t care one bit if Amos’s influence seeped back into Adrion, as long as he fucked me like I was the breath that kept him alive.

Slowing the pace between up-and-down motions, he made my hips roll in circles when he pressed me hard against his base before lifting me again. Strong hands controlled my body like I was a doll.

The friction on my swollen clit had me taking in sharp breaths through my teeth, too sensitive but not bruising it further undeniably wrong and inarguable with my unleashed desire for him.

Use me for all I fucking care...

“Meant to be mine, and I’ll keep what’s mine!” His voice at its darkest—*fuck*, I’d never heard him like that before. He gunned for fistfuls of my hair and nearly ripped my damn head off to expose the elegant curve of my neck. “Now, take my mark and every drop of my *goddamn* cum!” One wrecking thrust of his cock, and he sank his canines into me.

Hot pain shot through the crook of my neck with his beastly growl into the wound. My eyes widened, and I screamed out in darkest sensation.

Adrion’s whole body tensed as he pumped his cum into my pussy. His viselike grip kept me in place, his cock throbbing inside me until he gifted me every drop of his warm load.

Sex with Amos was hot and filthy. But with Adrion? Adrion didn’t play in the same league, not even the same damn sport. He invented his own godly discipline of love and desire with those intention-packed words fucking my heart into nirvana.

Sated breaths and hoarse groans of fulfillment hung heavy in the air.

His fangs lost touch with my neck, and I went slack in his arms. His warm juices leaked out of my pussy, and I squeezed his cock, hoping to keep most of it inside.

“*Hell*, what was that?” I murmured into his chest, and his chuckle jostled my head.

“That wasn’t Hell but Heaven. A taste of what our future nights will look like, now that you’re mine from dusk till dawn and every other second of the day.”

“Promise...”

He took my face in his hands and moved his hips with such gentleness, it stirred the bliss that spread from head to toe. “Promise.”

Tiredness descended on me, and I allowed myself to prolong my stopover in Heaven. His taste lingered on my tongue, same as *our* scent engulfed my senses. The way our chests heaved in perfect synchronicity made me want to stay like this forever, but that wish was denied.

“When will you get it over with?” Adrion’s body tensed beneath me, and I looked up. The warmth in his eyes had been replaced by something that caught me off guard, a look as hard as granite.

“With what?”

His expression bore his rising temper, jaw muscles ticking as Amos’s influence seeped back into his demeanor. “Texting *him!*”

“Rion, I won’t break up with Ezra over text. First comes tomorrow’s job—” But he cut me off with a snarl, and his grip on my bruised skin began to sting.

“You’re done with him!”

Cupping his face, I tried to make him understand. “I am! Believe me! But he deserves more than—”

“That human deserves *nothing* from you, Ivy! He got more than he deserved for six *fucking* years!” Copper took over his irises as spite dripped into his words, like acid burning its way through flesh.

“*Yeah*, right! Fucking my best friend behind his back is what he deserves, topped off with a cowardly breakup text. *Exactly*, Adrion, *exactly!*” I bit back, sarcasm and frustration sharp on my tongue and even sharper in my glare.

Moments before, our words had been smooth and tender. Now, they stung fiercely with the precision of arrows. Love doesn't abide by rules, and neither does war, as his next words proved how much alike these two were when invoked by wrath. "You didn't seem too concerned about what *I* deserved when you chose to be that human's slut for the last six years!"

The sharp impact of my slap to his face echoed through the night.

I gunned for his throat with tears glazing my vision. "Come again, Adrion Gregori! I didn't catch that."

"Ivy... *Shit!* I didn't mean—" His expression slipped, bluish-green eyes widening with remorse as they darted between mine.

My bottom lip quivered. Tears I couldn't contain any longer flowed over my cheeks, and I climbed off him.

Pain, anger, and disappointment weighed on my chest, burning a deep hole into it. "That's what you thought of me? A *slut*, huh?"

"N-No... *Fuck!* Love, I'm sorry—" He took my hand, but I yanked it away. I flexed my fingers and balled them into a fist.

Stoic, I stared at the messy sheets. "Every time I lied to Ezra about our *innocent* pecks. Every time I let you hold me tighter than a friend should but loved it. Every damn time I deleted your texts on my phone before I returned home to him," I gritted out, and a sob slipped over my lips, "I felt like a slut! But *thanks* for pointing it out!"

"Ivy, listen—"

"*Leave!* Leave before I..." But my hurt feelings got the better of me when I looked at him and yelled, "*Fuck!* Adrion, just leave!"

He got up and picked up his clothes before he glanced back at me one last time, but I held up my hand. It took all of my self-control to keep from crumbling in front of him.

And that was something I wouldn't do. Couldn't.

His words reflected my deepest, most shameful thoughts. Thoughts I had had about myself for years. Guess hearing them from someone you love gives them painful validation.



Beams of sunlight delivered warmth to my face as I opened my eyes the next morning. The coziness of fluffy-pillow Heaven engulfed me with the sheets around my legs. I treated my eyes to a few more moments of rest and rolled over with a long, soul-deep yawn stretching my lips, too tired to face my work responsibilities right away.

Hues of Armani Code cologne snuggled up my nose, and a rush of adrenaline pumped through my body when I ripped my eyes open again. Adrion was gone, but his scent still lingered on me and the sheets, his invisible claim all over me and more *evidence* of him seeping out between my legs.

The many sprinkled blood stains and smears next to me kick-started rattling gears in my head, interlocking together to press *play*, and last night's sinister passion flashed in vivid images inside my mind.

Scorching copper. Skilled fingers stretching me. Scarlet streaks smeared all over my skin. Fucking both Amos and Rion. Moaning. Panting. Coming. Sweetest hell, does this count as a threesome?

A groan of frustration left me from the intense memories prickling my skin with renewed arousal. Subconsciously, I clenched my thighs together and arched my back; the need to build pressure on my clit ratted out my innermost desires. Desires I'd denied for years.

“Worship me, little Vixen, for I will make you sin.”

Amos is one wicked bastard of a sinner... I'd do it all over again, though.

I recalled all the things *we* did and what he triggered in me that had me giving into those filthy cravings. Dark cravings I didn't know existed. Sick cravings that now haunted me.

"H-Have me, please, Daddy, fuck me!"

I begged Amos like the good little slut I've always been.

Yesterday's lust-blinded pleas now cackled inside my head like a pack of hyenas, threatening to turn me deaf. I hid under my blanket with crushing shame.

"Fuck," I hissed and pressed the duvet onto my face, hoping it would suffocate the slut-shaming horde of words. But my stupid brain had more in store for me.

"Be mine after tonight and for the rest of our lives."

I'd given myself to Adrion—*heck*, I'd signed on the dotted line without thinking it through. Last night had not only soft-washed the light around us but also the reason I had initially wanted to deal with my mess of a love life before seeing Adrion.

My plan to first break up with Ezra went down the drain, and my night with Adrion ended with me kicking him out because of an overreaction.

Happy now?

My teeth threatened to break from the force I clenched my jaw with. I hated myself for being so fucking selfish.

Getting a kick out of fucking Amos was one thing, but being tied to him for the rest of my life? *Fuck no*. Even though I wanted to be with Adrion, now more than ever. His wrath-fueled words, I hadn't forgotten, but I cursed myself for lashing out when he'd only reacted on pure emotions; just like me.

The stench of my chagrin overshadowed my unleashed libido, and it stuck to my skin like an inordinate dousing of

musk-heavy perfume, promising me headaches for days to come. How was I supposed to face Adrion again? After he'd left, I'd only managed to brush my teeth, pee, and put on a shirt before I went to bed. Every inch of my skin screamed for a long, thorough shower.

On tired legs, I teetered into the light-flooded bathroom. Slick rivulets of cum ran down my thighs, and I halted in front of the mirror. The worn-out reflection staring back at me was anything but pretty. Crusty blood was partially plastered over my face, throat, and chest. My puffy eyes sported bags, and streaks of smudged mascara reached down over my jawline—I'd cried myself to sleep.

Steam fogged the air as I scrubbed off the sinful proof of last night, turning the water extra hot. I let the foamy washcloth glide over my body, mind drifting off until I went over the soft skin of the joint between my neck and shoulder.

Closing my eyes, I reached up to the spot where Adrion had *marked* me, wandering down to my hurting pussy, where Amos had *corrupted* me.

Why did it feel so natural?

They'd never get to have a mate—Adrion's human half made sure of that. But our mate-like chemistry was a riddle I wasn't able to solve.

Grabbing after any plausibility was like keeping water from seeping through my fingers. Then Danielle's vision came to mind, but I shook it off. If he wasn't my mate but instead my twin flame, why had we been able to resist each other for years?

I should've broken up with Ezra a long time ago. Hell, we were even somewhat engaged! All these years, I've wasted both our time...

Sorrow marred my face, carving my forehead with deep creases.

It's official—I'm a kinky, cheating slut, and even Rion thought of me that way. Ugh, no, that's not true...

I forced myself out of my delirium when the importance of tonight's mission called for my sole attention. Corvina didn't simply kill one of our hunters—*no*, Devlen was our friend, even if only distant. Shit had gotten personal, and every fiber in me yearned to drag her witchy ass to Chief Hardin.

Stepping out of the spacious shower, I walked up to the big mirror next to the door and wiped over the steam with a towel. The heated tiles beneath my feet balanced the contrast of the chilly air brushing my naked body.

The bruises were gone. Even the bite marks had vanished, and beside my emotional mess inside, my body didn't give away any hints of my dive into unholy waters.

Seems like I got my mojo back... for now.

Wistful waves hit me—was there a possibility I looked at the missing bite marks with disappointment?

Even if Rion could have a mate, would it be me?

I combed my spread fingers through my wet hair, still struggling to cope with how things ended.

“Whoa! Hold up!”

A thin blonde strand peeked out behind my ear. I weaved through the sides, searching for more, but this strand was the only nasty rebel.

“Oh, no, no, no!”

I hadn't been sexually active for what felt like an eternity, and sleeping with both Adrion and Amos had fueled my powers, much like when Marcus kissed me. But last night had one hundred times the effect. And it had also weakened Danielle's spell somehow.

Fucking great...

I still pondered the possible reasons when my personal ho anthem resounded from the bedroom. I'd change it later, that was for sure. Striding out of the bathroom, I grabbed my phone—Marcus.

“Ready for today’s hunt?” His upbeat voice irritated my grumpy mood like *Happy Hour* an emo.

“Kind of, you?” I forced the words out, my voice rugged from yesterday’s opera of lust and sin.

“You bet!”

I could imagine his damn smirk, remembering his intentions, as today’s voyeur that surely made him feel like a kid at an all-you-can-eat pancake buffet.

“Of course you are,” I said under my breath.

“Get your virgin-looking ass to HD. I’ll brief you.”

“Almost out the door,” I lied like every girl running late and rushed through my routine at hyperspeed.

With my hair quickly styled into smooth perfection, thanks to my now-straight hair and my still-fresh-smelling *Parental Advisory* shirt from yesterday paired with a new set of lingerie and denim hot pants, I hurried to my Alfa Romeo and jumped in.

Trapping a cigarette between my lips, I fumbled with my CD folder, searching for that one CD that would help me bring on my A game for today’s hunt. I’d welcome any distraction from Adrion with open arms.

Although late, I needed to find it. The right music could set the right mood to give more than just a hundred percent. It’s like your life’s soundtrack—the wrong choice can ruin the movie. Fact.

I never warmed to using USB sticks or connecting my phone to play music. This girl right here was an old-school baby.

Ahhh... here you are.

The CD had tracks from when I was seventeen, and I still vibed to them. With Iron Maiden’s “The Trooper” blasting, I had Guido’s tachometer needle bumping and surely ignored a few rights-of-way.

Twenty minutes and one or two *oopsies* later, I pulled up in front of Hell's Discovery.

Driving to my personal parking lot, the gleaming surface of a jet-black car caught my attention, and I assaulted the brakes when I couldn't help but gawk. Eyes ready to pop out of my sockets, I eye-fucked every inch of that American beauty. The hood long and wide with angled edges, it reached far over the drawn lines on the asphalt.

Belongs to nobody from HD... Hm, whose car is this? Lucky bastard!

"Sorry, Guido." I patted the steering wheel and peeled my stare from the other car's dazzling chrome grille. *Oh boy*, those big double headlights on each side, the front framed in chrome, poured in a heavy dose of savage. A dream fleshed out in pressed steel never looked that beastly.

Marcus waited outside the building, halfway perching on the San Marino Blue hood of his car, with two takeaway coffees, talking to a guy his towering height but, in comparison, leaner than his pumped frame.

Still stunned from the brutish front side of the mysterious car, I walked up to them while peeking back a few times.

That was until I caught a closer glimpse of the man flipping a small box in his glove-covered hand before Marcus put the coffee cups down to give him a fat bundle of cash in exchange.

Who the hell is that guy? No. What is he?

Horns. Two thick horns graced the head of the guy I hadn't seen before. Their color at the base the darkest of black, swallowing the light's reflection like a black hole, only to transcend into shades of pine green from the middle up to the tips.

Same green color as his eyes. Beautiful...

"Morning, Blondie." I gave a semimotivated salute with two fingers and glanced over to the man next to him. "Hi."

The guy hummed in return, not caring to look at me or show any bits of courtesy.

What in good hell is he? Okay, one last peek. But not too obvious!

Sparsely rippled every two inches and softly spiraled to the tips, the set of bicolored horns' thick bases reached from his temples to parts of his forehead's hairline. About eight inches long, their surface matte and smooth, they graced close over the man's head between strands of his charcoal-black hair. The contrast to his alabaster skin just as eye-catching.

I've never seen anyone like him!

My fingers itched with an unusual desire to touch, but a vise grip on my wrist startled me before I realized my left hand had subconsciously made the decision to reach up. Same as I hadn't realized that I now stood on my tiptoes.

"Don't," the man objected with a hooded stare, his intensity hard as if he could bored holes into stone. If I hadn't been standing right next to him, I surely would have missed his words. Voiced so low, it didn't leave room for anything but a warning.

I darted my wide eyes from my hand to the glowing pine-green stare of the man whose gloved hand still prevented mine from touching his horns. The gloves were the same black as the rest of his attire; any other color would've clashed with the aura he oozed. Guess that made his eyes so strikingly beautiful.

Oh, hell, I want to die! Awkward, awkward, awkward!

"O-Oh. Um. Sorry. But... you have something up *there*." Ridiculous stuttering left my mouth as I brought up my other hand and pointed, making small rotating gestures at his horns. "Lint. In your hair."

A ghost of a twitch moved the corner of his mouth in what I guessed was amusement, but it vanished in the blink of an eye, and I wondered if I'd imagined it.

I sound fucking stupid... Lint? C'mon! Wait. Why do I even care?

“Sorry, man. Ivy can be a rude little fuck sometimes, but she’s cool.” Marcus chuckled but shot me a chiding glance that I caught in my peripheral view.

After what felt like an eternity in an abstract limbo but most likely was nothing but seconds, the guy peeled his glowing eyes from mine when he faced Marcus again and let go of my wrist. I pulled back my hand and took a deep breath. *Heck*, those pine greens had x-rayed me.

“Until next time,” the mysterious guy said to him and glanced down at me with wisps of disturbance before he strode away from us.

Marcus patted the small box he’d received and shouted after the guy. “Yep! Thanks, Rho!”

I halfway turned to look at the mysterious man again who had made it to the top of my weirdest encounters. His strides over the parking area elegant and slow yet were loaded with power. I couldn’t stop wondering *what* he was.

“*Hello*, brown-haired beauty!” Marcus joked and caught my attention. “My rude coworker chick leaves me waiting, and I’ve got time to kill. You down for a quickie in my office?”

Snot threatened to fly out of my nose as a heartfelt cackle burst out of me. “Marcus Ferrow, you’re *un-fucking-believable*! Is that one of your notebook’s stupid hookup lines?”

His dimples were about to pierce his cheeks. “Sure is!” He huffed and handed me one of the coffee cups he’d placed on his car’s roof. “Let me guess, you kept me waiting because you couldn’t decide which CD to play?”

“Couldn’t find the right track. You know I don’t drive without music.” I shrugged and burned my tongue when I took a sip. “*Shit*, that’s hot!”

Marcus crooned, “That’ll be today’s motto!”

The hellish, pristine roar of a V8-engine and goose-bump-invoking burbles from double exhaust pipes had me snapping my head back in the direction the man had walked off to.

Just as elegant and slow as he'd moved, he drove past us in the jet-black car I'd eye-fucked minutes before. Gloved hand lowered on top of the big steering wheel, the guy oozed ethereal energy and it called to me when his darkened green eyes found mine for nothing more than a second. A tremor went through my left hand, and I flexed my fingers just to close them into a tight fist.

The Impala is his? Lucky bastard! His eyes didn't glow... I swear they glowed before!

"What. Was. That?" For the longest time, I stared at the brute rear of the most beautiful car I'd ever seen, double back lights on each side triggering a stretched groan of worship from my lips.

"*Man*, I know what you mean. His 1967 Chevy Impala is a fucking *monster!*"

"No!" Waving him off, I knitted my brows and scolded, "*Excuse me*, Blondie! I know what car that is! But *what is he?*" I faced Marcus again, and a noticeable tremor went through my left hand once more, so I clutched it with my other.

Why's my hand shaking?

"What do you mean *what is he?*" Marcus quoted and cocked his eyebrow at my hands.

I brought my hands above my head and formed rings with my thumbs and index fingers, swooshing back and forth. "*The horns? Hello?*"

"What horns? Are you high?" he mocked and sipped on his coffee, looking at me like I'd asked him the sum of two plus two. "That was Rhodin! He's my supplier of five years, a dealer for anything occult or special."

“Avada Kefuckya! That’s not funny, Blondie! How could you not see his horns?” My voice climbed gradually higher, and I stepped closer to him to tap at the side of his forehead. “Right there, spiral and dark!”

“No fucking idea what you’re talking about. As far as I know, he’s a demon, and I only deal with his grumpy ass when I have to. He never speaks more than a few words. What a damn weirdo.” He swatted my hand away but froze. “Wait. What’s that smell?” He scrunched his nose, and his cerulean blues inspected me from head to toe with hawklike sharpness.

“What? I showered before I left!” I took a step back, sniffing under my arm, and met his eyes with a serious *fuck-off* look.

He pulled me closer again and turned my head to the side, taking in whatever scent irritated him.

Shit! He must smell Rion on my shirt!

“Why the fuck do I smell Gregori all over you?” His eyebrows dipped, and angry red blew through his irises.

Heat crawled over my face, up to my ears—damn snitchy body signs.

Shifting my weight from side to side, I looked up to the sky, seemingly struggling to find my voice.

“No!” he boomed. “Don’t tell me you messed between the sheets with that short half-blood bastard! That little piece of shit!” His notorious, hot-headed Aries Mars threw a fit, and I hurriedly tried to put out the fire before it could team up with my karma to bite me in the ass.

“*First of all*, hold your testosterone-doped horses. We only made out a bit. That’s it.” Far from the truth, but I couldn’t expose my latest slip into the blazing fire of desire and lust.

“Can’t believe it, Ivy! What the fuck were you thinking?”

“This was a one-time thing anyway... We ended up arguing,” I mumbled, sorrow digging a six-foot-deep hole for

my heart.

“Whatever!” Throwing me a crushed look, Marcus left me behind as he stomped away.

All I wanted was to break up with Ezra first, and now I have to lie again. Fuck my life. Seriously!

Catching up to him, we walked into the lobby, where I caught the delightful tones of Mrs. Chevers’s melodic humming before she greeted us with her sweet voice. “A wonderful day, isn’t it? Ivy, your hair color looks gorgeous! You *have* to tell me who did it.”

“Aw, thanks, Beatrix! My more-than-talented friend Danielle Doubain, she’s the owner of Salon Golden Hour. Here, I’ll give you the address.” I wrote down the location on a sticky note and handed it over. “But don’t get used to my new look. I’ll be back to blonde by tomorrow latest. Hey, I still owe you! Tell her to bill—”

Marcus cut in. “Wrap it up, ladies! Chief Hardin awaits us.” Obviously, he was still pissed.

Suck it up, buttercup.

Hitting me sideways, Stratov’s words about Jenna’s death flooded my mind, and I was about to ask Mrs. Chevers about why she didn’t confide in us, but I didn’t get the chance to.

“Of course, I didn’t mean to hold you up for too long. Mr. Hardin is in a bad mood today, so you better go now. He had trouble with his new slave. *Ugh*, you know he can be”—she was halfway into rolling her eyes but quickly straightened up and forced a stiff smile when her look fell over our shoulders —“*difficult*.”

Chief Hardin’s strong aura behind us sent the hair on my neck standing up straight.

I cocked a knowing eyebrow at her and whispered, “Guess we discuss the hottest hair trends another time, shall we?”

I put on my million-dollar smile and turned to our fuming boss.

“You’re late, Ferrow,” Chief Hardin spat at Marcus in his usual manner whenever he wasn’t satisfied with one of his slaves. His piercing amber eyes diverted from Marcus and found mine, his look softening for a fleeting moment.

“A wonderful good morning to you, Chief! It was my fault, by the way. Sorry.” I gave him a cheeky grin and brushed the single blonde strand behind my ear. “But we are more than prepared, and you’ll be more than pleased to hear all about it.”

His expression further softened with a faint smile wrinkling the corners of mouth before he narrowed his eyes at Marcus again. “I hope so! This witch killed one of my best hunters.” And with that, he turned and stomped to the elevators.

“Is that sweat I see on your temples?” I teased Marcus and pulled him along.

“You wish!” He poked my ribs with a half smile, and I yelped.

Chief Hardin turned to us with annoyance plastered over his face, and I shrugged. “Coming!”



Sharp, grayish-black eyebrows knitted, our boss’s expression was stern when the doors of his office closed behind us with a *bang*. He poured himself a generous glass of his go-to beverage—Fireball Cinnamon Whisky.

Awful, deafening silence hung in the air as we made our way to his desk.

Marcus took one for the team and spoke up when he stepped forward with confidence. “We’re prepared, and *theoretically*, there shouldn’t be a problem—”

Chief Hardin’s palm smashed down on the granite desk, and the crystal glass quivered, its golden-brown contents sloshing up to the rim.

“I didn’t hire you to come up with *theory*, Farrow! Don’t fucking bore me and waste my time. I want that witch dead or alive, by tomorrow morning at the latest!” he barked.

Wow, Mrs. Chevers wasn’t joking.

I walked past Marcus and approached Chief Hardin’s desk with my million-dollar smile that never failed to ease his flaring temper.

“What Marcus means is, we came up with a good plan, and you won’t be disappointed.”

“*Ivangeline*, your new look is enticing to say the least.” He looked me up and down with hungry eyes before his gaze settled on my full breasts.

These sisters are still the same, Chief.

“However, let’s hear it.” He gestured for me to lay it on him.

“Yes, sir. Corvina and I have shared history, so I’ve adopted this look to disguise my identity. Using this to our advantage, plus temporarily hiding our auras, we’ll be able to get close enough without raising suspicion. The three wanted souls working for her will be our ticket to the apartment, where we suspect her to be. But to be honest, Marcus is the true mastermind behind this operation, and he was about to brief me. So, we should let him explain the details instead. He deserves the credit.” I waved Marcus over to me, and he went straight in.

“Witches are strong and their spells even stronger. We won’t stand a chance as long as she’s able to cast them. Instead of fighting her in combat, like Devlen tried to do, we’ll use a classic demon trap.” He paused, aware how ridiculous this part of the plan seemed. “*Yes*, a demon trap won’t work for too long, *but* in combination with purple monkshood-spiked bullets, we’ll be able to bind her powers long enough.”

He gave the small box in his hands a shake, rattling the contents.

Chief Hardin stared at Marcus for a couple of seconds, then focused back on the paperwork in front of him. Refilling the crystal glass, he chugged it down in one go and threw the empty whisky bottle into the blazing hearth before he opened a new one.

He never gets enough, does he?

Without looking at us, he sent us out on a harsh tone. “Whatever, just bring me that witch. Preferably alive. Ferrow, as discussed yesterday, don’t stretch the budget too much.”

We didn’t hesitate, and on quick feet, we left for the door with matching nods.

“Budget? Chief Hardin gave you a budget? How generous,” I whispered-yelled with excitement on our way out.

Once outside the office, Marcus pulled out two tickets and waved them in front of me.

“Believe it or not! But we’ll fly out to LA this afternoon. I’ll pick you up at your place, so go home and pack everything you need.”

“Fly? Like *fly* fly? We could just switch realms. Wow, I love it!”

He chuckled and grinned boyishly. “Yep. I know you love to fly, so let’s make this trip a fun trip! We’ll switch to an airport in the human world and take the plane from there. Although, after the shit you pulled with Gregori, I’m not sure if you deserve this.” He placed a hand on my shoulder, and I eyed it with suspicion. “But, *hey*, I forgive you.”

“*Forgive*,” I sneered under my breath and withdrew from his touch but quickly shot him a sweet *you’re the best* grin right after when I caught his daring stare.

“What are we going to do?” He hyped me up and raised his hand for a high-five next to his head. “Say it, baby, say it!”

I jumped up to deliver a heartfelt hand smack. “Drag souls and kick ass!”



Later that day, mild air caressed my bare legs up to the hem of my denim hot pants as Marcus and I got out of the tiny charter. Leaving my kukri blades at the smithy left me with the kind of nakedness I usually avoided like plaque on my teeth. But after what went down at Stratov's mansion, it was the only right thing to do.

Los Angeles greeted us with shimmering lights and a beautiful sky, dipped in dusky hues of wild orchid, baby pink, and apricot. It was a little after 6 p.m., and we still had about four-and-a-half hours before things would get serious.

A wine-red piece of Italian perfection waited for us on the airfield, its 320 hp engine just waiting to roar up a freeway.

"I'll drive. We want to make it to the hotel alive, don't we?" Marcus teased as he threw his bag in my direction.

I caught it with a dull *oomph* and clicked my tongue. "No way! This is a 1981 Maserati Khamsin, Blondie." My eyes swept over the never-ending hood of this stunner of a car. "He needs to be driven with passion. You don't even know how to drive stick! I'm driving."

Dropping the bag, I set about lowering my bum into the driver's seat of the sleeping beauty.

"*He?*" Marcus scoffed. "The only thing that needs to be handled with passion is my fat—"

I cut him off with a glare. "I'll drive. *Capito?*"

“*Okay*, but I’ll draw out even the smallest detail about what went down with Gregori on our *thirty-minute* drive.”

Asshat!

“No, you won’t!” I exclaimed with wide eyes, sudden heat of exposure gripping me. “There’s *nothing* to draw out.”

He laughed heartily. “You know I can be a pain in the ass.”

You don’t say?

Breathing through my teeth, I closed my eyes and opened them again with a mischievous plan forming in the back of my mind. “Of course you can drive, *Daddy*.”

I turned my earlier shame into my advantage since Marcus had a thing for these kinds of kinks as well. I’d tease his thirsty ass only to leave him drier than the damn Mojave Desert. This was just the harmless beginning. If he thought he could play games with me, then it was on.

As expected, my little tease earned me a short, heated glance from him.

Too damn easy.

“Sorry, baby,” I whispered to the Italian beauty I’d sentenced to a torturous drive with Marcus’s nonexistent stick skills.

The streets were packed, and I went through the details in my head as swiftly as a gust of wind. Guilt and doubts distracted me enough to keep my trap shut about him tormenting the clutch of this piece of automotive history.

To fuck or not to fuck the wanted souls... Dammit!

I groaned aloud.

Not even officially separated from Ezra yet, and I’m considering cheating again... What for? Yesterday, I signed myself over to Adrion. Shit! No, I don’t want to fuck them.

The touch of Marcus's rough hand on mine snapped me out of my thoughts and calmed my jumping leg.

"Everything will work out, don't worry," he said and squeezed. "And sorry for shouting at you earlier."

"So empathetic tonight, huh? Who are you and what did you do to Blondie?" My forced humor failed to ease my nerves, but I didn't want to worry him. Our mission should be his only priority and not my relationship dilemma.

"I have a caring side. Didn't you notice in all these years?" He grinned, and I puffed out a breath.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd fall for it, Marcus Ferrow. You're just hyped to see me naked tonight. After we get back, I probably need to hire a bodyguard so Bekka won't kill me in my sleep or cut through Guido's brake lines!" I theatrically played how I'd suffocate under a pillow and pulled my hand away. I prepared my next clapback, expecting him to counter, but he remained silent.

A grim expression was plastered on his face when I glanced over. "I gave her the boot after her tantrum in the parking lot."

"Oh... Sorry to hear." The obvious lie left my lips, and I rubbed his arm with my nonexistent Aquarius comforting skills.

Was about time you left that psycho...

I decided to not ask any questions, as he wasn't the type to mourn, but curiosity still tickled me. "Why did you—"

His cold tone cut me off, knuckles bleached as he grabbed the steering wheel with a vise grip. "Let's leave it at how she started to talk shit about killing you in your sleep. Bitch is a ten but batshit crazy."

Dang, might call me Medium Ivy from now on.

"Sweet." I was convinced enough to double up my locks at home.

“Daily blowjobs are nice, but her constant drama wasn’t worth it.” He shrugged and pulled over, parking our car in front of a luxurious Waldorf Astoria hotel.

“You sure we’re at the right hotel?” I looked out in disbelief, thinking about how much a night must cost, knowing how cheap our Chief was.

“Yup!” Popping the *p*, he looked over at me and grabbed the weapons bag from my lap. “Chief Hardin gave me a nice budget, and I thought *why the fuck not?* Okay, I spent a little too much but, *hey*, that’s a problem for Future-Marcus!”

“Well, then, let’s rock!” I grinned wickedly and hit the notes to P!nk’s “Get The Party Started.”

We entered the decadent lobby through the largest revolving door I’d ever seen.

The hair bristles on the sides made the most perfect *swoosh* sounds and made me want to keep going for another round, but Marcus pulled me with him and groaned.

“How old are you? Twelve?”

I stuck out my tongue and narrowed my eyes at him.

A tall woman with platinum-blond hair greeted us at the reception desk. She wore the most perfect ivory designer jumpsuit and poured champagne into two elegant flutes as we walked up to her.

I cocked an eyebrow at Marcus, but he just waved his credit card at the reception lady.

“Ferrow. One night.”

“Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Ferrow. We’ve been expecting you. Your luggage will be sent to your honeymoon suite.” She melted at Marcus’s smile and *blessed* me with a short, semiapproving once-over. “Please follow me.”

Yah, my old Converse and my various metal band T-shirts never failed to have an effect on snobby people like her.

She walked us to the gold-adorned elevator and waved us in.

“Mr. and Mrs. Ferrow, huh?” I whispered to Marcus, giving him a subtle side nudge in the ribs. He just grinned like the tool he was.

She brought us to our suite and opened the big wooden double doors, presenting us with a luxurious foyer. Sideboards against each wall were decorated with white lilies in elegant vases, burning candles, and all kinds of pricey knickknacks. I came to admire a decadent big chandelier I fancied from the first second.

She turned to Marcus, still not giving two shits about my presence. “If you need *anything*, I’m at your service—”

“That won’t be needed”—I pursed my lips and squinted at her name tag—“Miss Hudson. Now, if you would give my *husband* and me some privacy, *please*.” I stretched the *please* more than necessary and gestured for her to leave with a sickly sweet smile on my lips.

“You called me your husband.” Marcus snickered from behind as I closed the doors after she left with an awkward nod.

“Watch your head, Blondie! It might explode.” I grinned and gave his buff chest a push, sashaying past him to inspect our suite. “You’re my work hubby.”

The bedroom presented a beautiful king-sized bed with a dozen of ivory-colored pillows placed with precision on the matching sheets. It looked heavenly and inviting in the warm light of the rose-scented candles that burned on each nightstand. Red rose petals lay strewn across the bed, and I couldn’t help but laugh as my eyes rolled hard.

“*Wow*, Blondie, I always knew you had a thing for me, but *dang!* You’re trying hard this time!” A low whistle accentuated my banter, and I yelped when two strong arms lifted me up a couple of inches to throw me on the bed.

I blew loose brown strands out of my face and rolled onto my stomach with a sultry smile. “Tsk, ts, here I am, praising your sincere effort for once, and you’re back to your raw ways!”

He grinned down at me with wicked heat. “I like it raw, Eso Babe. Now that I’m on the market again, wanna bang your hot cousin?”

I grabbed a pillow and threw it at his face.

No one could ever understand our antics like we do. Love it!

“You wish! Not that your relationship status mattered before, right?” I gave him a cheeky smile and played with the loose strands of my hair, wiggling my ass teasingly. “Remember, I’m an innocent virgin tonight, and as that, I wouldn’t engage in anything *raw*.”

“Hope you had the same stance with Gregori last night.” He threw the pillow back with force and poured himself a drink from the expansive liquor cart.

“For fuck’s sake!” Groaning, I rolled over.

I needed a distraction as memories of Adrion and Amos drenched my thong with arousal. But thinking about how things ended last night only made my need for distraction worse.

I got up and chose a random crystal bottle to pour me a glass of, but Marcus snatched it out of my hand and brought the clear liquor to his lips.

“Nope. You need to stay focused, and your lightweight ass can’t handle much of this stuff anyway.”

I bit my cheeks, taking slow, deep breaths. A damn drink. All I wanted was a damn drink to settle my inner battle of heart and mind. One look at the bottle in Marcus’s hand and its label, I opted for the next available distraction instead—him.

Horny asshat won’t mind it anyway.

Was it wise to keep on playing with fire? *Nope*. Was it something that would keep my nerves from racking? *Abso-fucking-lutely*.

“What’s that?” I picked at his gray flannel shirt like scratching a stain, and he lowered his face in surprise.

That’s when I stood on my tiptoes and brought my lips dangerously close to his. I puckered them and sucked in deep whiffs of the oozing liquor aroma lingering in the immediate air between our lips. He inhaled sharply, as if he feared I’d snatch his soul by sucking in his booze-fueled breath.

“Mmmhhh... gin?” I hummed and ran my tongue over my lips, pretending I savored the faint hints of pine aroma. “Keep it. I’m not the gin type anyway.” I lowered back onto the flat soles of my Converse and shrugged, peeking up at him from underneath my lashes.

Marcus looked down at my mouth with hooded eyes. “You sure about that? Seems you’re about to discover a new kind of high. Careful, you might get addicted.” Low bass tones rumbled in his chest, and his husky voice caused my clit to tingle. “I’d be more than happy to be your dealer.”

His cerulean blue eyes started to shift to excited crimson when he locked them with mine. The air sizzled with electricity as he tensed under my sensual gaze, just as I under his, but I pulled the plug before I would—once again—do things I would most likely regret.

Our teasing game is on a whole new level. Hell, I shouldn't enjoy it that much!

“I’ll shower now. See you later.” I started to undress in front of him, not breaking eye contact as I took my time. “That’s for stealing my chance to drive the Maserati.”

He groaned under his breath and tensed. A muscle in his jaw jolted as he reached out to touch me, but I took a step back and made my way to the bathroom. My naked butt bounced with each step, and I turned to shoot him a wink before I slipped through the bathroom door.

I peeked my head out again, this time with sincere gratitude. “Thanks again. You know... looking after me, and all that stuff with Bekka.”

“Sure thing.” He jerked his chin at me but threw one of the pillows in my direction right after. “Fucking tease!”

Guilty.

A quick clean-freak routine later, my body treated with my favorite peppermint body lotion, I walked back to the bed, all swaying hips and confidence, and opened my suitcase.

When I was at my apartment a few hours ago, I had ditched my first pick and packed a sweet white dress instead. The lace arms and the hem ending above my knees looked darn cute and innocent yet with a touch of sexy in the plunging neckline.

“You’re a beautiful thing, Ivy. You know that, right?” Marcus’s raspy voice reached me from across the room, where he sat on a big leather wing chair.

Déjà vu...

I shifted my weight from side to side, glancing over the dress that was snug in all the right places, and twirled a brown strand of my hair with nervous fingers.

“Thank you. Do you think this will do, or should I pick something else?” I mumbled and pulled at the lace with timid tweaks as I inspected my stilettos. He scoffed and walked up to me with smooth strides, his hands shoved in the pockets of his black pants.

“*Hell*, you could wear a potato sack, and everyone would still stop and stare.”

He’d changed into a tight-fitting gray Henley paired with ragged cargo pants. But what I liked best was the tactical vest he wore whenever we went hunting.

Damn, he looks sinfully good.

His dirty-blond hair was on point, as usual, the top part carefully tied back into a bun. My fingers itched to destroy his little masterpiece, but I decided to keep my slutty hands to myself for a while.

I sighed and turned to the window, looking out into the dark mysteries this Friday night was about to unfold for me.

“There might be no way back after I—” Biting my lower lip, I stopped midsentence, realizing I’d already sealed my relationship’s fate one night ago.

I still owe him a text. Shit...

Ezra had texted me once more Thursday night, short and somewhat still pissed, stating he wanted to know if I’d be home this weekend and that, despite everything, he missed me.

All while Rion and Amos kept me busy...

He’d also texted that we should have a serious talk once I return and that he’d thought about a lot of things. I didn’t make time to reply yet, unsure of what to say, since I didn’t plan to show up before Saturday afternoon. On top of that, I didn’t bring my phone with me to avoid my ties in the human realm messing with my focus. I didn’t even come up with a lie about my absence today, as he said he wouldn’t be around anyway.

But he did ask, and here I was, wearing a gorgeous white dress, staying in a luxurious honeymoon suite with my flirty sidekick, preparing for our hunt, where I’d most likely be seducing three rapists.

“Ivy, things won’t be the same after tonight. If you didn’t notice, things started to change—you started to change—way before tonight.”

I looked at his tall reflection in the window as he spoke out the truth I’d been discovering and accepting bit by bit.

“Most of the time, I’m your goofy partner who has your eyes rolling more than any other man, and I might add that it’s a damn shame on my part that it was never in a sexual way.”

He chuckled before his voice dropped. “But I do care about you, more than I allow myself to show, and tonight, I’ll have your back. Ivy, I’ll always have your back!”

I turned to him with watery eyes. It was more than just this job tonight. The changes I’d been through since I left my apartment in Bearno were thrilling yet overwhelming. I finally felt more like my true self. I was happier and empowered—although my cheating overshadowed my new happiness.

My relationship with Ezra was close to its expiry date, a date that was set from the beginning. I’d catered to my selfish needs when I’d pushed it back further. It was time to pull the plug—but not tonight and not via text.

Same went for Adrion. Had I canceled the possibility to give us a chance, although I couldn’t picture a future that included Amos? No, not completely. That would be something to ponder over with Lani and bottles of liquor after I’d finished this job—hugging the toilet included.

“Okay, enough of that sentimental shit!” I smacked my palms when my levelheaded Capricorn moon decided that this moment with Marcus was starting to resemble a damn soap opera. “These souls won’t drag themselves!”

“Let’s rock!” We both said as we high-fived, and he grabbed the weapon-filled bag before we left our suite.

As we walked through the sparkling hotel lobby, I caught Miss Hudson’s thirsty gaze solely fixed on Marcus.

She’s such a rude fuck! Okay, I’m a damn hypocrite but whatever...

I stopped and took Marcus’s hand, putting it on my waist, and pulled him down to my level. “Just play along,” I whispered and looked over his shoulder at Miss Hudson, giving her a provocative grin before I pressed my lips to his for a peck.

Clutching the nape of his neck with my palm, I made our peck look like a real kiss.

Marcus reacted without further convincing and urged my lips to move along in blissful synchronicity. The gin aroma still present on his lips, he parted them and gave me a playful poke with his tongue.

Oh, Blondie, you're so thirsty.

I pulled away and gave his ass a nice smack. "Let's go, honey!"

Not needing to look at her a second time, I could only imagine how jealousy etched her face. One stiletto heel hovering two inches above the floor tiles, I prepared for swaying hips and a touch of attitude when I'd walk out of this lobby.

But Marcus stopped me when he grabbed my arm and yanked me around. A twitch moved his upper lip as he zeroed in on mine.

"My *wife's* a fucking tease. I feel used." His husky voice was so damn alluring it stirred a rush of warmth in me. "But feel free to use me as you please, baby."

I gulped and held his stare, a nervous smile tugging on the corners of my lips.

Sexy bastard is a master at playing games. Touché.

With a yank, I freed my arm and put extra effort into swaying my hips confidently out the revolving door, even if my heart pounded like it was on steroids.

Strike two and another one's around the corner.



Just when my tongue was about to dive into her sassy mouth, little Miss Tease pulled away. Only purpose of that stunt? Make Designer Barbie jealous.

Did she just use me? Fucking hot!

I grinned and gave Miss Hudson a wink when I caught her thirsty ass staring.

Inside the car, I opened the weapons bag and checked it one last time. Ivy shot me a doubtful look when I handed her the fake ID.

“Selena Gomez? Um... you know that’s the name of a famous singer? Couldn’t you come up with something more creative?”

“Ugh, details, Ivy!” I waved her off.

These girls are never pleased, are they?

“You’re a hot brunette—which I prefer, to be honest—you’re young, and don’t get me started on those two double C melons.”

Ivy stared down at her tits and scoffed. “Double Cs? If anything, they’re DDs! I feel offended.”

“Shut your sassy mouth and listen for once. The bouncers won’t give two shits about your name—bat your fake lashes at them, and you’ll be good.”

“Blondie, these are my real lashes! You have no clue.”

“Eso Babe, you’re one hot thing, if not even the hottest thing I’ve come across and haven’t fucked *yet*. But, damn, you can be a pain in the ass!”

“Avada Kefuckya!”

The guys hopefully have a ball gag for her.

“Okay! So, what we—you—will do is, you go inside alone, grab a beer, and have a good time. Our guys booked a table next to the DJ booth, so make sure you dance within their sight—”

Ivy clicked her tongue and shot me a side-glance. “*Hell*, dancing for category threes... *Okay*, I’ve done worse. Whatever.”

I sighed and continued laying out the plan. “I’ll go in first. You’ll come in a couple minutes later. I’ll be at the bar, watching you. They’ll most likely invite you for drinks that will be spiked with drugs.” I pulled out a small vial with a shimmery blue substance. “Drink this now. It’s a cassia senna mixture, and it’ll lessen the effect of the drugs. As a demon, the drugs shouldn’t affect you, but since Corvina runs the whole racket, I’m not sure what exactly they’ll put in your drink. So, let’s be cautious.”

She downed the mixture in one go and scrunched up her nose. *Yup*, shit tasted nasty.

“When they decide to leave, play along and act like easy prey. Remember, they think you’re drugged. I’ll hide my presence from them once you leave. Only you’ll be able to see me, since you’re a demon.” A heavy breath left me.

“Then the real work starts. Corvina won’t expect me, so I’ll use this to my advantage. When she’s about to start the ritual, that’s when I’ll step in and let the trap do its work.” I glanced over to Ivy and couldn’t ignore the pang of nervousness exploding in my chest, my heart almost doing hiccups at the thought of what would happen if I failed to trap Corvina at the first attempt. There was no room for mistakes.

“Once she’s trapped, this big boy will come into play.” I pulled out my beast of a huge-ass gun and showed Ivy the monkshood-fueled .475 Magnum bullets.

“But you won’t kill her, will you? Your gun will shoot her ass into a different galaxy!” Her eyes widened.

“No worries, I’ll only go for her leg or arm.” I patted my Wildey. “The monkshood will bind her powers long enough for us to take them all into the lower realm. Now, I owe Rhodin a favor. Plus, it cost me too much money, since he refuses to bill HD. Obscure guy. Took me years to gain his trust, but here we are.”

Ivy went silent for a moment, eyes narrowed at her bare ring finger. “About the wanted souls... I’m still not sure how far I’ll go.”

“I leave it up to you. Remember, I’m right with you, so don’t worry.”

“Got it! Let’s cash in those bundles!” She gave me her brightest smile and punched my biceps.

That’s the energy we need, baby!

We launched into what we always did before beginning a hunt—blasting and singing the chorus of the only song we both liked, AC/DC’s “Highway To Hell.”

If only I’d known this would be our last time.



Loud hip-hop and heavy bass drummed through my chest as I entered the spacious club and walked downstairs to the main area. Countless spotlights tormented my vision with flashing blue and red, the tables alongside the walls packed with girls of all shapes and sizes—all young, all tasty delights on two legs.

Gag-triggering, heavy doses of perfume mixed with hints of vomit clouded my senses when a group of five chicks passed me by—Hell knows what that last chick had on the

hem of her neckline. *Man*, I'd long forgotten how much I hated parties in the human realm. Over the years, I'd preferred to hunt for my lays in darker places, less flashy, less pretending, more down to the level of unhinged lust I sought. Nothing these young chicks could keep up with, but who was I to not have a snack here and there regardless.

I situated myself at the long, curved bar and ordered a beer from a short bartender with big boobs.

She placed a shot next to the beer and grinned at me. "This one's on me. I'm Steph." She winked with a lollipop in her mouth.

Bow chicka wow wow!

I let my eyes roam over her hot frame and brought the shot to my lips, letting the cheap liquor burn down my throat.

"What's your name, sweetie?" She eye-fucked me and poured me another one.

"Sweet doesn't quite suit me." I lowered my gaze to her pink lips and took my time inspecting every inch of her face. Meeting her eyes again, I wet my lips. "But, for you, dear, I'll be sweeter than the lollipop that gets to stuff your flirty mouth."

I enjoyed the effect I had on her. *Man*, I was used to having every woman with a pulse drooling—she was no different.

Well, except for Ivy. I admit, it kicked my huge-ass ego in the balls, but she wasn't on my *have to fuck* list anyway. No, weird Eso Babe was family, even if I enjoyed teasing the fuck out of her on the regular. Our hilarious antics brought a smile to my face, even on Mondays.

Bartender Chick leaned on the bar, presenting me with her enticing cleavage, and gestured for me to come closer. "My shift ends in an hour. You can invite me for a few drinks later. My place is just a quick walk from here. Gotta serve the next table, so don't go, okay?"

“Sure, babe.” I didn’t intend to go anywhere with her, but who was I to not engage a little in this amusing flirtation?

Ten minutes already... Where the fuck is she?

Just when I let my eyes roam the club, I caught Ivy walking down the stairs. She placed each step of her beautiful legs smoothly and, at the same time, with so much confidence. Blood pumped into my dick, and I gave it a not-so-discreet squeeze.

Shhh, Cockzilla, she’s like our little sister! Might turn a blind eye to that on a boozy night at Cloud9. Man, I’m so fucked up.

If I didn’t know better, she could’ve been mistaken for an angel arriving with heavenly grace.

A naughty angel I’d corrupt to the dark side by banging out her senses.

I chuckled at my unapologetic, perverted ways, and a boyish grin curved my lips.

The white dress hugged her body in pretty much every place, and her round titties bounced as she walked up to the bar. I liked the contrast to her usual wardrobe. Sure, she looked good in those low-slung jeans that occasionally gave me peeks of her thongs, but I’d pick dresses over jeans any day.

I ordered for her. “A beer for this lovely angel.”

The guy who took over after Bartender Chick left nodded and handed Ivy a Heineken.

“Thanks, but this *angel* right here’s in for a crazy night. Sambuca, but make it a double.” She winked at the bartender and did that stupid wiggle thing with her eyebrows speeding up and down.

He poured her a big shot, and she emptied it at once, slightly scrunching her nose and licking off the remaining liquor that coated her lips.

I whisper-yelled at her through clenched teeth, “What the hell? Stay focused.”

She leaned toward me, and her pupils flashed bright gold for a second as her eyes locked with mine. “I’m focused, Marcus. How ’bout you?”

Ivy ran her tongue over her lips, leaving me wishing she’d lick mine instead. If tonight’s job wasn’t a top priority, *and* if she’d let me, I’d have her on me and forget about being close friends for one night of pleasure and pain.

Her full lips would be the perfect cock ring. Shit, I should’ve fucked Bekka before I broke up with her. Focus, Ferrow!

Ivy’s eyes landed on my more-than-obvious bulge straining against my ragged cargo pants, and she tilted her chin, flaunting those perfect, plump lips.

“Seems to me your *focus* isn’t on our job, or I should say *your job* to watch over me.”

“Careful what you wish for, Ivy.” I got up and towered over her petite frame on the barstool. She lowered her elbows back to the bar’s countertop and swung her feet back and forth between my legs, teasing me with a smug grin.

Over the years, I’d gotten used to her weird quirks. I’d even call them cute, as they complemented her personality. Something I could never tell her without fearing she’d be pissed as fuck. *Yup*, sassy girl was a cute munchkin on the inside but wouldn’t let it show.

But tonight, she pushed my buttons, and I decided to join the game that could be run by more than one person.

Sliding my hand over her warm skin, I grabbed her smooth leg and brought it around my hip. The hem of her white dress moved up and exposed her black lingerie hugging her plump pussy.

A full-time sinner dressed like a part-time saint. So fuckable.

“I’ll watch over you every second tonight. And you can bet your hot ass I won’t miss even the smallest detail when you’re butt naked in front of me.” I dug my fingertips into her soft skin, and she arched her back. “With every inch of that fucking tight body on full display for me to enjoy.”

Her lips parted, and I sensed her heartbeat playing a beat of thrill and excitement.

Where’s that sassy attitude now, huh?

I released her with a satisfied grin but tensed when the presence of our wanted souls sharpened my senses. My eyes snapped to the three guys walking down the stairs toward a cordoned-off table along the wall.

“They’re here, Ivy. Go.”

She brought herself out of the flustered state and straightened her dress. Without a word, she left and gave me a nice view of her round ass and hips swaying from side to side.

With confident strides, she approached the dance floor, weaving her way through the mixed crowd, and started to dance by herself in front of the guys’ table.

I walked up to the DJ and asked him to play N.E.R.D.’s “She Wants To Move” before I retreated back to the bar. Ivy’s eyes lit up in flashing gold for a split second, and a loud squeal cut through the air.

I’d been on the road with her long enough to know which songs got her going, despite the fact that her music tastes differed from mine dramatically.

Okay, that one time she belted out Metallica’s “Enter Sandman” was somehow hot! Little part-time saint knew all the lyrics. Ain’t got shit on Hasselhoff, though.

Her body moved naturally to the beat, her hands wandering over her hips, up to that small waist, looking so inviting to grab, and kept on wandering up to her titties.

With both hands, she went through her brown hair and put that perfectly shaped bone structure of her lovely face on

display with a genuine smile brightening it. Her feet moved effortlessly, and her heels stomped with the beat before she shook those hips in a way that had my lust spiraling.

It was hypnotizing to see her dance like nobody was watching—in fact, almost every guy and girl couldn't help but watch. Succubus allure.

I could watch her for hours... Too bad she'd never dance to any of my songs.

It didn't take long before a guy approached her from behind, grinding on her. Concentrating, I eavesdropped with my powers. *Man*, Ivy was the nosy one of us. Seems she'd rubbed off on me.

He whispered awkward hookup lines in her ear, his hands glued to her hips, but she shook her head and put distance between them when she waved him off with a finger up in his face. My lips twisted in devilry. If there was one thing next to my car that I was proud of, then it was my self-written hookup line bible. This fucker could use it right now!

I should get it published one day. Ha!

One glance at the wanted souls and they already eyed Ivy and exchanged some words. Tuning into their convo, I listened to every word over the blasting music.

“Tenner, look at her. You think she's a virgin?” A younger guy with short black hair leaned into the guy next to him. By their faces, they could've been brothers, but the contrast of their hair colors couldn't have been more obvious.

“*Fuck*, Rylee, look at that bitch. She's too hot to be a virgin! Bet she rides different cock every night,” Tenner snapped, his eyes glued to Ivy's rhythmically moving body. “We need virgins.”

“Why not have some fun with her either way? I'd fuck her senseless without hesitation. We can find us a virgin later.” The third guy with dark shoulder-length hair snickered and gestured how he'd fuck her.

“All right, all right. Lemme check.” Tenner, the blond guy, stood and made his way to Ivy, who was fully drowned in the song.

I'll drag your asses to Hell. Just wait for it.

Rage crawled through my veins as Tenner walked up to Ivy. Despite our plan, where she'd let these guys fuck her, disgust and protective jealousy fueled my mind.

She never said she'd go through with our plan. Maybe I was wrong when I suggested my selfish idea. There's no way to find out now.

Irritated by these useless feelings, I took a generous sip from my piss-warm beer and kept on watching.

Ivy sensed who approached her from behind, soul category three aura reeking of bad karma—*yup*, Tenner had closed the distance between them with wack dance moves. She played along as she let him press his crotch against her ass, grinding on her. He took her hand and twirled her around to face him.

Seizing the moment, she paved the way for him to pull her closer when she snaked her arms around his neck—not that she even had to stand on her tiptoes with his pitiful stature.

Aw... Short little fucker.

“I haven't seen you around here before. Where are you from?” he shouted over the music.

“Alabama! I was supposed to meet up with my long-distance boyfriend, but he ended our relationship over text just before I got on the plane. So, I thought *fuck him! Imma party instead!*” Snatching away Tenner's beer, she sipped on it. “I'm glad he didn't pop my cherry tonight. He would've been my first, but who needs a boyfriend anyway?” Ivy laid it on him with zero shame, and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Sorry, I'm already a li'l tipsy. Wanna see my ID?”

Pop my cherry? C'mon! Wack, Ivy, wack!

“Whoa, whoa, you ain’t shy, huh?” He swept his eyes over her fake ID once and grinned like the rapist motherfucker he was. Here in LA, no one would notice a missing girl from Alabama. “Too bad for him! He must be an idiot to ditch a stunning girl like you! I’m Tenner. Wanna come join me and my friends?”

He didn’t wait for her response when he placed his hand on the small of her back—way too low for my liking—and led her to the table where the two other guys had already poured her a drink. Fuckers couldn’t help but grin, knowing what Tenner’s return with Ivy on his tail promised.

She sat between them and introduced herself, upbeat, naïve with a pang of tipsy. Just what these dipshits liked.

Rylee, the younger one, gave her the drink, and she brought it to her lips without hesitation. “Thirsty, huh? I’m Rylee, and this is Don.” He pointed to his friend with shoulder-length hair. “Feel free to spend the evening with us. I’m sure we’ll have a lot of fun.” He toasted her and chuckled like the low-life category three he was.

“Can you believe my boyfriend left me? Tonight should’ve been a special night for us, but he grew tired of me holding back sex. Whatever, I’m not here to mourn! I’m here to party!” Ivy giggled and emptied her drink in one go.

Slow it down, dammit!

Running their shitty game on her, these idiots wouldn’t stop rambling on about how famous their dance group was in Malaysia and Canada. Men had a natural itch between their legs to impress their desired lay, and I was guilty of that, too. Ivy laughed along and did what she was amazing at, luring them deeper into her web of seduction. They surely felt special, even though they weren’t.

Right from the start, I’d learned about her allergy to big egos and arrogance. Not that they’d ever get to know her long enough to learn for themselves. I huffed.

Don't know how she's dealt with my ass all these years. That first time we met, though. Will never forget our elevator incident.

I zoned out. Their shit bored me beyond belief, but when a specific scent assaulted my nose, all the hair on my neck rose; it was too familiar and still my least favorite next to Gregori's.

Oh. Fuck. Me.

It was none other than Ezra, whose scent had me hyperalert when he entered the club, four friends of his in tow. After five years of working with my Eso Babe, I'd had to smell it way too often whenever she returned from the human realm.

What the fuck is he doing in LA? Bearno is about one thousand miles away!

My eyes darted to Ivy, who still engaged in the nonsense bullshit of our wanted souls.

Good, she hasn't seen him yet. I'll handle his ass before things escalate and this stupid human ruins our operation.

I walked up to Ezra, who was making his way to the bar, my powers ready to take his ass out, one way or another. Improvisations, I had an affinity for, but the thing with those handy fuckers was always the same—easily done, easily busted.

And when I caught Tenner suggesting for the group to leave and Ivy stating she'd quickly freshen up first, the latter fact laughed at me.

Fuck!

I already stood next to Ezra, resting my hand on his shoulder when that happened. He looked at me with confusion written all over his punchable face. "Can I help you, buddy?"

"Yes, *buddy*, you can—" I sneered, convinced I could handle this in time, but Ivy's eager voice from behind proved otherwise.

“Marcus, the guys want me to leave with them, are you —” Her voice cracked when her eyes fell on Ezra.

Shit hit the fan.

Dark-brown eyes scrutinized her, head to toe, and I caught myself shooting blasphemous prayers to whatever deity that this waste of breath wouldn't recognize her beneath her makeover.

Sure as fuck he did. He'd been her boyfriend for six years.

“*Ivy?* What the hell are you doing *here?*” he shouted, with that kind of sharpness that had my blood boiling with the intensity of a pressure cooker. “Is that a wig?”

“Um... *wow*, what a surprise! What are *you* doing here?” She was caught off guard, racing thoughts tangible as her eyes bounced between me and Ezra.

“Who's this guy, and what are you talking about other guys taking you with them? Why do you look like this, anyway? What the fuck!”

Ezra, in my eyes, nothing more than a little pinscher who was ready to shred the postman's pants, barely reached my shoulders with his short height. Fucker didn't know who'd waited for years to finally punch his ass another couple of inches shorter.

Ivy's lips trembled, but I had her back.

“Watch your tongue, *human!*” I growled and went straight for his throat with my hand.

“Marcus, stop!” Her voice pitched high with panic.

I inched closer to his face, brown eyes wide from my threatening presence. “She was trapped with you long enough, *human*. I don't get what she sees in you, but if you *ever* dare to shout at her like she's some kind of dog, I'm going to make you a Friday's special.”

Unbothered that he'd never know about Bobby's BBQ truck in our world, I was ready to deliver him there personally.

For fuck's sake, it was Friday, after all.

Ivy grabbed my arm and cut in with authority. “Let. Him. Go.”

I released him after one satisfying, final squeeze, and he gasped for air, clutching at his throat. His friends, useless bystanders who stood there open-mouthed in shock, didn't dare to even move, never mind intervene. A small crowd was building around us, and I decided, reluctantly, to leave it up to Ivy to handle the situation.

We couldn't allow our targeted souls to see this and leave without her.

Ivy gave me a death glare and returned her attention to Ezra, who was back to raging at her in petulant, furious tones.

“My sister was right! *Holy shit*, I cut her out of my life for you. What for? Look at you, whoring around with other guys. We're so done! Don't fucking bother to return home. I'd thought blowing off some steam on a guys' trip would help me return home to you with a fresh mindset. *Fuck*, I'd thought we could make it work despite our problems. But you're a waste of time!” He grabbed her left wrist and pulled at her hand, attempting to take off the ugly-ass ring he'd gifted her.

Since her ring finger was already bare, his stupid little attempt was not only useless but pathetic.

Ezra twisted his lips in what I'm sure he felt was supremacy. “Why doesn't this surprise me one bit?”

“Our souls are getting impatient. Do something about that human!” I urged her.

“Souls? And why does he call me *human* all the time? Who the fuck are you, huh?” Ezra directed his fuming anger back at me, and I shut him up when I let Hell's fire flash in my eyes for a second.

You're lucky she's here with us!

Ivy gave me a quick nod and pulled Ezra close to her, whispering in his ear. “I'm so sorry... So damn sorry, Ezra!

You deserve better.” Her eyes flashed a light gold when she brought her forehead to his; none of the bystanders noticed anything unusual about what was going on. “Forget that you saw Marcus and me tonight and carry on with your friends. We broke up last week and agreed that I’ll pick up my stuff another time. Now, go and have fun.”

And with that, she released him and focused on his friends, setting them into a trance as well when she hugged them. “You useless tools won’t remember that any of this happened, either. Oh, and Farukh? Avada Kefuckya, you little piece of shit!”

She turned her back on them and clawed at my biceps when she pulled me along with her to the dark corridor leading to the restrooms on quick feet.

“Ivy, you okay?” Sincere concern layered my voice, but she shook her head, and her lips started to tremble again.

“Marcus, I swore I’d never use my powers on him.” Tears ran down her face, and she buried it in her small hands. “He was never supposed to hear anything about the lower realm’s business. Look what I’ve done!”

“You chose to protect him,” I said and reached for her, but she backed off with a scoff.

“No. If anything, I chose the easy way—as usual, when it comes to him and me. All I wanted was to break up the right way. But, *oh look*, Ivy fucks up again!”

“I’m so sorry. I know he means a lot to you—” But she silenced me with her hand up.

“Don’t. We have a mission to accomplish.” Her demeanor shifted, and honestly, it chilled me to my bones when she continued with the freezing coldness of an iceberg, as if the life she’d clung to for the past six years hadn’t just splintered into shards in front of her seconds before. “I’ll leave with the wanted souls. You know your job.”

I nodded and let her push past me. Her wall-of-bricks behavior might’ve fooled others but not me. But it was what

we needed for this mission.

Ivy's strides were loaded with anger, and for a moment, worry infiltrated my mind. Would she be able to pull herself together after that scene? *Yes*, I loathed that bastard, but I knew she was having a hard time letting go of her life of lies for reasons I couldn't understand.

This is the last thing we needed right now. She's distracted. Not good.

Ivy switched into the slightly drugged, giggly prey they expected her to be the closer she got to the wanted souls' booth, and I exhaled in relief.

"Thanks for waiting, guys! You know us ladies need a few extra minutes to check on our makeup." She pretended to stumble and grabbed Rylee's upper arm for support. The guys exchanged knowing looks and stood to surround her and escort her out of the club.

She shot me a quick glance over her shoulder, her lucid eyes incongruous with her playful, lopsided smile, and I pushed out two quick breaths.

It's on! Man, if we make it back alive, I'll buy that Cloud9's gentlemen's club membership my damn self. Shit smells like it's damned to end in a disaster.



I grabbed the weapons bag out of the car and kept some distance as I followed them down an uninviting, dark alley. Ivy gave her best drunk-girl impersonation when she tipsy-giggled and urged them to take her to their place.

"It's not far from here. Let's go!" Tenner offered his arm, and Don joined on her other side.

Rylee fell back and whispered into his phone, probably talking to Corvina, "We have one. Expect us in a couple of minutes." He hung up and caught up to the group.

A few minutes later, they arrived at their apartment building, looking all fancy, with its slick and shiny facade next to the rather old brick buildings around it. Hiding my presence from the human eye, I followed them inside and walked behind them as my nerves rode a damn roller coaster.

Tenner pulled out his keys and opened the door, checking the corridor for any witnesses, and urged everyone to go inside.

Burnt sage irritated my nose when I walked through the door, not needing to open it, as obstacles like doors in the human realm weren't a problem once I'd hidden my presence. I decided to keep watching how things would unfold from the door. I'd take up position somewhere else later.

The room dripped in the light of a dozen candles, our category threes prepared drinks at a minibar and suggested to Ivy to get comfortable on the sofa. A camcorder on the small coffee table next to it had me smirking.

I see, fellow porn enthusiasts.

“Why don't you dance for us? Your moves were quite hot on the dance floor,” Rylee said and offered her another drink.

“Sure, why not?” She drank half of her spiked cocktail and got up, ready to lure our souls even deeper into their misery.

Tenner put on some poor music to play through speakers placed around the room, but she shook her head. “Nah. Give me something *good* to move to.”

He switched to an electronic song—in my opinion, worse than the one before, but Ivy didn't object. Instead, she began moving and dancing in a sultry way. I got distracted for a moment, almost forgetting what we came for, with her swaying curves clouding my brain with desire.

Ugh, why didn't I fuck Bekka before we left for LA? Ah, oh yeah, right...

With her fingertips, she lifted the hem of her dress by a few inches as she sent them on a smooth ride over her beautiful rack.

Don and Rylee joined and sandwiched her in front of Tenner, who sat back on the sofa with both his arms spread on each side. She invited both bodies to crush her in the middle as she let her ass rub against Don's crotch and snaked her arms around Rylee's neck.

It didn't take long before both of them roamed their hands over Ivy's stunning body, paying attention to every delicious inch.

"Boys, behave!" she chided with a grin and pushed off Rylee's busy hand when he groped her ass under her dress.

Back on the sofa with a drink in his hand, Tenner spoke up, "Ready when you are."

His friends nodded, exchanging hooded looks over her shoulders. Don grabbed a fistful of her rich-brown hair and tilted her face to meet Rylee's heated eyes.

The darkness within him crawled out when he looked down at her, announcing the beginning of a game I'd never let them win. "I was born ready."



Every single nerve in my body on full alert, I clutched my hands into steel-hard fists, every brooding fiber aching to punch these bastards straight to Hell. But I couldn't—not yet.

I now leaned on the kitchen counter across the spacious living room and had the hardest time pulling myself together as the scene in front of me changed from light fun to amateur filth.

Tenner got up from the sofa and circled the group like a lion, ready to jump at his prey. “You know the deal.”

Don groped Ivy's breasts, looking far too engrossed and enthralled to stop. “You always get to fuck the virgins first! That's unfair!”

“Fuck off, Don! You know how we roll, and you agreed to it. You get to play first, so shut up!” Tenner countered while taking off his shirt and skinny jeans.

“Wow. Um... thank you, I guess? What an honor that you two idiots are fighting over my virginity,” Ivy mocked with thick sarcasm and was granted a hard squeeze of her neck by Don that silenced her for a moment.

“Feisty, huh? Let's see if you're still sassy when you choke on my dick, bitch!” Rylee fumbled with his pants and freed his semihard cock.

Oh, she'll tell you. Must suck to be you.

Ivy got down on her knees in one smooth motion and immediately started to stroke his small dick, catching him off guard.

“You mean this *little buddy* right here? If you think a wiener sausage will silence me, then I guess the answer is yes. This *bitch*’s still sassy.”

Yep, that’s my girl!

I smirked to myself as I thought about how my fat cock would silence her bratty mouth instead.

Shhh, not now, Cockzilla!

With cautious steps, I altered my location once more and hid my presence next to a big wooden clock close to the window. A light breeze from outside slipped through the crack of the open window and fluttered the curtains, the thin fabric flapping through my leg instead of against it.

Whatever you sickos are planning, I’m right here. Where the hell is Corvina?

Even though I wasn’t visible, I kept my breathing even so as to not raise suspicion. My ability to hide my presence might make me invisible to humans and non-demons, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t hear me. Can’t have it all.

What happened next tested my self-control, and I bit down hard on the inside of my lips to keep a growl from thundering out.

Skin on skin, Rylee’s fist met Ivy’s face with a smash. “You little whore!”

She wiped away traces of blood from her busted lips and licked the smeared back of her hand like a wounded beast. Slow and long were the strokes of her tongue as she pinned Rylee with malice in her widening eyes. And then, too fast and undetectable for the human eye, bright neon yellow flashed over the whole of her retinas before it vanished again.

“My grandma throws harder punches than you. Come try again, big boy!”

What the... What's up with her eyes?

The change in her aura sent icy shivers down my spine. I had nothing to hang my growing nervousness on, nothing obviously visual that would prove me right. But the cold, invisible waves she radiated? Far too perceptible when they hit me to not ring my alarm. Our human targets didn't notice, but I did, and I wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

A pang of eerie energy tugged at me, unfamiliar yet disturbing enough for me to grow wary.

"Enough!" Tenner shouted from beside the sofa with brooding hunger in his look. "Strip her down!"

Don and Rylee began to tear at Ivy's dress and lingerie, ripping them off her body like animals, until she was nothing but naked perfection before they got rid of their clothes as well.

Her body presented itself like it was made to walk around naked. Chocolate-brown hair barely reaching past her shoulders, it allowed to fully appreciate her pretty back, and her plump ass teased me to cherish it with spanks.

I took a deep breath and did my best not to listen to my insatiable thoughts.

Focus, Ferrow, focus!

"You probably envisioned your first time all cuddly and vanilla." Tenner grinned and gulped down the rest of his drink. "Sorry, I don't fuck that way. Make her ready for me!" He eyed Ivy like a starving man and freed his long, curved cock out of his briefs, giving it a few quick strokes.

Ugh, too many peens sniffing fresh air! Fuck being a voyeur. How did I convince myself this was a good idea?

Don knelt behind Ivy, cupping her pussy with a hand and strummed her little clit with two fingers. "C'mon! You heard him."

Her reaction to his touch was hesitant; she stiffened before her hand shot up to her temple, and a groan slipped over her

lips.

What was that?

Rylee brought his tip to her full lips, squishing her cheeks to open her mouth for him. “This doesn’t have to be bad, you know? Be a good little slut and suck my dick,” he ordered and held her hair tight at the back of her head with his other hand.

Ivy sought eye contact with me for a moment as I stood at a good distance behind Rylee.

Can't rely on your powers because of Corvina, but I'm here, and I got you.

Then, in a fragment of a second, distorted streaks of neon yellow illuminated her retinas again; ice-cold waves engulfed me, and a jolt went through me. My lungs stopped expanding to obey my body’s shocked reaction. I’d never seen any demon’s eyes act like that, let alone Ivy’s.

Again! What the effin' fuck is going on? What did they put in her drink?

The next instant, Ivy averted her eyes from me and opened her mouth to welcome his tiny dick, devouring it with mocking hunger. Rylee moaned out at the sensation her needy mouth gave him when he threw back his head in response.

“Pheew! She’s a pro! How the fuck is she a virgin?” He grunted between heavy breaths and tightened his grip on her hair.

“Move!” Don got up and pushed him aside, presenting Ivy his rock-hard cock. Going with the flow, she clutched his shaft and swallowed his length, working her slick tongue around the tip before she released him with a *plop*. Unhinged, he thrust back in and fucked her mouth with quick pumps.

Rylee nudged him away. “Let’s make her ready.” He gave Ivy a harsh push that brought her down on the beige carpet. “Sassy mouths make good fucks. But first, let me taste that pussy.” With both hands, he spread her legs and buried his face between her thighs.

Ivy's hesitant cry echoed through the apartment as the clock struck 11:45 p.m.

How far will she let them go? She can look out for herself, though, no worries... Yeah. No worries at all. Dammit!

We'd been on hunting missions before, but witnessing how she allowed wanted souls to use her body for enjoyment was something I wasn't used to. Doubt I ever would, nor that I knew she ever went this far.

My eyes darted from Ivy to Don when he gunned for his friend's neck and yanked him to the side before he feasted on her pussy himself. Greedy fucker groped her full tits while sliding his tongue through her slit.

Ivy responded with more moans, throatier than before, and when she tilted her chin, she closed her eyes at the pleasure of Don's tongue on her pussy. "Make me feel good!"

This was more than two jerks fighting for their piece of pussy cake. I was in the midst of watching "Hunger Games at the patisserie." Both guys fought for their place at the table as if their lives depended on it as they took turns eating her out like starving men.

I glanced over at Tenner. The slender dumbfuck remained in the same spot as before and was busy stroking his dick. His hooded stare fixed between Ivy's legs.

How the fuck is he standing there, all cool, while his brainless friends escalate?

I tensed with uncertainty, their behavior far too deranged to be considered normal.

Is this more of Corvina's work?

The living room bared no sign of our wanted witch, only obscenity. Ivy, sprawled on the floor, hiking up her legs by grabbing each full thigh. A wicked grin evident on her face from the scene in between her legs, she pushed Rylee's face aside, inviting Don in when she took his hand and guided his fingertips to her pussy.

Her altered eyes found mine again. “Come on, Don. You can bet my juice gets better. Taste it!”

No matter how I turned it, her abstruse behavior threw me off, and I grew more nervous with each passing second. Molars grinding, I forced myself to stay levelheaded and not blow my cover.

“This is the best fucking virgin we’ve ever had. Little slut is enjoying herself. Too bad you won’t remember any of it later when we get rid of you, but I will.” Don looked down on her with sickening arrogance, indifferent to what he thought would happen to her later.

She’d be fine. But he? I’d gift him and his friends *souvenirs*, dick fractures, with best wishes from *Marcus fucking Ferrow*.

With my hands clammy, the urge to get this job over with chipped away at my cool.

How come she goes that far without putting up a fight? Where the hell is Corvina?

Ivy met his hand with slow grinds of her hips, sexual hunger evident when taking two of his fingers. He pulled out and licked off his glistening digits, releasing a deep, satisfied groan.

She shot me an expectant look and sucked in her lower lip. I couldn’t wrap my mind around what the hell was wrong with her.

She’d been so hesitant. But now?

Having her this obedient right in front of me—naked, of course—had become a big part of my jerk-off routine over the years, but this girl here was different from the one I’d worked with for the last five years.

Her vibe became unrecognizable, a complete contrast to what I thought I’d known well enough. In front of me lay an unhinged, sex-crazed woman with zero warmth to her. Body so soft and inviting, yet she used it like a cold, lethal gun.

Almost as if this wasn't Ivy. But who else would it be?

The guys became her little sex puppets, with her being their cruel master. They didn't even realize the strings they were attached to were slowly starting to wrap themselves around their throats.

"Rylee, show me how much you want this pussy. Don, fight for it!"

It was a mere purr but laced with a different voice—distorted, deep. Whatever vocals crept over her lips, they gave me fucking chills. I wasn't sure if my angst-infiltrated mind compromised my hearing or if Corvina already had discovered me and our little plan.

Becoming prey in her sick game would be fatal.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and neck, the room sticky hot from dark sexual tension alone.

A scary chuckle rumbled through Ivy's chest, and her titties bounced when she pushed Don's face away with her bare foot. As Rylee was about to go down on her again, Don delivered a straight hit to his face.

"What the fuck are you idiots doing?" A naked Tenner shouted from next to them and tried to get between both guys as they exchanged bloody punches.

Blood dripping from their faces and fists, they didn't stop their lunatic fight for pussy.

"It's my turn!" Rylee boomed and brought Don to the ground with one last hit to his liver. Fucker groaned out in pain but stood right away.

All heads turned when a cackle of chilling laughter erupted from the floor.

Ivy lay on her back, her hands raked through her disheveled hair, with wickedness tugging on her lips. She looked otherworldly, beautiful, her skin dotted with blood. But her laugh? Devilish. Chilling. Terrifying.

Trembles shook her head, minor and subtle, but enough for my rising doubts to get a hold of me.

Something's not right! Fuck...

“Boys will be boys, huh? I tell you what, the one with the most blood on his hands gets to fuck me first.” She quirked a suggestive brow and parted her legs. “Get started, you delicious sinners!”

Delicious sinners? I heard that one before...

Don leaped forward like the punches he'd received before were nothing but shoulder pats and let his fists rain down on Rylee.

“Corvina!” Tenner bellowed through the living room, hands groping at his blond roots. Fucker grew nervous as he lost control over his dipshit friends and even lost his erection.

Yeah, buddy, I'm confused, too...

An unnatural breeze put out all the candles at once as the door to the bedroom opened with a *bang*.

Corvina entered the scene, see-through black robe exposing the colored phoenix on her ink-adorned leg with every step. Powerful and precise in her strides, her long light-brown hair flapped in waves as she sashayed up to Tenner and caressed his face with her long nails.

“Now, now. What's all that noise out here?” she purred next to his ear with hints of her Brazilian upbringing as she snaked her arms around him from behind. Her pitch-black eyes fell on his friends and, lastly, on Ivy, who didn't care to bless her with any attention. Corvina's reaction didn't give away anything, though.

Good. She doesn't recognize her.

Blood pressure unhealthily high, I traced the edges of the demon trap with impatient fingers, a rush of adrenaline pumping through me.

I can do this. We won't end up dead like Devlen!

“So, this is your virgin?” She scrunched up her nose. “Looks like a slut. I told you to bring me virgins, Tenner. She doesn’t look drugged, either. She’ll remember. *And what the...* What’s up with your stupid friends?” She looked over at Ivy and the other two idiots with disgust etching her face and narrowed blacked-out eyes.

Easy, Marcus, easy.

I loosened my grip on the trap, fingers changing positions for me to throw it with ease.

“She is one. I’m sure about that. And how we get rid of her later is none of your business,” Tenner spat and freed himself from her touch.

“She better be. I need a virgin for my ritual. Otherwise, I’ll pay you with misery instead of fame. You don’t want that, do you?” Corvina backed off, the smeared blood on her breasts partially dried, and sat on the sofa before crossing her ink-adorned legs.

These human idiots stood between me and the sofa, and I cursed them, as I wouldn’t be able to trap her. Opting for a better vantage point was too risky; one mistake, and she could notice me, but I needed to do something. Quick.

Tenner narrowed his eyes at Ivy. “Let’s get this over with.”

No!

With quick strides, he walked up to Ivy and grabbed her by her hair, pulling her up to face him. Her knees buckled, but she steadied herself and straightened.

A wicked grin kept on stretching her face, and she looked down at his limp cock before jerking her chin up, challenging the blond fucker. Vocals low yet bizarre, she purred, “Is *little Tenner* scared of me? I’m flattered.”

Dammit, what’s up with her voice?

His first hit landed on her jaw; her head snapped sideways from the impact.

The second hit he landed on her temple, her posture went slack, and he pushed her down flat onto the ground, booming at Corvina over his shoulder, “Get fucking started!”

“Don’t forget who you’re talking to, *humano!*” she snapped and walked back into the bedroom. Don and Rylee, nothing less than damn category threes, still kept me from getting the angle I needed to land the trap right at Corvina’s feet.

Shit’s about to go down any second, and I haven’t been able to trap her yet!

My insides froze at Ivy’s unmoving body, but that was nothing compared to when she woke with a gasp and pleaded with trembling lips, her soft voice cracking. “Stop. Please!”

She thrashed against Tenner’s grip from behind and turned her face toward me, where I was still concealed by the window. Not neon yellow in the retinas but gold burned inside her pupils when she shouted, “Blondie!”

Hard limit! She needs me!

Torn between sieving heads with ammo and keeping my presence hidden, I tensed from head to toe. She’d addressed me directly in the only possible way without busting our plan and risking falling victim to Corvina’s deadly magick.

Think, Ferrow, fucking think!

“Blondie? Keep mocking me, bitch, and see what happens!” Tenner’s eyes darted to the window, confusion creasing his forehead, but he averted his look. He yanked her head back by the roots before he grabbed her with the other hand by the hip to level her ass. “I’ll fuck some sense back into you, weird-ass ho!”

Her sobs and strained growls forced me to the verge of losing it when she brought her hands behind her head to claw at his tight grip.

I was ready to beat the shit out of him until he was nothing more than a puddle of bloody mush, but at the same

time, I cursed myself for not being able to intervene just yet.

Corvina will be back any second!

The demon trap in my right hand, my mind jumped from one possible scenario to the next; none of them promised we'd walk out of this alive if I acted before Corvina returned.

“What’s that? You’re not as feisty anymore, huh? I didn’t even fucking start yet!” Tenner sneered, giving her ass a harsh smack of his hand before he gave his hardening cock a few strokes.

Quick and sloppy, he spat on the tip of his cock and invaded Ivy’s pussy with one hard thrust until skin met skin. The sound of his hip assaulting her ass paired with her rage-fueled screams filled the spacious room.

“B-Bastard,” she pressed out between clenched teeth with squinted eyes. “I’ll fucking kill you!”

Pain, blood, and body juices all over—I ordered shit like that for breakfast—but to have Ivy in this situation made me sick to my stomach. Her screams, triggered by every hard thrust, drowned out the deep growl of pure hatred rumbling through my chest.

My mouth dry, I pulled out my gun from behind me, moving the safety lever with a careful nudge, and prowled closer to them on light feet. I had enough shots to kill all of them, and by now, I didn’t care to drag them to their Ruling any longer.

C’mon, Corvina! Drag your rotting ass back out here!

Anxiety sweat coated my neck, and beads of it seeped under my shirt beneath the tactical vest. My eyes bounced between the closed bedroom door and Tenner, who kept on pounding into Ivy.

Fuck the money. This wasn’t worth it!

I hated myself for my selfish ways and for dragging Ivy into all of this and coaxed her into fucking them. She’d been hesitant and didn’t tell me her decision on how far she’d go.

Not that it'd change any of what was going down in front of me. It was too late—all of this would turn into permanent memories for both of us.

Electric goose bumps crawled over my cold-sweated back, snapping me out of my thoughts when a strong aura behind me poked my insides.

“Seems like we have a special guest tonight. You weren't invited, though. *How rude!*” Corvina's heavy Brazilian accent carried her amusement, and next, the coldness of a serrated blade tore through my skin with brutal force, right through the fabric side of my tactical vest into my ribs.

We're dead!



The cold blade of Corvina's knife stabbed into my rib cage, and both my gun and the demon trap slipped out of my hands as they fell to the floor with loud thuds. Ivy's scream thundered through the night, same as the *bang* when my gun went off.

"Your sweat fills the air. Rage, mixed with hints of anxiety." Corvina inhaled, pushing the blade further into me before pulling out. "My favorite scent."

Kneecaps first, I crashed to the floor when she pushed me down, forcing my head up with a strong pull on my bun.

"Where are your manners, Marcus? Would you like to introduce yourself to the guys? Never mind. They seem quite *busy* with your partner." Corvina taunted with a huff, arrogance biting and shrill in her laugh she didn't care to hide. "Well, I guess, we're past courtesies anyway."

With a swift push of her bare foot, she kicked my gun out of reach and picked up the demon trap to hold it up with a finger, staring at it in disbelief.

A tired hum ran over her lips. "I feel quite offended, to be honest. A demon trap? Oh, *come the fuck on!*"

Warm blood soaked my shirt and made its way down my tensed body.

"Would've been enough for your skinny-ass," I pressed out between clenched teeth and got a kick to my balls in

response, the crippling pain bending me over until my forehead met the floor.

She dropped the trap beside me and stepped on my wound. Filthy witch enjoyed every second when she applied selective pressure with her toes. “Since the last *uninvited guest*, I’ve cast a spell that lets me see any hidden presences as soon as they enter here.” Swinging her leg back, she brought it back to kick me. “Believe me, I could’ve killed you right from the start but watching you lose your shit over *her*?” Corvina jerked her chin at Ivy. “So much better. But show’s over now. Say *adeus*.”

Our plan went right down the drain in front of Ivy, her widened gray eyes switching between me and Corvina. She raised her head from the carpet, pupils flashing in brooding gold. “Marcus! No! You fucking whore!”

“Says the one who’s getting banged on an IKEA carpet? Aw, Ivy, now this really hurts.” Corvina cocked her head and grabbed her chest. “You’ve known me quite some time. I’d even say you *used* to know me better than anyone else, and still, you tried to deceive me with *this*?” She made loose gestures to Ivy’s hair and scoffed. “I always knew you were below me. Fucking repulsive. Your big foot partner isn’t any different. What a perfect match.”

Corvina clicked her tongue. “To be fair, yesterday, a little birdy chirped something *interesting* into my ear when it asked me to curse a specific *someone* who went by the name *Juno*. However, I’d declined, as she didn’t have the money to afford my services, but she insisted and sent me a picture from her phone. Surprise, surprise—it was a picture of you, Ivy!”

Slow, light footsteps paced around me as Corvina grazed my shoulders with her long nails. “Same style as on the photo you’d shown me of yourself back when I let you entertain me with your pathetic, miserable life. I had to look twice, though with Adrion licking you off like a dog, it was clear. But in light of our history, I decided to not act on it. You’re not worth my energy.”

“*Oh*, so fucking generous. Here, you get a sticker,” Ivy sneered with cutting sarcasm. *Man*, I wasn’t the only one who had an affinity to push buttons at the most inconvenient times.

Corvina’s pitch-black eyes bored into her with hate and amusement at the same time. “Your cheap little makeover is pathetic.”

“You let weak humans do the dirty work for you. Now who’s pathetic—” My voice cracked when Corvina stabbed me in the shoulder from above.

“I don’t think you’re in the position to disrespect me any further.” This time, she didn’t pull out but slowly twisted the serrated blade inside my shoulder, my vision glitching from the pain. Inching closer to my ear, her nasty, iron-heavy breath had me tilting my head. “You stay right here. Enjoy the show!”

As a demon, the wounds her knife caused weren’t fatal, but still, she was a powerful witch. Anything she used was fueled by her powers.

When Corvina discovered me before I was able to make a move, our chances had become almost zero. My mind racing, I went through the options of how we could come out of this alive.

I looked at Ivy, hoping she’d come up with a plan—*hell*, she was the loophole expert.

Sweat and blood from Rylee’s and Don’s fists covered her body. Her vibe shifted once more, a flame close to extinguishing into nothing but smoke.

“I’m so sorry... This is all my fault!” Bitterness coated my hoarse voice just before Corvina broke my nose with a brutal kick to my face.

“Shut up!”

“Oh, c’mon! Not my nose, bitch! How’s this pretty boy supposed to face his groupies after we kick your ass?” Blood

washed around my taste buds, and I gave her a bloody half smile.

Pushing buttons till the end. Can't help it.

“*Cala boca!*” Corvina shouted down at me and walked up to Ivy, dangling her blood-smeared breasts right in front of Ivy’s face.

“Not sitting up high on your moral horse this time, huh?” She let her pitch-black eyes roam over the scene in front of her. Tears of anger ran down Ivy’s cheeks as the blond fucker kept on degrading her from behind.

Corvina picked up my gun from the carpet and aimed it at Ivy’s head.

“Right now, I don’t give a damn about the ritual. I could just shoot you.” She pressed the muzzle against her temple but pulled away. “But wouldn’t it be *fun* if I shot Marcus first and your slutty ass gets to watch before I end you as well?”

“Pull out!” She sent Tenner flying back when she kicked him and crouched down to squish Ivy’s cheeks together. “Now, look at you, pitiful whore. You’re disgusting.”

Spit met Corvina’s face in response, and Ivy steadied herself on both hands.

“Suck dick and choke on it!”

“You little cunt!” Corvina pushed her on her back to straddle her, bringing the sharp blade to Ivy’s throat. The others kept their distance, gawking at the dark violet energy sparks sizzling around Corvina. Bitch was pissed.

“*Para aqui,*” she chanted with a scary bite in her tone, and my body lifted on its own, her powers bringing me closer to them. Unable to move, I levitated above the floor, shoe tips dragging over the surface with scratching sounds. Every single muscle in me fought against her magick, but it was useless.

“Why are you here?” She growled down at Ivy before breaking the ulna bone in my left forearm with a swift twist of her hand.

The cracking sound of my crushed bone reverberated through my tensed body, and I clenched my teeth and swallowed the urge to groan. I wouldn't grant her the pleasure of giving in and allowing her torture to give away the obvious pain. The blade in my shoulder slowed down my healing, the sliced wound unable to close.

“*Oopsie!*” She grinned and pushed down the blade on Ivy's throat, cutting into her skin. “Shall we try again? Why. Are. You. Here?”

“Hired by the one and only—William Hardin! He ordered us to drag your rotten asses to Hell, and trust me, the only reason you're still alive is that I can't fucking wait to see you get tortured to death.”

Ivy pushed up her head to meet Corvina's furious eyes, cutting deeper into her own skin with that bold move.

“Remember Devlen? You killed one of Mr. Hardin's favorites, dumb bitch,” Ivy hissed and pushed even further against the blade. “He was our friend!”

Corvina inched closer to her face. “Boo-hoo! He was weak, just like you two pathetic excuses for demons.”

“What about the ritual? Should we—” Tenner urged from behind, but Corvina's death glare cut him off.

“Shut the fuck up, or I'll have you eating your shit! This right here is none of your business anymore. Leave!”

Without a second thought, those scared idiots picked up their clothes and put them on, hurrying to get out.

“Wait!” Corvina tapped her lips, with growing excitement lifting her brows. “She might not be a virgin, but she's a *succubus*. Tsk, tsk, why didn't I consider that earlier?” She sat up straight and ordered them back. “There's also power to drain from you. Tenner, get back to work!” Corvina released Ivy's throat from the dagger and flipped the blade back and forth with wickedness creasing her cheeks.

Blood ran down the sides of Ivy's throat onto the crimson-stained carpet, each drop accompanied by thunderous drums of her heart. My demon powers granted me precise, above-average hearing, but now, I cursed my special abilities as angst and panic caused them to boost.

"Tonight, it's time to try out something new, my weak human idiots." She pointed at Don. "You. Undress Marcus and have him suck you off. I'll drain his energy as well."

Don's and my expressions were almost the same, a *what the fuck* had never been as obvious as now. For the first and last time, we were on the same page tonight—hell no!

"Fuck this shit! I'm out!" He scoffed and continued dressing.

With a twist of her hand, Corvina cut off Don's airflow and purred, "I didn't catch that. *Come again?*"

After what must've felt like an eternity to Don, she released him with another twist of her hand, his voice shaking. "S-Sure. Why not, I guess?"

Corvina got up and sashayed behind me with a long, stretched hum. "If you behave and be his little bitch, I'll promise to make your death as quick as possible."

"Don't fucking touch him!" Ivy raged before she received a punch to her face from Tenner, who demanded her attention.

"Fucking look at *me*, stupid ho!"

I never felt as weak and useless as at this very moment. My blood pressure pounded in my ears, and my claws ached to rip off his head, with the rest of these human scumbags. But my body ignored the rage that pumped through my veins and remained nonresponsive.

I'm losing more blood by the second, and with that witch's dagger in my body, my healing won't catch up fast enough. Shit!

A furious growl rumbled through my chest when Corvina gave the knife a violent push and cackled like a fucking hyena,

twisting the serrated blade in my wound once more.

“Isn’t it a fabulous night?” She pulled it out, taking her time to make it as painful as possible, and held the dripping blade over her open palm. “Forcefully taken, blood makes magick so much more potent. But that’s nothing compared to its maximum, if the sacrifice is forced to drink it.”

Walking back to Ivy, she let more quick droplets fall into her hollowed hand. “You’re nothing, Ivy, and you’ll never be more than *nothing* compared to me.”

“I’d rather be nothing than be the epitome of filth and decay!”

Quick and fierce, Corvina tossed the knife, lowered one knee onto Ivy’s arm, and squished Ivy’s cheeks together before she brought her blood-pooled palm to her mouth. Ivy shot up her free arm to claw at Corvina’s hand, but the witch left her with no choice but to swallow when she pressed her hand flat onto Ivy’s mouth.

“Stop fighting, or I’ll kill Marcus right away!”

Ivy writhed and thrashed, brows dipping deep, hatred etching the visible parts of her face. It was when her throat moved with the gulp that her head tilted back as if yanked by force, and her golden pupils shone brighter than ever before.

Her breathing strained, and her body began shaking as she started to sweat unnaturally. Then she closed her eyes and slackened, lifeless.

The swinging seconds pendulum of the wooden clock tortured my senses, oversharpened by my invoked powers and rushing adrenaline. Every second without any sign of life from Ivy was one too many. I fucking lost it, and my breaths became loud and sharp. She didn’t move; by the missing movement of her chest, she must’ve stopped breathing altogether.

“Ivy!” My heart pumped pure fear, threatening to seize, as the clock announced midnight. Each chime was followed by long echoes throughout the living room.

No, no, no!

“No pulse,” Don said after he scrambled over the floor to reach for Ivy’s jugular vein. Rylee moved closer as well, whereas Tenner stood by the wall like a statue.

Corvina bent down to check for herself. “No pulse. Tsk. Not even good enough for a simple sacrificial ritual, but anyhow”—she faced me with a sly grin and removed herself from Ivy to approach me, twirling her hair—“we still have another one here.”

A sharp intake of air cut through the living room and had Corvina halting two steps away from me. All heads snapped to Ivy, her back arching so high it threatened to snap her spine in half.

With wary steps, Corvina walked over to her levitated body.

“This is new.” She inspected Ivy, pitch-black eyes scanning over her arched body and, lastly, gave Ivy a timid push with her bare foot.

Hitting the floor with her head first, Ivy touched down hard and gripped Corvina’s ankle, throwing her against the window with unnatural speed. Bones and glass cracked; Corvina lay there, knocked out from the impact and surrounded by shards.

Weakened and injured, Corvina’s spell lost its power over me, and I regained control over my body and healing.

My eyes snapped back to Ivy, who pushed herself up with the grace of a goddess. That familiar, chilling voice, with its layers of unholy seduction, made a comeback.

“Sinfully *taken*, sinfully *given*, sinfully *tasted*.” It was a beastly vibe, rolling in deep specters of darkness that gave her rich voice an underlying taste of power and doom. And with that, two flaming, neon-yellow eyes locked with mine, burning themselves into my soul. “You taste *exquisite*, Marcus.”

“What the fuck... I thought she was dead?” Don’s last words ran over his tongue before a generous amount of wet warmth splashed into my face.

Faster than my shocked brain was able to catch, *she* had slaughtered Rylee and Don like pigs; body parts ripped and scattered in front of me, across the living room and at Corvina’s feet, waking her.

Horror widened her pitch-black eyes, bouncing between handless arms, shreds of skin, and bodies bleeding out quick-running rivers of crimson.

The walls were painted in splashes, torn guts sprawled across the furniture, and inches of intestines hung from the ceiling light—a fucking massacre.

Swiping the blood from my eyelids with both hands, my vision smeared and blurry, I took in Ivy’s wholly splattered appearance walking up to me. The slaughter’s metallic tang in my nose and Corvina’s frantic screams left me in sensory overload, distracting me from the wounds that hadn’t finished healing yet.

Cold sweat coated Ivy from head to toe with thin streaks of fresh blood running down between. Her bright neon eyes framed by the crimson life essence painted a mask on the rest of her face.

Her hair. Those eyes. What... Wings?

I couldn’t stop gawking at the dark wings that graced her back.

Unholy fuck!

As she spread them, blood dripped onto the floor, joining the puddles she sashayed in with bare feet. Next second, thunder rolled through the night, and lightning strikes joined when they cracked relentlessly, as if Zeus himself whipped the weather to bend to his sudden mood swing.

Long black hair cascaded in soft waves, her body occasionally illuminated by the storm raging outside that had

appeared out of nowhere. Her round tits bounced with every step, red dripping from her nipples. Dark feathers of her wings ruffled smoothly into place, almost reaching the floor.

“Ivy... you grew wings. Your hair. It’s black. What the fuck is going on?” The flood of words left me, unable to process the situation, all while I imprinted into my mind every inch of the heavenly yet devilish goddess who now stood in front of me.

How is this possible?

At first sight, her wings were drenched in shades of black but revealed a stunning, rich, wine red upon closer inspection, starting from the middle down to the tips.

Satisfaction laced her voice, still chilling me down to my bones, as it was terrifying, evil, and powerful. “*Sorry*, Ivangeline’s not available right now. In fact, she won’t be around for a while. Nice to finally meet you, *Marcus Ferrow*.” She gazed down at me, and a toothy grin lifted her death-adorned cheeks.

My mouth opened but nothing came out, eyes bouncing all over *her*. There was no warmth to her grin when it spread all over her face, nor an ounce of happiness in the way she looked at me—only madness.

Quiet yet loud in the midst of deathly silence, a door squawked.

“Someone wants to leave the party,” *she* purred and turned her head toward the front door, catching a wide-eyed Tenner with his shaky hand on the door handle.

“Pimediis, what do we think of that?” With a rustle of her wings, a large inky shadow detached from her and crept over the floor toward Tenner.

Sickening screams sliced through the night when the guy’s intestines gushed out of his abdomen, synched with scarlet streams bursting over his lips instead of words. The bodiless shadow clawed at every inch of the exposed guts; it took its time.

A smoky thin black thread appeared out of Tenner's mouth as his jaw went slack, and it curled and snaked its way back into the shadowy creature right after. Terrifying stuttering in Portuguese issued forth from Corvina as she pressed herself into a corner.

What the fuck was that?

Over by the door, *her* shadowy helper rose and pinned Tenner to the wall with Corvina's discarded knife. Quick streams of warm crimson trickled onto the floor, the drops killing the silence with the deafening sounds of Tenner's body bleeding out.

"You have a knack for art, Pimedi, I give you that." Light-footed, *she* made her way over to Tenner's corpse and pressed her lips to his dead ones. Her shadow melted back into her with another rustle of feathers. "Long gone are the good old times, my friend. But look what fate has gifted us. We're free."

Sashaying her way through the gory chaos, she stepped toward me, her smile growing as she approached.

Running her tongue across the corners of her mouth, she tasted the latest slaughter, where it mixed with the massacre coating her from head to toe. She wiped a flat palm up her torso from beneath her right tit and brought the fresh iron taste to her wide tongue, licking it, as she pinned me down with thrilling intensity in those neon-yellow eyes.

"I'm Allegra."



Marcus stared at me, eyeballs on the verge of popping out of their sockets, like he'd discovered his parents were related.

What a simple little mind.

I thrummed with the power flowing through me as I stretched my new body and savored the tang of blood, fear, and death lingering in the air I breathed. The dramatic drop in temperature and pressure that had come with the sudden weather change called me closer to the window.

Unusual for the otherwise mild and calm night indeed, it'd started to pour outside. Thunder boomed, and flashing lightning illuminated the splattered walls around me in the most ominous way.

Even Mother Nature cries and trembles at my arrival. They all should.

Walking closer to the window, I tilted my chin and scrutinized my mirrored appearance before a striking flash cast half my face in light. Taunting, it was, the reminder of my time in the soul cage, and I leaped forward at my reflection to shatter it with my fist.

Howling wind surged through the broken glass and raged its anger at me.

Free but forever bound to lay eyes on a reflection different from what I once called my very own throughout centuries in

the prime world. The face my mate loved to hold when he kissed me, the body he'd adorned with scars. Forever gone.

For too long, I'd been caged in Ivangeline's split soul. Stupid girl didn't even know she was the spawn of an ancient species. Oblivious to everything, going through life like a chicken missing its head.

Gone are the days of imprisonment.

"At least I got to keep my hair and eye color." Twirling my dark locks and smacking my ass, I peeked over my shoulder at Marcus, who still couldn't peel his gawking eyes off me. "*Divine!* Don't you think?"

Lost for words, he swallowed, throat bobbing. The struggle of his slow, primitive brain trying to catch up was entertaining.

"Don't overwork your tiny mind, pawn. Let's put it this way—Ivangeline is on vacation, and she won't return anytime soon." I continued licking off the fresh blood coating my hands and fingers with lingering hunger for more. "Although being trapped in the cage *I* was kept in doesn't resemble a vacation—quite the contrary." I grinned and found delight in every little twitch of Marcus's expression that ratted out his fear.

At last, he managed a pathetic stammer, "Wha—what are you?"

"In an ancient realm, I'd been a queen, the mate of the one who was *always hungry, never sated*. The mate of a devil with a prophecy. In your realm? I'm a banished succubus goddess, caged into Ivangeline's bloodline of unworthy split souls for generations." Tracing my lips with wet fingers, I tensed from the faint feelings of chagrin tugging at my heart—or what was left of it. "Longing to be freed so I can return to the mate I'd been stolen from by dragons."

Cocking my head, I skimmed over Marcus's weakened posture. "In Ivangeline's case, a succubus split soul with angel *and* dragon parts. The irony behind it! Caged into a split soul

with dragon parts. Dragon! The species that once ripped me from my physical body!” I scoffed as I cracked my neck. “Blood is so powerful, you know? She’d given in to carnal acts, where she’d tasted blood one night ago when she fucked that half human and his beast. But that was consensual.”

Amos’s energy was dark, wicked, and so delicious! Stupid girl has no idea that he unknowingly paved the way for me.

I raked my fingers through my black mane and took delight in the buzzing sensation of my powers flowing through my body. “Not like this time, when your blood broke their spell over me. Life essence forcefully taken from someone she loves and consumed by her without her consent—there is no stronger catalyst for magick. That human raping her surely helped as well. So much sinful energy. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Y-You’re w-what? A succubus goddess?” His jaw dropped, and by the gape of his mouth, his brain was a smoking mess. “Ivy’s also part angel and dragon? A spell?”

Not the brightest candle on the cake.

“Are you a broken record? *Y-You’re w-what?* Marcus, weren’t you listening?” I sauntered through the blood-adorned living room with a genuine smile stretching my lips, absolutely in awe of the fatal consequences of my powers.

This could pass as art.

“Yes, unbelievable, right? Me, an ancient demon goddess, caged in a split soul. Such unworthy treatment.” Walking through puddles of blood and sprawled intestines, I made my way back to him. “It got boring in the soul cage over the years with their constant attempts to *tame* me. Illusive. As if they could tame *me!*”

Awful shivers ran down my naked back as I thought about all the years I’d been doomed to witness Ivangeline’s pathetic life.

I clicked my tongue in annoyance and raked my hands through my dark, silky locks once more.

“It’s making me *nauseous*, how she wasted her life being so emotional and nostalgic and, *dear doom*, don’t get me started on her relationship with that human. Repulsive. Her little cat and mouse game with that half werewolf was just as pathetic, but at least it got quite entertaining last night. This body”—I took my time as I let my hands glide past my gorgeous medium-brown areolas, down to my toned abdomen —“is completely wasted under her command. And all this time, she was so damn oblivious to its full potential.”

A small movement in my peripheral vision caught my attention.

“Oh, right. Almost forgot about your useless existence.”

My eyes fell on Corvina, who pushed herself up, only to crash back onto the floor as the impact of my attack still reverberated through her bruised limbs.

“*Sorry!* Haven’t used my powers in a long time, and this body still needs to adjust.” I sashayed over to her and placed my foot on her head with a devilish smirk.

Seeing her like this, weak as a roach beneath me, brought my clit to life.

With firm pressure, I lowered my foot, pressing on her head, basking in the results of the fatal powers I was slowly regaining.

“Marcus! I can cage her back in!” The witch shouted before I gave her ugly face a heartfelt kick that had her spitting out a broken molar.

“Me? Caged in again? What an entertaining delusion!” My body bent with hysterical laughter, red-splattered walls echoing my amusement. “Shall I show you all what *real power* looks like?”

Lightning flashed outside and ripped through the gloomy clouds, casting their death-bringing light onto my wings from behind.

Feathers rustled as they birthed my shadow once more, and he revealed himself when he brought his hands around Corvina's throat. The horror that caught her by surprise further squeezed her windpipe and left her gargling. I crossed my arms with a broad smile, thrilled to see my old friend enjoying his regained freedom as much as I was.

“Do you *really* believe I spent the last centuries locked away in split souls, generation after generation, just to jump right back in after slaughtering these three plebs and devouring only one soul? Just wait and see how my mate will fulfill his prophecy and soak the soil of both realms with the blood of sinners and unworthy half-blood scum. This is just the beginning.”

I hooded my eyes and swept them over Corvina's face, admiring the beautiful hints of blue caused by my shadow's assault of her windpipe.

“We have done it before, in the prime realm, my devil and me. We feasted and feted as we bathed in the blood of the vessels whose souls we'd eaten. That was until filthy dragons ripped me from him because of a damn prophecy!”

Primitive old lizards! How could they dare to strip me from my body and steal me from my mate?

I lowered the feathery tips of my wings to my legs, the disgusting softness brushing my sin-coated skin.

“Isn't it ironic? A demon goddess with black angel wings? But the angel species that once had black wings found extinction hundreds of years ago, not that it really matters how their bloodline found its way to Ivangeline's ancestors.” A sharp scoff blew out of me. “I'd rather have them ripped out.” I stared at the wings with distaste and hatred. “Ivangeline and I, we're two different sides of the moon—bound to one another and cursed to never share the same light.”

Wasn't it enough to spit on my pride when I got caged in a split soul that inherited dragon heritage? But cursing my new body with wings? How shameful.

Corvina watched every movement with her muscles stiffening, anticipating the moment I would bless her with the final brutal strike that would end her agony.

But I had something different in mind.

“Pimediis, that’s enough,” I ordered, and my shadow retreated to me with a rustle of my wings, sprinkling Corvina’s face with a fine rain of blood as she lay at my feet like a broken doll.

“You’re quite powerful, witch.” Grabbing her long brown hair, I brought her head up a couple of inches from the floor, hissing at her between gritted teeth, “As long as that split-soul mutt resides in me, I’m blinded to my mate’s presence by the higher powers of the dragons. You help me get rid of her, and I’ll let you go. *Pinky promise!*”

“Marcus! Help me!”

Both hands shot up to my ears as Ivangeline’s voice boomed through my head, the mental barrier faltering. Corvina peeked at me with swollen eyes but didn’t dare to move.

“Shut up!” I yelled, and my claws scraped over my scalp as I struggled to keep the upper hand. Ivangeline kept on screaming.

“Let me out!”

Pain vibrated through my head in waves as Ivangeline rattled the bars of her cage.

“Ivy, are you still in there?” Marcus’s whisper made me snap my face in his direction, and I let a devilish snarl creep through the air as a warning.

Rage burned through me, and within a split second, I launched for his hair with my claws. “Don’t you dare speak to her!” I tormented his scalp, pulling and ripping, as my wrath spiraled. “She’s gone, and she won’t return! This body now belongs to me, and I’ll get rid of the remaining fragments of her in time.”

She's not as weak as I thought. Eating one soul isn't enough to remain in charge.

Smoothing my voice and releasing him from my rending grip, I traced his youthful face and lips with my index finger.

“Forget about her. She was useless and weak anyway. I need you, Marcus. I need to feast on many, many souls to recharge fully. I could bless you with powers you haven't even heard of.” I straddled him and whispered sweet lies into his ear while rocking on his crotch. “I can give you that. Devouring souls invokes power so brutal and ecstatic, you'll never want to stop once you had a taste.”

Fruits are sweetest right before they go bad. Can't wait to eat yours once I have no use for you any longer, my little pawn.

“You could dine with us when the time comes and my mate corrupts the souls of the human realm and turns them into sinners. Turning all of them into ripe, sinister, tasty delicacies.”

Marcus's lips parted as I brought my face close to his, and he closed his glowing red eyes when I placed a lingering kiss on his lips, sharing the human blood with him.

“But for that to happen, my devil needs me strong and well fed. Bring me the darkest of souls, the souls you call category fours. Help me, and I'll see you as my ally once I'm reunited with my mate.” I leaned back, sweeping my gaze over his bloody masterpiece of a face, and purred, “Are you in, or will you fight me for Ivangeline's soul? That could get interesting.”

He let his eyes roam over the massacre and jerked his head lazily in Corvina's direction. “I can help you with the witch. What do you need me to do?”

Loyalty is royalty, not that scum like him would honor such things.

A burst of shaky laughter sounded from the floor before the witch coughed up more blood. “Now this is just to my

liking! Ivy's not only a prisoner in her own soul, but her *friend* turns his back on her. Ha!"

A wicked grin lifted my cheeks. I pulled Marcus against my lips and tasted him once more, our tongues caressing each other as his strong hands pushed me harder onto his bulge.

I broke our heated kiss reluctantly, but there would be enough time to play later. "*Now, now*, don't get impatient! Let me finish what I've started." Deathly excitement prickled my skin when I shifted my attention to Corvina. "Time to work, witch! I need to find my mate."

I approached her, feeling the delicious anticipation and madness widening my eyes and mouth into a wicked grin. Her weak attempts to crawl away from me were pathetic yet so delightful. "Initially, I wanted to let you die as slowly and painfully as possible, but now I have plans for you. Look on the bright side! Today's your lucky day."

An ecstatic rush of victory heated my skin as I put my foot on her head again, ready to crush her skull if she wouldn't comply. "Now, let's hear it, witch. Show us some *hocus-pocus!*"

-click-

The brutal buzz of thunderous volts surged through my body, and forced me to my knees. I caught a glimpse of the trap that had tightened around my ankle, piercing into my flesh with sharp metal jaws. Warmth coated my foot and pooled beneath it.

A fucking demon trap?

"Cage her back in, and I'll let you go!" Marcus's alarmed voice sent blasting rage into my mind.

But the second powerful shock lanced through my body, and my vision glitched as my powers threatened to fade.

Destined to rule, and they spit on my pride with their pathetic plan.

"Now!" he roared with the intensity of a bursting volcano.

I clawed at the trap with strong, vicious rips. After all, my full powers hadn't returned yet, and the terrifying thought of being banished *again* boosted the strength in my muscles. But the more I yanked, the harder the metal jaws bored into my flesh.

I'll kill both of you weak little insects!

The sound of a metal hammer striking a firing pin had my instincts on full alert before the deadly sonic boom of a bullet followed. Piercing pain shot through me, so acute and distracting that I almost missed the second hit of the gun's hammer.

My movements stilled, and my fingers ultimately let go of the trap around my bare ankle as agonizing pain pulsed through the hand that refused to follow my control.

I shifted my eyes to Corvina, who'd started to chant beneath me in the oldest of wicked tongues. Bringing my claws forward to strangle the last bits out of her, I viciously growled as my eyes widened.

My hand!

Blood streamed uncontrollably out of my left hand, the flesh around the hole ragged and destroyed. I reached down to my left thigh, where another source of wet warmth coated my leg.

"You..." I snarled with bared fangs, turning halfway around to unleash my fatal wrath on Marcus, but he'd vanished. My vision blurred more with each passing second. Jaw grinding and invoking the last bits of leftover power I had to kill her, I reached for Corvina's throat once more.

"Pimedi—" My last weak attempt to summon my shadow failed when Marcus blindsided me with a deep growl, giving away his presence. The hard muzzle of his gun met my skin as he brought the weapon to my shoulder.

"Time to sleep, bitch!"

The gun's hammer slammed down for the third time, and the familiar horror of imprisonment consumed everything around me.



Freezing water hit my face, and I gasped for air. My eyes flew open with the shock, but I squeezed them shut again; the brutal contrast of warm rays of sunlight lasered my eyeballs. In the next instance, the presence of two strong hands pushing my body down had me kicking and boxing blindly, panic washing over any rational thought. But it was short lived.

My body too deprived of energy, I surrendered into the soft pressure against me, and my back came down on something cushy.

A bed?

But pain stung through my back in response, and I curled to my side with my lungs pressing out heavy pants, moving the loose blonde strands that were sprawled out in a mess next to my head.

A familiar deep voice resonated in my ears from above me. “Ivy, calm down! It’s me! You’re safe now!”

I peered up through heavy eyelids.

Marcus?

He patted my face with a soft towel and gave me a sheepish smile. “Sorry, but you wouldn’t wake up. You fucking scared me!”

I tried to keep my eyes open, but everything remained blurry, and the uncontrollable shaking resumed.

“Stop. No. No!” Snippets of the night before flooded my mind and lit up a fire of horror within me. “Marcus, help me! Get me out of here! Let me out!” I screamed and buried my hands in my hair, pulling at the roots, trying to rip out the torturous scenes that had started to flash before my eyes.

Hot pain exploding over my face from their fists, Tenner’s harsh yanks at my hair, him raping me, Don’s disturbed look before my hands tore at his throat until I was fingers-deep in its flesh. Falling into darkest black.

Rough fingers took my hands and pinned them down on the wet sheets next to my face. “Ivy, breathe! Allegra’s caged in again!”

Those few words pulled me into the present and brought crushing realization to me.

Last night was real... Our mission. Tenner raping me. Corvina. All that blood! And her!

The demon’s name alone granted horror permission to tighten its grip on me. My mouth hung open as I cried out the pain I’d suffered from the soul exchange, switching between sobs and hyperventilating until my lungs burned.

Complete darkness creeps up on me as I sit in the cage, consuming all of me with its chilling embrace. Cold metal cuts into my wrists as I try to free myself from the cuffs, and the piercing pain of something tears at the bare skin of my back as I try to stand up.

I heaved in a sharp breath and kicked at the blanket as the terror surfaced again. “Take them off! Get them off me!” I yelled, fighting against the phantom sensations on my wrists. Every movement caused my back and shoulder to sting, and my left hand burned under something tight and coarse, same as my left leg.

Air huffed out of my lungs when something—someone—heavy spread out on top of me, restricting my movements. Strong arms wrapped around me, holding me in place.

“I’m here, Ivy, I’m here. It’s me, Blondie. No one will hurt you. Now, breathe in... And out.”

When I stopped writhing, he loosened his hold and pushed himself up a few inches to give me space. With more steady breaths, I calmed down and shifted my blurry gaze around the room. The many framed Hell Mates pictures of naked demon models next to a tour poster of Hasselhoff by the wall indicated that we were at Marcus’s place.

I curled my toes and took a thin, wavy strand of my hair between my fingers, inspecting its warm blonde color. The movement was simple, yet it flooded my mind with relief.

My body, my thoughts.

I faced the intense worry reflected in Marcus’s narrowed cerulean blue eyes when my vision cleared further. Bringing my hands up again, I couldn’t peel my eyes from the old, dried blood under my nails, and tears began to pour out of me.

My hands and body had been coated with all of their blood...

“You washed me,” I mumbled.

“As much as I could.”

Sorrow and gratitude gripped me, both emotions too strong for me to handle.

“It’s over.” He let out a shaky breath and lowered his forehead to my heated face. “*Hell*, Ivy, I thought I lost you last night. I’m so sorry! I promised to have your back but failed to stop this from happening. Everything happened so fast. I couldn’t... *Fuck!* Please forgive me.”

Lost for words, I stared right through him. The events of last night kept their hold on me and didn’t let go.

Control over my own actions had slipped as soon as they tore off my clothes... Why wasn’t I strong enough?

Exhaustion took over, and my eyelids became the curtains of my consciousness. I tried hard to open them again but

couldn't. Sleep enveloped me, and I drifted off.



Later, when I woke again, Saturday night's darkness had devoured most of my surroundings.

"No!" Fear crept through my body from head to toe once again, numbing me.

"I'm here with you!" Marcus's worried voice sounded from across the bedroom as he came to me in quick strides. He lit a candle on the nightstand, the dim light softening my view of the room, while faint wisps of Creed Aventus cologne crept up my nose.

Yes, still Marcus's place.

Sweat coated my face, and I tried to lean on my right arm, but it gave way, and I slumped back onto the bed, only to bolt upright again from the pain in my shoulder.

"Don't. Just get some rest, Ivy." He placed a cool washcloth on my forehead, and I rolled to the side, bringing up my knees. I'd never felt this weak and vulnerable before, adrift in a haze of pain, fear, and memories that threatened to consume me.

As I gathered the courage to ask about last night, a storm of knocks assaulted the front door.

"Ah, finally! What took him so fucking long?" Marcus left for the door, and fear's cold touch grazed me.

Don't leave me alone!

Low whispers carried to my ears from the corridor outside before he walked back in, followed by the familiar shape and features of a man wearing a long gray coat.

Rion?

My tired eyes fell on my best friend, who looked straight-up pissed. His look softened when he saw me but not before he shot Marcus a death glare. Warmth prickled my cheeks but not

the flustered kind, more the *Hell, I want to hide under a rock* kind.

“I called you three hours ago! What the fuck took you so long, Gregori?” Marcus shouted, but Adrion disregarded him without a word when he came over and kneeled next to the bed. He enclosed my hand with his and asked if he could check my body for any injuries.

So awkward...

“Rion, why are you here? Don’t worry, it’s not that bad.” With shaky movements, I pushed myself onto my elbows once more, but he shook his head and pushed me down, warm gentle hands on both my shoulders. I flinched, pain shooting through my right shoulder and my tormented back at the same time.

Adrion’s expression was hard to look at; maybe he thought the same about me. Taking off his coat, he placed it on the chair by the window and came back to me, rolling back the sleeves of his black button-down shirt. “Ferrow did the only right thing—for once—and called me. Ivy, *please*, let me check.”

Marcus rolled his eyes behind Adrion’s back and scoffed. “Cut the shit and help her!”

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I mumbled to Marcus, who watched Adrion like a hawk, his lips set into a tight line and feet drumming a beat of restlessness.

“Can you stop being so damn stubborn for one second? Trust me, if I’d known a better solution, I would’ve gladly spared myself his annoying ass.”

Adrion’s brows dipped when he discovered injury after injury on my body.

“You *goddamn* bastard. How dare you talk about *me* like that when you were the one who couldn’t protect her? Have you seen the cuts and bruises?” His hand gripped the sheets. “And why’s her skin scarred multiple times? It looks like

someone shot her in the hand, leg, and shoulder, but they're already healed. She didn't have these scars before!"

I gasped in shock when Marcus threw a nearby chair against the wall and shouted, "*Fuck*, I know! It was the only thing I could do at that moment to save her!"

"*You shot her?* Three times?" Adrion boomed, voice grave and dangerous. His grip on the sheets threatened to tear the fabric with each new clench of his trembling fists.

"Boys, please. I'm okay. I'm the one to blame." I gave Adrion's hand a tender squeeze and tilted my head sideways to meet his eyes. "Our plan went to shit, and there was nothing Marcus could've done to help me. If there would've been the tiniest option, he wouldn't have gone so far as to shoot me. I don't know what exactly went down as I wasn't fully there... Ugh. It's hard to explain. But I trust him, Rion, and so should you. *Please.*"

Amos's rage burned in his eyes, shifting between copper and his usual soft blue-green; keeping his beast on a leash was challenging. But, lastly, Adrion calmed down, and I was damn relieved to not witness yet another bloodbath.

"You have a lot of explaining to do, Ferrow!"

"*Man*, whatever, Gregori. Do your damn job and help her!"

I flinched as Adrion applied pressure to my abdomen while he continued to examine me.

"The fresh cuts on your wrists, throat, and cheek are halfway healed. Good to see you got your mojo back. Can I see your back? Please take off your shirt for me, love."

"*Love*. Really? Fucking softie. Just pull the damn shirt up high enough." Marcus crossed his arms, familiar revulsion tugging on his upper lip.

Adrion's eyes locked with mine when he answered Marcus, not bothering to hide the faint grin lifting his lips. "Ivy *blessed* me with that sight and *other things* two nights

ago, Ferrow. Nothing I haven't *seen* or *touched* before. You were the one who called and begged for my help, remember?"

Thick tension filled the air, and the sound of cracking knuckles synched Marcus's deep growl thundering through the room.

I blushed and averted my eyes from Adrion's hooded look, crumbling under his intense gaze. "Can you help me take it off?"

Without hesitation, he hooked his strong arms under my upper body and lifted, sitting me up and starting to remove my shirt with careful motions.

I don't remember putting these clothes on. I'm not even wearing a bra!

"Wait. Marcus, is this your shirt?" The tips of my ears tingled with hot embarrassment.

"Of course it is. Couldn't let you stay naked. And, as you might remember, your clothes were torn, so that's that. *Damn*, Ivy, I've seen your gorgeous body as well, to be precise—*from every angle and legs spread*. Nothing to be ashamed of." He smirked and basked in the effect his words had on Adrion as his low blow granted him a death stare.

You couldn't keep this to yourself, could you, Blondie? Evil little fucker...

"Could you *please* shut the fuck up and let me continue to do my job?" Adrion snapped at him before he turned back to me. "Better fucking believe I'll rip his eyes out later."

He slowly undressed my upper half and kept his eyes above my chest. He gave me the shirt to cover my breasts and inspected my back.

The malicious snarl rattling through his throat didn't wait long to emerge. "What. The. Fuck."

I balled my hands into fists, tightening my hold on Marcus's shirt. Words danced eagerly on my tongue, ready to spill out, but I paused and swallowed them.

The truth will prevail. He deserves to be confided in. I'm so fucking ashamed. I don't even know the whole story... But I have to tell him.

Turning sideways, I looked at him between wet lashes and started another attempt to shed light on my darkest hour. “Remember the mission I’d told you about? We’d been contracted to hunt three men. *Things* didn’t go as expected—” The rest of my sentence got stuck in my throat, but my sudden silence was nowhere near as deadly and eerie as Adrion’s.

His gaze dropped to my white-knuckled fists. I could’ve mistaken it for pity, maybe a moment of shock after he’d seen my tormented back, but his nostrils flared with every rage-infused breath.

And, *shit*, it came out, slow and steady at the beginning before it turned forced and shallow.

“Who did this to you?” He killed the silence with his own darkness evident in every syllable. “Did *they* do this to you?”

“The wanted souls don’t matter anymore,” I whispered down to my lap.

I can't tell him I got raped by Tenner... Not now.

“It’s complicated. When I was in the cage it was dark... So, so dark. I d-don’t know what happened or how.” Bitterness coated my cracking voice, and tears pooled in my eyes. I knew what Adrion was looking at wasn’t pretty, although I hadn’t seen it myself. “Something cold pierced through my skin and kept me in place. I couldn’t get up. It hurt too much.”

“Looks like a row of hooks was attached to you,” Marcus murmured, gone was every ounce of his usual cockiness.

“Names.” Adrion’s voice, low and dangerous when he pressed for information, made me almost miss what he’d said. But I didn’t miss the copper in his eyes raging like an inferno, ready to destroy everything that comes its way.

“Rion, I told you they don’t—” I gathered the courage to look up and meet his eyes but couldn’t; copper filled with a

yearning to inflict death was fixed on my back.

“Three names. Give me the *goddamn* names, Ivy, and I’ll end every fucking one of them!”

“Gregori, calm the fuck down!” Marcus intervened and stepped closer. “Their names would be useless, since—”

Adrion bolted up and leaped toward him. Quick and precise, he delivered a straight uppercut to Marcus’s jaw, the resounding crack leaving no doubt he’d hit his target.

“You fucking piece of shit! You let that happen to her! I don’t even want to know what else happened yesterday. A fucking cage?”

I gasped in shock. I’d never seen him fight with his fists, as they were sacred to him as a surgeon. Marcus didn’t care to protect his face from Adrion’s hit, and as a result, blood coated his lips.

“Deserved that one,” he groaned morosely, rubbing his jaw before he flexed it once. Lucky for him, his healing worked properly—unlike mine. He ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip and jerked his chin at Adrion. “Beat me up all you want. It won’t match the pain I feel because of what happened.”

“Good. ’Cause I’m not fucking done with you, Ferrow!” Adrion shouted and raised his fist for another strike.

“Adrion, stop!” I yelled before he could continue to seek relief for his temper. “They’re dead! Hear me? Dead! All of them.” I unclenched my fists to hit them down on the sheets, devastation buzzing through my entire body. Once I had his attention, I took a deep breath and put the shirt back on with the speed of a turtle and continued. “I wasn’t in a cage. Well, I was, but not like you think. She, *Allegra*, took control of my body and locked my soul away.”

He let go of Marcus and softly swept me into his arms, holding me like the most delicate flower, before he brought his hands up to cup my face.

“Don’t blame Marcus.”

“Ivy.” He loosened his hold, only to wrap his arms around me again. With long, soft strokes, he combed through my hair and then rested his head on mine. “Your soul locked away? Who the hell is Allegra? I can’t follow. It sounds crazy,” he whispered and pressed me harder against his heaving chest.

Sure as hell it sounds crazy...

Before I could explain, Marcus snapped at Adrion, “Can’t you see how exhausted she is, both physically and emotionally? Just put on some ointment or whatever helps her heal faster and let her fucking rest. I’ll explain later.”

“I’ll need to stitch the holes.” Adrion closed his eyes and exhaled, bringing the tip of his crooked nose to my cheek, with his lips hovering above my skin, achingly close. “Sorry, love, but it’s better if I do. Your back’s wounds should’ve healed by now like the rest, but they didn’t.”

The familiarity amid all the uncertainty comforted me, and I soaked up the warmth of his touch. Instinctively, I molded to him when I leaned forward.

“It’s okay, Rion. Do whatever you think is best.”

Marcus crossed his arms. “You better have everything with you.”

“Fucking hate him,” Adrion whispered against me.

“Heard that one, Gregori!”

I took his hand and squeezed it. “Let’s talk tomorrow. Please stay tonight.”

“Better fucking believe I’m not going anywhere.”

“Of course you won’t,” Marcus grumbled under his breath as he waited by the door.

Adrion went to grab everything he needed to stitch me up and then applied a good amount of whatever was in that small tin to my back before he started. “Keep breathing and try to concentrate on something else.”

I hummed in approval.

With the first deep intake of air, piercing metal made its way through the skin on my back—this time to heal instead of rupture. I forced myself to follow Adrion's directions, and I thought of the bliss I experienced from the thrilling abyss beneath me whenever I sat on one of Mount Rizar's cliffs or whenever wind whipped in my face while speeding on highways with the windows down.

It worked, and I welcomed the surprise when he announced he was finished stitching my tormented back.

The strong scents of anise mixed with ginger permeated the room when he opened a small bottle and poured a green tincture into a cup.

"This will numb the pain a little and help you heal faster." He handed me the cup, and for a moment, I paused when I scanned his face; etched with so many emotions. Grief, confusion, pain—none of them what I ever wanted him to experience because of me.

"I'm so sorry, Rion." A whisper, so mere yet loud enough to deliver the underlying meaning only we understood. I closed my eyes and gulped down the essence.

"Don't be, love." He stroked a loose strand behind my ear and placed a tender kiss on the back of my scarred hand.

I wish I'd never gone on that mission. I wish I'd never denied my love for you.

Loud, drumming taps on wood disrupted our intimate moment, and Adrion's forehead creased as his expression revealed his inner conflict. I yearned to know every little thought that haunted him right now, but he got up and made his way to the door.

"You can crash on the couch. Now, let her fucking rest," Marcus said, and I didn't have to look at him to know how annoyed he was. He shot me one last glance before he walked out after Adrion.

The tincture might have triggered my gag reflex, but at least it made me drowsy in no time.

Moments later, when I started to drift off, a sharp intake of breath stretched my lungs as a fear-laden thought crossed my mind.

What if I don't wake up again?

I tried my best to stay awake, but who was I kidding? Exhaustion and weakness took over. The amount of energy needed to heal chipped away at my condition, and the thought of Allegra terrified me like nothing else.

I can't be alone... Not now.



Without much thinking, I sat up in bed and called out for Adrion. Quick footsteps sounded from outside before he peeked around the door.

“Ivy? What’s wrong? Do you need anything?”

We hadn’t talked about our *threesome* escalation yet, and, even if I wanted to hide under a rock, his comforting presence had me longing for him again.

If you only knew how badly I wish I had handled things differently, to truthfully say I was all yours, when, in fact, I hadn’t broken up with Ezra yet. Impatient and selfish... Shouldn’t have done it.

He cleared his throat, snapping me out of my guilt trip, and brought me back into the present.

“Oh... Um, can you stay with me?” My question a mere mumble, I chewed on the inside of my cheeks and lips, feeling incredibly vulnerable and stupid to ask him to comfort me.

He closed the door behind him and walked over to the candles by the window, flipped open his Zippo to light them and then snapped it closed before he sat next to me on the bed. Nothing more than a faint glow was cast around the large bedroom, yet it didn’t need more to wrap me in safety when I had Adrion with me. His hand wandered over the blanket up to my thighs, where it came to rest, applying comfort with long, slow strokes of his thumb.

“About last time, can we just forget about—” I started.

He shook his head, squeezing my leg with spread fingers. “Don’t. I’m sorry I was so disrespectful to you. Amos—” He let his gaze drop before it found mine again. “I let his possessive nature control me. You were right to put me in my place.” His bluish-green eyes swept over my face with such softness, cradling me in his feelings that couldn’t help but show in the way he took me in. “Please, love, do me a favor.”

“What?”

When his stubble grazed my cheek as he leaned in close, wrapping his arms around me, I couldn’t help but hold my breath. My body stiffened, but my heart pounded with the strike power of a jackhammer.

“Don’t ask me to forget about that night. I’ll hold it dear for the rest of my life. I hope you will, too.” He sighed. “Our time hasn’t come yet, but it will. I’ll wait, even if each day has my heart yearning and bleeding. But until then, keep the memories of what *we* shared close to your heart. Can you do that for me, love?”

He’ll wait for me, although he’s hurting so much...

I hooked my hands behind his neck and held on to him. *Fuck*, my poor heart was about to crumble from sorrow—much like me.

“I will, I promise.”

He gently combed through my hair with his hand and let go as he leaned back with a warm smile. “Good. C’mon, let’s get you ready for a good sleep. I’ll bring you everything you need.”

Soon, he came back with a bowl of warm water, a washcloth, and a loaded toothbrush.

Finally...

I brushed my teeth and enjoyed every second of it. After last night, I felt dirty, and he knew how much I hated that feeling. Marcus had washed me a little before, but I needed to

do it again. Grabbing the washcloth and gently washing my face, upper body and then between my legs, I hummed in delight.

“We need to apply more ointment in a few hours, but for now, rest, okay?” Placing everything on the nightstand, he went over to the chair by the window and placed his belongings on the windowsill before he sat and blew out the candles.

Our breathing became the only sound in the bedroom, everything around us fell quiet.

I looked up at the ceiling and whispered into the darkness we both shared, “Thank you.”

“You never have to thank me for taking care of you. It comes naturally.”

True. Much like I caught myself missing him and his warmth close to me.

I went back and forth in my mind whether I should ask him to sleep next to me. On one hand, I grew nervous at the thought of him asking questions. On the other, the memories of the last time we lay in bed together filled me with growing longing.

“Rion?”

He hummed in response.

“Can you sleep next to me? *Please?*”

Without a word, he climbed into bed and slung his arm around my waist from behind. Keeping me in his safe embrace, he snuggled closer to bring his nose to the crook of my neck. He took deep breaths, and a deep hum vibrated through his chest.

Amos just can't help it.

I stilled for a moment.

“Relax, love. It's a hundred-percent me. You'll always be safe with me.”

His calming voice and his signature scent that never failed to either thrill or comfort me had my body releasing tension with each even breath.

“I know,” I managed to say and intertwined my hand with his. With circular strokes, his thumb caressed over the big scar on the back of my hand.

Spooning with Adrion had always been one of my favorite things, but now, in light of all that had happened, the untold truth brooded within me, and the pressure to act on it became unbearable. Struggling to speak out the unspeakable, I clenched my teeth and pressed my tongue against them and then gave in.

“I made a mistake, Rion.”

He nudged me with the tip of his nose and placed a tender kiss on the nape of my neck. “We all do, love.”

My teeth would break if I continue grinding them, so I ripped off the Band-Aid and got it over with. “No, please hear me out. Those men we hunted were rapists, and with a witch, who also happened to be on our list, they used virgins for sex magick rituals by drugging and raping them.”

Adrion tensed behind me, and his hold on my hand shifted into a tight grip.

“My job was to bait them by making them believe I was a virgin. Remember Corvina? She was the witch they worked for. That also explains why I looked so different when you saw me at Cloud9.” I was back to grinding my teeth and met his grip on my hand with my own intensity. “Lines became blurry with the wanted souls. I thought I had everything under control, but it slipped through my fingers, as if someone else was pulling my strings. That was until—”

A sob, louder than I’d expected, burst over my lips, but I released the truth as if it would eat me alive if I kept it inside.

“N-Near the end, Marcus wasn’t able to intervene like we had planned and then he got attacked by Corvina. O-One of

the men... He raped me.” My whisper scornful and cutting, I shivered from the rising anger. “Rion, he raped me!”

Both our hands threatened to break the other’s, but he didn’t let go, and neither did I. Holding on to him was the strength and safety I needed to not fall apart.

“I couldn’t stop him. I was left with no choice!”

Adrion pressed his face into my hair, his voice dark and dangerous. “Stop.”

“These memories will haunt me forever. Will forever be part of me. *Fuck*, I’m so sorry, Adrion!” My side of the pillow got damp from the tears spilling out of me, and I started to tremble with sorrow and wrath. The truth was out, but it kept eating me up.

“Stop!” He pulled his hand from mine, even when I tried to hold on to him.

I’d dreaded this moment and hadn’t prepared myself much for his reaction. But he blindsided me when he crawled above me and rolled me onto my back with tender nudges until I faced him.

Brooding anger etched his face, but the remains of my cowardice crumbled into nothing but dust. I might’ve crashed to my lowest point one night ago, but I wouldn’t fall back into old mannerisms. No more lies.

“Resent me all you want, but I’m done lying, even if it means losing you,” I said, and pieces of the tension within me faded.

A scoff shot over his lips. “Resent?”

What came next was more than I’d hoped for.

“These memories will become nothing but distinct fog, fragments of a nightmare you once had but won’t ever have again!” He darted his blue-green eyes between my deep brown ones and lowered his lips close to mine. “Let me be the one to lift that weight off your shoulders. Let me be the one to soothe your heart.”

Warmth spread through my body with the first kiss he gifted me, followed by more as he continued. “I’ll erase every touch, every filthy mark and cover you with mine instead.”

Our kiss, fragile and tender, ignited into consuming passion when he caressed my lips with his tongue, and I welcomed his hungry warmth with long, deep tongue strokes.

Since the last time we’d lain in bed, I’d yearned to be filled with him and only him.

“Make me forget, Rion. Replace even the smallest detail until all I remember is you.” I breathed against him between heated kisses. “How you feel. How you taste. How you love.”

He pulled away but didn’t leave much room between our needy mouths and huffed. “Don’t worry. From now on, I’m the only man that gets to fill your mind and body, and what I have for you is big in every *goddamn* way.”

I released an awkward sound, somewhere caught between aroused and girly embarrassment, because of his darn charismatic, cocky ways. How come I hadn’t noticed this strong, dominant side of him in all these years? It brought me to my knees, and *damn me*, I’d happily bruise my knees for him, day after day.

“Love, I wasn’t joking.” He tilted his face and gazed down at me, copper taking over his irises behind hooded lids. “I’d claimed you before, claimed you so you could forget about every other man. You let me, and I’ll keep up with it until you accept we’re meant to be.”

Gone was my girly shyness, much like any playfulness that had prickled my skin moments before. *Sweetest hell*, I might’ve died on the spot. The heat between us became scorching, and all I wanted was for it to purge the pain and regrets from my soul.

“Do it again.” My whisper low and shaky, I was on the verge of either melting or exploding from the heat that kept on stoking inside me. “*Please*, do it.”

“Do *what* again?” he murmured, so deliciously deep it had my pussy leaking in anticipation. His gaze pinned me, paralyzing me.

Déjà fucking vu...

His forehead found mine, and he spoke into me—darker, huskier. “Make those gorgeous lips form the words we both know you want to spill.” One smooth motion, and he nudged my legs farther apart. “And I’ll make that pretty pussy sing.” Dragging my lower lip with his thumb, he teased me with an agonizingly slow but hard roll of his hips. “Say it, love.”

The delicious pressure of his tensed body between my thighs clashed with the soreness of the fresh stitches on my back. My lips parted wider, and I clamped my eyes shut. Death by sensations.

“Claim me, Rion.” One tilt of my chin and my eyes hooded, I dove into his mouth with my tongue wide. His hips jerked forward and gave me a second taste of what was to come—or *who*. And it would undeniably be Adrion who’d pound my troubles away and *fill* me with new memories.

I snaked my arms around his neck, hooking them together to keep him as close as possible, but he broke the kiss and shook his head, the tip of his nose brushing mine.

“You don’t get to touch me, love. Not until you take care of your *past* in Bearno.” His words stung for a fleeting moment, but truth be told, I didn’t mind the reminder. Not when he brought my hands above my head and enclosed my wrists with a strong grip.

“I broke up with Ezra. I’ll move out as soon as I can.” My voice low, I didn’t allow my eyes to deliver anything but affirmation that there was nothing that could come between us ever again.

Adrion’s lips parted as he closed his eyes, his movements freezing in place.

“Rion, it’s over.”

A sharp huff came from him. “Finally. All mine. After all these years.” When he opened his eyes again, they struck me; flashes of copper buzzed through his irises. But he didn’t allow Amos to take over again. Not that he needed him to place a claim on me. “Still, you don’t get to touch me this time.”

Pinned not only by his gaze but also his grip, I took in shallow, expectant breaths.

“Okay.”

“Doesn’t mean *I* don’t get to kiss who’s rightfully mine.” Eager and hungry, like a starving beast, he squished my cheeks together with his other hand and devoured me with a soul-sucking kiss.

A thin thread of spit connected us when he spoke again. “Doesn’t mean *I* don’t get to touch who’s destined to be mine.”

Hell, I turned into a starving animal myself when I licked over his lips to lap at the thread.

I breathed into him and hiked up my legs. “Then, feel what you do to me. I’m so fucking wet for you, only you.”

Still locking my hands above my head, he reached down and slipped his eager fingers beneath Marcus’s boxer shorts. His eyes never strayed from mine until his digits found my slick pussy and its drenched, tight entrance.

He shut his eyes, and a groan rumbled through the deepest corners of his chest; the vibrations transferring onto me made me even wetter when my pussy couldn’t stop twitching.

“You’re dripping for me, love.” With that, he slid inside me with two of his thick, trembling fingers. “Feel how easily you take me? So *goddamn* wet.” Another finger joined, and he pushed in until his knuckles met my clit. My pussy reacted with fierce squeezes, each of them delivering an insatiable hunger for more.

His shaky breath was loaded with every ounce of control he'd forced on himself. The waging war between him and Amos was evident like an inferno when he opened his eyes again, brightest copper flashing around his pupils. "This time, you're all mine."

"All I want is you, Rion," I spoke out my plea, tone earnest and soft, and his eyes regained their mesmerizing blue-green. "I'm yours and I need you."

He roamed his hooded gaze over every inch of my face, and a faint smile swept over his lips. "Good, because I'm a selfish bastard when it comes to you." Slowly, he twisted his hand, only to move in the opposite direction right after.

I couldn't hold back the moan, far too fucking eager on my tongue, so I released it.

Adrion's hand retreated from my drenched pussy and covered my mouth. With his hot, sticky fingers, he muffled my growing lust.

"Shhhh, love. Take my fingers and keep quiet. Eyes on me." A naughty gleam crept over his hooded look, and I nodded. "Let's hear your pussy sing."

I pushed up my hips to meet his body, desperate for him to continue.

He tapped my lips with his fingertips, and I opened my mouth and nearly released a loud groan when he dipped them inside. Enclosing them, I sucked off my arousal.

"Remember what I want you to do," he rasped before he lowered his hand between my legs again and entered me knuckle-deep. Each stroke synced with the wetness seeping out of me.

Biting my cheeks, I pushed back my head and squeezed his fingers in return. *Hell*, I wanted all of him—right now, base-deep until I'd faint.

He picked up speed until my slick, greedy pussy sang an obscene symphony with the muffled moans I kept hostage

inside. “Hear that? Your pussy is fucking addictive!”

Shit, I want him so badly!

Basking in the results of his own kind of therapy, he admired the pleasure-infused struggle gracing my face. “*Gods*, you look beautiful, but you’ll look even more lovely once you take my cock. Better fucking believe I’ll be your last.”

His lips found mine again, and I dug my toes into the mattress, hips pressing down hard as I arched my back to seize the firm pressure his digits delivered to my G-spot.

My breaths turned into pants, hormones on an ecstatic chase through my blood system, and I was about to come undone right beneath him in Marcus’s bed. Too far gone in our little bubble, I tossed all caution out the window and ignored the little voice inside my head telling me we could be caught any second.

Adrian left me empty and starving when he pulled out, but the fleeting disappointment vanished and turned into spiraling desire when he undressed my lower half, quick and effortless.

“You don’t get to touch me, and I should say I’m sorry. But I’m not.” He traced my jawline with his mouth and scraped his teeth down my neck until he stopped at *that* part of me. *That* part, he’d marked before, *that* spot that had healed the next day.

With a bone-vibrating, deep growl against my neck, he reached down for the button and fly of his pants, and I dragged in a sharp breath in lustful anticipation when his thick, heavy cock thudded on my belly with a smack.

Acting on pure instinct, I followed his body’s lead when I brought my legs around his hips. His fat tip gifted my pussy its own sticky arousal, prodding against my tight entrance with every soft roll of his pelvis.

“Want to know why I’m not sorry you don’t get to touch me, love?”

My chest heaved, quick, and forceful. The lust going rampant in my mind and body coiled up like a snake, ready to attack. “Yes.”

Adrion’s lips parted to make way for his fangs to tease my exposed skin, though he didn’t pierce it, whispering instead, “Because *I* still get to fuck who I’d marked as *mine*.”

Resembling my heart’s cry for every fiber of this man I loved so much, I clenched my teeth and gritted through them, desperate and in pain. “*Fuck*, Rion, I’m yours!”

His cock, so thick and hot, slid inside my drenched pussy as he pressed his groin against me. I savored every godly inch of him, widening me to fit his girth. More lust-filled sounds escaped from between my clenched teeth when he lowered his mouth to my jugular notch and licked.

“*Goddammit*, you’re the most beautiful when you’re filled with my love for you.” Adrion fucked me into welcomed oblivion, and at this point, none of what had happened before could yank me out of this state of pure bliss.

Our eyes were drawn to the scene between my legs, both of us savoring the delicious sensations each time he nearly pulled out, only to slowly push himself inside me again, stoking the all-consuming passion. His length sent me on an oxytocin trip as our movements picked up speed, and we rushed toward the verge of losing our minds over each other. I matched his rhythm with my own to pleasure myself with his gorgeous cock.

“Touch yourself.” He let go of one of my hands and led it down to my clit. “You’re in control. I want you to decide when to come. It’s your decision, love. I’m right here with you.”

If I wasn’t completely lost and sold to him before, I sure as fuck was now.

“Rion—” Words got stuck in my throat, and I raised my head to meet the tip of his nose with mine while he slowed his thrusts. “I’m safe with you...”

“You’ll always be, love.”

I brought my middle finger up to his lips, and he sucked it in, his bluish-green gaze soft and loving. Taking my hand and reaching down between us, he guided me until I found my swollen clit, and I didn't wait another second to switch between strokes and circular rubs.

"There you go." He let go of my hand and brushed past my waist and up to my breasts until he settled his palm on my cheek, cupping it equally tenderly, the way his soul cradled mine when he kissed me again and again between muffled moans. "Enjoy yourself. You're safe with me."

My lower region tensed with my building orgasm, and Adrion switched from slow, rotating hip rolls to long, deep thrusts. Falling into a state of hazed fulfillment, I struggled to keep quiet, but at the same time, it spiraled my arousal to heavenly heights.

Then he pulled out, the hot, sticky head of his cock prodding at my tight entrance. Rhythmically, he pushed himself in until my pussy swallowed the blood-filled crown and then he pulled out only to push back in—fat head stretching me with every sliding stroke—again and again. I fucking lost my mind over the exquisite sensation that each push and pull brought me.

While he kept my lips captive with his, stroking my tongue in the most sensual way, I followed through and pleased my clit with steady firm rubs until my climax pushed me over the precipice into ultimate release. At the first quake of my exploding desire, he drove his length in all the way and drew my orgasm out by continuing to fuck me through it. *Sugary hell*, I'd never come that hard; I might've even seen stars on my flight.

Panting, sweating, and trembling from the force of my climax, I needed to vocalize my release. But he didn't grant my unhinged lust further relief by allowing me to break the kiss and moan aloud. Instead, he bit down on my lip and held it until the waves of my orgasm subsided to soft ripples.

Legs tired and heavy, I lowered them onto the sheets and let my lungs expand with much-needed oxygen. Then I brought my shaky hand above my head again and hooded my eyes. “*Please*, Rion, mark me.”

His cock jerked at my plea, thick length still buried inside me, and I couldn’t help but clamp down on it.

Joining my hands together, he enclosed them and brought his lips back to the crook of my neck. “How do you wish me to mark you, love? It’s one hundred-percent your decision and yours alone.”

If I hadn’t been soaring down from my orgasmic high, I would’ve been loaded with my next one. His manner of comforting me soothed my heart, and I answered his burning question with the only thing left I needed.

“You’re the only man I want this from. Fill me up, *please*. Mark me from the inside until there’s nothing left for you to gift.”

My words shuddered through him like the fired gun at the beginning of a race, and his thrusts picked up speed and intensity. I tensed from head to toe when I couldn’t help but strangle his cock with my pussy. Bringing my legs back up around his hips, I held on to him in every possible way.

Adrian altered his angle and reached for my left thigh to hike it up, entering deeper with each strong motion. I hissed in both crazed desire and the prickling sensation from my stitched-up back.

“Take all of me!” His head hung low, brown strands brushing my face, until he tossed it back, following it with the sexiest moan I’ve ever heard—ragged, dark, primal. “*Gods*, be mine!”

With each spurt of cum, his cock twitched inside me, and I savored it with every clench of my pussy. His oxytocin trip left his breath shaky, and I covered his sweaty forehead with tender kisses.

The elbow he'd steadied himself on trembled, much like the rest of his body, and he managed to roll to the side before he crushed me. He pulled up the blanket to cover us and buried his nose in the side of my neck, nibbling at that delicate part of my body.

"If only I could mark you like any other of my kind does, but this is all I'm able to do." The pang of sadness his murmur carried tugged at my heart.

My shoulder and back didn't sting as much as before, so I rolled to my side and faced him. I brushed over his temple, and the softness of his hair caressed my fingers as I ran them through it.

Meeting the quiet vocals of his murmur, I stroked his crooked nose with mine. "Life is weird in its own ways, isn't it? You can't have a mate, and I don't want a mate. The idea of being forcefully bound by fate scares me. If anything, I've learned that life comes with choices, and I want to make each of them myself."

Adrion's gaze became distant and dull. His overemotional and equally protective Cancer moon made me love him to pieces, but at the same time, I needed to be careful with our fragile union. Delicate, sensitive, in need of time and devotion—much like me in the deepest corners of my being.

Placing a kiss on his lips, so loving and tender like it'd be my last, I left no doubt about who had my heart. "*You are my choice*, Adrion Gregori. My heart has yearned for you for over a decade, and now? We've chosen each other. No way in hell do I want my privilege to make choices ripped from me ever again."

I brushed my fingers over his temples with absentminded strokes as I dipped my brows. "Cutting my ties in Bearno is just as much a choice *I* made."

Lingering intimacy warmed my scalp when he weaved his fingers through my hair. He retracted his touch to settle it under my chin, tilting it up.

“Look at me, love.”

My heart skipped a beat every time he demanded my sole focus with those confident moves of authority.

“Ezra was once your choice, wasn’t he? Tell me you won’t wake up one day and decide to make another choice and go after a life that doesn’t hold a place for me.”

His words reached deep into my soul, and rising hurt prickled my nose, building tears glazing my vision. I blinked them away, unwilling to leave Adrion doubtful.

“I can’t make it undone. Life doesn’t come with guarantees, except for death. Have faith, Rion. My love for you will always seek a life with you.”

Residing in our little blissful bubble, we were engulfed in peaceful silence for the longest time. We changed positions frequently, relentlessly showering each other with cuddles and kisses.

Content hums vibrated from his lips to mine when he kissed me for the hundredth time but came to a halt when Marcus’s voice resounded from outside of the bedroom.

Oh... Good... Hell...

“Ivy! Everything all right?” He boomed through the door but barged in without a warning. *Okay*, I had to credit his worry for me, if it hadn’t been for his notorious ambition to piss Adrion off whenever he could. And his timing couldn’t have been worse.

Marcus’s narrowed eyes fell on us and then widened, blazing red burning down on Adrion next to me. “What the fuck are you doing in *my* bed, Gregori?” His grip on the door handle threatened to break it as the metal protested with squeaks.

Lucky for me, it was dark. Otherwise, my *rouge*-flushed face would’ve given away the heated state I hadn’t fully come down from yet.

“Marcus, I asked him to sleep next to me.” Keeping my tone casual, I hoped he’d leave and wouldn’t discover the mess we’d made. Or the *proof* of it that had started to leak out of me. “I got scared when you both left, so I called out for him.”

“I fucking know you called for him! That was *two hours* ago before I fell asleep on the couch!” He started to take a step toward the bed but halted, stiff like a statue. “Your scent.”

“What scent? You can leave, it’s all good. Rion can—” I didn’t get to finish my pathetic little attempt to divert him.

He exclaimed, “Your arousal! No! Did he—” His flashing red eyes darted between Adrion and me. “Did you guys fuck in my bed?”

Adrion shifted next to me and got out of bed. I caught a glimpse of his cock as he stuffed it back in his pants as he turned away. Quick and inconspicuous, it appeared Marcus hadn’t noticed it.

“Ferrow, you’re such a cock block! We made out a bit, that’s all. Was about to sneak outside for a smoke anyway.” Adrion approached his coat by the chair with lazy strides and pulled out one cigarillo from the package.

Thanks for keeping our business on the down-low...

A quick twist of his hand, he flipped the cigarillo to between his lips and snapped his Zippo open and closed three times. “What if we fucked in your bed?”

No! No! No! Don’t poke the beast! Dammit, Rion!

Metal cracked when the door handle bent under Marcus’s vise grip before it broke off. “Tell me you did and find out for yourself, half human.”

“Out,” I ordered and sat up in bed. Both pairs of eyes landed on me, and I didn’t give a damn whether it was dim or not, but I put my finger up regardless. “You and you”—I pointed at them—“I don’t have the energy to put up with your childish behavior. Out.”

And with that, I let myself fall back and groaned out in pain as my body scolded me with aches. “You two fucking kill me.”

Both left the bedroom, mumbling low sorrys, but as soon as they were outside in the corridor, their annoying ping-pong game continued.

“Great, Gregori! Happy now?”

“Shut the fuck up, Ferrow!”

My love life had turned into a huge mess, and it had gotten harder to cover, much to my frustration. *Okay*, having sex in Marcus’s bed was a savage move, I admit. Doing it with the man he despised as much as my ex didn’t make it any better. I’d openly asked for trouble.

But I wasn’t ready to exploit more of it. Not now. Not after all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

I’ll tell Blondie after Chief Hardin kicks both our asses over our failed mission. His bed won’t concern him any longer... Damn, he’ll be pissed either way!

Marcus’s aversion toward my best friend surely made it easier to keep my trap shut for a little longer. I could only imagine how many weeks he’d stop speaking to me for when he learns that I chose to be with Adrion.

Procrastination had been one of my love life’s worst enemies, but jumping into a relationship right after a breakup didn’t seem wise, either. After I went to the toilet in Marcus’s en suite bathroom, I paced the bedroom, back and forth, still too emotional to go back to sleep.

Lies and trepidation work the same—rip off the Band-Aid and get it over with.

Heart rate increasing, I embraced the determination pumping through every vein.

I made my way to Marcus’s desk, looking for a pen and paper in the few drawers on the side. My breaths came out in

puffs with the change of heart gripping me, while my hands shook from adrenaline.

I scribbled down eleven words, folded the written message, and walked over to Adrion's gray coat he'd left by the chair. One last time, I opened the piece of paper and read the words before I folded it anew and hid it inside the small pocket next to his cigarillos.

My heart whispered words of ease, and I grabbed a new pair of boxer shorts from Marcus's drawer and slumped back into bed.

Soon, none of what happened over the past six years will matter any longer.



A pained scream ripped through Marcus's apartment in the darkest hours of Sunday. Mine.

Panic-infused adrenaline pumped through me as long clawed fingers tore into my cheeks, eager to dig into skin until it'd burst open. Wide neon-yellow eyes way too close for comfort as if the monster of my cruelest nightmares was about to tear my face to shreds in the next second.

Allegra!

But instead, my vision cleared to two warm hands cupping my face as the dulled sound of alarmed voices carried to me. My body, painfully cramped moments before, now slack and exhausted. Someone must've turned on the light on the nightstand, as the sudden brightness assaulted my eyes.

What's happening? Bluish-green eyes... Rion?

"You're the doctor, Gregori! What's wrong with her?" Marcus's panicky voice came from right next to me.

"I don't know! She was cramping for no obvious reason! Last time I'd checked, she was sleeping peacefully. *Fuck*, Ivy! What's going on?"

A distorted cackle, so terrifying and chilling, echoed through my head. I tensed as fear regained a choke hold on me, and I sought safety from the person closest to me—Adrian.

“Help me, Rion! She is... She is... Where... How... No!” I sputtered and darted my eyes through the bedroom. No sight of *her*. My chest heaving, I couldn’t decide whether to be relieved or if I’d hallucinated moments before. But the pain in my cheeks had been real, too real.

“I’m still here, Ivangeline.”

Allegra’s evil voice, now crystal clear, sliced through my mind, and my hands shot up to my head, covering my ears. Tears of bitterness ran down my face when I yelled, “Go away!”

“Is it her again?” Marcus held my wrist, and I snapped my eyes to his, which reflected the same horror within me. I wasn’t able to speak, too terrified of the truth, so I squeezed my eyes shut and nodded.

The stiffness controlling my legs lessened with every calm breath I forced myself to take.

“We need to bring her to Chief Hardin. We got no time to lose!”

“She’s not in a condition to walk, Ferrow! Ivy needs to rest! It’s 3 a.m. Let’s wait until later,” Adrion bit back in return.

“I’ll carry her, idiot! He might be the only one who can help us, and he’s the only one I trust right now. It was stupid to wait this long.”

Since Adrion arrived here last night, his usual warm voice had gotten replaced with spitting anger more frequently, same as his copper eyes burning down on Marcus more often. “Yeah? Then, why did you call me?”

My breathing became steadier, and intense exhaustion crept over me. I tried my best to catch even the faintest whisper in my head, but there was none.

Is she gone?

“Can we please wait a few hours?” I yawned and looked up at Marcus with a pleading look. Every muscle in me hurt

and yearned for rest.

“No. Who knows when *she* will make a comeback, and no way in hell are we waiting for that to happen! Let’s go!” he snapped at Adrion, with determination in his cerulean blue eyes that shifted to angry red.

“*Blondie, please.* After all that happened, I really need to rest, and with both of you here, I feel safe.” I slowly looked between the both of them. “Give me a few more hours and then I’ll be a good girl and do as you say.”

Marcus dragged both his palms over his face with a long groan and pushed out a quick breath with that familiar mischief flashing in his eyes. “If it wasn’t for the shit that went down before, that last part sounds fun to me.” But he switched to concern knitting his forehead. “*Man*, Ivy, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

He never changes, does he?

Adrion tightened his grip on my arm, his thoughts tugging at my ears, so I shook my head. “I’m too exhausted for your flirty bullshit! Can you guys both stay here with me? Just for a few hours.”

This was a lot to ask of them, but *damn*, I needed them.

“Both of us? Gregori, go outside and kill some time for all I care,” Marcus ordered and jerked his chin at the door.

I dismissed him without a second thought. “No. Get in the freakin’ bed next to me and keep me company.”

Both men glared at each other, waiting for the other one to duck his head and leave.

I blew out a small sigh. “*Please.* Arguing with you is the last thing I need. Marcus, you can stay on my left, and, Rion, you come over here. And now I’ll close my eyes, and I don’t want to hear anything but *Yes, Ivy, of course.*”

Adrion didn’t wait for Marcus to make the first move and lay down on my right, daring him to refuse with a glare. But

when the lights got switched off and the bed dipped with Marcus's weight, I couldn't help but smile.

There you go.

"Thank you," I whispered, pulling the blanket up under my chin and doing my best to hide my selfish satisfaction.

"Tsk, whatever," Marcus muttered, and his elbow brushed me when he put his hands behind his head.

He'd always tried to avoid Adrion like the plague, like it was an Olympic sport, but there we were—all three in bed, with me in the middle.

Foolish when I thought having them next to me would grant me a good night's sleep. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Marcus radiated discomfort, his six-feet-four body stiff like a plank, whereas Adrion's vibe was washed with something I couldn't put my finger on at first. But after a few minutes, when he moved his hand underneath the blanket to place it on my waist, I had my answer—possessiveness.

It was pitch-dark when I turned my head toward him in response to his flex, his coppery eyes meeting mine in the dim light shining from his altered irises with his blown pupils taking up space.

Wasn't it enough that he slept with me hours ago, in Marcus's freakin' bed? He'll be so pissed when he notices Rion's hands on me!

I let my right elbow deliver a subtle *what are you doing*, but it only granted me a shiver as his fingers worked their way under my shirt and started to caress my bare skin.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

I gave him a daring look with my golden pupils reflecting in his eyes, but from what I could see, he simply flashed a small toothy smile in return.

You've got nerve, Rion!

Still and unmoving, we lay like this minute after minute.

Drowsy, I sensed sleep wrapping its cozy arms around me, but my heart hiccuped when Marcus's fingertips traced up my thigh, drawing my attention to his presence and reminding me whose bed this was.

Congratulations, Ivy. You're in bed with a possessive half werewolf and a cocky demon. No sleep for you.

These guys caused my heart to do backflips, and my stomach was about to somersault. My lower lip almost hurt from biting it, and my brain began screaming *oxygen* since I didn't dare to take more than shallow breaths.

If Adrion discovered Marcus's hands on me, shit would hit the fan, and that was something I wasn't looking for, so I played it cool.

Maybe Marcus will stop when I don't react.

As if my thoughts tugged on Marcus's ears, he altered his position to lay halfway on his side and faced me. His fingers brushed up my thighs, moving dangerously close to the fresh boxer shorts I'd changed into earlier.

I turned my head, only to see his eyes were closed. Same as Adrion when I checked him for any kind of reaction, his breathing even.

Marcus Ferrow, you can't be serious!

But he was, and he proved so when he continued tapping his way up my body. I held my breath from the pang of contradicting sensations. When I faced him once again, his smug grin curved up to his shimmering red eyes, looking right back at me.

Motherfucker is playing games!

The breath I held found its way out rather loudly when my muffled groan sounded from between the sheets. Heat flushed my face before it tingled my ears.

“You okay, Ivy?” Marcus’s lower-than-usual voice mocked the shit out of me, and I’d had bet my precious Alfa Romeo he enjoyed every second of it. Did he not give two fucks and stirred the pot in hopes of pissing Adrion off? Most likely.

I whispered as quietly as I could, “Avada Kefuckya.”

Blondie, I love you, but you’re an evil little shit!

The naughty gleam in his eyes remained, and his hand moved up, drawing small circles on my side. Then his fingertips began to playfully tap on my skin, bouncing over Adrion’s hand on my waist going back and forth.

He’ll wake up Rion any second!

I pinched his hand through my shirt, but my movements came to an abrupt halt when Adrion’s sleep-coated voice brought the hair on my arms upright.

“Did you say something?” he mumbled and picked up where he’d left off before he fell asleep, shooting heat to my pussy with each lazy stroke of his fingers on my skin.

He wasn’t aware of Marcus’s little game, and Blondie dearest didn’t care to stop when he let his fingers dance up to my breasts.

Shit was about to hit the fan.

Their fingers used my body for their torturous tango, stroking and circling back and forth—a dangerous dance duet only one of them was aware of.

This has to end!

Trying to shake off Marcus’s needy hand, I turned away from him and faced Adrion instead. His eyes barely opened for a moment and met mine, seemingly satisfied by my change of position. My heart stuttered when his warm hand moved right onto my sternum.

A cooler touch from behind had my alarm bells going off again. It was Marcus’s large hand snaking its way to the front,

going slowly but surely up to my waist, and it didn't stop there. His selfish fingers skated over my skin, making their way up to my breasts, as his mouth pulled into a grin against my neck when he closed the gap between us almost unnoticeably.

Marcus's hot breath brushed over me, his lips hovering ghostly, and it caused my clit to tingle like a junkie awaiting the next shot just before the needle pierces into the skin, followed by destructive fulfillment flowing through the veins.

My body reacted before my mind when I kicked at his shin with my heel.

And then something happened that Adrion probably didn't expect when he couldn't keep himself from touching me: the stroke of Marcus's fingers on his.

Copper eyes wide as saucers when they flew open, he gunned for Marcus's hand and yanked it off my chest.

I'm not here... I'm not here...

He bolted up next to me, roaring, "Don't fucking touch her!"

"*Oops.* Thought you were asleep, Gregori. *My bad.*" The sarcasm in Marcus's voice was as thick as the layers of his ex-girlfriend's makeup; he knew exactly what it did to Adrion. "This is *my* bed. Thought you needed a reminder after you had some fun earlier—in *my damn bed!* You owe me new sheets!"

I should've known he wouldn't let the chance slide to shove his stupid ego down Adrion's throat, hoping he'd choke on it.

Cocky fucker used me. Touché!

"Okay, enough!" I exclaimed and glared at Marcus. "Need a reminder of what happened on my first day at HD? Elevator, ring any bells? Out. Now!"

His signature loud laughter boomed through the air when he got up and removed himself from the battlefield but not without kicking Adrion's pride one last time. "We should do

that again. Seems like Ivy got wound up quite a bit. Smells delicious!”

“Piece of shit!” Adrion got up in an instant and kicked the door shut behind Marcus, snarling and growling at it before returning to bed.

“Out!” I didn’t have the energy to entertain these two any longer and didn’t care about what might go down behind closed doors, as long as I got another few hours of sleep.

And, with that, I sent out my raging best friend as well.

These two kill me...

Even though a small headache emerged, a smile found its way on my lips, and I drifted off faster than I thought I would.



The heavy wooden doors of my office opened, and the sound of lazy footsteps echoed from the walls with the night of this Saturday swallowing most of the light in the hall.

“This better be something important, William. I was about to head out to LA for a new project.” Kaizer’s towering figure came to a halt in front of my desk, evident distaste reflected in those familiar gray eyes with their vertical black pupils looking down at me.

All the supremacies passed down to him, and he walks around like scum.

Much to my dismay, he wore gray sweatpants, and if that wasn’t bad enough for his reputation, he wore one of those ridiculous “SavageSix” hoodies—as usual.

“Watch your tone, Kaizer!” I barked, rising from my big leather chair, and met his unaffected stare with authority.

Eight hundred and eighty-one years younger than me, and he disrespects me like that. Pathetic kiddo.

“We need to talk.” I gestured to the large black Chesterfield chair in front of my desk.

He sat without a word, letting his arms rest on either side of the leather. The pulled-up sleeves assaulted my eyes with the ridiculous amount of ink plastering his forearms and hands, triggering a vein on my forehead.

I hated how disreputably he carried himself, and Kaizer enjoyed shoving his choices down my throat when he flaunted his foul taste in art on purpose.

His expression held juvenile carelessness as always, if it wasn't for that underlying hate that subtly shone through every once in a while.

“Remember the prophecy I told you about?”

“Vaguely,” he answered as he cracked his neck and let his head fall back, not hiding the disinterest in his tone. Young fucker's throat was covered with more disgusting human work they liked to call *art*.

“Just what I thought.” I huffed, combing through my hair with quick fingers, rising impatience causing my claws to scrape my scalp. “You, the fated fulfiller of the prophecy, destined to rule over the souls of both realms but denied of that because the mate you need to fully gain access to your inherited powers is locked away. Sounds familiar?”

I checked for a reaction, but his face seldomly gave anything away, especially when it came down to conversations between us.

Fucking unworthy to rule. Years of training completely wasted on someone like him.

Grinding my molars, my cool slowly faded, but I continued. “Beatrix spotted a dragon in the inner-city part of 3018 Belliz three days ago. The last of the five dragons that guard the vessel in which your mate is bound. This means your mate—”

A loud strike of resistance cut through the air. “You know damn well I don't believe in *prophecies*”—he air-quoted and got up—“and you know I don't want a mate since I don't believe in having one for myself, neither do I need one. So, if that's all you have to tell me—”

But I snapped at him with a vicious snarl that set my eyes alight with threatening bright amber. “Sit. The. Fuck. Down.”

Kaizer's pupils were on the verge of disappearing, leaving his eyes almost purely silver-gray, but he stopped in his tracks and obeyed for once.

"Twenty-four years ago, I had a trace—a thin thread of hope—when I found the fourth dragon, Axelion, and the woman he protected." I jerked my thumb back at the dragon head trophies over the fireplace. "He was as taciturn as the three I'd killed before him. But there burned a different fire in his eyes—deadlier, and what I quickly came to see, protective."

Seemingly bored, Kaizer checked his watch, but I continued in a pressing manner. "Filthy lizard laughed victoriously when he told me he'd given life to a new vessel, protected by the inherited dragon powers, and that they'd brought it into the safety of a realm I don't have access to. The human realm."

Yes, the very realm you favor over ours, ungrateful little fuck.

He remained silent, but the twitch in his jaw didn't go unnoticed, giving away enough for me to further plant my intentions into his mind.

"Spotting the fifth and thus last dragon, not only in our realm but here in 3018 Belliz, resembles a gift from destiny. Allegra might be out of my"—I bit my tongue, and iron seeped into my mouth—"your reach for now, but it'll be just a matter of time before my plan to free her becomes successful. And, when that happens, nothing will stand in your way to fulfill your fate as the ruler of all souls in both realms."

"Your plan." He jerked his chin at the dragon trophies without breaking eye contact. "None of my business, none of my plans."

"This?" I pointed to the jagged scar that reached from beneath my hair at the top of my head to down behind my ear. "I wear it with pride! Axelion might've been close to crushing my skull, but in the end, that didn't save him or the succubus

mutt he protected.” I rested both my palms on the massive granite desk between us, looming over him to make sure my message was understood clear as fuck. “I did *everything* and beyond for Allegra. You got to live your pathetic way of life for far too long. This is your purpose. This is your destiny!”

Thirty-eight years old, and he wastes his time building motorcycles in the human realm. Superior heritage completely wasted on someone unworthy like him.

With Hell’s fire burning in my eyes, I inched closer to him, lacing my order with a deep growl that vibrated through my chest. “Say goodbye to your human toys and live up to everyone’s expectations. The time has come. It’s just one step away, and you’ll do as I say when the final steps need to be taken. Do you understand, Kaizer? Or will those machines be the only legacy you have to offer?”

His tall frame rose from the chair, pale knuckles on fire as he placed them down on my desk, tearing at the last threads of my nerves when he showcased that lazy smirk I loathed so fucking much.

“Everyone’s expectations, huh?” The mockery in his voice almost had me going for his wide inked throat. “Do you know what old men like you have in common? Bitterness. Crying after *what-ifs*. Pathetic and weak.” Young fucker poured more oil on the proverbial fire, and his juvenile disrespect pulled his mouth into a Cheshire grin that had my death-bringing claws begging for blood.

My growl turned into a vicious snarl when I hunched over the desk to grip the collar of his hoodie, but Kaizer’s smirk only grew, and I cursed the familiar arrogance in his eyes.

“You ungrateful son of a bitch,” I hissed between clenched teeth, my shimmering, jagged fang crowns on full display.

The time has come, and he acts like a spoiled brat. I can’t let this chance pass—not again.

“Watch it, old man.” He freed himself from my grasp in—what stressed me to no end—an effortless motion and straightened his hoodie with an unbothered swat of his tatted hand.

When he turned and made his way to the door with the same lazy strides, my unleashed rage reflected in the storm of flames erupting from the hearth behind me, taking over the walls and the ceiling. Whirls of embers swirled in the air, the inferno behind me eager to burn him to ashes.

“We’re not done yet!”

He halted and craned his neck to look at the blazing sea of fire above him. His shoulders slumped as he turned around halfway and shoved his hands in his pockets, voice flaunting the sincere mockery beneath his calm vocals. “William, that might scare your employees, but that trick stopped scaring me when I was five.”

The granite under my claws gave way as they bored into it, and I released the rage inside me with thunder. “You can’t run from the prophecy, Kaizer!”

A long sigh passed his lips, like whenever he decided to end our fights and leave me to face responsibilities he so easily ignored. Same as now, when he reached for the brassy handles of the big wooden doors, glancing at me from afar one last time.

“You’d be better off letting me live my life however the fuck I want to live it. I never asked to rule, and you know that. You *used* to be my mentor—a bad one, I might add. So, get back in line, old man.”

My clothes burned to nothing, flakes of ash landing on the floor, as I fucking lost it over his careless and disrespectful ways. “This might be the last chance to find our queen!” The desk beneath me cracked from my rage-invoked powers, veins along my temples and arms on the verge of bursting.

“I’m off to LA for another month. My Indian Scout waits for me to finish it. But, as always, it was a *pleasure* talking to

you, *Father.*”

And with that, the massive doors closed behind him.



Later, at 5:30 a.m., Ferrow's damaged bedroom door opened with the hinges screeching as I came back to check on Ivy. She had finally drifted off to sleep. Her even breaths brought contentment to me, same as the sight of her appearance that, since yesterday, was back to her beautiful honey-beige blonde mane and those light-brown freckles I loved so much.

Good. At least an hour or two before we head out. What a night...

After freshening up in the guest bathroom, I slumped into the kitchen with slow steps and draining grogginess, searching for much-needed coffee in one of the many cupboards. The suns had started to rise, and the fragments of the last nine hours softened with a new day beginning.

Ferrow's kitchen was spacious yet simple. A lot of light wooden cupboards, a giant stove in front of two big windows, and what looked like dying orchids standing somewhat misplaced on the gray countertop. The many Hell Mates pictures on the walls just as tasteless. The ugly-ass table and three chairs matched the rest of the kitchen. Who bought only three chairs?

All that money can't buy taste.

I couldn't care less about how he decided to live his life and how he chose to feel comfortable at home, but the flex he'd tried on Ivy had me pissed, to say the least.

Reaching for the handle of a cupboard, I gazed at a Polaroid of Ferrow and Ivy at Cloud9. Both of them in a loose hug while he pointed his index finger at her, as if he wanted to show off his latest catch.

A shiver bolted through me when I remembered the moment both our hands met on her body.

Ugh... Fucking Ferrow!

To be honest, I wasn't aware of him touching her until she moved abruptly, just before his hand touched mine on the delicate, soft skin of her *décolleté*.

Indeed, she'd been exhausted and in desperate need of rest. Still, I couldn't help but touch and comfort her. It came naturally to me, and ever since that night at Cloud9, something had changed between us.

Whereas before an invisible barrier separated us, a thin veil that kept us from crossing a physical line—now we sought each other's warmth. My fingers itched to touch her again and drown with her in the depths of intimate moments we'd forever remember.

How much longer until she gets her stuff to move out? Goddammit, how much longer will she keep me waiting?

The possessiveness within me crept out, and Amos grew impatient, much like me. We both ached to fully claim her, to have her to ourselves. Like she was our mate.

I'll never have a mate. Fuck being half human!

Every demon, every angel, and obviously, every wolf had a mate. Even damn witches had mates. But that didn't quite count for us half bloods. Our human side blocked our ability to sense our mate. Cruel—we wouldn't sense them, even if they stood in front of us.

I never thought about it like that, and at this moment, it crushed me more than ever.

She has to be my mate. There's no other way.

My heart grew heavy at the thought of never finding out if Ivy was my mate.

If she were, she'd never experience it either, since my human side makes it impossible. She'd never know if I was hers, thinking she hadn't met her mate yet. Life is fucking cruel...

Of course, this was all mere speculation in my head, but the idea morphed into a plaguing itch inside my mind I couldn't ignore anymore. Like every time I couldn't help but jack off after meeting Ivy just before visiting Natalia for another release.

Not that this had happened since Thursday. No, never again, now that she was mine, without a doubt.

At the same time, I thrilled at the possibility of being Ivy's mate. The love between us was undeniable. The insane pull whenever I was close to her was almost crushing, and she felt the same.

If any other man touches her again... I'll lose my shit!

A loud groan rattled my throat, and I balled my hands into fists.

If only I could get rid of the useless human part of me. As her mate, she'd never lay eyes on a different male the way she does me. My bite mark would be permanent, adorning her soft skin.

If I thought I was crazy about her before, I sure as fuck was madly obsessed with her by now. Too far gone.

Whatever madness went down two nights ago, she'll handle it with Ferrow and her boss. William Hardin might be a greedy asshole, but Ferrow is right for once thinking Hardin is the best option to seek help from. He's always had a soft spot for Ivy, as far as she's told me.

My thoughts got interrupted when Ferrow made his way into the kitchen with familiar arrogance in his eyes and leaned on the kitchen counter, observing me like a hawk does its prey.

He put ridiculous effort into flexing his bare upper body, triggering a scoff from me.

All bark and no bite.

“Don’t you own any shirts?” I turned my back on him and continued searching for coffee.

“Like the one Ivy’s wearing? Yup, that’s one of them.”

I couldn’t stand his presence, let alone seeing him half naked, especially after what happened before. But now, even the barest note of his scent irritating my nose enraged me. His fucked-up stunt had only hammered the last nail into the coffin I’d envisioned burying him in, so he’d never breathe the same air as Ivy ever again. To never see him with her would be better than winning the damn lottery.

“Coffee is in the right cupboard next to the window. You sure need it.” His second snide remark pushed my buttons further, raising the hair on my neck. Without a word, I took out the coffee and started to fill the coffee machine.

He sauntered over to the fridge. “Want some milk, bud?”

“No, thanks, *bud.*” My snap came out sharp. *Yes*, I asked for trouble and prayed he’d give me a reason to knock him out. *Gods*, it would feel so fucking good.

“You’re full of sunshine, aren’t you? You still mad because of what happened in bed? I mean, it’s not like I wanted to touch *you*, bro!” He laughed, pissing me off even more.

“First of all, I’m not your bro.” I growled, facing him. Ferrow held up his hands with an even dumber grin on his punchable face. “Second, if you *ever* touch her again”—my upper lip lifted to expose my fangs, my eyes flashing feral copper as hues of sepia mixed into my vision—“I’ll cut your *goddamn* hands off. You’re lucky Ivy is in need of care. Otherwise—”

He killed the distance between us when he teleported in front of me, looking me up and down. Crossing his arms over

his buff chest, stupid fucker was way too close for comfort.

Fact, as a full-blood demon, he was taller and stronger than me with my five-feet-eleven height, but I was dead serious about punching out the lights of his damn blue eyes if needed.

“Otherwise what? Sounds like a threat, Gregori.”

“Good.” I snarled, holding the eye contact.

He looked down at me with a blank expression on his face, but wild storms of red erasing the blue of his irises gave away his burgeoning anger. “She’s not your mate, so keep your weak excuse of a wolf on the leash!”

I took a confident step forward and closed the already small gap between us. My mouth quicker than my brain, I shouted up into his face, “She could and should be! Ivy has always loved me!” My knuckles cracked from the force I balled my fists with. “You have no idea about us. Without my human half, she’d have been mine all along!”

Why did I tell him that? Fuck...

His voice came out in a burst of deep, mocking laughter, and I regretted my slip instantly. “*Us*? Do you know how ridiculous and desperate you sound? You and Ivy, there’s no *us*—if anything, you took advantage of a weak moment.”

Then something within me snapped, and sepia insta-washed my vision. Amos took over, and he grabbed Ferrow by his throat, ready to rip it out, but froze when the door of the kitchen opened a crack.

I switched back when I sensed Ivy’s presence. Amos kept on smashing against the mental barrier, far too enraged to not slice Ferrow up.

“Good mor—” She halted but then rushed over to us, grabbing my arm and pulling at it. “What the hell! Adrion, what’s going on?” Her irritated voice brought me out of my angry state, but after all, it was her simple touch that calmed my beast.

I let go of him, and he backed off with knowing satisfaction on his face.

Shut the fuck up, Ferrow! Don't you dare!

“*Little Gregori* is pissed because my hand accidentally touched his. You know, when we both let our hands wander over your body back there in *my* bed.”

“Avada Kefuckya, Blondie! You played games. That was damn childish.” She laughed it off as she walked to the fridge and opened it. Bending down, she had her next blow ready and fired with that sassy charm I loved so much about her. “Why is it you can't help but flaunt your huge-ass *cojones* in front of Rion every time you meet? Did it ever cross your mind that he's a bit ahead of you for not trying so hard? *Just maybe?*”

I would've loved to see her wearing only a shirt that hit just above her soft thighs and perfectly catered to my hungry eyes with every bend—if it was *my* shirt! But seeing her wearing *his* shirt and *his* boxers pissed me off to no end.

That will be the last time you wear any other man's clothes. Better fucking believe it, love.

Ferrow cleared his throat, far too theatrical to not ring my alarm.

I quickly tried to change the subject, hoping he'd keep his trap shut about my vulnerable thoughts. “How do you feel? I'll check your stitches after breakfast, but I think your healing took care of the rest, so we can pull them.”

But this dickhead of a demon decided to make this morning as memorable as possible when he threw me straight into Hell's fire, grin creepy wide.

“Gregori thinks you're his mate. Said you *could and should* be.” His words cut through the room, and dreadful silence poisoned the air, the air my lungs were missing at this point, as everything within me turned to stone.

The milk splashed onto the floor next to Ivy. Her immediate reaction had my heart running through a blender at

level ten. Ears glowing from blood rushing into them, her telltale signs ratted her out, too obvious every time.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if we were.” Her voice calm but void of any of the affirmation I needed most right now as she went to clean the floor.

A spark of faith comforted my rising fear, but the darkness within me didn’t wait long to devour it with doubts that threatened to erase my sanity.

My voice boomed through the kitchen, louder than I thought it would. “Fuck you, Ferrow! You’re full of shit!”

My insecurities showed, and I took them out on him, speeding forward with a balled fist, but he blocked my hit with a snarl. “Nuh-uh, Gregori, not this time.”

He pushed me off, but I was straight-up furious and went for another hit that caught him by surprise, aiming for his solar plexus with two quick forward punches. Within seconds, we were both on the ground, exchanging dull blows.

I don’t know why I went for him instead of playing it cool, but the way Ivy let the milk drop in shock had me panicking.

“Here’s a fix for your hook, Gregori!” He sent a brutal hit to my face and broke my nose.

“Bastard!” I groaned in pain but didn’t hesitate to repay the favor as I gunned for his throat to strangle him. The cartilage in my nose healed quickly and moved back in place. One hard smash to Ferrow’s cheekbone and satisfying cracks resounded.

“Stop it! Now!” Ivy yelled, and we growled at each other before finally letting go. “You’re both incredibly stupid! Marcus, Rion can’t have a mate! Let go!”

“*Man*, tell me something new. But he thinks you both *could and should* be if it wasn’t for his pathetic, weak human side! Am I right or am I right, Gregori?”

Ivy's deep-brown eyes looked down at me in shock, widened, and—with what hurt like a motherfucker—disbelief.

“Is that true?” Her voice came out quiet, too quiet for my liking. “You think we *should* be tied by a fated bond?” The way her voice sounded caused my insides to turn. Right now, I cursed myself for letting my thoughts out into the open, especially in front of Ferrow.

Think, think, think!

I wasn't ready to go there. The truth and its possible consequences resembled a visit to the chambers of horror to me. I had to sneak my way around it somehow until Ivy was ready to accept the truth—we were meant to be, one way or another.

“*Bullshit!* You know I can't have a mate because of my half-human disability. He's exaggerating!” I laced my voice with performative easiness, but each and every word sent sharp, poisoned daggers straight into my heart. Speaking out this part of the truth only painted the brutal reality of my life in disastrous, sad colors.

The aftertaste of those words coated my tongue with bitterness, and Amos's rage prickled my whole body.

Gotta leave before I lose control completely...

I shook my head as I stood and straightened up and then slung my arms around Ivy. I couldn't catch the faintest emotion in the way she felt against my body; her silence scared me. I decided to make this goodbye as quick and casual as possible.

“Good to see you feeling better. My job here's done. It's better if I leave before Ferrow gets hurt—again.” I huffed and shot a glance at Ferrow. “I'll remove the sutures now.”

Behind the cool facade I put up, I crumbled inside. Piece by piece. Every second I remained in that apartment chipped away at me. Ivy's reaction flayed me open, leaving me scared and vulnerable. But nothing I'd freely show in front of Ferrow.

Her back looked good, not one hundred-percent healed but good enough. Thanks to my flawless technique, there wouldn't be any visible scars. I was relieved to see her healing had started to kick in on its own again.

As soon as she's mine, she'll never be on a low ever again.

“Rion.” Ivy's concerned voice reached my ears after I removed the last suture.

“Don't.” I turned her around and ran my fingers through her wavy hair on both sides and shook my head. “Hit me up when you can, okay, love? We'll take things slow—together.”

However she felt about what Ferrow said, now wasn't the time to talk about it. So, I gave her lips a soft peck and left.

I'm such a fucking coward...



A million thoughts ran through my mind as I walked up to my car and threw my bag on the ground with force.

Goddamn Ferrow!

Of course, this useless piece of shit couldn't keep his trap shut. I hated how much he enjoyed exposing me, ratting me out to Ivy with my batshit crazy theory of us being mates. *Shit*, just hours before she'd told me the *last thing* she wanted was a mate.

I look like a complete idiot! Wishing for something she'd told me would be the last thing she wanted. What if she overthinks her choice to be with me?

I let my hand slide into the back pocket of my pants and groaned when my fingers reached nothing but fabric.

My keys!

Running my hands through my hair, I tensed when flashes of the windowsill appeared before my eyes.

Well, genius. Time for the walk of shame.

I tilted my head up to the sky smothered in soft hues of tangerine with pairs of lizovs squawking as they peacefully soared high above me. The sweet smell of weeping willow branches bleeding out their annual sap carried to me, and I looked down to my feet.

Surrounded by the day-to-day comforting normality of the lower realm, but the complete opposite raged inside me.

As if it wasn't torturous enough to be exposed by this dickhead and to have cowardly lied my way around the crazy truth, I'd to go back in again and parade another fake smile.

With dread in every step, I made my way back to the apartment and slouched through the dim corridor when I noticed a crack of light shining through the very last door at the end of the third floor—Ferrow's apartment.

I must've been too stressed hurrying out of there, so I didn't close it properly.

Taking my time to get there, I walked up to the door, with my knuckles ready to announce my return, but my hand froze midair when I heard the nervousness that layered Ferrow's voice in an unfamiliar way.

I couldn't help but eavesdrop, even if it'd be only for a moment or two.

"There's something *she* told me that still doesn't make sense to me. Although putting together the pieces now, it makes absolute sense. Your light-blond hair, even though you look at least half Asian. Your pupils shift to gold instead of your irises turning red." He paused after that. His next words lifted the veil on a surreal reality I wasn't prepared to face. "Ivy, you're not a full succubus."

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

"*What? Come again?*" Ivy screeched, voice loaded with doubt.

I thought back to the first time I met her and instantly recognized her inner demon, a succubus. But besides that, there was nothing.

What kind of bullshit is he making up now?

I kept as quiet as I could, aching to hear his answer to his insane theory that overshadowed mine by far.

The sound of moving cutlery made it harder to catch every word, and the blood pounding in my ears didn't help, either. I inched closer to peek through the crack of the door, but it was too narrow, leaving me with only a small sliver of the kitchen.

“Allegra was caged in your soul—your part succubus, part angel, part dragon soul. Ivy, you never met your birth parents, right? So, if you do carry angel *and* dragon blood, well, you have a split soul,” Ferrow concluded and finished with uneasiness evident in his low voice. “No one knows in which particular ratios they're split. But one thing is for sure. All mixed-bloods of non-human heritage have them, and it seems you do as well.”

Holy fucking shit! She's part dragon? How's that even possible? They only exist in stories from ancient times!

It was my turn to *drop the milk*, but the only thing dropping was my jaw—and *damn*, it dropped hard.

“We'd always wondered about the authenticity of the four dragon heads in Chief Hardin's office, right? Creatures like those were supposed to exist in our realm as myth, a mere whisper among crazy hermits living in the mountains. Guess your inherited dragon part proves otherwise.”

Ivy's only response was a stretched, sarcastic *Sure* that climbed way too high. She was growing nervous.

I had the hardest time keeping quiet and not storming in to press out all the details myself, but it was wiser to let things unfold naturally, since Ferrow didn't trust me.

“Okay, dragons aside. When was the last time you saw an angel? Wrong question, *pardon*. Have you *ever* seen one? I haven't and I don't know of anyone who has. That's batshit crazy!”

Ivy had a point. We've always known of Hell's counterpart, Heaven, but had anyone of us ever seen where the good souls resided? No. Neither have I ever seen an angel.

“Crazy, indeed! But after *she* took over your body, she told me that, for your whole life, you've had no clue of her

existence, neither did you know about your other soul parts. You've always thought you were a regular succubus." He paused again, shuffling plates around. "You're far from that, Ivy." His words became barely audible, and my eyebrows knitted together. "Same goes for Allegra. She said something about being a succubus goddess from a realm I've never heard of, being stolen from her devil mate by dragons, and a prophecy about feasting on souls and other weird-ass shit. *Man*, you should've seen her, a walking sex goddess—"

A noticeable *oomph* interrupted the dick-driven nonsense he sputtered, and the corners of my lips lifted for a second.

She probably punched him.

"Focus, Blondie, focus! Keep Cockzilla quiet for a second! This is fucking important," she scolded.

Knew it...

For a few moments, it became quiet inside, and I was on the verge of making my presence known.

"But why... *How* am I back in my own body? Also, having a split soul with angel *and* dragon parts together *with* succubus parts? A prophecy? *Fuck*, Marcus, do you know how ridiculous that sounds?" The flood of questions left her lips like a wild river, and her nose started to run by the sound of her sniffing. She was close to tears but not out of fear—out of frustration and anger. Who could blame her?

My foot lifted, I was set on walking in and giving her the comfort she needed, but her next question kept me rooted to the spot.

"Does Rion know?"

Hell no! Not one fucking word did he mention.

Ferrow's casual scoff raised the hair on my arms straight up, and I clenched my teeth, my upper lip baring my fangs.

"You kidding me? No. Big fucking no! I'm the only one other than Corvina who knows about it, and I want it to stay

that way until we find a solution with her and Chief Hardin to banish Allegra completely.”

Corvina? Why should she be involved in finding a solution?

I knew Corvina, better than I wished I did. For a short time, she'd been Ivy's best friend—best female friend—and I had disliked her from the get-go. But I'd known better than to talk Ivy out of that friendship. She needed to find out for herself, and eventually, she did.

“Whatever! Now, tell me, how am I back in my own body? And what are these scarred wounds? Sorry, but how did *you* banish Allegra? And why did you shoot at me?”

“Well, that hurts. But you're right, I had no chance against her. The demon trap and Corvina's ratty instinct to survive rescued you. For now, at least.” Layers of sorrow clouded Ferrow's voice as it grew quiet. “Ivy, it was almost game over for us!”

He blew out a long sigh before continuing and sent my mind through the foggy jungle of Friday night's events that masqueraded as scary insanity.

“It all started when Corvina forced my blood into your mouth, and the next second, your eyes shone like damn headlights before you slumped down. I wasn't able to sense your breathing, not even a damn heartbeat! *Shit*, I thought you were dead!”

Dead?

My mouth went dry, and fear choked my lungs. I gripped the doorframe, the wood cracking under my vise grip.

“Did you hear that?” Ivy's question had me releasing the doorframe like it burned my palm. I turned into a statue, unmoving without proof of my presence escaping me.

“Never mind. Then what?” Her voice sounded farther away, as if she'd changed her position.

“Corvina locked Allegra away, back into your split soul. I had no clue she was *that* powerful. But after I used the demon trap in a last desperate attempt to get us out alive, she put a spell on Allegra that bound her powers and brought her to her knees, where she surrendered and gave up control over you after I shot her three times.”

Ivy hummed in waves but pressed for more. “What about my scars?”

“It seems like the injuries Allegra experienced show on your body, although they healed. I shot her in her left hand and leg and, lastly, in her shoulder because she was about to kill Corvina before she was done with the spell. Sorry, but I didn’t see any other way to handle the situation.”

The strange scars on her...

Ivy’s voice became monotonous, and the underlying bitterness it carried was hard to listen to. “Wow! And how long will that *trick* last? How long before my lights go out and I lose to her again?”

I guessed by the sounds of her muffled cries, Ferrow had pulled her in for a hug.

“Ivy, I don’t know. Smart-ass witch threatened me, saying she could reverse the spell at any time, as she’d caged Allegra only temporarily. She didn’t want to tell me for how long. Corvina told me she could banish her permanently by using one of her strongest rituals, but in return, she expects a favor from Chief Hardin.”

“What does she want?”

He huffed. “Her untouchable immunity and safety. But the Chief wanted her alive to torture the fuck out of her, having her die a gruesome death, and he gets what he wants. That’s why I held off on going straight to him. I need a plan. We need to convince him to grant her what she wants. If not—”

Ivy’s sobbing completed the sentence even I knew the ending of. “If not, Allegra will return. And I probably won’t get to come back next time.”

Won't come back... I'll lose her!

My body went numb. All warmth escaped me at that thought.

“I’ve got you. Don’t worry, I’ll find a way. For the time being, I brought her to the safe house on Wellmington Street. Chained her to the generator with bio-coded handcuffs made of iron and a demon trap. I’ve injected her with a monkshood mixture to keep her from recharging too quickly. Better safe than sorry,” he said.

Ivy remained silent.

After a few beats, Ferrow revealed the stakes. “She gave me seventy-two hours to get Chief Hardin to agree, or she’ll reverse the spell.”

“Reverse the spell,” she repeated with a stoic tone, and wood scratched over the floor as she pulled out a chair.

A surge of energy flowed through me as the details of a plan flashed before my eyes.

I know of this safe house!

Ivy and I had hung out there a few times, sharing a big-ass spinach feta cheese pizza and smoking our favorite blend of rose shisha tobacco as she vented about her life in Bearno.

If I can get to Corvina before Ferrow does, I'll make her agree to help Ivy and banish my human side in exchange for a safe escape and her regained freedom.

Everything around me faded into the background as the idea of getting rid of my human side spread within my mind like wildfire in a dried-out forest. My pulse sped up, and my palms became sweaty with excitement.

A full werewolf—a full werewolf with a mate.

The sound of breaking dishes and wood snapped me out of my hazed mind.

What's going on in there?

“No way in hell will I lie to Rion!” Ivy shouted.

“I don’t trust him, and you’d be wise if you did the same. Dude is shady! If you only knew the things he does behind closed doors, you wouldn’t look at him the same. When did you plan on telling me you let this half human fuck you, huh?”

No! Does he know... Impossible!

“Marcus, that’s none of your business, and you’d be wise to watch how you talk about him when I’m around!”

Once again, I found myself almost walking in on their conversation, but Ferrow’s accusations triggered unhealthy anxiety; it peeked its head out from where I kept it locked inside, and my heart threatened to stop.

Does he know about Natalia?

Ferrow didn’t wait long to deliver the next gut-punching line. Guy’s brutal. “Why? Because you love him?”

I froze—for the third time—desperate for answers. She’d tell him the truth, the untold truth no one besides the two of us knew. The truth I ached to finally hear out of her mouth.

“That’s nothing I’ll discuss right now! My love life certainly has no priority at—”

Tell him!

“Do you love him or not?” he roared, and more wood splintered and broke. That must’ve been the table or one of the cupboards.

Why doesn’t she tell him already?

The fear I experienced wasn’t solely emotional; my chest ached, and my suddenly tight throat didn’t allow more than shallow breaths. My claws bored into my skin as I balled my fists even tighter. The tips of my fangs pierced into my lips from pressing them together to hold back the furious growl that ached to escape me.

“Yes!” Ivy roared back. “Happy now?”

I closed my eyes and released the tension with steadier breaths.

She openly admitted it!

Ferrow's croaked response followed after a long sigh. "Abso-fucking-lutely not! You jump from one mistake to the next. He's not good enough for you. You'll waste your time with Gregori."

She huffed. "Good hell, Marcus! I planned on keeping to myself for a while to process everything. I just broke up with Ezra! I won't be with Rion right away! *For fuck's sake*, I would've confided in you as soon as we were through with this mission. Now was not the time."

Not right away? What if she regrets it and crawls back to that human? That happened once before!

My earlier fear morphed into unleashed rage, erasing any rational thoughts, and a metallic tang seeped into my senses. I flexed my hands and looked down at my bloody palms.

I can't let that happen, and I won't.

"You'll set yourself up for more misery!" Ferrow's voice heated up with fury, and plates shattered in the sink right after. "Mark my fucking words! He'll cause trouble!"

Ivy's response wasn't any less loaded. "Enough! I'll go shower now. Can't believe it... What a damn shitshow!"

My thoughts became clouded with consuming darkness, and I had the hardest time to keep Amos at bay, but the desperate love I had for her was the only driving force for me right now. The only thing that kept me sane.

I waited another minute before I knocked and walked in as casually as I could. As Ivy was taking a shower, I didn't have to face her in this uncontrollable state I was in. It wouldn't take much for me to lose my shit. Ripping out Ferrow's throat for infecting her mind with doubts about me became insanely alluring, but I saved that for another time.

“Yeah, *welcome back*, Gregori, let yourself in. Why not?” Ferrow snapped at me, but I mumbled a quick *forgot my keys* and went straight to the bedroom to retrieve them.

Without paying him further attention, I stormed out the door and closed it behind me with a *bang*.

I'll have my human side banished, and then she'll be all mine, without a doubt. Soon.

Outside in the corridor, I snatched my pack of Moods cigarillos with trembling fingers and frowned when a paper snippet fell to the floor. I bowed, not ready for the strike of adrenaline shooting through me.

“Meet me next Tuesday in your rented room, 11 a.m.—Ivy”

My eyes bounced over the phrase at least ten times, and her earlier words struck me. Fear gained a smothering choke hold on me.

“I won't be with Rion right away!”

With a plan in mind and bleeding fists, I left the building with nothing but pure determination to go and strike a deal with Corvina before they could.



Thick clouds of warm steam fogged up the bathroom I'd locked myself in before showering—my mind a devastated battlefield from the bomb that got dropped on it.

Outside the shower, I'd lowered to the floor and let the cold, hard tiles imprint their steady coolness on my bare butt, which achingly reflected the stark contrast of emotions roiling within me.

My spine whined and nagged from avoiding the support of leaning against the wall after more than an hour. I wanted to lean back but couldn't, hot showering the not-fully-healed, stitched holes reaching from my shoulder blades down to the middle of my back had been dumb. It seemed the wounds I'd received from the soul cage didn't heal as fast as the rest.

Before, I'd stared over my shoulder into the mirror above the sink, my once large beautiful mandala tattoo ruined by the tasteless souvenirs from the soul exchange. Adrion had done an amazing job stitching me up, and thankfully, my natural healing had kicked in again, but I couldn't stop scrutinizing the reminders that stared back at me in the glass.

The row of hooks had been there—cold, cruel, and real.

Zoned out, I stared at my bullet-pierced hand, the scar tissue looking like a star had exploded on it. The red edges were still newly ragged, lightly raised, but numb.

Weird. They already act like old scars. Will I carry them for the rest of my life as well?

But then again, Adrion's face haunted my mind, and I couldn't shake it off, not even the steaming hot shower I took could. If anything, it fogged my mind even worse.

I let out a long breath, softly pounding my head back against the wall, hoping it would magically make the dreadful memories go away, only to flinch at the stinging pain coming from my back.

“Gregori thinks you're his mate... Said you could and should be...”

Marcus's words flashed in my mind like a big, fat neon sign, making it impossible to think of anything else. I clawed at the roots of my hair, with tears pooling in my eyes, shaking my head in disbelief and frustration.

No, no, no, no!

Although his words had started the mess within me, after all, it was Adrion's expression when he denied it that perpetuated it. I knew that expression. *Heck*, he was my best friend. It was the same expression he had when he lied—that crooked smile that failed to include his soft eyes.

Forbidden love had turned into sinful redemption, only to cover me in darkest chaos. How can he say something like that when he knows I don't want my choices ripped from me?

Our forsaken feelings had ticked inside us for years, a bomb that was meant to blow up sooner or later; *later* had arrived earlier than I'd thought.

Dammit, I want to be with him, just not before I got to sort out my life... He'll be hurt if I tell him next Tuesday. Things will get fucking messy.

Could I have stopped this train wreck? Yes, but I didn't. Just like I gave zero fucks about Ezra when I let Amos drag me into his dark addictive world of taboo kinks or messed between the sheets with Adrion, *twice*. I'd been a willing captive with no intention of freeing myself. Too shortsighted to see the domino effect coming.

I thought back to Thursday night at Cloud9, back to every second when I had wrapped myself in overdue longing with Adrion. Hell's alluring fire of passion had burned both me and my common sense alive and had left me with no choice but to surrender.

I'd waved that white flag with enthusiasm.

The aftermath of that night clearly wasn't what I'd expected, neither had I expected for Ezra to fly all the way to LA and certainly not that I'd use my powers on him to mess with his memory. He was better off without me, so I didn't mind it as much as what had happened in Marcus's kitchen before.

Unconsciously, I traced the skin on my neck. Was it possible that Adrion's crazy theory held an ounce of truth? Wouldn't it legitimize our complex chemistry and the insane longing that had brooded for over a decade? His human side blocked his ability to sense his mate, but that didn't mean he couldn't have one.

"I'm a fool in every damn way," I murmured and buried my face in my palms.

Played with fire and burned myself... Surprised? Why's he so invested in the idea of being mates? My choices are privileges. Doesn't he trust me enough?

My mind was a mess of working gears, and what it spat out only had my thoughts spiraling.

All these years, he's believed we were fated?

"Until you accept we're meant to be."

Our friendship was never innocent. It was just as much of a farce as the rest of my life.

No, even if he was able to have a mate, it wouldn't be me. I could never love Amos. There's no way I'm his mate.

Had he awakened desires I never knew existed? *Yes*. Did I yearn to be his *little Vixen* again and serve his taboo kinks? *Shit, yes*. Did that make us fated? *No*.

I can't imagine his pain, knowing he'll never have a mate to claim. All because of Rion's human half. But that's what I love Rion for. He's gentle and loving. Giving in to him before keeping to myself for a while only complicated everything!

When I started to pound my head against the sandy tiles of the bathroom wall once more, a series of knocks pulled me out of my spiraling thoughts.

“Are you glued to the toilet or what? Open the door, Ivy! I need to piss and brush my teeth!”

I closed my eyes and silently laughed at Marcus's ways of being anything but decent.

Wrapping the towel tighter around me, I slowly got up from the floor and reached for the door to unlock it. “Sorry... Got a little lost in here.”

Marcus swiftly pushed past me, and his hands went to his zipper as he positioned himself in front of the toilet.

“*Ew!* Could you at least sit down like any other man with manners?” I scrunched up my nose.

He didn't bother to sit and kept peeing as he preferred it, turning his face halfway back to me with a huff.

“You know this is my place, don't you? First, Gregori walks back in without knocking or my permission—or how did you put it?—like any other man with *manners*. And now, you have the audacity to tell me how to piss?”

This tiny piece of information caught me off guard while I started to brush my teeth. “Rion came back? Why?”

At least he flushed before turning to me, stuffing his junk back into his pants.

“Dumbass forgot his keys,” he said and came to stand next to me, eyeing me in the mirror with underlying skepticism. “He's shady—”

I snapped, “What's your problem with him? He helped when *you* called him last night. Remember?”

“He was the only option I had! I don’t trust him, Ivy. You think you know him through and through? Think again. This man is mad obsessed with you, and you gave him a reason to further spiral in his obsession. He’s a psycho! I’ve said it before, and I’ll happily repeat myself until it gets into your stubborn head. He’ll cause us trouble!”

My mouth fell open, and small droplets of foamy toothpaste dotted my chin. “What do you mean *think you know him through and through* and *he’s a psycho*?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Got something to say? Say it!”

Marcus averted his eyes from mine and began to scrub his hands under the running water of the sink, his expression grim. “Did he ever mention a woman named Natalia?”

A pang of jealousy ignited a fire in me, and I spat out the toothpaste harder than necessary. “*Yup*. Why? He told me about her. He’d every right to sleep with whomever he pleased.”

Marcus’s eyebrows shot up, and he pointed at me. “So, you see nothing wrong with him having a prostitute under contract and making her look, behave, and fucking smell like you? *Wow!* I knew you were weird, but—”

A twitch in my scarred hand, I dropped the toothbrush, and it met the sink with a short *clink*.

“Thought so.” His voice was stripped of earlier mockery but instead quiet and sad. “I’m sorry, Ivy.”

Thursday night at Cloud9. Her face, body, and haircut, so eerily similar to mine. The way she stroked Rion’s hair.

I let my gaze drop, paralyzed, as I stared holes through the sink. “Pretty crass accusations there, Blondie.”

“No, *facts*.” At his words, my eyes drifted back to his, cerulean blues full of sadness and pity—I couldn’t take it.

He splashed water into his face and combed through his hair, taking in one slow, deep breath through his nose as droplets ran down his cheeks.

“Friday, a week ago, before you left for the human realm. It was one of those damn long nights at Cloud9, and I saw her at the bar, just before closing. *Man*, she was a mess, and besides two empty wine bottles, no one kept her company. We were the last ones there.” Marcus studied me with a wary look, and the hesitance in him made my heart crumble. Not an ounce of his usual fuckery evident in the way he spoke to me.

I waited for him to continue, couldn't say a word, too struck by the truth that dawned upon me like a thunderstorm. Charged and ready to strike again and again.

“Poor thing thought I cared to listen about how *her guy* has obsessed about another girl for the past six years. She was fucking wasted and slurred out the weirdest shit. How he wanted her hair to look—even demanded she bleach it—or how he groomed her to stroke his hair in a specific way. But lastly, what caught my attention was when she mentioned the perfume he used on her each time they met.”

“Dolce & Gabbana Light Blue?” I whispered, the words crawling out of my mouth with ache in every syllable, and my mouth went dry. “I don't have a monopoly on that perfume.”

Matching my quiet tone, he took a step toward me, but I inched away. “She did mention the exact brand of the perfume, but there's more.” He paused and let the hand he'd reached out to me drop. “That night, he'd almost killed her in a fit of rage when she didn't obey his demand to not speak while he fucked her. *Damn*, it was hard to decipher what she said, with all the sobbing and crying. But I caught a name.”

Even without looking back at him, the sorrow in his expression burned down on me. Sorrow I didn't want him to feel for me. He took a deep breath, and his next words echoed in my mind like the final nail into my heart's coffin.

“It was yours.”

No. No. No.

“Why should she?” I shouted, eyes closed, and my palms pooled with sweat as I clutched the edges of the sink.

“Because it’s you he pretends to fuck when he keeps the room dark. She’s even paid enough money to not take any other clients. Then she dropped another name. It was his, Gregori’s. After that, she passed out from hell-knows-how-much booze she had in her system. Xavier helped me get her up to the sixth floor. She’s one of Cloud9’s prostitutes, Ivy!”

I covered my mouth with both hands and muffled the sob rushing over my lips.

He’d almost killed her? A prostitute? Made her look and smell like me? The same perfume he’d gifted me?

“W-Why should he do something like that? He—he’d never—” The flood of words stuck in my throat, choked by hot pain spreading inside my heart.

“He’s fucking obsessed with you! I didn’t tell you because I was high on pitying the dumbshit, so fucking pathetic. Kinda amused me at first. Never had I thought things would get serious between you two.” Marcus’s temper flared up, red taking over his irises. “You’re not safe with him. He’s fucking deranged!”

Comforting coldness wrapped around my heart as I put up my walls to keep my heart from bleeding out in front of him. Spilling a single tear, I wiped it off with the back of my hand and lifted my eyes to meet his. “This is something between us. I’ll talk to him myself first before I act on whatever crazy shit a drunken prostitute spewed.”

Marcus scoffed but let me be.

“But thanks for telling me. Gonna go up to the rooftop for a smoke.” My mumble barely audible, I wiped off my mouth and reached for the door handle. One half turn of my head over my shoulder, I gave him a soft look, even though my insides were tearing themselves apart. “Love you, Blondie.”

“Love you, too!” Marcus gave me a tired smile, and I was thankful he didn’t harp on about it.

Feelings running amok, I rushed to change into boxers and one of Marcus’s wide shirts, snatched my pack of cigs out of

the weapons bag he'd packed two nights ago, and stormed out of the apartment.

The walk through the corridor with its bare concrete walls leading to the elevator stretched out into agony. My pulse pounding in my ears as my vision blurred, I sought comfort against the wall for a second, and my teeth began to chatter. Seconds, minutes, I lost track of my surroundings or any ability to think straight.

“Even demanded she bleach it... Groomed her to stroke his hair in a specific way.”

Marcus's words struck me once again, this time with revelation as sick as it could get. I exhaled quick breaths over my lips, and my legs threatened to give way.

For six years, he'd been doing that? On the night he kissed me in the parking lot as well? Right after I drove off?

Tilting my head up against the rough wall, I sobbed between harsh intakes of breath and was on the verge of losing my shit. Staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, tears trailed over my cheeks and down the sides of my throat.

Fuck, I need fresh air!

I pressed my eyes closed and exhaled, long and shaky. But poisonous pain kept me glued to the spot when it resumed with a toxic bite into my heart, infiltrating the space with darkness.

“Almost killed her in a fit of rage when she didn't obey his demand to not speak... It's you he pretends to fuck when he keeps the room dark.”

I let my jaw go slack and my eyes go unfocused as I sat there in disbelief. The truth about Adrion hit me harder this second time, and sheer devastation gripped me, head to toe, mind to soul. I couldn't cage the scream building in my chest, so I released it. Rampant and slicing, it cut through the lingering silence on the third floor.

The chill of the grimy corridor tiles met my bare legs when I couldn't prevent my body from sliding down the wall

and onto the floor. With both hands, I clutched fistfuls of the far-too-big shirt and bit into it, muffling another bitter scream.

“Imagine there are things you don’t know about me, love.”

When Adrion’s words from a week ago blended into the darkness of my rioting feelings, I tore at the shirt until it started to rip. My breathing became irregular, and the tips of my fingers prickled with the need to inflict pain that would sedate my broken heart.

No... This can’t be true! He’s tender and loving. He’d never be capable of—

Even my thoughts got choked as something inside me snapped. My familiar coping reflex kicked in, forcefully honed since the divorce fiasco of my parents, and I followed the whisper of my mental survival instinct and pulled out a cigarette.

He’s nothing like my adoptive father! Adrion’s a good man.

Pressing down the spark wheel of my lighter, I let the flame burn the tip of my cigarette and pulled on it like it was my last breath. Keeping the smoke trapped in my lungs until my body forced me to breathe, I released the dense cloud of smoke.

Breathe. Calm down. Now, take another drag.

I smoked until scorching heat stung my lips from the cigarette that had burned down to the filter. My thoughts were no longer crushing waves seeking to drown me but the quick ripples of a pebble in a tidal pool, blurring the water but not disrupting it. I wiped a hand across my puffy eyes.

Fuck, I love him! Whatever is going on, I need to confront him myself. What Marcus said can’t be true! He deserves the benefit of the doubt until I see him again.

My heart ached, but I had ninety-nine problems, and the biggest one of them was caged within me, impatiently waiting

for its chance to rip my consciousness to pieces. My life hung by a thread, and I hadn't forgotten about the scary incident from the other night.

I'd deal with Adrion's alleged madness another time, even if the accusations carved my heart with doubts. They might've wrecked me temporarily, but they couldn't kill the faith I had in us.

In the end, everything won't be as it seems! First, we need to juggle Chief Hardin's unpredictable temper and get rid of Allegra.



One emotional breakdown and two cigarettes later, I walked back inside Marcus's apartment and into his bedroom to look for something to wear besides his far-too-big boxers and shirts.

Bekka's and his breakup was recent, and I hoped to find some clothes she'd left there. Opening the door to his spacious walk-in closet, I started going through the drawers.

Bingo!

Bekka's clothing size was about the only thing we had in common besides being succubi, so when I picked a pair of snug jeans, a thong, and a silky white blouse, I was more than pleased to have something more fitting to wear.

No bras and no socks! Great...

Lastly, I put on a leather holster around my thigh that I pulled out of Marcus's weapon drawer, sliding the dagger he got from his grandmother into the sheath—it was one of his favorites but also the only one I found.

Back in the kitchen, I caught Marcus munching on a sandwich. Giving me a once-over, he arched his brows at my choice of clothes. My nipples showing beneath the fabric surely played a part in that as well.

"Yah, right. These are Bekka's clothes, and I'm not wearing a bra. Don't act as if it bothers you. I'm not turning up at HD in your shirt and what? Boxers?" I laughed, snatching

his sandwich to take a bite, and pressed the button on the coffee machine for a lungo.

While the delicious smell filled the air, I looked down and gasped. “Please tell me she left a pair of shoes here!”

“Nope.” He grinned as he eyed my bare feet with amusement and got up to get his sandwich back. “We can buy shoes on our way. Now, let’s get going! I already have two missed calls from our lovely Mrs. Chevers, so I’m slightly stressed. If there’s one thing you don’t want to see on your phone—”

I completed Marcus’s sentence with a sigh. “It’s a missed call from Chief Hardin.”

He got up and picked up the keys to his Hellcat. “Exactly, sweetie. We both know he’ll hold me accountable for being late, so *please*, bring your coffee and your lovely ass, and let’s get going!” He paused by the front door and blocked my way with his hand against the doorframe. “If you need someone to talk to because of that shit with Gregori or your ex, I’m there. But for the record, if you lose my grandmother’s dagger, I’ll kill you.”

I gave him a cheeky grin and blew him a kiss. “Got it.”

We were halfway into the city before Marcus pulled up at a small boutique. Six minutes and a new pair of white Converse in size seven later, I announced changes to our plan. “I need to talk to Corvina. Please drive by the safe house.”

He dismissed me. “Not going to happen, Ivy. We’re already running late, as I told you before! The safe house’s on the other end of the city. She’s chained and trapped, so don’t worry. Corvina won’t be going anywhere. It wasn’t part of our negotiation, but I don’t trust her. Whatever you need to discuss with her will have to wait until we’ve convinced the Chief to spare her life.”

I squeezed his arm and didn’t give a crap if I sounded desperate because, right now, I was—desperately clinging to my life and the control over my own body.

“Marcus Ferrow! My life depends on her! I *need* to talk to her about our plan with Chief Hardin! We, no, *I* can’t fuck this up! What if he doesn’t believe us? We’ll need a plan B. And I’m not waiting for him to turn us down and risk losing against Allegra. Blondie, you’re my friend! *Please!*”

He kept on driving with a grim expression on his face, lips pursed as he chewed on the inside of his bottom lip, same as whenever he weighed out both options and consequences.

“Marcus, please,” I whispered and rested my hand on his veiny forearm.

He glanced over for a moment and clicked his tongue. “*Man*, if he whips my ass, I’ll be whipping yours for at least a week!”

I beamed at him. “You’re the best! I’ll make it quick, promise!”

“No, Ivy, the promise *I* give you is that I’ll have you bent over my knees to get an extra good look at my work after I’m done whipping you if Chief Hardin decides to kick my ass! And, *no*, I won’t make it quick.”

A mischievous look danced over his face, and heat crawled up my body. Big pervert knew how to push buttons, and I was glad he did. He dulled the ache that still pounded inside my heart, even if the effect was only superficial.

“Whatever.” I playfully crossed my arms over my blouse and pouted. “But I doubt you’d actually hurt me.”

“If I decide to hurt you, you’ll ask for more of my disciplining for days to come!”

Marcus’s flirty cerulean blues glanced over at me once more, and fine lines built around the outer corners of his eyes as he grinned from ear to ear.

I burst out in laughter, but my cheeks and ears heated up, nevertheless. “A new hookup line? Nice!”

“Sure is.” He kept on grinning and patted his shoulder. “It’s hella good, isn’t it?”

I shook my head and gave into more waves of laughter. *Damn*, that momentary distraction was exactly what I needed.

“Funny that you’re also part angel. Makes it even more fun to push your buttons and get you flustered. You’re like the female equivalent of Rudolph, with your glowing almost-red ears! Look at them in the mirror, it’s weird!” Marcus kept on teasing, and I loved every second of it. “Speaking of your angel side, are you now offended when I say *hell*?”

“Oh, Avada Kefuckya!” My laughter filled the car, and I slapped his upper arm.

“A naughty little angel, huh? Maybe you really do need a good whipping to help you behave.” His eyes gleamed with hot flirtatiousness.

“Focus on the damn street, you pervert.”

I hated my body’s telltale signs, even if I had to admit I loved how Marcus teased me.

A short drive later, we stood in front of the safe house. It was an apartment in a smaller complex of ten units rented out by other hunters that worked for Hell’s Discovery.

“I’ll come with you.” He got out of the car, checked his gun, and we made our way up to the first floor.

The building was old, but the security locks were high-end. Earning your living as a hunter was dangerous—not only the job itself but living as a hunter also meant you never knew who was after you.

Marcus inserted the key and typed in a combination of codes for the security lock, pushing down the door handle.

He walked in with a bellow, “Corvina! Ivy wants to talk to you. Don’t try—”

His tall stature came to a halt when he was almost around the corner into the living room.

“Marcus?” I asked in a low whisper, the crushing answer already dawning on me.

“She’s gone!” His growl earth-shattering like thunder, I sprinted past him to look for myself. The white papered walls of the functional, furnished living room laughed back at us; the room lacked any decoration, same as it lacked a particular witch he thought he’d cuffed to the generator.

Gone.

My knees gave way, and I crashed down to the hardwood floor with my stomach sinking into the dark abyss of this unfolding disaster.

I’m screwed.



My eyes darted around the crappy furnished room like a ping-pong ball and, lastly, landed again on the spot where Corvina *used* to be two nights ago, handcuffed to the damn generator with a big fat demon trap around her right ankle.

But no matter how many times I frantically looked for her, the rotting bitch was nowhere to be seen. My jaw muscles ticked at the sight of the unlocked demon trap and handcuffs.

I went through the place like a tornado, punching and kicking down doors, flipping every bed and every damn table of the four-room apartment—no traces of Corvina.

Outraged, I teleported right back into the living room and smashed a chair against the window; a dull thud, instead of the sound of breaking glass, only spiraled my fury.

The safety glass does a better job than me.

“Marcus, stop! She’s gone!” Ivy shouted from the floor, where she kneeled.

“*Hell*, I fucking know, Ivy! I searched every inch of this damn place!” I yelled back at her with red flashing in my eyes.

Did I make a mistake? Was I too lax when I cuffed that bitch, or was I sloppy when placing the demon trap? I’d drugged her with monkshood.

“It wasn’t your fault. She must’ve escaped somehow. Maybe we underestimated her powers.” Her voice soft as a feather, she tried to calm down the storm that raged within me.

I huffed. She knew exactly what Corvina's escape would mean for her destiny, and still, she tried to calm *me*.

It's just a matter of time until Allegra tears down the mental barrier or Corvina decides to simply reverse the spell to get back at Ivy. We don't even know how long her spell will keep Allegra in check.

No clue. No solution. Nothing.

Remorse and self-hatred buzzed through me as I croaked out, "I failed you, Ivy. I fucking failed you again."

The words cut through my throat like razor blades. My eyes pooled with tears, but I blinked them away when I turned and walked to the nearby window.

As much as I hated to admit it, I was scared shitless—the thought of losing Ivy brought sourness up my throat, and the deep-rooted instinct to protect her and to face failure for that matter, shattered me.

I pulled my large gun from the back of my pants, tossed it aside, and lowered myself to lean against the wall underneath the window, right next to the chair I just destroyed. Kicking away the broken pieces of it with my left foot, I palmed both sides of my face as I let my head hang, going through every little detail over and over again.

Ivy stayed kneeling on the hardwood flooring, zoned out with empty eyes boring holes in the floor.

I let my eyes scan the trashed living room. When they fell onto a specific spot of the generator, I jumped up and ran over to it. With quick fingers, I inspected the cold metal, eyes searching every inch of it for signs of magick or forcing, anything that would give away hints of how she escaped.

No scratches, no damage. The handcuffs I used were designed to be unbreakable, and only the person who locked them could open them. Technically...

"Someone helped her." Angry shivers went through my body as the words left me quietly, but my rage got the better of

me as I ripped off the metal handle in one piece.

We were betrayed!

Ivy didn't even flinch as the heavy metal bar landed a few feet away from her, seemingly accepting her fate and welcoming resignation.

The lifeless look she gave me kicked my insides, her voice just as void of any emotion.

“No. She must've escaped on her own. No one besides us knew of her whereabouts. Only hunters of HD have access to this building, let alone have access to this particular apartment. It's over, Marcus.”

My frustration echoed back from the walls. “Nine other hunters live in this complex, and none of them would enter here when they saw it was sealed from the outside. Even the newbies learn that a seal means *fucking occupied!* Plus, it's locked by a code system. It doesn't make sense to me.”

What did I miss?

Ivy lay back down on the floor, her eyes closing as she took in deep breaths.

“Your back. It's still bruised, isn't it?” I expressed my concern for her as gently as I could, given the circumstances. I at least wanted to comfort her, even if only a little.

“*Ugh*, fuck my back! Right now, I want to feel everything, since this body—*my body*—is all mine. For now. Never knew I'd appreciate the feeling of a stinging back. But here we are, huh?”

I sighed out a quick breath. The sight of her lying there, trying to come to grips with her fate, crushed me. I averted my look from her up to the ceiling, grasping for any idea of how to save her.

All of a sudden, her dry and bitter laughter resounded through the debris-strewn room, and it shook me to my core.

“This is so fucking funny.” She turned her head in my direction and locked her teary eyes with mine, her body shaking from laughter.

“No, Ivy, I don’t know how any of this could be described as funny.” I forced myself to hide my brooding anger, but my voice came out flatter than a fucking crêpe. My usual uncalled-for asshat wit was completely missing at this moment, just like the spark her eyes usually held.

“Argh!” She exclaimed, her hands shooting up to her temples.

“Is it Allegra?” Panic fueled my voice.

“No,” she pressed out. “It’s just a migraine, I guess.”

“*Man*, you scared me!”

Mumbling a quiet *Sorry*, she closed her eyes and drew in calm breaths. “It’s subsiding already. What the hell was that?”

Ivy steadied herself on one elbow, and her tired eyes roamed around the trashed place. She’s never looked that miserable. “Not that it really matters, now that I’ll be gone in a few days. But I used to come here with Rion. Every time, when I needed to escape from the piles of lies I’d built around me, when I decided to stick to Ezra and somehow make it work. Every time I needed Rion, he wouldn’t hesitate to meet me here and brought my favorite pizza and a bottle of ketchup.” Tilting her head back with closed eyes, a small smile graced her face. “Oh, and don’t forget the shisha!”

Of course he would. Dumbshit.

I held back my urge to gag at both Gregori’s pathetic way of jumping at her every whim and, of course, her wild cravings.

“Spinach beef feta cheese pizza.” I gave her a crooked smile. “With extra ketchup!”

For once, I shut my mouth about my thoughts on Gregori and her absurd cravings, letting her indulge in whatever memories gave her comfort.

“*Yep.* And this place right here became my personal safety spot, a bubble I escaped into with Rion if we weren’t sitting on one of Mount Rizar’s many cliffs. But now, the same place that once gave me comfort and shelter has turned into my grave.”

Her laughter turned wicked, sending goose bumps all over my arms. She closed her eyes again and cackled until tears escaped.

“Isn’t that *oh so ironic?* Serves me damn right!” She gasped for air between shrill laughs.

Then something inside me clicked. My powers invoked as my eyes switched frantically between blue and red.

That dirty little dog.

“Gregori. You were here with him, even though he’s not working for HD,” I mumbled to myself, but somehow, Ivy still managed to hear me.

“Didn’t you listen, Blondie? I just told you we were—”

I cut her off with a vicious growl rumbling through my chest that pulled her out of her mad state as she looked at me with a deep crease between her eyebrows. She slowly gathered herself from the floor.

“It was him!” I boomed, and Ivy flinched as my fist slammed down onto the floor, splintering the hardwood plank into pieces.

“What do you mean—”

“The wolf mutt must’ve eavesdropped on us when I was telling you about how Corvina caged Allegra back in. I even mentioned the safe house. He had everything to come up with a plan!”

“Marcus, that sounds—” She started again, but I cut her off once more, spitting out the venomous truth with a roar.

“I fucking told you he’ll cause trouble!”

Her laughter disappeared and got replaced with a blank stare. Over and over, she shook her head, stammering quietly in disbelief.

She needs me to be calm and levelheaded right now.

“Ivy, think! He cursed his human side and the way he talked about his *disability* of being half human and not being able to have a mate. He’s so far gone into his sick little mind he could think he can use Corvina to banish *his* human soul.”

C’mon, Ivy, think!

“So, he’ll be able to have a mate... Hoping, no, *convinced* it’ll be me.” She breathed out, and for the first time ever, I knew she saw Gregori in the same light as I did—as I fucking always had.

She visibly crumbled down into a messy ball of desperation as she pulled up her knees and buried her head between them with loud, awful sobs escaping her lips.

“We have *nothing*. No Corvina, no plan to keep Allegra in check, and certainly no clue how to explain everything to Chief Hardin,” she sobbed out the obvious facts.

I couldn’t gather up anything in response, as this was exactly what it was—a total disaster.

“Give me your phone.” She wiped her runny nose on her sleeve and extended her hand toward me with a flourish. “I left mine at my place.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I messed this up. I’ll call Chief Hardin and prepare him for our failure.”

But she had something different in mind. “No, I’ll call Rion.”

My eyes burned in an even brighter red, vision sharpening as anger rattled through my throat once more. “*What for?* So he can lie to us?”

“Just give me the damn phone! *Please*, Marcus. Maybe I can talk some sense into him. I’m sure he did it with good

intentions. *Dammit*, he doesn't even know how crucial Corvina is to us. Who knows how much he heard? Maybe it's not too late." With pleading eyes, she extended her hand toward me again.

Still so damn gullible.

"Your angel side makes you even more naïve. Fucking softie. It's repulsive!" I couldn't hold back my obvious dislike of these traits.

"Marcus. The phone. Please!"

"Whatever!" I pulled out my phone and tossed it in her direction. "But I tell you—" I started, but she silenced me with a finger, and I caught myself shutting my trap to hear the ringing on the other end of the line.

After a dozen rings, the mutt finally answered the call.

"Rion! It's me, Ivy! Did you take Corvina with you?"

Of course he did.

He stammered and hectically asked what she was talking about.

Guilty.

"Adriano Gregori. Did you or did you not take Corvina with you? Answer me!" she pressed, and when I caught him spilling his admission, I fucking lost it and leaped forward to grab the phone.

But she bolted up and put distance between us. I dared her to defy me with my red eyes and the claws extending from my nail beds. She held up her finger once more in her signature bossy way with determination in her glare to keep the fucking phone.

Come on, Gregori! Tell us where you are, and I'll rip your damn head off.

"But why? Rion, we need Corvina! You don't understand. Where are you? Wait, what? Don't hang up! Wait!" She abruptly paused and looked at the phone with a blank stare,

slowly letting it slip through her fingers onto the floor, where it landed with a thud.

With rising panic in her eyes, she looked at me, and her lips started to tremble. “Y-You were right... Marcus, you were right!”

Next second, she sprinted toward me and pressed the air out of my lungs when she brought her arms around my torso and cried bitterly.

“He told me he’d save both of us, told me to trust him, and that he promised we’d be together no matter what. What the fuck is he thinking?” she shouted the last words.

Truth be told, I was far from being an empathetic individual, but the pain that spread through her was palpable in each heart-wrenching sob that followed.

“This dumbshit of a half human. Fucking *knew* he can’t be trusted.” I growled out with viciousness as I held Ivy tight against me. Her petite body was flush against mine, her shoulders heaving, with her face buried right below my chest.

We’re fucking screwed.

This was a total disaster. There wasn’t any other way to put it. But right now, I was the only one who was *there*. Right in the middle of the crashing walls of the life we used to know, the life we took as a given, my partner, who *I* had taken, as a damn given.

We’d worked together for the past five years, and the friendship we’d built over that time became special to me, even if that wasn’t what I’d been after at the beginning.

I was a total jerk who thought he had the biggest balls, but she taught me otherwise. I’ll never forget the best Monday of my life.

As I held her, memories of the last few years appeared in my mind.

“Remember our job in 3033 Braxton? When you almost shot off my head?”

She began to giggle between sobs. “Told ya to not move, Blondie! I saved your ass, *again*, when that skinwalker had you in a headlock.”

“Eh, I remember it quite differently but, *yeah*, you saved me.” A small grin tugged my lips.

“Even if I’d shot your head off, would’ve been your own fault. You know guns aren’t my thing, and you packed the wrong weapons bag. Told you to pack at least one blade, as my kukris were at the smithy that day. Plus, you messed it up when you gave up your defense at the wrong time.” She looked up teasingly with her wet eyes.

Man, how can someone so adorably short be so damn sassy?

A small tear escaped from her almond-shaped dark-brown eyes, and I wiped it off her cheek with my thumb.

I didn’t have anything on my mind when my body took the lead and my lips naturally met her full ones with firm pressure.

What the heck?

Surely, I wasn’t the only one taken by surprise, as I didn’t know where the fuck that came from. But instead of breaking the kiss, I deepened it when my large hands cupped her soft face.

She remained still, obviously shocked by my move, but she didn’t pull away either.

With a last comforting soft push of my lips, I pulled myself back from her and found her big-as-saucer eyes staring right back at me. Her cheeks flushed with deep red tinting her freckles, and even her ears heated against my fingers.

Realizing what I’d done, I laughed sheepishly, and my eyebrows shot up. “Sorry. You know I’m terrible with all things emotional, and *this* is the only way I can handle those messy suckers.”

She nodded and kept staring at me, jaw slack with surprise.

“Um, did it work, at least?” I rubbed the back of my head, suddenly self-conscious about my incredibly stupid ways.

“I guess?” Wide-eyed, she looked like a doe caught in headlights.

My gaze softened, and I pulled her into my arms, placing a kiss on her wavy blonde hair.

“I don’t know what it is, but you trigger my protective side. I want to comfort you. You know I’m a dumbass and incapable of forming a meaningful bond, but with you, it’s developed naturally over the past years. You’re like my little sister, Eso Babe.”

“It’s astrology, Blondie, not esoteric.” She slowly tapped my back but pushed me off with a frown, clasping both my arms. “So, you still think comforting your *sister* by kissing her is appropriate?”

“No! Argh! Just shut your witty trap and let me be there for you. You know my lower brain does the main part of my thinking most of the time.”

I laughed at how dumb I’d sounded before and swept Ivy off her feet carefully.

“Fucking pervert, Marcus Ferrow! Last time, it was *hot cousins who fuck*, and look at you, being hungry for even more perverted stuff!” She laughed and playfully wiggled against my grip around her waist.

I placed her back on her feet, and a genuine smile spread across her face.

Finally, one thing I did right.

“Yup! *My* pervert,” she chirped and punched my arm before loosening my hands from her body and walking over to the window.

Man, I’m really fucked up!

I tightened my bun and shook my head, laughing to myself.

“Enough of that whiny-ass shit. What’s the plan, big daddy? You better help me not die, or I’ll kick your ass once you join me in Hell’s fire!” She was back in the game with her sassy, alluring side glowing through the walls she had pulled up to keep her raging emotions at bay.

Ha! Same old, same old when it gets too mushy.

“Let me get this off my chest first. *Dang*, I hope my mate is as smoking hot as you. I already hate your mate and fucking envy him. Ha! At least my lips were on yours first!”

She giggled as she looked out the window, shaking her head at my usual bullshit.

“*Fine!* I’m done. We’ve lost too much time by now, so let’s teleport straight to Chief Hardin and tell him how it is. If there’s someone who might be able to help you, it’ll be him.”

I cringed at the thought of his lashing anger, which would solely be directed at me, as he never raised his voice at Ivy.

Fucking big-titty bonus.

“Everything will work out, right? We got this!” She turned around with warm rays of sunlight shining in from outside the window illuminating her silhouette. “And, *hey*, once this shit is over, we’ll charter a jet and fly all the way out to Italy in good ol’ fashioned non-demon style.”

Of course she wants to fly.

I huffed with a lazy smirk lifting my lips. “We’ll watch the sunset above the Mediterranean Sea as we take a swim, and we’ll explore the region around Liguria. But don’t forget my models! Life’s too short, right?”

There was a different kind of aura surrounding her now, warm and, yes, heavenly.

The angel glow suits her—so fuckable.

“Only if you pay!” She grinned from ear to ear, and a pang of happiness spread through me.

I’d never thought the day would come when I’d be blown away by someone who was part angel, let alone part dragon. But here we were, and my dick twitched in approval.

Can't help it, I guess.



Sunday, 10:39 a.m., safe house

“All right, let’s get this over with.” Marcus gave me one last nervous look, and we teleported.

Or rather, *he* teleported. I found myself standing in the same spot, blinking repeatedly, growing more and more irritated.

“What the actual—”

No matter how much I tried, I remained where I was, and that was in the damn living room of the safe house apartment.

The last time I’d teleported was when Marcus brought me to his apartment... Nope, in fact, he teleported us both as I was unconscious. Could it be...

The obvious answer echoed in my nervous mind with taunting laughter. Was there a possibility that my succubus powers had been restricted as well when Corvina banished Allegra back into my split soul? If my demon powers were lost to me, I was left with the powers of my angel and dragon parts. Or so I guessed.

Angels don’t teleport, neither do dragons—or maybe I just don’t know how they do it... Shit!

“Great.” I groaned out and blindly kicked away the broken pieces of the chair Marcus had destroyed in his fit of rage earlier, and my foot brushed the barrel of his precious Wildey gun.

He must've forgotten it. Oh, right—Chief Hardin!

I knew exactly how easily fueled our boss's temper could get. Plus, we were a day behind the deadline. Marcus was already at Hell's Discovery and was probably being subjected to Hardin's anger all by himself.

Muzzle in first, I let the barrel of his gun slide into the back of my jeans, sped out of the apartment, and jumped down several stairs, almost breaking the door when I ran into it as I sprinted out of the building.

Taking in quick breaths, I looked around.

His car!

But as fast as the idea of taking his car appeared, the next problem dawned upon me—he had the keys. Time was running, and I used the hand grip of Marcus's gun to break the window by the driver's seat to climb in.

I cringed when I brushed off the shards from the leather seat.

Marcus will be so pissed!

Lowering onto the driver's seat, I rummaged for the spare key in the glove box, a faint grin lifting my lips. But it slipped off my face as soon as I grabbed nothing but papers.

Murphy is still one mean little dipshit. Okay, plan B!

If I had any useless knowledge, then it was how to hot-wire a car.

Thanks, Rion! Ha! If my mother only knew her favorite prince charming taught me that and so much more...

I stifled a whine as I pulled out Marcus's grandmother's dagger and started to break off the plastic steering column below the steering wheel until the wires were freed.

Oh boy, never thought I'd do this again. Marcus will be pissed—like really, really pissed!

“*Okay, okay.* Which were the ones for the power and which for the starting?” I closed my eyes, trying my hardest to remember what Adrion had taught me, but it was hard to remember because, most of the time, I was a panicky mess beside him, urging him to hurry up before we got caught.

“These better be the right ones,” I whispered to myself before I cut through two red wires I believed to turn on the power of both lights and the general electronics. Stripping off the rubber parts on both ends, I twisted the bare wires with semiskilled fingers.

The shining light of the car’s dashboard display greeted me in my peripheral view, and I released a yell. “*Hell yes!* Now, we need to start you, baby. C’mon, Blondie’s in trouble!”

My palms and ears heated as I grew more nervous about mastering the last crucial part of starting the car and getting my ass to Hell’s Discovery.

The knife’s blade cut through the brown starter wires like butter, and again, I stripped off the ends, ready to join them, but a nasty shock rattled through my hands and body when I touched the bare parts.

Ah, right... Gloves.

“For Hell’s sake! Come on, don’t leave me hanging. *Please!*” I gritted out between clenched teeth as I brought the ends of the starting wires together, hoping I remembered Adrion’s instructions correctly.

The 717 hp engine roared to life, and the familiar thunder resounding from the exhaust pipes had me releasing the wires. I jumped up and down in the driver’s seat. Another painful shock went through my leg when I touched the bare wires again.

“Argh! Fucking shit!” I cursed but couldn’t contain the laugh that had me shaking my head.

Blondie, I’m running that extra mile just for you! You better not forget that when you freak out about your car later.

I didn't have tape to seal the ends, so I sat there, half crisscross, so as to not touch the wires again with my left leg.

Beaming like a light bulb, I was ready to drive off and save the day, but there was something I forgot, and this *little something* reminded me when it refused to budge, rolling its eyes at my noob attempt. The steering wheel was still locked.

Time's running out...

Looking at the precious knife, I shook my head and decided to try my luck and got out of the car, placing both my hands on the side of the steering wheel, and yanked it with force.

Bingo!

I had the beast roaring down the street in moments, pushing the Hellcat to its limits as I raced for the office and my partner.

There was no time left, and angst whispered worry into my mind while Bloodhound Gang's most famous song blasted out of the speakers.

What if the Chief gives him the boot? Hell no, that can't happen!

Yes, Marcus often got on my nerves, especially when he tortured my ears with his questionable taste in music, but there was no way I could image having a different partner.

When I arrived after many *oopsies*, and *nobody saw that* in front of Hell's Discovery, I abruptly stamped on the brakes. Jumping out of the car in the middle of the parking area, I sprinted inside the lobby and frantically pressed for the elevator like Chief Hardin himself was after me.

Mrs. Chevers's soft humming caught my attention before her voice reached my ears, and I turned my head. "Oh, you better hurry, dear! Marcus is already *up there*." She pointed upwards with a small smile.

"I know, I know! *Good hell*, we're in trouble."

“Oh, yes, *you are.*” She continued to hum in her signature melodious manner as she went back to her reception desk and looked at me again, giving me a weird tight smile that kind of irked me, but it was also the way she spoke that gave off unsettling vibes.

Wow, what was that?

Finally, the elevator arrived with its usual *bing*, and I hurried in, abusing the button for the seventy-fourth floor, like it would make any difference as to how fast it would get me there.

Come on, come on!

I couldn't accept that Marcus would face the Chief's anger all by himself, and I hissed at the doors to finally close. After all, it had been *our* mission, and we both had contributed to its failure. Who knew I had a crazy, evil demon inside me that wants to rule Hell or that I'm part dragon? Life is fucking crazy!

Running down the corridor, I came to a halt in front of Chief Hardin's office, and my heart smashed up my throat. I'd expected loud screaming or anything that would give away one of his famous temper tantrums, but only eerie silence hung in the air.

Maybe he's in a good mood today and they're already working on a solution. Oh, please!

I took a deep breath and patted Marcus's gun at my back; he'd be happy to have it again. Releasing parts of my tension with three quick puffing exhales, I pushed down the beast-tongue-shaped door handle, hectically combing through my wild mess of a mane last second with clammy hands as I entered.

My smile broad and dazzling, I walked in with quick, long strides, ready to ease the tsunami waves of our boss's spitting anger. I quirked my brow at the closed window shutters and the waves of unfamiliar power that lingered in the hall, the sizzling hearth fire painting shadowy art on the marble floor.

Bright amber eyes bored into me with gripping intensity from where he stood, and I gave myself a not-so-convincing inner pep talk.

Allegra wants me dead—his fury can't be worse. Right. Right?

“Excuse my delay, Chief Hardin! Had to hot-wire Marcus’s car... Um, plus, traffic can be crazy around this time. I’ll explain everything, sir.”

Where’s Marcus?

“Any idea what a stunning sight you are, *Ivangeline*? We’ve been waiting for you. You have no idea how long, actually.” His honeyed voice carried through the air with a lustful taste to it, round and sticky, like those candied apples I loved so much.

The heavy double doors closed behind me with a louder than usual *bang*, and I flinched.

He seems to be in a good mood, though...

Kind of confused by the missing anger I’d expected and the thick layer of charisma that brought warm sensations to my cheeks, I almost tripped. But without faltering in my steps, I walked toward him with a cocked eyebrow and turned my head to each side as my curious eyes roamed around, searching for Marcus.

“Um... Thank you? Won’t happen again, sir. Where’s Marcus?”

Chief Hardin prowled toward me with slow strides. Oozing strength in every step, low vibrations of both uneasiness and irrational excitement prickled the roots of the few hairs on my arms and moved over the rest of my body, head to toe.

His towering frame came to a halt, and his amber gaze burned down on me. Vibrant orange hues swirled in his hooded eyes that shamelessly caressed every inch of my face.

I dismissed the whispers of warning in my gut and brought my hands behind my back, straightening up, but even then, I barely matched the height of his wide chest that heaved slow and controlled breaths.

“Oh, don’t worry, *my precious*. Ferrow’s right here.”



Sunday, 10:39 a.m., safe house

“Ready?” I exhaled with a tremor in my breath.

Ivy flashed a reassuring smile that stretched her freckle-adorned cheeks and nodded. “Ready when you are.”

“All right, let’s get this over with.”

Hell, please let Chief Hardin be in a good mood!

One blink of my red eyes, and we teleported straight into Chief Hardin’s office—or, at least I thought *we* did. Ivy should’ve been standing right next to me in front of his large granite desk. But she wasn’t.

I turned to both sides, looking for her, and while my brain still pondered over her being missing, my eyes jumped from the right side of the office with its ridiculously large oil paintings to the floor-to-ceiling windows. No sight of Ivy.

“Ferrow!” Chief Hardin’s icy voice cracked through the air like a whip that ached to strip off my bare flesh.

Abort mission, abort mission!

“Sir, Ivy should be here. I don’t know what happened. Let me just go find—”

With a snap of his fingers, he cut me off midsentence, and I crashed onto the cold stone tiles of the floor with my back first before my head followed.

One of those days, huh? Ouch!

He didn't bother to stand up from his big leather chair in front of the hearth as I remained glued to the floor like a damn carpet. Flames cracked and whistled, dangerous and threatening like himself.

"Do you know what day it is?" Resting his neck on the top part of his chair, Chief Hardin voiced his thinning impatience, with his tone perfectly matching the rough tiles beneath me—void of any comfort and empathy for my back.

"Sunday, sir," I pressed out, his invisible force pushing down further on my body.

As an alpha demon, he was able to direct his powers without touching or looking at someone, and I'd always thought it was hella cool—until now.

He clicked his tongue. "Exactly, Ferrow, it's fucking *Sunday!* I'm not known to have patience—" With his hand, he reached up and slowly closed it into a tight fist, building pressure weighing down my chest, and a series of quick, shallow breaths left me. "*Why* am I not already torturing the living hell out of that witch you and Ivangeline were hired to hunt down and bring me *yesterday?*"

Can't fucking breathe...

After taking his damn time, he leaned forward, probably annoyed by my lack of answer, as I gasped and panted for air, soundless like a fish on land.

"Ah, right." Not affected by my fight for oxygen, he casually got up and released me from his crushing force with another effortless motion of his hand.

Vibrations of his slow, heavy footsteps reached me as he made his way over.

I got up and did my best to stand somewhat upright with my chest out and breathing controlled. I wasn't giving him the satisfaction of coming off intimidated, even if I had to admit

he was straight-up scary. Especially when he wasn't in the mood for excuses, let alone failure.

Where the fuck is she?

“Now, *again*, Ferrow. Why aren't my claws up in the jugular veins of that witch yet? And don't you dare bore me with excuses. I'm not in a good mood today, and my fingers itch to torture. Speak!”

As if I wasn't already on an unhealthy stress level nine, he inched closer to me with his devilish snarl resonating in my ears.

I need more time!

Whatever the reason for Ivy's absence was, she wouldn't leave me hanging. Fact.

Telling him the whole truth without her support wasn't anything I thought of as smart, and that was my actual brain thinking and proving to be the smarter one for once.

Maybe I can fill him in on half the truth before Ivy turns up. No word about Allegra yet, though.

“Chief, the witch had noticed us before we were able to execute our plan fully, and Ivy got severely injured. However, we managed to secure the witch but then someone unexpectedly intervened. It's quite complicated, sir.”

That someone was me the first time around. But, yeah... Details.

Circling me like a beast does its prey, he prowled behind me, which sent a cold shiver down my spine. Dress shoes revealed nothing more than slow footsteps, the clicks of their heels cold and sharp. In my imagination, each click was a nail that got hammered into my coffin, one by one.

C'mon, Ivy, where are you?

“*Complicated?* Do you know what else is complicated?” Chief Hardin's voice was back to its velvety smoothness, but I

sure as hell knew better. Inside, my boss was fuming and waited for me to give him a reason to lash out.

With gathered bravery, I turned around to him, meeting him with a confident but not challenging look. My heart drummed against my rib cage, pores seeping tiny beads of anxiety sweat. I wasn't a pussy to feel scared. I was smart to feel scared when my boss sized me up like a beast does its next meal.

Easy there, Ferrow. Pick your words wisely.

“Sir, there was another person involved. He's not working for Hell's Discovery—” My windpipe got assaulted with the grip of a damn boa constrictor when he brought his clawed hand around it.

“I asked you one simple question, *Ferrow*. No, in fact, two”—he further tightened his grip, and something within me cracked—“and I expect you to answer!” Fangs baring, he inched closer to my face, and I caught a terrifying glimpse of the jagged white-gold fang crowns I'd witnessed ripping several throats out in the past years.

“Do you know what else is complicated, *Ferrow*?” He dared me with feral swirls of brightest amber in his eyes, his pupils tightening to barely noticeable slits.

“D-Delivering answers without getting k-killed?” I gargled out, each word crippled from his crushing force. Every muscle tensed to the max, I prepared for another strike of pain with my lungs howling out way-too-short breaths.

One last brutal squeeze, and he released me from his death grip instead.

Coughing and gasping for air, I leaned forward, steadying myself on one knee and rubbing my crushed throat with the other.

“You give me fucking migraines, *Ferrow*!” He pinched the bridge of his nose and glided one hand through his unnaturally white hair, combing back loose strands that dared to fall in his face.

Straightening his black suit vest, he walked back to his desk and poured himself a whisky, the glass almost overflowing, before sitting down. His eyes snapped to me, hyperfixated.

Shit. I can't wait for Ivy. I need to fill him in.

“Sir, this might sound batshit crazy but please hear me out. There was another demon, a female demon! After everything went down the drain... Sorry, I lack the words to describe it as I was in shock, but—”

Annoyed by my lengthy explanation, the fire inside the large hearth snaked out tongues of cracking flames.

“All right, got the memo!” I licked my lips and hoped for the best. “The female demon emerged from *within* Ivy!”

Again, his pupils turned into thin slits, threatening to vanish in his bright amber irises, as the fire behind him started to rage.

I paused for a moment, not sure whether I'd be dead in the next second.

“Go on.” His jaw tightened like his grip around the liquor glass when he brought it to his lips. Drops of liquor spilled over the corners of his mouth and down his throat when he narrowed his eyes at me behind the glass.

Okay, I'm still standing. Careful steps, careful steps.

“The female demon went by the name Allegra, and she was some kind of split persona of Ivy.”

Next second, the glass cracked under his vicious grip, but his facial expression remained like it was carved out of stone.

When another expected storm of anger never appeared, I continued with caution. “This demon, *Allegra*, took control over Ivy's body and killed the wanted souls. However, the witch and I were able to banish her back into Ivy's—I know this sounds crazy—split soul that includes not only succubus parts but also angel *and* dragon.”

Shards crunched in his large palm as he closed his fist around the broken liquor glass. The remains of it cut into his flesh before he tossed them sideways, wounds closing, as if nothing had happened.

“Chief, there’s more. Before that, Allegra blabbered some nonsense about a prophecy or Hell knows what story she made up. But we kicked her ass, and she’s now temporarily banished and under a strong spell that binds her powers. We need your —”

Everything from then on happened so fast. Too fucking fast.



A sea of flames covered the high marble walls of the office and then my back crashed into something hard at full force; several of my bones broke like twigs.

My head pounded, pain sliced through it, and darkness wrapped my consciousness. But it was short lived.

“Ferrow!” Crippling agony woke me when Chief Hardin’s invisible force struck me. With two of my limbs already broken, he kept on administering his rage and broke the other two, one by one.

In between, my eyes flew open from the brutal pain, and I caught glimpses of the office’s floor before I squeezed them shut again.

He’s pinned me to the fucking ceiling!

A metallic tang drenched my senses as warm wetness seeped out from the back of my head. My blood dripped down from me, sprinkling the floor seventy feet beneath me.

My healing kicked in, and the cracks in my bones grew together. I panted and hissed out wild cusses; my body had never needed to recover from so many fractures at once.

Chief Hardin stood in front of his desk, leaning back and rolling up the sleeves of his button-down shirt in a slow, precise manner. He was in the mood to punish the fuck out of me for failing his orders so badly and made sure I got the memo.

If only I'd known the true reason earlier, but the truth didn't wait long to reveal itself.

“So, *you* little meaningless piece of a regular demon met *her*?”

Nothing but an agonizing, muffled cry escaped through my clenched teeth as he used his superior force to break several bones in my arms and legs again. With another twist of his hand, his unleashed powers nearly made my body merge with the stone surface of the ceiling. The concrete cracked and crumbled, much like the hope within me.

“And after *you* had the *honor* of laying your worthless eyes on the loveliest entity that ever breathed”—one more twist of his clawed hand and another crack in my body followed—“you helped the witch and banished *her* back into the filthy split soul of Ivangeline?”

Fuck, that was my skull again!

Like before, the blood from the back of my head ran down sideways and added to the gathering puddle on the floor. Writhing on the spot, I tried to do anything to free myself but was completely useless. The amount of energy I'd invested in healing drained me, and even that was beginning to slow down.

As the flames snaked along the walls, the heat and its biting stench became smothering. Not able to move, I could only guess if it was blood or sweat that made its way down my temples.

Beastly and deadly, his growl sounded at a barely audible level, dull beneath the sounds of the crackling of the fire, but no less loud. He stared up at me, locking his cold eyes with mine. “I'll enlighten your simple mind about the *nonsense* she told you.”

Narrowing his eyes, he sent another jolt of pain through my body.

My teeth were about to break from the force I clenched my jaw with, as this sort of pain was nothing I'd ever

experienced before.

Chief Hardin moved to the row of large windows and shut out all light with a snap of his fingers. The hearth's hellish fire and the lit walls drenched the room with tangible threats; shadowy flames scurried over the floor, as if they had a mind of their own.

“More than nine hundred years ago, there was a prophecy, crafted in an ancient world that found extinction in a war centuries later. It'd been the prime realm that gave birth to *our kind*. After decades of feasting, it became a realm with breathing vessels but no souls to fill them, all of their souls devoured by the devil of gluttony and his mate.”

His kind... Feasting on souls... Devil and his mate... Same stuff Allegra told us!

My healing slower than it ever was, it took its sweet time. The fracture on the back of my head refused to close.

I need more time!

“Your kind? So, you have siblings or—” The rest of my ridiculous attempt got cut off when slicing pain shot through my tongue. Pressing it up to my gums, several cuts overflowed with blood, and I grunted, straining to divert my powers to stop the immense blood loss.

“The prophecy decreed that the devourer of his own world would aim to bring the same fate upon the two remaining realms, and history would be bound to repeat itself. Draining all fleshly vessels of their souls for him to feast on. For he's nothing less than the devil of gluttony, *always hungry, never sated*.” Chief Hardin snatched the Fireball Whisky bottle off the granite desk and chugged down the rest of it before he smashed it into the fireplace.

Allegra called her mate the one who's always hungry, never sated...

A new bottle found its way into his hands right after, and he chugged down half of it.

Turning his head sideways, he tilted his chin and looked up at me from beneath his sharp charcoal brows. Fang-baring grin wicked as madness widened his eyes. “Sounds like paradise, doesn’t it? If it hadn’t been for dragons cutting the devil of gluttony off from his superior powers when they ripped his mate’s soul out of her physical vessel to be dragged into the lower realm by five of those filthy creatures.”

Wait a second! He’s not an alpha demon but... No!

“They blew up the whole prime world, thinking they could fight the prophecy for the greater good. But I made it into the lower realm. Witty flying bastards thought they won the war when they lost their battle against *me*,” he spat with disgust etching his face, and for a swift second, pain laced his voice. “Five dragons who stole her from me! Making me *blind* to her soul’s presence. Dragon magick is old, much like it’s powerful.”

No doubt left, he’s the devil of gluttony. That also explains why his eyes are different from any other demon I’ve ever seen. Oh, shit!

I thought what I’d learned about Ivy two nights ago blew my mind, but *this*? This whole ongoing prophecy, devil, and dragon mess blew my mind with the force of a bazooka rocket launcher.

Shifting his focus to the dragon head trophies before him, he cracked his neck before he set them on fire.

“I killed each of them on my hunt for my queen, slowly and painfully. The fourth one found his death twenty-four years ago after he told me the newest soul vessel of Allegra was brought to the only realm I couldn’t access without my full powers—the human realm.”

I darted my eyes to the four dragon head trophies on the wall above the fireplace mantel. Charcoal-scaled and massive, they were, with long dagger-like canines dominating their impressive jaws, each of their heads graced with a set of spiral horns.

Ivy's twenty-four and was abandoned as a baby! One of those dragons was her father?

My eyes narrowed, I read the inscription of the fifth trophy board that was empty—*The Last Dragon*.

Adrenaline rushed through me, another mind blow right around the corner, when I recalled Ivy's nonsensical blabber from the parking lot two days ago.

"Right there, spiral and dark!"

Rhodin... Ivy was freaking out over horns she said she saw on Rhodin's head!

Hardin snapped me out of the smoking mess of my racing thoughts when he ripped the fourth dragon head off the wall.

"The fucking irony!" His fist caught fire, and he crushed the head with a powerful smash before he burned it to ashes within mere seconds. "The prey found its own way into the beast's den! He might've stolen the love of my life, but I get to consume his daughter's soul to get back what he'd taken from me. Karma, isn't it?"

Hardin walked closer to the sizzling fire, and brooding orange heat framed his silhouette. Reaching inside, tongues of flames engulfed the hand he'd crushed the dragon's head with. "*Motherfucking* irony, indeed! My mate's within my reach but couldn't be farther from me!"

He whipped around and pressed me further to the ceiling with his finger pointing up. "The prophecy was *mine* to fulfill. That was until my stupid bitch of a wife cursed me with a son!" His voice shook and matched the vibrations in the ceiling he kept on molding me to. "Since the bond between Allegra and me got cut by a higher power, it's been like we'd never formed a union. My *son* inherited my mate bond with Allegra, and he became the new fated fulfiller of the prophecy! An *ungrateful, stubborn, lazy* excuse of a devil's son."

The pressure on my chest smothered me. Thoughts became distorted snippets of reality and imagination, when Hardin's face morphed, and orange-yellow reptilian scales

appeared on his pale skin. He opened his jaw, unhinging it like a snake preparing to draw prey into its mouth. A long, meaty, reptilian forked tongue extended from the maw, flickering and tasting the air, as if he were even savoring it.

I didn't trust my sense of vision any longer. For how was it possible for him to have a tongue like that? Shutting my eyes, I puffed out quick breaths before I opened them again. Either I had suffered major brain trauma or, indeed, he was a monster the likes of which I'd never seen.

Hardin's bright amber eyes widened before they glazed over with a milky shimmer for a moment.

"Oh, guess who's just arrived? Our *special guest* is here!" he crooned, shooting me a telling look before his face morphed back to normal. "I still have plans for her, but you won't live long enough to see any of that."

"Don't fucking touch her!" I croaked out with the little air I had left and got silenced when he cracked his knuckles, razor-sharp pain spreading across my tongue once more. The tangy, metallic flavors of blood pooling in my mouth brought biting sourness up my gullet.

"Consider your current position and who the hell you're talking to, kiddo!" he boomed and released me from the ceiling, only to slam me back against it with full force. "The only reason you're still alive, Ferrow, is to tell me where the witch is that banished Allegra. I'll enjoy ripping out the information, believe me. So, do yourself a favor, and I'll make your death a quick one."

I can't heal fast enough...

A deep chuckle rattled through his body, and he mused aloud, "Torturing our sweet *Ivangeline* for the answer would be so much more rewarding, though."

Bastard! She doesn't know anything!

Several agonizing moments later, the familiar squeak of the door handles announced Ivy's arrival, and her upbeat voice resonated in the dimly lit hall right after.

I couldn't help but scream out in desperation for her to run, but Hardin's powers silenced me, dulling my outcry to nothing but mute air.

Piece of shit!

“Excuse my delay, Chief Hardin! Had to hot-wire Marcus's car... Um, plus, traffic can be crazy around this time. I'll explain everything, sir.” She beamed with her signature million-dollar smile.

To hell with my car—I'll die and never see that smile again.

“Any idea what a stunning sight you are, *Ivangeline*? We've been waiting for *you*.” He drank her appearance in like an alcoholic cheating on his twelve-step program. “You have no idea how long, actually.”

Ivy shot him a wary look with a cocked eyebrow.

“Um... Thank you? Won't happen again, sir. Where's Marcus?” She let her eyes roam the cavernous office as she walked toward a danger she had no fucking clue about.

It's all my fault! I trusted him with your secret! Please forgive me, Ivy!

This nightmare of a devil eyed her with hunger and met her halfway, stalking toward her with predatory strides.

His unnaturally tall frame came to a halt, right beneath me, giving me a torturous jolt through my body once again when he tilted his face and darted his eyes to me for a fraction of a second.

“Oh, don't worry, *my precious*. Ferrow's right here.”



My right hand shot up to my forehead, responding to the wetness that dripped onto me in a slow but steady rhythm, and I slowly wiped away whatever just landed there. Frowning, I stepped back and looked at my hand but froze at the sight of my blood-smearred fingers. My head tilted, and I snapped my eyes to the ceiling.

Shock drained my face of blood to cold white porcelain, and my mouth gaped open. “Marcus!”

Quick and panicked, I darted my eyes back to Chief Hardin, who watched me with intense curiosity. His expression bared no emotion besides dark amusement. That kind of amusement he loved to turn lethal.

“*Ivangeline*, do you remember what you told me on the day of your job audition?”

“Fuck, no, I don’t!” I exclaimed, screechy and irritated. “Sir, what the hell did you do to him?”

He’s never gone this far when he was pissed with one of us hunters! What did Marcus tell him?

Dismissing my question, he continued, circling me with smooth, slow strides that gradually closed the distance between us. “It’s hard to find good employees, remember?”

My palms instantly became clammy, a pang of foreboding sending my body on hyperalert, and my heart was about to

jump right out of my chest, assaulting my rib cage with fierce beatings.

“Please, sir, it wasn’t Marcus’s fault! *Please* let him go!” Blonde strands of my hair flew around as I spun, facing him with undisguised pleading on my face.

Killing the remaining space between us, he squished my cheeks together with rough, cold fingers and leaned down to my level as he inched closer to my face. “Stop with that pathetic behavior! *She* would never plead.”

“*She?*” I dared to ask, my voice thin like paper. The scary answer dawned upon me, with chilling whispers of horror scratching at the back of my mind.

He fanned my face with his whisky-fueled breath. “We both know who I’m talking about, right, *Ivangeline?*”

My jaw slacked in admission, and involuntary trembles made my lower lip shake with fear that had the corners of his eyes twitching in excitement.

“*Allegra.*” The name of the sleeping horror inside me crawled out of my mouth in an almost soundless whisper. I clutched my mouth with my hands, as if speaking out the entity’s name would make her reappear.

Chief Hardin released my face from his painful grip and looked down at me with a flicker of madness in his amber eyes. “You want me to let Ferrow go?”

“It wasn’t his fault, sir. Let him go and take it out on me instead,” I urged, not knowing where the blind courage came from, but I wouldn’t let Marcus pay the price.

Everything happened because of me... I’m done running from consequences.

Shoving his large hands into the pockets of his slacks, Chief Hardin made his way back to his desk and turned, meeting my eyes with amused satisfaction in his fang-baring smile.

If only I hadn't met Adrion on Thursday. If only I hadn't cheated. He wouldn't have taken Corvina with him to banish his soul to have me as his mate.

He tilted his head without breaking eye contact, and with a snap, he released Marcus from the ceiling. His body crashed down onto the hard tiles right next to me with merciless speed. Blood splattered as Marcus hit the floor, and spatters of his dark-red life essence landed on my leg and hand.

“There, I let him go. Happy now?”

The air in my lungs exited all at once with the horror in front of me. My knees hit the tiles, and I crawled over to my partner, my Blondie, turning him onto his back. With shaky hands, I searched for a pulse as I leaned over him and took in his awful state. All that blood and several fractured bones in his handsome face made him nearly unrecognizable.

A weak beat of life throbbed beneath my thumb.

He's still alive!

“Marcus, please! Say something!” a tearful whisper left me, and I placed a soft kiss on his bloody forehead with trembling lips. The cathedral-like hall echoed my loud and hollow cries when I turned my head to Chief Hardin and shouted, “Why the fuck did you do that?” But he couldn't have looked more unbothered.

Marcus's hoarse voice sounded from below me, but I couldn't decipher what he tried to say. “What? Can't understand you. Everything will turn out fine, I promise!”

“How brave you are, *Ivangeline*, offering to take his place. But, *unfortunately*, I'm not done with him yet. He still owes me something.” Chief Hardin laughed, and pure wrath bloomed beneath my skin, invoking a storm within me.

“Whatever that is, I'll give it to you instead!” I shouted, rage blinding me to the power difference between us.

“Oh, you already have, *my precious*. You brought Allegra to me, and now, only the witch that banished her is missing.

Once I have her, she will reverse this ridiculous little spell, and finally, the prophecy will unfold. The fated fulfiller will be reunited with his mate and blessed with his superior powers to rule over all the souls in both realms.”

The flames inside the hearth blazed unnaturally high, licking the sooty sides like a hungry beast does its muzzle. “He’ll commence turning human souls into sinners and indulge in their exquisite taste when he devours them at the fated feast. I’ve had to depend solely on Hell’s entries for long enough.”

Reverse the spell? Fated fulfiller? Hell’s entries? Is he... Allegra’s mate?

My hand that laid softly on Marcus’s face glided to the floor. Gripping terror kicked my insides, every fiber in me drenched in stinging, acidic fear.

My family, Adrion’s family... Billions of souls!

“I-Ivy.” Marcus’s croaking voice drew my wide eyes back to him and his crushed face. He enclosed my wrist with cold fingers. Tears ran down my cheeks, as he could barely open his cerulean blues from the brutal damage he’d suffered in the drop from the ceiling. “Run!”

His words had my stomach sinking like someone had chained an anchor around it and dropped it into the frozen brutality of the Bering Sea.

Marcus’s hands abruptly lost touch with my wrist when Hardin pointed one finger up and smashed him against the ceiling once again.

“Nuh-uh-uh! Don’t put any bad ideas into her pretty head, Ferrow. We’re not done yet, but you’ll wish we were, and you’ll beg me to put an end to your life if you don’t tell me where that damn witch is!” Shouting the last part, he pressed Marcus’s body further into the ceiling, sending cracks splintering through the cold stone.

His healing has already slowed down too much! He won’t make it much longer!

“Stop! He doesn’t know where she is! Someone helped her escape! Torturing him is useless!”

Narrowing his cold eyes at Marcus’s blood-covered body, Hardin flashed his jagged fang crowns. “Torture is never useless, *Ivangeline*. If anything, it’s *rewarding*. So, let’s try to tickle out the answer, shall we?”

“No!” I yelled.

But Hardin ignored me and continued with his torturous investigation. “Where is she?”

Nothing came over Marcus’s lips but blood and a ragged groan. Dust and fragments of the ceiling scattered on the floor around me.

“Who. Helped. Her?” Hardin didn’t back down, and his fists caught fire.

“*Please!* I told you he doesn’t—” I begged, the words tearing my throat.

Fire. A hungry inferno of flames lit up the darkness above me.

Scorching heat spread over Marcus when a massive fireball erupted from the hearth and blazed straight up to the ceiling, consuming his whole body at once.

My breathing puffing erratically through my clenched teeth, I gripped my hair and clutched at the roots. Compressed whines escaped me as shock took over, the terror sinking into my bones.

“You, a simple demon kiddo, found *her*, the most magnificent and powerful succubus, the lost mate. My mate!” Hardin roared. “And then you caged her in again!”

Bloodcurdling screams filled the room, and I acted on instinct when I pulled Marcus’s gun from my waistband, pushed the safety lever, and swung my wrist forward to shoot at Hardin.

Everything from then rushed in fragments before my eyes.

With one effortless twist of his hand, Hardin blocked my attack, and my side met the marble office wall with incredible speed that overwhelmed my senses.

I dragged myself up as fast as I could, loose brackets of stone breaking off from the wall I'd collided with. My lungs didn't expand right away, causing tears to shoot to my eyes in my body's instinctual fight for oxygen. Disorientated and dizzy, I steadied on the wall with one arm and shook my head repeatedly. Marcus's gun was not in sight, and his dagger, which I'd carried with me as well, had splintered into pieces, the tip of it laying in bits between crumbles of marble and dust.

The speed my healing lacked worried me but not as much as the lack of gut-wrenching screams.

The screams—Marcus's screams—had died down.

No, no, no!

I flung my head back to look at the ceiling with angst paralyzing every muscle in me. Merciless tongues of flames licked over Marcus's body, and the outline of his blazing silhouette burned itself into my very soul.

The hard floor caught my slumping body, both kneecaps bruised and hurting from the impact once again. Complete darkness smothered me, killing every capacity for light, even though everything around me was drenched in Hell's fire. The inferno raged with sizzles and whipcracks, their feast on Marcus's body scarring my heart and soul irreversibly.

Hardin snapped twice, and all fire went out; the whole room dipped into deathly silence and shades of the darkest black.

All sources of light were erased when Hardin had snapped his fingers, and a strong series of gags bent me forward in the middle of the hall. But I was denied the release my body cried for.

My choices killed him!

“He didn’t know where Corvina is.” My breathing became flat beside my heart racing from grief and hate. Steadying myself with both hands on the cold tiles, I released a thunderous outcry, and my wide eyes bored holes into the darkness beneath me. “You killed him for nothing!”

A single clap cut through the air, and the large hearth lit up anew. Heavy clacks of shoe heels gave away Hardin’s intention, his monstrous presence prowling closer with every step in my direction.

At this point, I had stopped caring—I didn’t care about his sadistic ways. I didn’t care if he would kill me as well. The collateral damage as the consequence of my selfish choices was done and irreversible. Marcus died because of my self-absorbed decisions, and the consequences of a life without him would haunt me for eternity.

Hardin crouched to my level and his long, cold finger lifted my chin, but I refused to look at him, rejecting his touch with a lethargic shake of my head.

“Sweet child, we’re not done yet.”



The tips of Hardin's shoes found their way into my peripheral view, and I glared up at him through swelling eyelids.

"You killed him," I roared and bolted up to smash my fists into him, but I could have tormented the wall instead; it would've been just as unmoving and unaffected.

"What an interesting thought, *Ivangeline*," he murmured with amusement in his signature smooth voice, though it failed to fluster me like it used to. The extreme contrast to his evil nature sickened me, curdling my stomach, so I punched out harder.

"You made a mistake"—pure hatred synced every fierce punch I delivered—"and you'll pay for it!"

I've been so fucking selfish... It should have been me who died by karma's deathly kiss. Adrion took Corvina because of me!

My hair flew around me in a dusty mess, loose strands stuck to my sweaty, blood-coated forehead.

Hardin yanked my hair with a clawed grip on my scalp, bending my neck backward as he stared down at me from his towering height.

Veins above his temples appeared, and the split tip of his tongue flicked outside his mouth like he explored traces of scents. "From the first moment we met, the urge to have you

has consumed me. To have you in every filthy and possessive way. Allegra's soul called out to me, even after all this time, even if I was made blind to this crucial detail for the past five years."

He would've chosen Allegra's life over mine anyway.

Bitterness etched my face, and I forced my eyes shut. Tears of regret that seemed to come from an endless source flowed over my cheeks.

But Marcus would still be alive if it hadn't been for Adrion taking Corvina. All because of me... Karma failed him!

"Come with me." Hardin let go of my hair and clutched my upper arm with his large hand. "Hate me all you want, but there is nothing you can do to change your fate. If anything, be thankful—" His mind-fuckery got cut off when rage seeped through my clenched teeth.

"Thankful? Fuck you and fuck your prophecy! You'll never rule. You'll never find out who took Corvina! Now, hate that all you want, bastard!"

My outburst granted me a vicious punch that smashed my face straight down to the merciless, hard marble floor. I forced my eyes open, dust whirling over the cracked marble beneath me with every strained breath I pushed out.

"Argh, *Ivangeline!* Now, look at your pretty face. All bruised and look at your burst cheek right here." He bent and swiped his finger over my bloody cheek before he licked it off. "That will heal soon. *Don't worry.* But see, I'm growing a little *impatient* here," he hissed and pulled me after him by my hair, dragging my aching body over the floor like the barbarian he was.

Screaming, I clawed at his brutal grip that threatened to rip my roots out. Dropping me right in front of his massive desk, he turned around and steadied one hand on the granite surface as he leaned down over me. The crackling fire behind me carved deadly sharpness onto Hardin's face; jawline

harder, charcoal-black eyebrows darkened his bright amber eyes. Every pore oozed his sadistic high.

How was I so blind?

“So, shall we try again? Maybe you can motivate Ferrow a *little* this time around? Because, if not, it’ll be your turn.”

“Your sickness knows no limits. You killed him! How the fuck do you want me to motivate him, huh?” I screamed at him, but my voice cracked the moment Marcus’s body crashed to the floor once again.

“Why should I hastily kill the one who has the most important piece of missing information? Any thoughts on that, Ferrow?”

Marcus’s loud gasp for air made my heart nearly experience a seizure.

He’s still alive!

A gush of adrenaline pumping through my system, I sprinted over to him and reached for his face with shaky fingers but pulled back. Countless blisters and cuts marred his skin. His healing couldn’t catch up to the brutal injuries he’d suffered.

He won’t make it much longer...

“Marcus, I’m so fucking sorry!” I whispered between sobs and then gave him a soft peck on his lips. No idea what came over me; maybe, I subconsciously kissed him goodbye.

Over all these years, he’d sneaked inside my heart, and he’d always have a special place in it as my closest friend, even though I never knew to what extent—until now.

Believe me, if I could, I’d trade places with you. I’m so sorry...

The moment our lips touched, a perceptible wave of coziest warmth swept through my whole body, escaping me and transferring into Marcus. Confused and shocked, I inched

away and couldn't believe my eyes when his face and body started to show signs of recovery.

What in good hell is happening?

“Ah, the kiss of salvation, inherited powers from a species that went extinct centuries ago. You keep on surprising me, *Ivangeline*,” Hardin sneered and huffed. “I’ve seen them, those creatures, born to purge the prime realm of *my kind*. Spawn of Death, who forgot their place in the universe. Enslaved by dragons, only to find themselves on the verge of extinction when the last of them got wiped from the realm. Even then, I found that silly angel trick to be highly annoying and useless. What a worthless power to heal others when you can’t fully heal yourself.” He scrunched his face in disgust while his amber eyes roamed over Marcus’s mending body.

The stinging sensation on my cheek proved him right, burst wound unable to close, but my powers had saved Marcus. A storm of thoughts rattled my mind about the endless possibilities of why I was able to invoke my angel powers without knowing what they are.

I moved closer to Marcus’s ear. “Don’t tell him about Rion. He shouldn’t die because he loves me.”

Karma shall come for me instead... Not for you nor for him.

Blinking at me through his dark-blond lashes, he gave me a weak grin. “Trust me, right now it’s fucking tempting to throw Gregori under the bus. But I’ll keep quiet. Not for him but to save you. Remember, if we make it out alive, we’re taking that trip to Italy, but you’ll have to pay. You ruined my car!”

Tears glazed my vision, and I blinked them away with a ghost of a smile lifting my lips. “Think you nearly dying tricks me into paying?”

“Maybe?” he croaked out and groaned.

“That’s enough!” Hardin boomed and taunted Marcus with his hand up, his fist opening in a flourish, revealing a

blazing fireball inside the hearth behind him. “You little incompetent piece of shit might not know where the witch is, but you know *who* helped her escape.” Lowering his head, he let strands of his snow-white hair frame his narrowed eyes. “A name. Now!”

Less than halfway healed, Marcus steadied himself on shaky legs and shielded me when he pulled me behind him with strong hands.

“And then what? You come up with a *task force* to hunt them down? Oh, *please!* Trust me, I’d love to see both of them burned to ashes, but guess what?” Marcus straightened to his full height when he snapped back with strong sarcasm and confidence I couldn’t help but admire. “No way in hell will I serve you Ivy’s soul on a silver platter. Fuck you!”

Bright orange scale patterns moved across Hardin’s face like waves as the fire behind him grew more furious, with its hellish tongues licking over the mantelpiece. His malicious snarl echoed through the hall, a composition of death and destruction only he could turn into a lullaby that promised to haunt me in my sleep.

Shock widened my eyes, and I couldn’t keep the new flood of thoughts at bay.

But I clutched Marcus’s still-bruised arm and regained confidence sparked up within me. We would come out of this alive, like we always did.

Hardin’s forehead creased, brows dipped when he balled his hand into a fist, and directed his burning rage out of the fireplace, shooting straight at us.

My instincts took charge of my body, muscles tensed, and moved my limbs, as if an unknown force had attached me to its strings. I found myself pushing past Marcus to stand in front of him, extending my arm against the flames that threatened to consume us.

What am I doing?

My palm began prickling as thin streams of water emerged out of it, joining into a wild whirl, and lastly, forming a protective wall in front of us.

The blazing fire hissed in agony when it hit the watery barrier and steamy, billowing clouds erupted in the air.

Unholy shit!

“Ivy—” When Marcus’s voice stretched with wariness and confusion, it matched the uneasiness spreading in my mind.

How did I do that? All I did was think about protecting him. Wait. My split soul.

“I have a feeling this won’t last long,” I gritted out over my shoulder and supported my extended arm with my other hand. “Teleport us! Now!”

“*Fuck*, I can’t! I’m too weak!” He grabbed my arm and dragged me back with him.

Snatching his gun from the floor as we sprinted by, he turned around midrun and shot a round of fat Magnums through the clouds of steam at the monster we’d once believed to be our ally.

A scream tore over Marcus’s lips seconds later and had us skidding to a halt. His gun’s grip around the walnut wood glowed in brightest orange, searing his hand as the metal melted down to the floor like magma.

The large cloud of steam parted around Hardin’s massive frame as he stalked through it, and the fireplace behind him raged with high flames. “You can’t be serious, kiddo! Did you try to shoot *the devil of gluttony* with your ridiculous little toy?” He mocked Marcus’s desperate attempt to buy us more time. “I’m immortal.”

Immortal...

My thoughts spiraled, and fear numbed me when I bellowed through my sore throat, “Teleport us!”

Frantically blinking, Marcus tried to get us out of there, but Hardin's chilling laughter reminded us of his superiority—a lion laughing at his nearly dead prey for attempting to scramble away.

A storm of fire lit up around us, the majority of the marble tiles and walls birthing tall, surreal flames as the room bent to Hardin's will.

We sprinted through the long hall as fast as our legs were able to take us; stretched, eerie echoes of snarls mingled with our racing footsteps. Our shadows scurried before us over the large wooden office doors; escape appeared within reach.

Next second, the towering features of Hardin blocked our way out when he teleported in front of the doors.

“Quite entertaining, *Ivangeline*,” he mused with a lazy smirk as we backed away from him with slow steps. His amber eyes blazed in the dim darkness, and he zeroed in on me. “Axelion was indeed your father. Filthy dragon and his power to control the water element. Too bad he doesn't get to see you like this, scarred and on the verge of your demise. But killing your soul to retrieve what he and his species had stolen from me will do. Karma favors me, it seems!”

My father? How has he ever seen dragons? Fuck, this is all too much!

Pale orange reptilian scale patterns appeared on his face once again when his true nature took over his skin inch by inch. Flexing his jaw, he averted his gaze and set his cold predatory eyes back onto Marcus. “I'm done playing games. Time's up!”

A sharp intake of air next to me sent another shock wave of terror through me. Gasping, Marcus fought for air as Hardin's force brought him down to his knees.

With my legs weak and shaking, I took up position in front of Marcus. His body and power weren't going to last much longer if we didn't make it out soon.

Time wasn't a tangible concept any longer. Seconds turned into stretched agony when Hardin made his way to us with heavy footsteps. One flex of his beastly jaw, the white fang crowns loosened and bared black canines beneath.

I steadied Marcus with my body and dragged him behind me as I tried to put distance between us and the deathly danger prowling in our direction. For every step we took backward, Hardin closed the distance even quicker, and at last, the chase was over when he teleported in front of us and lunged forward with his claws extended.

One glimpse with horror in my wide eyes, I barely managed to push us down to the floor and save Marcus from yet another brutal strike.

Knuckles cracked and then a snap resounded.

Air left my lungs at once when I crashed into the doors with a loud *bang*, paired with the cracking sounds of wood. I lay on the floor after being thrown through the air like a pitched baseball.

I clasped at my head and reached the seeping spot on my aching scalp, warm wetness coating my digits. Pain lanced through my head like a lightning bolt, and I pressed my eyes shut. Unlike before, with my demon powers, I had no control over my healing now.

C'mon, heal already!

Marcus's distorted scream tore through the hot, smothering air, and I snapped my eyes to the vicious brutality in front of me. Horror and agony spread through my mind like poison, killing off every foolish capacity for hope as panic gained a paralyzing, ice-cold grip on me.

Blazing yellow flames snaked around Hardin's towering frame as he held Marcus's dangling body up with a one-handed vise grip on his throat. Deadly fangs sank into the neck and shoulder joint on Marcus's left side, the gory torture cast its sickening shadow play in dark pictures on the floor.

Marcus's body dangled in the air above the sea of fire, and he kicked his feet, but none of that affected Hardin as he kept on tearing at the exposed flesh like a feeding beast.

Deep growls rattled the air after every gulp of blood he stole, half of it streaming down in thin rivers, pooling at the tips of Marcus's shoes before they dripped into the heat. With his head forced to the side, he faced me.

Gone was the cerulean blue when his eyes found my stare but instead replaced with adrenaline-infused bright red. His body's survival mode kicked in, but it only granted Hardin larger gulps.

He's focused on Marcus. Now or never!

Sprinting toward them as fast as my weakened body allowed me to, I seized the moment to blindside Hardin when I jumped up and directed my attack straight at the back of his head. Blood splashed my way when he unlatched his mouth from Marcus's mangled throat to halfway whip around, blazing amber eyes catching me when his other hand gunned for my throat with crushing force.

The brutal impact had several bones in my neck cracking like twigs, but this time, my healing kicked in faster than I thought it would.

Holding me from his body at arm's length, he hissed at me with wicked reptilian eyes, "Wait until it's your turn, *Ivangeline!*"

Licking over my cheek, his long, snake-like tongue brought fresh blood to my skin, and my lights threatened to go out as he strangled my jugular veins.

"N-No..." I ripped at his hand with fading energy and was forced to witness how Hardin tore at Marcus's flesh once more and feasted on his blood.

I had no air left to scream, and gargling sounds came out of my mouth, tears blurring my vision.

I'm so fucking sorry!

Marcus's stare found mine one last time, the sea of flames beneath him flickering in his wide eyes. The acid of the deepest agony burned fissures through my heart when his red irises glazed over with the coat of death, turning them into dull cerulean blue organs staring right at me. The fire crackling beneath us went out with the gushes of blood streaming down his body, and what remained was the scorching inferno and its embers filling the hall around us.

Hardin released his limp body to the floor where it dropped, lifeless, into the puddle of blood that had saturated the dark marble tiles.

The grip on my throat loosened, and my feet hit the wet floor. My ankle gave way, and I slumped down into the lukewarm essence that kept on leaking out of Marcus's dead body. Although my lungs stretched, the scream that made its way past my shaking lips was silent. Tearing pain ripped through my whole body, and my mouth hung open with hot streams of tears burning over my face.

With terror crippling my sanity, I crawled over to his dead body and lifted him into my lap with my arms around his torso. The brutal pain of my scarred soul found its way out when my vocal cords vibrated with pure horror in every second of my scream.

His lifeless body sagged against me, and his mangled wound kept on bleeding out gushes of crimson that ran over my chest and warmed my shock-frozen body.

"No, no, no! I'm so sorry," I cried out with devastating sobs in between and held him as tightly as I could. Bringing my lips to his, warmth flowed through me, but nothing happened. I kissed him again, pressing my lips harder against his.

"C-Come back... Please!" Shaky whispers fanned his skin, and I buried my face between his loose, wet strands and couldn't catch my breath. "We made a vow. Stay! You can't leave me!" But my newly discovered, supposedly miraculous

powers failed me when they denied my most desperate wish. He didn't come back to me.

The light of Marcus's life had vanished right next to me, same as the fire in the hall when it went out in the instant the window shutters flew open.

Clapping his hands once, Hardin moved closer to me, but I clung to Marcus's corpse even tighter, sobbing desperately into his shattered form.

"I've forgotten how bitter demon blood tastes. That shit always gives me migraines. *However*, we have a name." He delivered the news of my fated demise, like sucking out Marcus's blood for information was nothing more than a nasty task he'd checked off on his to-do list.

You didn't deserve to die such a gruesome death. You died because of me—I wish you'd never met me.

Rays of sunlight streaming in through the tall windows touched down on us and flooded the large office. Even Mother Nature took delight in torturing me as the full impact of Marcus's fatal wounds burned into my soul.

It should have been the warmth of the Italian sun covering him as he drank his Italian coffee, like it should have been the waves of the Mediterranean Sea that got to wet his blond hair as we swam under the sunset—me by his side to create those memories with.

Memories of friends, of partners in crime, of family. Memories we'd have reminisced about for decades.

None of that would ever happen—not for him, not for me, not for *us*.

"It's over, *Ivangeline*. Surrender and I promise he'll be buried appropriately." Hardin's voice, calm and cold like a frosty morning in January, made my tears stop flowing as rage flushed my body.

I looked down at Marcus and closed his dull eyes with gentle fingers. "Your promises are worthless and nothing but

lies.” Whispering against his forehead, I gave my dead friend a promise and kissed him goodbye. “We’ll kick ass together in our next life, my beloved friend. Please, forgive me for what I’m about to do, but there’s no other way.”

This is my only chance to stop this madness, or billions of souls will find death.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and lowered his limp, lifeless body.

With all the power I had left, I sprinted to the opposite marble wall, where I’d been thrown the first time, and scabbled for Marcus’s broken dagger on the dusty tiles. My white-knuckled grip around the handle brought the razor-sharp tip of the splintered blade right to my chest over my pounding heart.

He’ll be the last who died because of me!

Adrenaline-infused madness widened my eyes and had my body shaking as a snarl from the deepest corners of my being erupted and carried my wrath through the fatal atmosphere of the hall.

“I will never surrender, and you will never rule!” I screamed across the room with the high walls echoing the sounds of my rebellion and let myself fall forward, ready to welcome death in all its glorious darkness.



Sunday, 7:35 a.m., safe house

“Shooting my head off will break the banishing spell and then it’s *Adeus Ivy*. Right, *Adrion Gregori*?” Corvina purred, with wickedness lacing her accent as she spoke out a promise of Ivy’s farewell if I dared to pull the trigger my finger was latched on.

Blowing away loose strands of her light-brown hair, she let out a throaty chuckle when her bruised forehead met the muzzle of my Mossberg 500.

“Good for you because that’s one of the reasons I won’t shoot you.”

I didn’t bother to switch back the safety lever and looked down at Corvina with sharpness, ready to put my plan into action after I’d spent the last ten minutes listening to her frantic rant about what happened two nights ago.

“Just to make my stance clear, if we don’t come to an agreement, or if I sense the faintest hint of you trying to run off, then this baby right here”—I patted my shotgun, and my unshakable determination bored tunnels into her eyes—“will make your life a living hell. And, no, *I* won’t kill you, but the acid in the bullets burning through your damn body will make you beg for death.”

Rattling the handcuffs keeping her in place by the radiator, she cocked her head at me and snickered with an unholy gleam in her eyes. “What generous choices I have, huh? I have no

fucking clue what you want from me, but I think we'll have a helluva lot of fun. That is, *if* you keep me interested.”

Inspecting the bio-coded cuffs and the demon trap around Corvina's ankle, I let a smug grin find its way onto my lips. “No problem.”

Crouching to her level, I could hardly disguise my rising wrath any longer, and a deep bass growl thundered through my chest when my eyes locked with Corvina's pitch-blacks. “Here's the deal,” I gritted out through my teeth. Peeling off her skin or dragging her behind my car were one of the ways I could kill someone slowly and painfully, depending if I had a say in the contracted hit. This time, I didn't, and I loathed the fact that I needed her alive. “You'll banish Allegra from Ivy permanently and then you'll also rid me of my human side.” I paused when she huffed out a breath. Cracking my tense neck, I laid down the rest of the conditions. “In return, I'll wipe out all traces, everything that could lead to your whereabouts, and you'll be free to live your dark little life of obscenities far, far away.”

Corvina leaned forward and thought hard for a moment before she pursed her lips and hummed. “No.”

No?

Irritated, my eyebrows shot up.

Amos's wrath didn't wait long to grip me, and he took over as sepia hues flooded my vision. Next second, a beastly snarl thundered through the living room, and he gunned for her face. “Bitch, I'm sure you meant *yes!*”

Shaking herself free from his tight grip, Corvina laughed and rolled her eyes.

“Nice to meet you again, *Amos*. But you and your half-human self heard right—the answer is no. Marcus Ferrow already made a deal with me and guaranteed my safety, and I highly doubt you can guarantee me the same. It's William Hardin who wants my head, after all, and whatever plan your little half-human brain came up with won't compete with

Ferrow's plan." She hooded her eyes and tilted her chin, goddamn devilry flashing in her gaze. "I'd rather put my trust in a demon who's far more qualified than you."

I don't have time for this shit! Ferrow could turn up at any moment.

Switching back, I made use of a trait I'd relied on way too much lately: lying my way around the truth to get what I wanted, hoping she'd take the bait.

"Trusting Marcus Ferrow? Didn't think you were *that* dumb, witch," I taunted and gave her a fang-baring grin. "I was at his place two hours ago, and he tortured my ears with his usual arrogance as he told me how easily fooled you were when he agreed to your—how did he put it?—*untouchable immunity* in exchange for banishing Allegra completely. He's planning on handing you over to Hardin once the ritual is completed."

I finished my little altered truth with air quotes and waited for her reaction without faltering in my confidence to lie my way straight to my goal.

C'mon on, Corvina!

Her upper lip twitched, and traces of fear mixed with her rising fury. "That son of a bitch!"

"Yep, I second that. So, did I make my offer *interesting* enough for you? Some serious hocus-pocus for a new life, and most importantly—a life without Hardin on your tail?" I wiggled a set of electronic keys in front of her, and my tensed shoulders relaxed when her eyes narrowed at them with curiosity.

"How did they find their way into *your* possession? Are those replicas?" Corvina tried hard to sound nonchalant, but her growing interest was undeniable. Bio-coded handcuffs were the latest thing here, hyped because of their unique way of combining fingerprints, an indestructible-material core, and weakening the person wearing them. A pricey rarity. I understood her skepticism.

“I know a lot of people. A lot of people with influence. The sort of influence that can guarantee you either a new life”—I put the keys back into my coat, and her eyes snapped to mine—“or a life full of misery. And lucky for you, many of those people owe me.”

Straightening up, I stepped back and awaited her answer with a cock of my head, the Mossberg resting on my shoulder.

“What guarantee do I have that you won’t betray me as well?” The question I’d already expected found its way over her lips, which barely moved as she gritted her teeth. “Because I can guarantee you that you’ll be dead if—”

But I cut her little threat off with a deep chuckle, and she raised her eyebrows with knowing satisfaction when I pulled out a blood-filled vial.

“I’m more than willing to go all in and make it simple for you to kill me if it turns out I talked shit. Once the rituals are completed, this will be yours. My blood.”

The confidence I held in my master plan was ridiculously high, but I wasn’t playing games when it came to Ivy, and I needed to lure Corvina deeper into my web of lies.

“Oh, you do keep on surprising me. Never thought you were *that* invested in our little mutt.” She grinned with her usual madness and whistled when she let her head fall back.

“I want your blood as well,” I demanded with zero tolerance in my voice and pulled out a second vial.

“Not going to happen,” Corvina snapped, but I further implemented my intentions and painted her soon-to-be reality with sadistic amusement lifting my lips.

“Now, it’s your turn to surprise me, witch. You choose Hardin’s torture over my deal? Hear that?” I tapped my ear. “Your pathetic cries fill the air while he rips your limbs out before he feeds them to the doomed. Oh, *wait*, you’ve stopped screaming—you’re already dead!”

“I’ll simply threaten Ferrow with reversing my temporary spell if he doesn’t arrange me a safe escape first. I can lock up Allegra from wherever I want as long as I have something from Ivy in my possession. He’ll accept. He’s loyal to her.” The confidence in her voice faded; all she needed was another subtle push in the right direction.

Pouring in the necessary amount of arrogance and indifference, I kept on infecting her mind with my lies, hoping they’d spread like cancer.

“Your life—your choice. Gonna go and visit the high priestess Azona instead, then.” I left her behind me but placed my last words precisely where I needed them when I turned my head to the side. “She owes me a big fucking favor, and wasn’t she the one who taught you all about handling souls? See, *I* have options—unlike you.”

She cursed under her breath in Portuguese, and I turned my back on her.

“You got me there, *Adrion Gregori*. We have a deal.”

Meeting her madness with my own insanity, I grinned from ear to ear and pulled out the electronic keys that unlocked the handcuffs effortlessly, as they were authentic duplicates of the original keys.

Massaging her bruised wrists, she moved her trapped ankle in my direction with a telling look.

“Your blood.” I dangled the vial in front of her and offered her my knife.

Snarling out her low opinion of me, she pulled up the sleeve of her dark robe and dragged the sharp nail of her index finger over her pale skin, leaving a clean cut that provided a slow flow of blood.

I filled up the vial with her deep-burgundy blood and sealed it before I put it back into my coat, giving it a soft pat before unlocking the demon trap with tools from my small leather pouch.

Gods, my plan really worked!

One chant of hers, and the wound around her ankle healed. Eyeing me with appropriate suspicion, she extended her hand toward me. “The other vial.”

“After you complete the rituals, remember?” I kept eye contact but couldn’t refrain from huffing in amusement.

I’m a badass genius!

“What’s so funny? You know I could kill you with your blood and my *hocus-pocus* if I wanted to, right? Hours, days, or weeks after we part ways.” Corvina looked at me with a frown and crossed her arms, tapping her long curved nails on them.

“No, you won’t.” I swept my eyes over her face and winked before I made my way out of the apartment, urging her to follow me. “C’mon on! We have no time to lose. It’s an hour drive to my safe house.”

If you only knew whose blood that is.

“Wow, another safe house!” She scoffed and ranted something under her breath I didn’t care to listen to and followed me.

I closed and sealed the door from outside, just like Ferrow had, knowing the exact security codes from my multiple visits here with Ivy.

When the final code was implemented, I closed my eyes for a moment and paused.

Soon, my love. You have no idea how far I went to save you—to save us. But you’ll forgive me when you eventually find out because, by then, you’ll be my mate, and the memories of your old life with that human will only be fragments of something you’ve always hated so much.

Amos howled in excitement in the back of our shared mind, but Corvina’s annoyed voice snapped me out of my inner world that had started to keep me hostage lately.

“*Hibrido!* What are you waiting for?”

Shaking off my obsessive desires, I led her out of the apartment complex, and we drove out of the city, heading south to distant territory.

Thirty minutes and two city borders later, my fingers drummed on the steering wheel. I was growing excessively nervous and tense.

“If your ritual works—”

“It will,” Corvina snapped and shot me a glare.

I let out a long breath. “Will Ivy feel anything? Will it hurt?”

“No, most probably not. *Unfortunately.* But she might feel disorientated or dizzy for a short while.”

I hummed and kept quiet for the rest of the drive.

The dark forest and its endless rows of pine trees overshadowed the lonely road leading to a small path that would end at my cabin. After another thirty minutes of dreadful silence and maneuvering my wide car through a path so narrow it was nearly impossible to drive through, twigs scraped over the white surface of my Mercedes as we pulled up at the cabin and got out.

“I built this cabin a long time ago. You’ll be safe here in the meantime. Not even Ivy knows about this place. The path that leads here can’t be found on a map either. It has everything—” But her disapproving scoff had me halting at the top of the wooden stairs as I was about to disable the alarm system.

“How long do you expect me to stay in this dump?” Looking at the moldering timbers, she scrunched her face with utter disgust.

“Didn’t think your life looked any different before. I thought you’d feel at home,” I spat back and disabled the alarm system. “I mean, of course, if you prefer to go back—”

“Cut the shit!” Corvina pushed past me with her elbow hitting my arm and stomped inside. “Now, tell me the rest of your plan, *híbrido*.”

After glancing outside through the thick dust on the safety glass, I locked and sealed the door from the inside with the pure essence of teak, drawing rectangular symbols on it to guard us from any kind of demonic powers before I went into detail.

“The alpha of the Crystal Creek pack—only a few outsiders know them by their original name, the Ghost Pack—owes me big time, and guess what their specialty is?”

“Get to the point!” Corvina hissed.

“Erasing the traces of their auras.” I turned back with victory stretching my cheeks and walked across the room, reaching for the handle of the small cupboard where I stored candles.

“Sounds like a legit plan.” Walking up to me, she gave me a slow once-over with curiosity evident in her eyes that had switched back to their usual hazel color.

“Tell me, *Adrion Gregori*, what’s so special about Ivy that you risk your life so willingly? If Hardin finds out it was you who helped me, your head will be next on the list.” Her mellow voice gave her question almost a touch of genuine interest, but knowing Corvina as I did, the concept of love was simply alien to her.

Crouching to get the last utensils for her to start working the rituals, I stilled and closed my eyes as I dove into the shadowy depths of my forsaken longings.

“The way she carries herself, with so much joy and faith in whatever she does... Her passion for the things she truly loves is contagious. She breathes it. A hopeless romantic, even if she tries to hide that but can’t help but be one around me.”

A bittersweet smile threatened to lift my lips, but I refused to let it show. “No matter how hard I try to fake it sometimes, she sees right through me. She saw something in me no one

else has noticed and made me feel *seen* and *loved* for reasons the rest of the world was blind to.”

And once she's my mate, there won't be a thing she'll ever miss.

I didn't notice how tight my grip around the wooden handle had become until it cracked. “To others, I'm Adrion, a convenient ally. To her? I am *home*.”

“*Ew*, I didn't need to hear it *that* explicitly!” Corvina exclaimed in her heavy accent and moved the old wooden furniture to the sides of the rather small cabin.

You'll never know what it's like to be loved by someone like her...

“Here, I only have the basics, but I'm sure you'll live up to your reputation and can make it work somehow.” I handed her a tin bowl, salt, a bundle of dried herbs, and black candles with sacred water.

“Basics indeed,” she sneered under her breath but started to prepare the space by sprinkling salt around the middle of the room where she sat crisscross with the tin bowl in her lap. Inspecting the herbs, she pulled out white yarrow and let it fall into the bowl with heaps of salt. “How come you have stuff like this?”

“I've had to learn a few things to compete with other hitmen who were fortunate enough to not be cursed with the disability of being half human.” My voice hard, I jerked my chin toward the many guns hanging on the wall and ground my molars. I've always been a man of guns and knives, but by now, my limited powers felt like I was missing a foot while I competed with others in a hundred-meter dash.

Good for me that I never fully played by the rules. But when it came to Ivy, I no longer played it safe. All in!

She hummed and extended her hand toward me, snark sharp on her tongue. “Her hair. Or did you not know of this crucial ingredient?”

“Bad idea to underestimate me, witch.” I hooded my gaze and pulled out the strands of Ivy’s hair.

Dead brown eyes flashed in my mind, and my hands shot up to both sides of my head, claws itching to carve out the haunting memories, but I shook them off.

Everything I did, I did for her. For us.

Gathering the few hairs I gave her in her palm, she clicked her tongue. “Relax!”

“Cut the shit and start.”

Nervous and thrilled, I observed every move of hers and held my breath when she started to chant in wicked tongues, low and exotic, in her throat. Pouring a good amount of sacred water into the bowl, small clouds of mysterious steam formed and filled the air around her head with herbal scents.

Corvina pushed down the lighter’s serrated spark wheel and lit the candle before she brought the flickering flame above her left palm, letting drops of wax gather in it.

Her breathing became erratic, and dark waves of power started to pulsate through the floor with each chant. With another drop of wax falling into her palm, she brought it to the bottom of the bowl, and her neck cracked and fell back like someone snapped it.

Panic clouded my mind and took over my body’s movements when I hurried over to her and checked her pulse. The moment I touched her, a force had me crashing against the wall next to the door.

“*Stupido!*” she shouted, and her black eyes bled out thin streams of burgundy blood as dark-violet energy sparks crackled around her.

“D-Did it work?” Fear-laden doubts washed over me, and Amos snarled at the mental barrier.

Fuck, what if her spell isn’t as effective now? Ivy... What if Allegra comes back?

Eyeing me with fury, she stood and wrapped the leftovers of the candle in a cloth she found at the sink. “Sure, it did, damn idiot! But you became part of the ritual because you were dumb enough to touch me while I was finishing the last verses. You’re lucky you’re still alive!”

“I’m okay,” I muttered gravely and cursed myself for almost ruining it.

“There are not enough fucks for me to give about your condition, sweetie. But who’s going to arrange my escape with the pack’s leader if you’re dead, huh?” She raised her brows, and I’m sure she judged me as the dumbest man breathing.

“So, are you a hundred-percent sure it worked?” I cautiously tried to keep going with my plan that still needed another ritual, the one to banish my human soul.

“Stop bothering me with questions! Do you want your soul to be banished as well or not?” Corvina took off her dark robe, and her naked butt bounced with every step as she walked over to the sofa where she placed it down.

“I don’t see any reason for you to walk around naked, witch!” I countered with irritation, but her chilling laughter proved once more that, indeed, she thought I was a clueless fool.

“If I start your ritual with the same clothes, then it will mess up the whole thing. Just shut up already and bring me new salt and a new candle. But white, since the part I’ll be banishing is human.”

Going through the drawer again, I couldn’t find a white candle, since I only owned black ones, my heart rate speeding up.

Damn, the only times I use magick is when dealing with non-human targets. No, wait—

“I got more candles in the shed.” I rushed out of the cabin and opened the shed’s squeaky door when my phone buzzed and Ferrow’s caller ID flashed on the screen.

He must've gone to the apartment already!

A lump built in my throat, and I put the phone back in my pants as my thoughts spiraled.

Sooner or later, he would've discovered Corvina's escape, but I didn't think he would turn up that soon.

While I was still convincing myself I was doing the right thing, my phone wouldn't stop buzzing, so I answered it with several lies eager to shoot out. The lie-gun's hammer was cocked and ready to fire, but my construct of loaded *cursives* collapsed like a house of cards when Ivy's assertive voice reached my ear instead.

“Rion! It's me, Ivy! Did you take Corvina with you?”

For fuck's sake...

“Oh, hey! Corvina? Corvina who, your ex-bff, that witch? What are you talking about, love?” Her usual straight-to-the-damn point attitude had caught me off guard, and I knew the moment I stammered out this drivel that she would see right through my charade—like she always did.

“Adrion Gregori! Did you or did you not take Corvina with you? Answer me!” She pressed impatiently, and her voice bore zero tolerance for anything but the truth. So much for patting myself on the back for becoming a skilled liar. The sweat beading on my forehead and my frantically pumping lungs proved otherwise. My eyes darted through the endless maze of branches of the forest around me, trying to see a way out of this web of deceit.

There's no way back now. She needs to understand that.

“Yes, I did.” I breathed out with my eyes closed, and my claws dug into the flesh of my other hand as the unbearable tension in me nearly had me crushing my phone.

“But why? Rion, we need Corvina! You don't understand. Where are you?” Ivy's voice became high-pitched with anxious hints; it was pointless for me to explain anything.

“Love, I need you to fully trust me with this. It’s almost over. I’ll save both of us and our future. We’ll be together, I promise! Need to hang up now.”

“Wait, what? Don’t hang up! Wait!”

“No, Ivy, listen! I love you. More than you know, and soon, everything I’ve done for us will make perfect sense. Making your wrongs right again, remember?”

Disconnecting the call, I hit myself on the forehead several times. I hated myself for putting Ivy through all of this, but it was the only way, and I had to protect her by leaving her in the dark about the lives I’d taken.

I did it for us and our future...

The faint smell of blood made me aware of my injured hand, and I wiped off the evidence of my lacking self-control, with gut-squeezing fear coiling inside me.

I’m so close. Fuck, I’ve come too far to back down now.

Exhaling quick breaths, I took a white candle out of the shed and cracked my neck as I walked back to the cabin, ready to take the final steps with the help of someone I’d never thought in a million years I’d need to bring me closer to my promised Heaven.



My hand grabbed the rough steel handle of the cabin's door, and flashes of dead brown eyes haunted me all over again. I crouched down, clawing at my roots until my scalp stung. But the pair of eyes didn't let me go, not when it was me who caused them to never see the sun birth rays of light ever again.



Earlier

Rubbing off dried blood stains on my pants, I observed my surroundings as I sat inside my car on Wellmington Street. They weren't terribly old, less than an hour, in fact, but old enough to have crusted over. Driven by fear and raging emotions, I'd been sloppy when I went to Lani's store to steal the second set of keys of all bio-coded handcuffs—the cuffs Ferrow had mentioned earlier in his apartment.

No one would ever come between Ivy and me. Never again. Not as long as I had guns to kill, fists to beat, and a feral heart that only pumped for her.

What had happened in 3270 Aarbrook, though, sent hot waves of anger through my body.

Lani shouldn't have been there! It's goddamn Sunday! She and her slave left me no other choice. Fuck, there was no time

left to properly set up the scene to look like a robbery. Ivy can never find out it was me, and she won't.

Wellington Street was wiped of people, nobody who could see me, so I got out of the car, going through my plan again. Both legs weak and trembling, my lungs began to strain from the breaths I heaved in uncontrollably and rising adrenaline shooting through my system. There was no room for further mistakes.

Corvina will need something from Ivy. Most likely her hair—gotta switch realms for that... Breaking into her apartment here would take too long with the high-end security systems. Plus, I need something to convince her to trust me—will find a solution to that later.

Pulling out a small amethyst pendulum and concentrating on Ivy's apartment complex in Bearno, I gave it a push and switched into the human realm. As a half human, I had to rely on pathetic tricks like that, and it contributed to my deep-rooted aversion to all things *Homo sapiens*, including half of me.

The smell of recent rain mingled with the heavy stench of smog in the streets in Bearno, and the old concrete block in front of me assaulted my eyes.

For too long, she had to come back here and live her miserable life with that human. Never again!

Even in the human realm, I carried my SIG Sauer P320 with me, but I double-checked if it was well hidden underneath the hoodie I'd changed into—I couldn't allow myself to raise too much attention here by openly walking around with a gun.

Entering the building, I located the elevators, stepped inside the narrow car, and pressed the glowing button for the twelfth floor. I paused in front of her apartment door and listened for any kind of activity.

Ezra isn't home. Good.

Silent like the *s* at the end of *vis-à-vis*, I unlocked the door with my picklock and closed it behind me, ready to search for Ivy's hairbrush, assuming I'd find it in the bedroom.

Ezra's stench crept into my nose the further into the flat I went, and revulsion flooded my thoughts. A low growl vibrated in my chest, and I cracked my neck at the thought of all the years he got to spend with her.

Just get it fucking over with...

Walking through the narrow corridor, I looked at framed faces on the wall staring right back at me.

Why did he keep the pictures? She said they broke up!

Jealousy poisoned my temper, killing off any rational thoughts. One particular picture captured my attention, though, spiraling my mind into the darkest corners of Hell. I couldn't avert my eyes. I just stood there, glaring at the frozen image. *Goddamn*, I lost my shit, and Amos's influence washed over me bit by bit.

It was a picture from when they'd started dating, the two of them in a tight hug, smiling stupidly at the camera. I remembered that day, the day she told me they were official.

Two days earlier, I'd been going back and forth about if I should tell her my feelings and then this human waste made it official when he took her on a trip to Austria.

I had the hardest time restraining myself from trashing the place. But Amos's temper got the better of me, and I smashed the frame into pieces with one punch that brought thin cracks to the wall behind it.

Lies! She was never happy with him.

Walking into the bedroom, I opened the door with a not-so-quiet squeak, and the wall's red paint mirrored my rage when my eyes fell on someone I didn't expect to see—Ezra.

Woken by the squawk of the old hinges, he rubbed his eyes, but the moment he caught my loathing stare, he bolted up into a sitting position.

“Adrion? What the fuck are you doing here? How did you —” The flood of words came to an abrupt halt when his eyes fell on the muzzle of my loaded gun.

His scent irritated my senses to no end, and a deep growl rattled through my chest when sepia seeped into my vision.

“Hello, *Ezra*.”

Almond eyes wide in fear, he clutched the sheets as my feral copper stare overworked his slow human brain.

“What. Are. You?” He pushed himself closer to the headboard with shaky breaths.

“Ivy’s mate.” A rush of power flowed through me, and it thrilled me to hit him with the truth right in his damn face. I didn’t intend to stop there. *Our truth* deserved to be told, and I sought payback for all the years he kept her hostage in this pathetic life.

Years she wasted on you. Years she could have spent with me—happily!

“Mate?” Perplexed, he gawked at me.

I didn’t care to enlighten him on the bigger picture. Ezra was useless in my eyes, and the more I heard from him, the more furious I got.

Short on time, I did my best to keep going with my plan to grab Ivy’s brush, but seeing him in *their* bed poisoned my thinking.

“For too long, you had what was always meant to be *mine*. Ivy belongs to me, only me. Because of *you*, she grew weak and miserable. Because of *you*, her heart was blinded to the truth,” I spat and my finger on the trigger flexed with death-bringing jealousy. “But after today, she’ll start her life with someone she deserves to be with, with someone she has always wanted to be with—me!”

Ezra shot me a death glare, and for a second, he forgot about our power dynamic. “I knew you fucked that slut behind my back,” he raged.

-boom-

Blood spurted from his shot-off right earlobe.

“Don’t you dare talk about her like that again, *human!*” I snarled through gritted teeth, my fangs piercing my lower lip as they descended.

I’d called her a slut, but I didn’t mean it! But you? You goddamn mean it.

“Better give me a reason to not turn you into a sieve because I have none.”

Crying out in pain, Ezra pressed the blanket to his bleeding ear and gunned for his phone. “Fucking deranged! Imma call—”

“I don’t think so.” I shot it into pieces and aimed the gun right back at him, stepping closer to the bed. The mix of both Ivy’s and his scent further drenched my senses and stoked my rage.

Ezra’s heart was about to stop, and a flood of pure panic drenched his expression. Half crying, he begged, “We broke up last week! What do you want from me? *Please*, don’t kill me!” With trembling hands, he reached for the drawer of the nightstand and snatched his wallet. “Here. You want money? Take it!”

A couple of crumpled green notes flew in front of my feet.

“Not enough,” I seethed and walked closer with a trembling finger on the trigger.

“Here, take the engagement ring. It’s worth at least one grand!”

Engagement?

The sight of the ring only dragged my thoughts into deadlier depths.

What if we hadn’t met last Thursday at Cloud9? What if I wouldn’t have seen her for weeks? Would he would have proposed by then?

Closing the distance, I hit his face with the side of my gun's barrel and pressed his head back into the pillows, bringing the hard muzzle straight to his forehead. He screamed out sounds of resistance, ripping at my hand on the gun, but he didn't stand a chance. Not with years of disciplined training evident in my body's strength and Amos, who infused his wrath into every working muscle of mine.

"You don't get it, do you?" I roared. "She was never meant to be yours! Nothing you could ever give me would be enough to make up for the years *we* lost!"

Ezra couldn't catch his breath, fear oozing out from every pore. His stench became unbearable to my sharpened senses.

Imprinting my gun's muzzle with increasing pressure on his skin, I ordered, "Tell me how sorry you are for wasting her time and making her so fucking unhappy! Tell me!"

Crying, he exclaimed between ugly sobs, "I'm sorry! I never intended to make her unhappy! We had our ups and downs, okay? But I wanted to better myself for her, even got her a ring four days ago to win her back! *Holy shit*, five months ago, she'd been the one who'd suggested for us to get married next year—"

-boom-

Blood sprayed my face like fine rain and coated the rest of me. Amos's unleashed wrath had killed my conscience when he took over and made the final decision to end him, right there in the bed they used to share.

Lies! Goddamn lies!

Zeroing in on the cranberry-sized entry wound between Ezra's eyes, I pushed Amos back as my body began to shake and angry tears blurred my vision. Dull thuds echoed through the bedroom as I brought my fists to his face over and over again.

This honor was mine to have.

Bones cracked, and his dead brown eyes occasionally stared back at me with every turn of his face when I screamed out with each punch that followed, “Liar!”

My chest heaved after minutes of beating his face bloody with my fists.

“She’d never have married you!” Bitterness drenched my words; acidic pain pierced my heart. “She never truly loved you!”

I lost track of how long I beat his dead body, but Amos snapped me out of my rage when he delivered the solution to my incomplete plan to fool Corvina.

I’ll use his blood to fill the vial. She’ll think it’s mine when I offer it as security for our deal.

Swiftly wiping over my face with the back of my bruised hand, I steadied Ezra by grabbing his shirt, and red streams seeped out of the entry wound, mixing with the smeared mess on his face from the outburst of my brutal rage.

I took out the vial with trembling fingers and dragged Ezra’s head over the edge of the bed where his blood kept on dripping out until the bottle filled up.

A heavy metallic tang hung in the air, and I wiped off the rest of my blood-sprayed face with the blanket. I pushed back his corpse to where he lay before, got up, and just stared for a moment.

The fatal consequences of my obsession with Ivy looked straight back at me through his dull, dead wide brown eyes.

I huffed at the massacre at my feet, mumbling, “As if she would’ve married you.”

The top part of the beige blanket drenched in deep red, I threw it over Ezra’s face, covering what was left of it.

Ivy can never find out this was me, either...

Deathly silence accompanied me when I walked into the small bathroom and started washing off the evidence of my

reckless love for her.

End of flashback



Heavy curtains of rain poured over parts of the forest in the distance, and a harsh wind had the brown leaves rustling around me. Gloomy clouds tainted the sky above me, same as the necessary actions I'd had to take darkened my human soul. I couldn't cope with what had happened as well as I thought I would.

Yes, I'd loathed Ezra wholeheartedly, and his death came in handy, but his empty brown eyes now haunted me.

Ivy deserves the best, and that's not a pathetic human soul. Time to get rid of it!

Shaking off the memories, I pushed out quick breaths and walked back inside.

"You look like shit," Corvina remarked and eyed me with a sneer.

"Just get fucking started with my ritual," I commanded, my tone peevish and cranky as I passed her the white candle.

"Watch it, Adrion Gregori! You want something from me, *remember?*" she hissed but continued preparing a new circle with salt and filled up the tin bowl with dried wormwood. "Men are so unworthy. The last man who disrespected me like that is dead. Served him damn right." She clawed at the bowl, her long nails scratching over the metal.

I shot her a daring look. "You want something from me, too, remember, witch? Hardin wants your head, and if it wasn't for me, you'd be tortured to death soon, if not already."

I renewed the seal on the door and turned back to Corvina, pulling out the vial with Ezra's blood, dangling it.

"My blood is in here," I said. "Your blood is in the other. Your escape for banishing souls. We both have leverage

against each other if one party doesn't fulfill its promise. Fair enough." I narrowed my eyes at her. "So, *s'il vous plaît*, get fucking started!"

Waving me off, annoyed because she knew damn well I was her best and only chance to survive, she finished the preparations and faced me with her pitch-black eyes.

"Listen up, *híbrido*, this ritual is no joke. Once your human soul is banished, there's no way to bring it back."

Oh, there would be one—if you get killed. Lucky for you, I won't let that happen.

Once she'd escaped with the help of my old friend and pack leader, Horatio Nakai, tracking her would become nearly impossible for Hardin or his little minions.

"Whatever. That's exactly what I want!" My shoulders tensed, and I cracked my neck to release the building nervousness taking over my body.

"No, you don't get it! Amos will take over most of the time, leaving you with little to no control, since your consciousness won't be shared equally any longer." She narrowed her eyes at me. "Not that I genuinely care, just being transparent with my services."

"*How professional.*" Growing more impatient, I plucked out a few hairs and handed them to her. "I'm going all in. I'll call the alpha once you're done." Eyeing her every move, nagging doubts found their way into my mind.

Ivy can't stand Amos. What if she won't love him? No, the mate bond will make her fall in love with him regardless of how she initially feels. It'll be me, after all, the one she loves. She chose me.

Putting these nagging thoughts on the back burner, Corvina was already halfway through the ritual. Dizziness wrapped around me, and stinging pain inside my head crawled down into my chest.

Falling to one knee, my vision became distorted as the chants broke down over me in waves. My chest tightened, and scorching heat pumped through my veins with every syllable that crept over her lips.

With a final cloud of steam filling up the air around us, the planks beneath me vibrated with Corvina's power flowing into my body, and a high ringing had my eardrums on the verge of rupturing. Oxygen failed to supply my brain with the needed amount, and I was on the verge of fainting, but I clenched my teeth and endured it. I just had to.

Then everything inside me faded into silence.

“Congratulations, Adrion Gregori, you're sans your human soul.” She chuckled, and wickedness stretched over her face with burgundy blood running out of the corners of her black eyes. “Or I should rather congratulate you, right, Amos?”



Two days later, Tuesday 11 a.m., back in Hell's Capital 3018 Belliz, I paced in my rented room for the hundredth time after calling both Ivy and Fero, only to hear their voicemails.

I didn't intend to stay longer than necessary. There was nothing holding me here besides Ivy.

With two packed bags on the bed, I was ready to leave for LA—with her. Our new life awaited us after we'd stay under the radar of the lower realm, and for that, we'd need to stay in the human world for a few months. I had connections everywhere, and now was the moment to make use of them.

She wrote she wanted to meet me today. Where the fuck is she?

The yellowed walls echoed my growl back at me when the consuming urge to finally see her and witness her widened, gorgeous eyes in reaction to the word *mate*, became unbearable.

Calling her again turned out useless, since it went straight to voicemail, so I decided to walk around looking for her.

A thirteen-minute walk later, I barged inside Cloud9 and caught Xavier cleaning the bar counter.

“Have you seen Ivy?” Impatience and my heightened hormone level made this simple question sound like a threat.

“Adrion, *nice to see you*. How are you? Oh, fine? Yes, *thanks for asking*. I’m fine, too.” He deadpanned and went back to cleaning the surface. “Haven’t seen her since Saturday, a week ago.”

My blood pressure rising, my fangs poked against my lower lip, but I decided to not cause any trouble and calmed myself down—for now. “Was a long-ass weekend. Double vodka, *please!*”

Dipping his brows as he shot me a skeptical look, he poured the vodka. “No banana beer? Must’ve been a helluva weekend, huh?”

“*Oh*, you have no idea. You know what? Just give me the whole bottle.” I snatched the shot from the countertop, chugged it down, and walked off with the almost-full bottle of vodka.

Xavier’s worried gaze weighed on me as I strode through the club, but I couldn’t care less to waste my time on him.

Sitting down in our usual booth, I glanced around the room, with my knees jumping. Corvina had prepared me for the changes this ritual would cause, but I still had to accommodate them. Since the completion of the ritual, Amos’s feral side had washed over me, drowning my streaks of human morality with his recklessness. But not only that, the change settled into my bones as I became perceptibly different—more powerful, more obsessive, and, *yes*, even ruthless.

My wolf side is supposed to nourish and grow what’s already there... Maybe I’ve never been much different from Amos. The bullets stuck in both Lani and Fabrizio sure as fuck tell a story. But they? They won’t.

It wasn’t the first and neither would it be the last time I’d killed, but now, it was the first time when my morality failed to slap me with any sense of guilt. Conscience suffocated by Amos’s beastly nature.

Not bothering pouring into the glass, I brought the bottle to my lips and chugged a quarter of it at once. A low scoff

went over my lips after the last drop had sloshed down my throat, surprised how drinking so much high-percentage alcohol didn't affect me any longer. Before, only one shot had me coughing the shit out of my lungs.

Amos had always preferred the hard stuff, whether it was alcohol, drugs, or sex. I wasn't anything like that. Before...

Dialing Ivy's number again only to be sent to voicemail had my claws extending and scratching the dark wood of the table, and I was on the verge of losing my shit. My eyes fell on the small heart I'd carved next to Ivy's initials years ago, and I tormented the table with a vise grip that had the wood groaning.

She has to be my mate. There's no other way!

I was in desperate need of a remedy. The kind of remedy that had always worked before I couldn't contain my rage any longer, when acts of cruelty turned into partial blackouts after I was done killing in fight clubs.

The waves of Amos's fury struck through my whole body, and my vision turned sepia as he growled, threatening to sentence me behind the mental barrier if I'd waste one more thought on fucking Natalia.

As if I'd fuck the substitute one more time when I get to mark the love of my life.

When my name rolled off a female's tongue behind me, I clawed even harder into the table and almost trashed it into a million pieces. Amos snapped and took over.

“Adrion, you're back! Why didn't you call—”

With a vicious snarl going rampant in his throat, he cut her off. “Bad timing, Natalia, bad timing!”

Pulse thundering like it was on steroids, I didn't know how much longer he could contain his rage before hurting anyone, the one who never let me down when I was on the verge of losing my shit and needed a *fix*. My drug of choice. He could bark at Natalia for all I cared, but hurting her

wouldn't sit right with me. I'd done that myself too often in the past six years. Not that I had a say in that any longer.

Just fucking leave!

But when she placed her soft hand on his shoulder, that was the final straw. Amos whipped around with a death glare in his burning eyes and claws ready to slash through skin as he bellowed, "You meaningless slut—"

Mate.

Copper met devilish red.

His jaw received a brutal uppercut from her fist, sending him out of the booth onto the floor. Looking at Natalia from below, he swallowed a thick lump, and his heart almost stopped beating.

No!

"You? *You* are my *mate*?" she gritted out her revelation with shaky bumps in her voice, and for a second, pain spread through his heart at the harshness of each syllable that crept over her lips. Cowardly bastard receded abruptly and left me to face the devastation of our unfolding tragedy.

Lethargy snaked its grip around me, and I buried my face in my palms, shaking my head. "No, no, no. This has to be a mistake," I whispered, with regret coating my tongue.

Natalia stepped closer with a huff that couldn't have been more loud, cementing the lunacy behind my plan. My dream. My illusion. My life. Ivy and me.

"After all this time, after all these *years*. Can't believe we're mates."

"Don't call me your mate!" I shouted before she could further crush my foolish obsession with Ivy. Keeping my face buried in my hands, I rocked back and forth with darkness consuming every fiber of my being. "Corvina fucked up the ritual. I'd let her rot six feet under, but I can't. *Fuck!*"

“Ritual? What are you talking about?” Natalia pressed, and I met the anger in her eyes with my own rage when acidic pain coated the truth that found its way out over my lips.

“I banished my human soul to have a mate!” Voice thunderous, my claws extended. “The mate I’ve longed for!”

She neared me, her footsteps on the floor barely audible, much like her whisper. “A-Adrion, what have you done?”

“You’re not her!” I glared up at Natalia, the mate I never wanted.

Realization dulled her face as she put the pieces together and stepped away from me with trembling lips and hurt washing over her expression, just like the other night when I ditched her to leave with Ivy.

“*Her*. It was always about her, wasn’t it?” Shameful tears rolled over her heated cheeks as she spat back poison at me. “No matter how hard I tried to make you *see me*. I never stood a chance against *her*!”

Our mate bond wasn’t sealed, but her pain transferred in barely perceptible waves, and shy feelings of pity raked through me.

All these years, I’d treated her like an object. The woman gifted to me by fate, the woman I never wanted. She never stood a chance.

“It’ll *always* be her.” The aching truth crawled over my lips in a hoarse whisper, and I hung my head as the devastating acceptance of my fate burned me alive. But my heart’s outcry for her couldn’t be silenced, and a storm of memories flashed before my closed eyes. The love we had denied, the love that had refused to die, the love we had given and taken in those two nights couldn’t be killed by karma’s cruel humor.

No! Fuck Karma, we’re meant to be!

This wouldn’t be *our end*. It couldn’t. I needed to find Ivy, no matter what, and if it would be the last thing I’d do—we would make it work.

“I’m so sorry,” Natalia whispered.

“You don’t have to—” I mumbled, zoned out, but she cut in with slicing coldness.

“*Sorry* for becoming your remedy. *Sorry* for being there for you.” Her words brushed over me, but I kept on staring holes into the floor. “*Sorry* for thinking you could ever feel anything for me. I’m fucking *sorry* for myself, waiting for you to finally see and love *me*—not *her*!”

“*Love me...*”

Confusion knitted my brows, and I peeked up at her.

Her bright red glare burned into the depths of my soul, and an unforeseen stabbing pain blindsided me, crippling my insides entirely when she sealed my fate as rejected mate with her mellow voice cracking. “I’m out of sorrys. I, Natalia Vivaz, reject you, Adrion Gregori, as my mate.”

Her words drenched me, skin to bones, in a distorted echo that crawled through my every vein. My chest tightened as the air I breathed in choked me.

My vision flushed with sepia-tinged strobe light effects, I pressed my eyes closed and bent forward. Unable to grasp the present moment, I clutched my torso with both arms as if my insides would burst open any second.

But they didn’t, and when the crushing waves of the rejection process subsided, I cracked my eyes open again, only to find myself lying sideways on the floor. Alone, next to the table I used to seek out through the crowd of people, hoping to see *her*, hoping to hear *that* voice that never failed to wrap me in heavenly bliss or drag me into Hell’s fire of longing and madness.

I recognized Xavier’s voice through the remaining ringing in my ears. “I have no clue what just went down between you two, and it’s none of my business—”

“Damn right, it’s none.” Every word I spat out was loaded with frustration, and I gripped the roots of my hair.

He huffed and crouched next to me. “Whatever is going on in your life, shit doesn’t seem healthy. And I see a lot of good people straying down dark paths with no guidance. So, take this advice coming from a friend—leave and sort out your life.”

“It’s too late. Better fucking believe me! Ivy will never look at me the same if she finds out.”

Xavier got up and scanned my prone form before he turned to walk away. “If it’s meant to be, there’s no *too late*. You only seem to be stuck at *not right now*.”

Pondering over his words, I kept lying there until a quiet thought evolved into a promise to myself—to *us*.

I’ll find Ivy, wherever she might be. We’re meant to be, one way or the other.



My devil instincts had my muscles pumped, and I closed the distance in one powerful jump, clawing at Ivangeline’s neck to stop her fall. Blonde strands hung down like curtains dipped in red and moved in time to her writhing.

So stupid and ungrateful.

“Oh, no, no,” I crooned and basked in her raw outcry. “You’re not going anywhere, and you certainly aren’t going to die *today*, my precious.” The dagger melted into pain inside her palm. Wincing, she dropped it and looked down at her blistered, shaky hand with beautiful whimpers filling my ears.

“You *will* surrender, and I’ll tell you one more thing. You’ll be a good, compliant tool from now on, or I’ll give you sweet ephialtes when it’s *Adrion Gregori’s* throat I tear to shreds and his blood I’ll be feasting on”—my rage erased the little patience I’d left for her, and I lifted her by the throat, bringing her face close to mine—“to get the information no one seems to share willingly!”

“The hell you will!”

Warm spit met my face, and my pupils thinned out to vertical slits, hyperfixated on the pulse visibly drumming beneath the skin of her neck. Ivangeline’s resistance was remarkable but so fucking annoying. She made my blood pump in places she wouldn’t be able to handle. As if I cared.

“It’ll be *your* blood I’ll bathe in, you sick bastard.” The words grated out of her mouth as she strained and clawed at

my brutal grip.

Oppressing and squashing the uprising disrespect into nothing but pain, I smashed her against the doors once more, where she crashed down to the floor with a heavy thud.

If it weren't for Allegra's soul needing a physical vessel, I'd tear her to pieces and fuck her until her body goes cold.

“Get up!” With a swift motion of my finger, I pinned Ivangeline upright against the splintered dark wood of the door and walked up to her with slow strides as my cock twitched in excitement from the heavy scent of fear and desperation in the air.

I could do this all day!

Halting a couple of feet away from her, I took in the results of my wrath as I turned around to Ferrow's tormented corpse, pointing at him and directing my finger back at her.

“*This is your fault, Ivangeline. He died because of you, and you know it, don't you?*” I enjoyed torturing her in every way possible.

My cock kept on swelling at her broken expression, but nothing like it would swell once her eyes had turned dull and disassociated from reality. Broken apart, piece by piece, mind and soul, until there would be nothing left to cage in my beautiful Allegra. Once she'd rebirthed my queen, the love of my life.

Soon, my queen. I haven't been idle all these centuries, and not even my son will come between us. You'll be my mate once again.

Tilting my head to the side, I scanned her quivering body with my hungry eyes. The white silk fabric, drenched in a beautiful deep red, stuck to her toned body like a second skin. I eye-fucked her shamelessly until the swift note of rage found its way into my senses, prickling them.

“I, Ivangeline Lucia Givelle, reject you, William Hardin, as my mate!” She glared at me with regained determination in

her voice, but the whipping cracks of rage-invoked flames sliced through the room in response, cutting through the remaining echoes of her ridiculous little attempt.

She has the same strength in her look as my damn wife when she presses me to talk to our son.

“Oh, my precious, that hurt! But not as much as when my wife cursed me with a son,” I mocked and narrowed my eyes at her, taking in the obvious confusion that was written all over her face with growing satisfaction. “Nice try, *Ivangeline*. I’m not Allegra’s mate—not anymore.” Bitterness crept into my voice, much to my irritation, proving how much the altered reality still dominated me and my temper.

Patience will prevail, and when the time comes, she’ll be my mate again.

“W-What? But—” Delicious demoralization grew like a disease in her wide eyes, her crumbling hope perceptible like a cracking skull beneath my foot before I crushed it.

A hellish snarl vibrated in my chest. “As much as I hate to tell you, *my son* is the new fated mate of the goddess within you. The very goddess this waste of breath had banished with the help of a witch.” I jerked my chin at Ferrow’s body, which had saturated the floor in crimson. More angry veins pulsed at my temples.

Yes, indeed, my ungrateful son of a bitch.

“So, reject me all you want, but it won’t change anything.” I redirected my attention to her and was pleased to see that the hope in her dark-brown eyes had turned into terror. Her evident devastation had me dragging my long tongue over my lips, and I had to restrain myself from feasting on her as well.

I released her from my force, and she faltered in her steps forward, staggering from side to side to regain her balance.

Oh, this is just the start, precious soul vessel.

The squeak of bent metal announced an unfortunate interruption of the enticing foreplay I'd just warmed up to, so I let my claws extend with a harsh whip of my wrist and prepared to unleash my temper on whoever was dumb enough to enter without my permission.

The brass door handles depressed, and the wench I had no fucking nerves left for entered.

“Beatrix, run!” Ivangeline yelled when she turned around and clasped Beatrix's wrist to yank her out of my office, but she didn't budge.

Told you not to fucking come in here!

Her gray eyes lowered, paired with that signature warmth on her stretched lips she'd honed so disgustingly well over the last century. She blocked the way out by pushing Ivangeline gently backward.

“Dear, why should I do that? *Okay*, I understand, my *beloved husband* can be a little—how did I often describe him?—*difficult*, right?”

Difficult? For Hell's sake, her job isn't to run her nagging mouth.

Ivangeline's fear spiraled noticeably when my wife's matronly disguise vanished and was replaced by the stunning version of her true appearance; no one would've guessed her older than thirty.

The deep nasolabial folds around her mouth smoothed, same as the saggy under-eye area, and her fair complexion now glowed with the rosy undertones of youthful beauty. The extra pounds of her elderly frame melted into a curvy hourglass figure and left her dark-blue attire fitting loosely around the waist and legs.

Ivangeline lost herself in panicked whimpers when she met the deception in Beatrix's stare. “No! You were part of it from the beginning? All these years—”

Loosening her tight bun with one hand, Beatrix gave her blonde locks a good shake and pursed her pink lips, sassing at me with that familiar sarcasm I hated so much. “William, didn’t you enlighten her about your *lovely wife* yet? I mean, you already revealed your true nature, *honey pie*. What’s more to fear?”

“Oh, *pardon*, how rude of me.” I scoffed and deadpanned at my wife before I directed my words at Ivangeline, sucking in my lower lip. “But we had so much fun, now didn’t we?” My little gesture didn’t fail to grant me the reaction I’d hoped to pull off; Beatrix’s upper lip lifted as jealousy etched her face.

The daughter of the devil of envy through and through. Always coveting, never giving.

With swollen eyelids, Ivangeline turned back to me, meeting my intense gaze with shaky breaths and the delicious smell of terror that oozed from her body’s every pore.

I flicked my tongue to taste and savor the kick I got out of her crushing resignation.

The perfect blend of stale smoke and dried fruits. Hell, it’s exquisite.

How she stared at me, dull and drained, made it tangible how hard her pathetic little world crashed into shards of illusions, leaving her with a brutal reality she never thought would be hers.

A mere twitch moved my fingers, and I balled them into a tight fist.

Your pain can never match mine when your father and his filthy allies of dragons took my mate from me!

But the indulgence in both Ivangeline’s alluring terror and my wife’s fuming envy was short lived. Petty wench rammed a small syringe into the side of Ivangeline’s throat, and I clenched my jaw in rising fury with each millimeter she pressed the plunger down.

With a weak grasp, Ivangeline gripped the syringe, but the mixture of chemicals worked fast, and her legs gave way as she slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Beatrix hummed and placed the needle cap back on before she slid the empty syringe into her blazer. “You brought my husband more joy over the years than he deserves,” she chided and twirled the tips of her blonde hair.

“I wasn’t done with her, you damn envious woman!” I barked, but she slapped back with a sliver of mockery in her honeyed voice, further plaguing my patience with that familiar eye roll she’d passed down to Kaizer.

“Go and fuck one of your slaves instead, William.”

Just as disrespectful as our damn son.

“I’ve already done that last night and this morning as well, *honey pie.*” I turned around and walked back to my desk at the end of the room, aware of my fuming wife, who sure as fuck bored holes of hatred into me with her eyes. She could play it cool all she wanted. At the end of the day, she was a jealous little shit.

Beatrix followed with angry stomps, which had the walls pitching back a quick click-clack staccato.

Folding my arms and resting my chin on one finger, I waited for her at my desk with a fang-baring grin that further pushed her buttons I knew all too well.

“When will the programming start?” Her sharp voice clipped. Now, it was my turn to roll eyes.

“You’ve lost all your humor, Beatrix. Relax.”

“Don’t tell me to relax, William! I’ve waited for this day to come since Kaizer was born, and I’m not going to waste one more day. He’s the fated fulfiller, and he—”

I cut her squeaky rant off with a dismissive twist of my hand.

“*Composure*, dear. The programming will start soon, but there are inconvenient obstacles I’ve to take care of first. Allegra got caged into her split soul—*again*—she’s banished and under a spell. A damn split soul with angel *and* dragon parts.” I jerked my chin at Ivangeline and paused, quirking a brow at my wife, and continued when her stiff demeanor relaxed a tad. “The witch that banished her is on the run. She received help from an unknown third party, but I went all the way and secured this crucial piece of information *for us*, and now I have a name. *Adrion Gregori*.”

One slow flourish of my hand, I gestured to Ferrow’s bled-out corpse and shed light on the obvious problem I still had to solve. “Ivangeline’s dragon blood keeps me from devouring her soul. So, I need to hunt and kill the witch, as that would reverse the spell naturally, or—”

But my wife’s temper got the better of her, as always, when she snapped and intervened, stoked-up fury in her gray eyes, “No! Break that slut in every possible way until her damn soul cracks! We can’t afford to wait any longer! You’ll start the programming today, William!”

I triggered a wince from her when I yanked her close to me with a clawed grip around her left upper arm and snarled with absolute authority. “You might’ve forgotten where your place is, *woman*. How dare you order *me* around? I’m a devil, after all, for fuck’s sake!”

With feral flashes of my raging amber eyes reflecting in her wide ones, I released her as a deep growl thundered through the room. My brooding wrath had the wooden boards of the burnt dragon head trophies above the fireplace quivering.

Beatrix scoffed and straightened her wrinkled navy blazer, scrunching her nose in disgust when she gave me a once-over. “*No*, I haven’t forgotten where my place is, William. On the day we fled from the prime realm, you made it clear that you still needed me as your right hand, more than in the centuries before. But you made me a placeholder on top of that, and

until this day, you haven't treated me any differently outside the bedroom. I gifted you a son!"

A son I never wanted. A son that stole my mate bond.

"And I regret taking you with me," I whispered to myself, and pain gained a chokehold on me. I closed my eyes as I zoned out for a moment. Her nagging didn't affect me one bit, since I'd heard it a thousand times over the past decades. But the truth in it kicked my cold, evil insides. If it weren't for my insatiable hunger for fleshy lust, I wouldn't have a son.

One of the rare choices I came to regret in my 919 years.

Tired of her ongoing rant and having more important things that needed my attention besides her out-of-control hormones, I decided to calm the storm that flashed in her eyes when I lifted her sharp chin with a blood-coated finger.

"Beatrix, my dear, this is a day to celebrate, and we shouldn't waste more time arguing. So, *please*, your devil needs his secretary, the one who does her job like no one else, to take our precious vessel to the treatment floor. We need to wipe out her memory of this incident so she won't try to run off in the meantime."

Keeping this woman in line is so fucking tiring. Snapping her neck wouldn't be wise, though, not until she's convinced Kaizer to accept his fate.

I lowered my lips to hers and shared the leftovers of the metallic flavor on my split tongue. "And most importantly, we need to reprogram her, so in case I don't find the witch, we can break Ivangelina and release our queen."

"*Our queen*," she spat with raised eyebrows and pulled-down corners of her lips. "How dare you talk about her like that in front of *me!*" Clawing at my chest, she pushed me away and stepped backward.

Why the fuck did I tie myself to this petty woman? Oh, right—I didn't want to waste my time raising a child I'd need at some later point.

Her voice carried hatred and jealousy as it grew louder. “All I ever was to you was the perfect tool, a skilled seeker with my shifter powers, able to see the creatures of your darkest nightmares while you were made blind to them. Guess my willingness to cater to your perverted needs was simply a nice bonus.”

And so not fucking worth it.

“Don’t think I don’t know how mate bonds work, *dear husband.*” Sawing at the thin threads of my waning patience, she clicked her tongue and swept her hooded eyes over my chest with another infuriating trait she’d passed down to our son—arrogance. “I knew you’d never stop looking for *her*, even if you had me by your side! Only reason for me to stay was to birth you a son—our son—knowing he’d inherit your fated bond, and I’d finally get to live the life that does my heritage justice. Powerful, feared, extravagant. Everything you refused to give me, the daughter of the devil of envy!”

And I’d believed she did it to bind me to her. Touché. Stupid wench is smarter than I’d thought.

“A life Allegra never deserved and won’t get to live long enough before we lock her up again. Payback can be bittersweet, William. Kaizer’s loyalty belongs to me—not you and not that succubus slut!”

The tendons beneath my skin jumped, and the veins on my arms visibly pumped impatient wrath, begging to be released in a murderous fit of rage that kept on building inside me. Daring her to keep goading me, my fists caught fire, and my last warning oozed out of me with the deepest vocals of darkness.

“Careful how you talk about my queen, Beatrix!”

A low scoff ran over her thin lips. “Or what? You’ll drag me to the dungeon and beat me senseless again? You got predictable and repetitive over time. Guess what, honey, I’m *the mother* of the new fated fulfiller, the son who hates you

almost as much as I do. *You* should be *careful* who you threaten.”

My outrage had the massive granite desk crashing against the wall, and the fire inside the hearth roared with flames whipping over the edges of the sooty sides. Losing the last bits of my composure, I let a powerful surge of energy breach through my aura, and the windows and mirrors started to spider, cracks threatening to ultimately break them to pieces.

“It’s my blood, the blood of a prime devil, that runs through his veins. He owes me his loyalty!” I boomed.

“You only passed down a birthright. He doesn’t owe you anything. Gone are the days where I have to fear your madness and humiliation!”

Something inside me snapped with the way her curved eyes mocked me with evident victory.

How do humans say—the day of “until death do us part” has arrived. My plan will work out either way.

“For the first time in what feels like an eternity, I have to agree with you. You were only a tool, and now your *services* aren’t needed anymore, Beatrix. I’ll talk or torture sense into our son, but you won’t be around to mourn his death once I have no more use for him, either.” My icy voice carried the promise of death, and I was ready to snap her neck like a twig when I leaped forward and brought my large hand around her dainty throat. “Allegra will be mine again!”

“Kaizer!” Her tearing scream had me pausing and altering my plans when movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. It was the silhouette of an overly tall presence entering my office with familiar carelessness in his strides—our son.

He shouldn’t be here. He was supposed to be in LA until next month!

Retracting my death-seeking hand from her pale skin, I straightened and tried to maneuver the situation into shallower waters. “Kaizer, you arrived just in time as we have your mate

—” But Beatrix’s snort thwarted me, and I paused with deep creases on my forehead when I looked down at her.

“Oh, William. It’s pitiful how bad your acting is. You fucked up again, and you didn’t even notice that you dug your own grave this time.”

Her eyes radiated amusement and deathly excitement as she drew circles around the left side of my chest with her index finger. A pang of nervousness flared inside my mind.

“We have no use for you anymore. Sound familiar?” she purred and tapped my chest.

Pain—insufferable pain—shot through my body and forced me on all fours in front of her feet with rampant sounds of agony gushing out of my mouth.

Impossible!

“You see, since you’ve betrayed me several times, I had to find some kind of *insurance*, a backup plan, for the day you’d fully turn your back on me and our son.”

Pressing her heel to my shoulder, she pushed my pain-stricken body to the floor and proved my spiraling fear; I caught a glimpse of something I thought I’d hidden forever after cutting it out and burying it centuries ago by invoking my devil powers.

“No, William, your eyes don’t betray you, and it’s exactly what you think it is,” she sneered, her voice silky yet full of darkness. “The only way to physically harm a devil—or, in my case—the only way to keep him on a leash. Weak, suffering, powerless.”

Extending her hand without looking at Kaizer, she took control of the only thing that could possibly ignite fear within me—my physical heart.

Beatrix crouched to my level and dangled my pumping organ in front of my face, wickedness flashing in her eyes when she pulled a dagger, pointing the tip at my life insurance.

Inching to my right ear, she gave my heart another squeeze that had me screaming out vocals of pure torture. “I gave you my all, and you promised me your love in return when you tied yourself to me with your vow,” she whispered with dangerous hints of revenge in her voice.

“Beatrix, I-I’m sorry—” Agony had my mouth forming words I’d never used sincerely before, but she silenced me by grazing my heart with the sharpness of her dagger.

“Shut up!” she screamed and rammed the butt of her dagger into my face with rage. “I take your promise seriously, William, and I’m keeping your *love*, even if it’s just this stinking piece of muscle.” Chest heaving from the thrill, she left me on the floor with my crippling pain when she straightened her spine and turned to our son.

“Kaizer, I’m your father! You’ll need my help to handle your new powers,” I pressed out with squinted eyes, somehow hoping to turn the tables, but his immovable stance told me his position when I received nothing but a cold stare in return.

“You were part of my conception, nothing more and nothing less.” Kaizer’s voice was stripped of any emotion, with his pupils thinning out into tight slits. “You can fucking rot for all I care!”

With every torturous squeeze of my heart, my powers faded and my senses blurred.

“I’ve underestimated you, Beatrix. You’re smart, I give you that.” With ache and strain in my voice, I pushed myself up on weakened arms.

She huffed and shot me a look of pure hatred. “You always did. Never thought *the devil’s secretary* would outsmart you, huh? But here we are, and what surprises me the most, for the first time ever, I’m glad you’re *nearly* immortal, William. Fucking hard to kill, but if it bleeds, it can be killed. You’re no exception, yet even you think of yourself as some kind of god.”

“Applause! My heart was never supposed to be found. Guess your habit of being a lurking serpent paid off.” Even in the inferior state I was in, I couldn’t resist mocking her, even though it only granted me more pain. My bitter chuckle was cut off when her claws pierced into my heart once again, and I collapsed.

Beatrix’s chest heaved with each excitement-laden breath, malicious pleasure glowing in her gray eyes at the shift in power dynamics.

“It’s time to handle things the right way—my way,” she said with a smile and snapped her fingers twice.

The doors of my office opened once more, and my shaky laughter echoed through the room when I saw two of my hunters walking up to me with demon traps dangling from their hands.

“You can’t be serious.”

Giving Kaizer a nod, she turned around to me one last time. “Try me, William. Try me, and I’ll show you just how fucking serious I am!” Walking out on me and dangling my beating heart from a string like a pendulum in the air before her, she made her intentions clear. “Take him to the dungeon and let him rot.”

She’s never been as attractive as she is right now.

“After all this time, Beatrix, I guess you’ve finally learned a crucial lesson from me,” I taunted from the floor, intent on bruising her ego one last time. She halted at the large threshold, her speeding heart rate giving away just enough for me to tell her my farewell with the most sincere compliment I ever gave her. “You became beautifully reckless.”

My deep laughter escorted her out, and she closed the massive doors behind her with a smash that had the wood breaking.

Kaizer’s loyalty might be yours, but Allegra’s devotion is all mine.



Cold bright light dazzled me when I cracked my swollen eyes open, and I responded to the sensory irritation by turning my head to the side. Eerie sensation prickled the rest of my body like an army of ants rushing over every inch of my skin. Limbs ignored the electric impulses from my brain. Mind equally incapable of proper function.

A twitch moved my brow, and I took in the vague features of a man with a shaved head. A dim thought swirled around that his head had the perfect shape to make this look work, guessing he was somewhere in his thirties. His side profile revealed strong facial attributes of a well-defined nose and jawline that led to a prominent chin. As he turned toward me, the bright ceiling light allowed my awakening mind to appreciate his intriguing, chiseled bone structure.

Unnatural bright hues of silver mingled in the cold stare he delivered when our eyes locked.

So alluring yet intimidating. What is he?

“You may now shift back, Nicolai,” a familiar female voice ordered from somewhere behind the tall man. “Did you see the look in William’s eyes? Priceless! Pathetic, how easily fooled he was. As if I would confide in Kaizer with any of this until he’s ready to accept his fate. He’s not, but he will be. Soon.”

Disorientation still gripped me, and my hazy brain failed to grant me clear thoughts that didn’t take detours on the way

to processing, let alone categorize my current situation. Sterile room plastered with white tiles, lacking any windows, any comfort besides a small sink and a heavily tarnished mirror above it. Should've kick-started an alarmed train of thought within me, but it didn't.

The mysterious man brought his fingers to his temples, and my focus shifted from the large lion head tattoo on his fully inked throat as I caught a peek of his equally ink-covered hands. Smoke-contoured skulls with letters and numbers graced the skin up to his fingers, illegible to my drowsy eyes.

I found myself wondering what the rest of his body's canvas looked like.

The fleeting fascination got wiped from my thoughts when bones cracked, and he proceeded to undress, starting with his large hoodie, and then peeled off his face, ripping at it with wet sounds of something resistant being torn apart. Next, the skin of his neck and arms followed. The many shreds of ink-covered skin landed beneath him like soaked cloths hitting the floor.

My stomach turned, vomit crawling halfway up my gullet. Sweat beaded on my forehead and on the side of my neck. Instincts finally started going rampant, but I still couldn't figure out why everything inside me screamed the name of fear, the name of torture. As if I knew who was to be revealed when the last shred of skin would tear.

Almost done peeling off his face, a shorter and much leaner person I recognized appeared beneath it—Nicolai Harber, the gardener of Hell's Discovery. Former soul hunter and torture fanatic.

Shocked, traumatized, and spiraling in fear from what I had witnessed, I gasped in panic, and the numbness in my limbs faded. Slowly, realization hit me that I was somewhere I shouldn't be.

What the fuck just happened? Where am I?

“Oh, look who’s done with their little nap,” the woman behind him remarked, not caring to hide the pang of scorn as she craned her neck around him, showcasing a pleased lift in the expression on her youthful face—Beatrix.

Marcus!

The crushing memories of what had happened flooded my mind like a tsunami, and terror doubled the strength my muscles worked with when I bolted up. But I didn’t. I couldn’t even lift my arm farther than a couple of inches, as I was left with minimal room for movement. Panic spiraled when I looked down my body and discovered leather restraints on both my wrists and ankles.

The tight belt around my abdomen further fixing me to a hard mattress didn’t help much either to gain the upper hand on my panic-laden thoughts. Then Hardin’s intentions to rid my soul for Allegra crawled up from the depths of my memory, and I lost myself to the panic that now controlled my body.

Pushing out frantic breaths through my nose like a bull, I boxed, clawed, and kicked around me as I tried to free myself, but it was to no avail.

Marcus died because of me, and Rion will be next!

The fatal reality hit me full force, so I screamed and yelled at the top of my lungs. Devastation had me pulling and ripping at the restraints like a lunatic. Hot tears ran down the sides of my face, and my breaths came so fast I began hyperventilating. My lungs were soon aflame with the lack of oxygen. Completely in a state of shock and eyes darting wildly, I pressed my head back against the hard mattress, fighting to regain control in a situation that couldn’t have been more insane and shocking.

A hand found its way onto my forehead, and my nostrils flared when Beatrix’s face appeared close to mine. Enraged, I thrashed my head from side to side, trying to get rid of her wrath-inducing touch.

“My husband was a bit—drastic with Marcus. I really liked him. He was so lovable and funny!” she admitted, but I cut in with a hateful hiss.

“Fucking cunt! Don’t you dare put his name in your mouth!”

“Angels shouldn’t talk like that, sweetie. Or maybe your filthy dragon part just can’t help it?” Digging her nails into my skin, she inched closer. “I’ll grill that bratty attitude with your split soul, right out of your damn head!”

Letting go, she turned and gave Nicolai a nod.

They’ll be after Rion as well... can’t let that happen!

The gardener’s thin fingers found the switch on a machine that looked like it was destined to fall apart any second. I hadn’t noticed the many bundles of wires leading to my bed in my foggy-turned-panicked state. The machine hummed in low vibrations, waiting, eager to execute its master’s orders.

Nicolai shifted his focus over to me, his eerie-colored eyes curving, and had me on edge all over again when the sadistic amusement in his toothy grin crawled under my skin. His eyes were a frozen arctic blue, the contrast between his eyeballs and the unnaturally light irises almost nonexistent. The evil energy within him hissed a silent promise, a promise he would keep, to make me scream like all the souls he’d tortured before. One last sinister stretch of his lips, he directed his attention back to the many buttons and dials on the control board.

Sounds of pure horror got choked in my throat before they could hit the air when the first shock of electricity streamed through my entire body, muscles twitching and contracting at hyperspeed.

The dive into the pool of electric eels ended as fast as it had started, and my body went slack against the mattress.

Beatrix’s dulled voice carried to me through a veil of disassociation, and the gradually decreasing hum of the machine promised a break from the torture. At first, my traumatized body welcomed the unfamiliar numbness soaring

through my mind, but reality hit back harder when it washed over me again.

Surreal agony followed, spreading from head to toe. The skin on my temples stung, and the distant smell of burnt flesh crept into my nose. What must've been seconds became imprinted as the most physically painful moments of my life. My healing began to kick in, slow but perceptible, the burning sting on my temples subsiding.

“The inherited dragon powers won't save you forever, Ivangeline,” Beatrix said, but her words only met my dulled state of mind.

Giving in to the weight of my head, I let it fall to the side, my hooded eyes roaming over the sink and mirror across the small room, zoned out and somewhat still paralyzed. But movement snared my attention and motivated a few brain cells to start working again. Irregular lines made their way over and across the tarnished, dusty surface of the mirror, slow and deliberate, with little left and right shakes. When a wild mess of lines graced the mirror's surface, my pulse began to speed up from the shock that rattled my overworked brain after I recognized the writing.

What the... Backward writing. Blon... No! Impossible!

Clicking heels on tiles and navy suit pants blocking my view had my gaze snapping up before I could finish watching whatever happened over there. Beatrix stepped closer to me with zero empathy in those gray eyes that had once held such cozy, familiar warmth whenever they'd greeted me.

“Guess we started a bit counterproductively,” she purred with a wicked smile stretching her lips. “*This*”—she snapped her fingers, and an electric current pulsed through me before it abruptly stopped—“will be my answer to things that don't live up to my expectations!”

The burning sensation gripped me anew, and I squeezed my eyes shut while sucking in harsh breaths.

“So, shall we try again?” she chirped in her signature sweet voice.

I need more time!

“Hardin isn’t Allegra’s mate b-b-but your son is.” I croaked out, my throat raw from screaming. “Why should you want him to fulfill such a gruesome prophecy that will cause all souls to find death?”

“That useless piece-of-shit father and husband will rot in the dungeon for eternity. I made sure of that,” she hissed back with a tremor in her upper lip and began to trace a slice across my face, starting at the chin and over my cheek with one razor-sharp fingernail. “Unlike him, I take my role as a parent very seriously, and I want my son to thrive. He’ll do justice to my heritage as the daughter of the devil of envy, and I’ll get to live the life I was denied. Powerful, feared, extravagant.”

Dungeon? Daughter of a devil? What the fuck did I miss?

Gunning for my face with a gruff grip of her other hand, her sharp nails dug into my flesh, and the pressure on my skin dared to give way.

“There remains only one little problem. Allegra’s caged in your split soul, and I have no clue where to find the witch that put her there.” Suddenly, a naughty grin cleaved her face from ear to ear with sickening delight. “No, wait! I *do* have a small clue, and this clue goes by the name of *Adrion Gregori!*”

“Y-You won’t find him,” I ground out between my teeth and wild yanks on the leather restrains.

Beatrix got up and fixed me with hooded eyes before she approached Nicolai with a nod. “Who knows? But, unlike William, I prefer plan B, anyway. I’ll just torture your soul until Allegra breaks through. Your physical vessel can be ruined for all I care, as long as it will still function. This was just the warm-up, dear. Feel free to make yourself at home here.”

Her melodious hum accompanied her on her way out, and I caught a glimpse of the corridor outside this room before the

door fell shut. Red-numbered door on the opposite side. A spark lit up within me.

The archive! We're three floors beneath the lobby! I'd been here once with Beatrix... She used a specific key in the elevator to get us down here. I'll have to get it, one way or another!

But the screeching of a drawer reminded me that I was far from getting out of here any time soon. It was Nicolai who had opened it, and right now, he stared me down with widening eyes.

“You heard my mistress.” Growing excitement tugged on his lips, and I caught a glimpse of a straight razor he pulled out of the drawer. “Flowers blossom with the right care and love. Plants even sprout anew if you prune them precisely. Let’s see what happens with *you*.”

Fumbling with his phone, he placed it on the machine and faced me.

The rhythmical, electronic guitar notes of Creedence Clearwater’s “Bad Moon Rising” carried through the air, the quick, upbeat vibe of the song clashing with the monstrous insanity etching Nicolai’s face.

The bright, sterile room echoed his slow footsteps when he approached me, flipping and spinning the razor with swift wrist motions. I pushed out labored breaths. Pure terror wrapped my racing thoughts, and when he arrived at my bed, I clawed into the mattress, scared shitless from the uncertainty of his next moves.

“It’s more fun with music, now, isn’t it?”

“You don’t have to do this, Nicolai!” Fear had me appealing to his common sense, which I highly doubted existed in the first place.

“I know, but I yearn to be a good slave and make my mistress happy.” His eyes curved as he cocked his head. “She’ll be happy to see I’m getting creative when it comes to

contributing to her success, even after ten years of serving her.”

With trembling lips and my jaw clenching, every muscle in me tensed, and I prepared for the pain he’d bring upon me.

Inching the sharp blade close to my face, he let his glazed look wander to my lips. Blue streaks reached from the outer rims to the dilated pupils like cracks in an ice floe. “You’re beautiful, Ivy.”

“Fuck you!” I raged and exhaled quick, forceful breaths through my nose.

Pulling at my roots with a tight grip, he brought the cutting edge to my hairline on the side of my head and started to shave.

Perplexed and irritated, I huffed. “Might not get you the title *torturer of the year*, but Beatrix will surely appreciate your little effort and write *he was trying* in your CV!”

Pausing, he increased the pressure, and a hot sting reminded me of the power dynamic as the blade cut into my scalp. “You remind me of something—*Bougainvillea*.”

“You’re one sick bastard!” I shouted and squeezed my eyes shut when he proceeded to shave off my hair with sloppy strokes, granting my scalp more stinging agony as he cut into it multiple times.

Not paying much attention to my pain, he continued musing. “The sweet smell of those vine plants is alluring, their striking beauty captivating, but their thorns”—he brought the flat razor tip to the delicate skin of my lips, and panic widened my eyes as my breathing hitched—“are what makes me despise them so much!”

Not daring to move, I held my breath and darted my eyes between his, dreading the moment he would cut me.

But he huffed and pulled away, kick-starting my fear all over again when he explained his intentions with zeal in his

sinister voice. “What do electrocuted people have in common?”

Shaved heads...

Seeing the horror-infused realization written all over me, he pointed his finger at the straight razor. “Exactly, *little flower.*”

Slow tears flowed sideways down my face. “Beatrix wouldn’t allow you to kill me. She needs me alive!”

Cutting edge back at my head, he hummed along to the song. “Oh, make no mistake. I’ll keep you alive, but electroshock therapy will make things easier for Allegra.” He averted his focus from my hair and gazed into my teary eyes, right into my soul. “Trust me, you’ll wish you were dead. What my mistress has in mind is much worse, if you’re asking my humble opinion.”

He let the razor graze my scalp, and I writhed and thrashed, but the stinging pain worsened. Bringing the blood-smeared blade to his tongue, he basked in the horror evident in every tense of my muscles and tasted the results of his torture with delight. “The lineup is quite long, you know?”

“Lineup?”

“Of clients who’ll pay to torture you.” He scratched along my jaw with the tip of the blade, down to my *décolleté*, and sliced through the blood-soaked silk fabric across my upper body, tearing my blouse apart with eager hands. “Take it as a compliment. The list of folks who would pay to fuck an angel-dragon hybrid is even longer.” Groping my breasts, his lips parted. “Lucky for me, I won’t need to pay a single dime.”

I spat in his face. “Suck dick and choke on it!”

He gripped my face and wiped off my spit with his other hand before he reached down between my legs. “Friends don’t talk like that, *little flower.*”

“Friends?” I snorted, pressing into his grip. “Ripping off your hand will be the first thing I’ll do once I get the chance.”

“This hand.” He gave my pussy through the jeans a squeeze, tapping my core. “Will stitch you together after hours of serving every demon, every creature walking this realm, however they please. Reconsider threatening your only friend here.”

His words echoed in my mind. My heart and sanity, in terrifying free fall, dragged the last bits of hope with them. Dry was my sassy trap, unable to bring out anything in return.

I forced my eyes past him and tried my best to focus on anything else, anything that could pull me out of this horror, even if only for a short while. Countless white tiles laughed back at me for thinking of trying to escape, and just as I was about to close my eyes, my drifting gaze turned into a stare.

The dusty mirror birthed lines. More than before. Clearer than before.

Wait. No... That can't be! I held your dead body in my arms!

Breaths speeding up, I bounced over those seven backward-written letters.

Blondie...

An eerie sensation drenched me, skin to bones, with icy needles prickling my sixth sense. A strong, omnipresent aura caused the chill inside me to turn into a rush of hope when wisps of cologne and coffee beans triggered my synapses to work at high speed.

Lights flickered, and the tarnished mirror birthed yet another sign—the outline of a large hand.

He's still here with me! He never left...

The ceiling light kept flickering and then darkness consumed the cell all at once before the tube cast its steady, cold light again.

Two seconds, I couldn't decide whether the urge to break out in manic laughter or to cry out in relief was stronger. Two seconds had passed, and I was ripped from racking my head

over those two options, when Nicolai entered the next round of the sick, perverted game he liked to call his job.

“Your personnel file states you’re a soul hunter,” he concluded with lavish rhetoric as he flourished his hand holding the razor. I tensed at the darkness of his chuckle. Flashing red melted the Arctic in his ice-blue irises, revealing the true monster residing within him. “How ironic! I used to earn my living that way, too.”

I was so wrong... Karma didn't skip me—it's right the fuck here!

My intake of breath sharp as I gripped the chains attached to my restraints, and I turned my head away and forced my eyes shut; silent tears of resistance squeezed their way out of me.

Rion will search for me when I don't show up next week! Fuck! If he runs into Beatrix, he'll be dead, just like Marcus... I've got to make it out of here before he comes to Hell's Discovery—and I will, no matter what!

Nicolai brought the razor back to my tormented scalp and lowered his lips to my ear, twisting my insides with a hoarse promise of destruction.

“You might *hunt* souls, Ivy. But I? I *shatter* souls.”

Thank You

That was it—the first book in the *Between Devils and Dragons* trilogy, and let me end it like I'd started it by thanking you for your precious time!

Reader reviews hold unbelievable weight in this big publishing ocean I'm swimming in and by submitting one for my book, you help me as indie author immensely. Reviews not only help other readers find their next reads but also us authors to gain more visibility and reach. Many other potential readers and I would be very happy to read your review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#).

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If you would like to reach out to me, don't hesitate. I'd love to hear from you, knowing we both lived through the same story at some point kind of gives us something to connect over, right?

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Read the full 17-page bonus chapter in the beautifully illustrated paperback and indulge in more Blondie/Ivy moments that will surely surprise you and give you exclusive insider knowledge.

The day of The Elevator Incident/Ivy's job audition

Mondays are like bad first dates—I hated both with a passion but pushed through anyway because souls and pussies weren't going to hunt themselves.

My granny raised no quitter.

If anything, she'd taught me to eat well and take care of myself. *Damn right*, that pussy beneath those tight-fitting leather hot pants I'd gawked at earlier in the elevator could be considered a healthy, full-course menu; my pussy radar never fails me! And the spitfire it belonged to could surely take good care of me in more than ten filthy ways. That smackable ass screamed *Reverse Cowgirl*.

Said blonde spitfire kept lasering holes—no, craters—into me with those bewildered, exotic dark-brown eyes after I'd announced that this audition was being held to find me a new partner. By her Asian-infused looks and short height, it was hard to guess her age, but I erred on somewhere between seventeen and twenty.

Ugh, she looks even cuter when she's mad. Look at the glowing ears! Who the fuck is she? Rudolph's sister?

Her name was Ivangeline. That much I'd discovered when my boss had tongue-tasted her name in his usual sex-fueled manner. *Man*, he really needed to chill with the creep vibes! But he was the one and only Chief Hardin, and while I had a thousand stupid ideas under my belt, I wasn't so dumb as to suggest to him to tone it down with the ladies. Especially this particular one he kept on eye-fucking.

Rule number one: Hardin was never to be corrected.

Chief Hardin peeled his hungry stare from Ivangeline and now spoke to all candidates. "As you have heard, you will audition to become Ferrow's partner. He's been a loyal and sufficient soul hunter for Hell's Discovery for the past"—he stopped midsentence to throw me a quick but annoyed glance, struggling to remember how long I'd been dragging souls for him—"several years."

Seven years, Chief, seven... Tsk, I even made it to the top of our billboard last year and chose a favor over a bonus check. Still got no idea what I will ask for this year, though. A sabbatical year to explore Italy or a free lifelong membership to Cloud9's exclusive gentlemen's club? Tough choice!

The other candidates, three guys and three girls, started to exchange whispers at his words. The ladies openly ogled me with growing interest.

But not Ivangeline. She stood there, stiff like a statue, from the moment I'd announced what she was auditioning for—the position of my partner. Her mouth agape, her eyebrows went from merging with her hairline down to almost joined as the irritation running rampant in her pretty little head was plastered all over her face.

She has no idea this could be her lucky day. Baby, one does not easily become Marcus fucking Ferrow's partner!

She-Blade had made one hell of a first impression on me. Not that I'd ever tell her that. Giving her another reason to feel superior after she'd pulled that stunt in the elevator was

nothing I planned on doing. Hey, I might not have had super high standards, but I was a proud man, after all!

I gave my balls a not-so-discreet brief massage—my coconuts still kinda hurt from her vise grip. Pushing the envelope was my middle name. Certainly, She-Blade had no sense of humor. All tough and serious when she'd threatened me with her long-ass, curved sword. Women like her were dangerous, making scrambled eggs with your jewels for breakfast if you crossed them. But that made her even more of a fuckable challenge if you happened to be the YOLO kinda man. *Yeah*, right up my alley!

“Surprise!” I flashed her a broad smile, followed by a quick wink, which only triggered a huff and a *fuck-off* look from her before I focused on the other six candidates.

What do we have here? All the guys are built like they could have my back when shit hits the fan. Toothpick Guy could threaten my lay count, though. Man could pass as Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson’s double. Feminist Guy? Hell nah! He didn’t get my joke about how hot women with “big round brains” are. Dude told me I’d never get a good woman with that kind of mindset. Bitch, please! Ugh... The third? Nope. Hard pass with those skinny jeans. Ten bucks says the dude’s a hipster.

I inspected the three girls, all of them pretty, with toned biceps and seriousness written on their faces. Well, except Miss Apache was hard to overlook. That black-haired lady was a solid ten with those long legs that made her stand out from the other two without much effort. She rocked some short haircut that reached down to her chin, and her eyes sparkled in poisonous green. That Apache honey was a sight to see and brought my cock to life.

Focus, Ferrow, focus! Looks alone won’t make a good partner!

She caught me staring and wet her lower lip.

Yup, definitely down to fuck. Dammit, no! I'm looking for a new partner, not pussy!

“Good luck!” I gave the candidates an acknowledging nod and made my way to one of the big Chesterfield chairs in front of my boss’s granite desk.

Ivangeline still hadn’t bothered to join the group.

Calling me a rude fuck! Tsk! Who’s the one standing next to that desk like she’s someone special?

Chief Hardin was in an unusually good mood today, and I cocked my brow at him when he poured me a glass of his precious Fireball Whisky. This was the first time in my seven years working for him that he offered me more than sharp-voiced orders. He’d treated me like any other of his employees, even though I’d only been fifteen years old when Hardin accepted me as a soul hunter.

A generously filled crystal glass appeared in front of me; I didn’t hesitate to accept Chief Hardin’s offer and let the comfy leather chair welcome my butt.

“Cheers and good luck to you as well, *Ivangeline!*” I mocked the blonde little spitfire behind me when I let her name roll over my tongue the same way my boss had and brought the crystal glass to my lower lip as I turned my head to face her.

“Blondie, luck is for posers,” she remarked with a short but sharp jerk of her chin, clearly challenging me. “Resonates with you, doesn’t it?”

A deep chuckle rumbled my throat, and I draped my arm behind the backrest as I shifted in the chair. “Did a blonde chick just call me *Blondie?*”

“Guess what? My hair isn’t the only thing brighter than yours.” She stuck out her tongue while she tapped her temple and wiggled her dark brows in hyperspeed. Shit looked ridiculous.

Barely taller than a hobbit, but chick is snarky. Maybe she's related to Bilbo? Man, I like her!

“The audition starts now!” Chief Hardin announced before I could deliver my next clapback. “I got no time to waste on anything but excellence. Last one standing. But no kills, or I’ll bill you the facility dumping costs! Now, fight!”

Immediately, the group of candidates, who stood at a good distance from us, rushed toward their stacked weapons on the small table in front of the six rows of benches in the middle of the room that added to the blasphemous cathedral vibes of my boss’s massive office.

“No weapons!” His snap cut through the air, the high walls echoing every ounce of bite he effortlessly delivered with two words. “My interior costs more than what each of you is worth. Each of you! Blood on the tiles and oil paintings might add to the flair but not bullet holes.” A snarl teamed up with his narrowed glare that was set on Toothpick Guy, who already had his hands on his two heavy guns. “Get your hands bloody and dirty, for the job of a soul hunter will have you stained with the beauty of delicious sinners on the regular!”

Finally, some action! C’mon, Team Sausage!

But to my disappointment, Team Sausage didn’t happen. They not only wasted excessive amounts of energy but also wasted their opportunity to double their chances of winning. All hell broke loose within the four walls of Chief Hardin’s large hall he called his office. Pained groans followed meaty thuds, and the ladies weren’t much cleverer. Miss Apache held one of the girls in a tight headlock, while the other had jumped on her back to claw at her jaw. Shit got messy. All of them lost their minds when they thought pushing a hard solo trip would grant them victory.

Not all, though.

Ivangeline had remained on the exact same spot I’d seen her when I’d barged into the office before and now perched her smackable ass on the granite surface of my boss’s desk.

Chief Hardin ripped his hawklike stare from the candidates when he noticed Ivangeline's careless move, but he didn't object. She had clearly sparked some kind of interest in him, same as she did with me.

Swinging her short legs back and forth, she watched the group fight in front of us like she was watching a damn circus show. Curious, eager, and definitely amused.

Chick got nerve! Is she that arrogant, or could it be that there's more behind that sassy attitude?

"Scared?" I sipped once again on the exquisite whisky and bent my neck to look at her over my shoulder.

"Analyzing." She puffed out a short breath through her nose as she kept her eyes trained on the ongoing fight, which got more brutal and fast-paced by the second.

The hall filled up with the thrilling sounds of harsh skin-on-skin impact, and here and there, someone spat on the floor.

"Boring." A naughty grin tugged on my lips, and I let a good amount of the spicy amber slosh down my throat.

"Brighter, remember?" Ivangeline tapped her temple again.

Please get the paperback and treat yourself to beautiful interior designs and—of course—the rest of the bonus chapter. Banter, cheeky moments, and a swoon-worthy Blondie scene guaranteed.

To My A-Team

Guys, guys, guys... We did it! This was a team effort, and without you, this book wouldn't be what it is: a wild, rebellious love child that was crafted and honed with a passion for creating worlds made out of words.

Dear Mr. Hot As Hell Daddy,

being married to a crazy author lady surely wasn't the easiest at times and neither was supporting me like you did, next to being the most loving father to our precious boys and earning a living for our family. You gave me room to fully live my passion and never grew tired of listening to my weirdest ideas. I got on your nerves, especially when you woke at night from my phone's light when I couldn't help but write or edit, but you never complained. You were man enough to even read the filthy spicy parts, knowing you were reading glimpses of my past life, and always supported me with feedback, ideas, and genuine happiness for my progress. You made me promise you a fishing boat once I'd be successful... There's no day you don't make me laugh in whatever kind of way, and I would've never gotten this far without your love, kindness, patience, and support. You are my number one fan. I'll buy you a boat before I find and buy back Guido... If he's still alive. *Fuck*, he better be! That's how much I love you!

To the man who had my hands shaking before he even uttered the first word when he picked me up for our first date in the most beautiful car I've ever seen—thank you! I love you!

Dear Marcelle,

you were part of my journey almost from the start. Heck, you even did a manuscript critique for me long before you offered that as professional service! Thanks to you, chapters "Russian Red," "Snow in Hell," "Ingalls and Bennett," and "Death On The Rise" exist. You pushed me to show more badassery, more depth between Ivy, Adrion, and Marcus and made me sprinkle

hope on the cliffhanger, whereas I wanted to drench it in darkness and hopelessness. Thank you for inspiring me!

Dear Jeanine,

you kick-started one of the most important changes in this book—the title and genre. Not only did you do an amazing job as a developmental editor, but you made me aware that the previous title and my idea of the book’s genre wouldn’t make the cut. That’s when I sat with my hubs and a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and brainstormed away to what came out as what we all know by now. Thank you so much for your thoughtful and amazing work.

Dear Aime,

I can’t thank the universe enough for sending you! It was an honor to get to work with not only such a talented but kindhearted soul like you. Maybe it’s because we share the same sun/venus/rising sign #astrogeeks, but you understood my style and author voice from the get-go.

I was hella nervous when I sent off the script to you—*okay*, nervous and hyped—because I couldn’t wait to hear what you thought. Sure, I looked forward to your edits like I look forward to my next family vacay in Italy or my next car drive sans kids with Metallica or Iron Maiden blasting... But, most of all, I *needed* to hear your thoughts on the mess I made Ivy and Co. go through haha! You were so invested in my story and believed in me from the start! That means the world to me.

Because of you, I wrote the bonus chapter, and I couldn’t picture this book without it. Team Aquarius!

Thank you, once again, for gifting me a wonderful chance and enriching my life with your knowledge as line editor and mentor.

Dear Sabine,

you read the words “thank you” a dozen times in our emails, and I won’t stop letting you know how grateful I am for your hard work and patience. Damn, who sends their cover designer a five pages documentation on how it should look? The

revision requests that followed were far from short, too. But you took my visions and turned them into a work of art, not only for me but for all the readers out there who love a unique cover design as much as I do. Thank you!

Dear Samantha,

you were the last to work on my manuscript, and I'm so glad to have found you! The universe might have thrown last-minute wrenches my way, but it sent you to save me. Thanks to you, *BDD* got what it deserved—a polished finish. You worked so many hours, until early morning, and had my back when I felt like bawling my eyes out. One can only come so far. Without you, I would've never been able to publish this confidently. You are the G.O.A.T. among fairy godmothers! Plus, working on the interior design was so much fun, and it balanced the stress that came with editing. Thank you so much for making my visions a reality and, of course, your hard work! You did an outstanding job—thank you! I can't wait to work with you on the rest of the trilogy.

Dear Hugor and Hugorky,

thank you for bringing my characters to life. I'll never forget the first time I received a draft of Ivy and smiled until my cheeks hurt. You guys have mad skills! I couldn't have found better artists to bring out the delicious badassery that flows through each of the characters' veins. I know my descriptions were super long, but you did a dope-ass job! You guys rock!

Dear ARC Crew and Street Team, aka The Cool Kids,

thank you to each and everyone of you who helped me enter the scene with a bang! As I write this, the ARC rollout is still two weeks away, but I know, without a doubt, that I'll be forever thankful. You guys pushed my confidence and made me work even harder! Thanks for having my back.

Other Work by IVLG

Between Devils and Dragons Trilogy

Between Devils and Dragons – Hellish Cries

Book 2

2024/2025 TBD

Between Devils and Dragons – Hellish Ties

Book 3

TBD