

A REVERSE HAREM SERIES

FOUR PSYCHOS

THE
DARK SIDE
BOOK I

KRISTY CUNNING



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Four Psychos
The Dark Side
(Book I)

by

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Thank you to the ones taking this fun little leap with me. <3

Chapter 1

“Oh! Oh yes,” the woman with the perfect *purr* says around an exaggerated moan.

Really, can't he tell the girl is quite dramatic with the theatrics?

But Three doesn't care.

Three is a rather selfish fellow, I've noticed. He lets One, Two, and Four do most of the heavy lifting, then he steps in and does something very scandalous it seems, if her breathy pants and moans could be trusted.

It's not really scandalous. He's just fucking her nice and hard, chasing his own release, and she's fake moaning like she's working for a Grammy.

It's times like these I'd really like to be able to eat popcorn. It seems like the perfect time to have a bowl. The damn stuff slips right through my non-tangible hand.

Frustrating. As. Hell.

Anyway, Three gets his and moves aside for Two to step in. Two likes the nipples. He always works the nipples, and that's when her moans will get raspy, more genuine. Two is who I'd like to meet first. Three would have to sit out if I ever get out of this half-here, half-not phase and touch some skin.

I'd make him watch, while Two took my nipples just like he's doing to her now. As he was doing that, I'd make One and Four change their routine from going first to going second.

As soon as Two finished my nipples, I'd have One and Four do that delightful little blindfold game they do. I wouldn't know which one had his face between my thighs, humming whatever tune he wanted. I wouldn't know which one was behind me and running his hands all over my body.

Those two like to share a lot.

Three would usually step in and steal all this glorious thunder so he could deliver some anticlimactic lightning. *Pew. Pew.*

Not with me. He'd have his very impressive-looking ass on the sidelines, stroking himself for my viewing pleasure, as Two stepped back in and took me slow, then hard, then slow...

Oh yes. This is exactly what I've been doing for the last few years since I became whatever this thing I am.

We went dancing tonight. The four of them often go to clubs to find a willing participant interested in a scandalous night of debauchery with four sexy men.

I love dancing. I always pretend like it's me they're surrounding as I stand in the middle with the woman of their choice, while they close ranks, boxing her in on the dance floor and making her feel like the sexiest, most desirable woman in the world.

It's breathtakingly erotic and empowering. Obviously it's just make-believe on my part, since they're not aware of me.

I'm neither here nor there. Alive nor dead.

I don't even quite know who I am. I know what century I'm in, and who the American president is. I assume that means I'm American, especially given the fact English is the only language I know.

But me? I have no clue *who* I am. I know all that other seemingly less important information, but not where I live, or what I do, or even my name.

And I have no clue who these four are, other than the fact they're not entirely human, though they look like the finest specimens in the world.

Well, I've learned their names; I just had them numbered first, so I considered them pet names after that.

Jude—Four—is the dark and tempting type. Not generally brooding, but certainly foreboding. A sinister twinkle sometimes flickers in his eyes. Dark

hair, dark eyes, beautifully tan skin, and a body that would set my panties on fire if I could wear physical panties.

Yeah, he's the one that drives you to the fine edge of pain, and that's when those moans become disbelieving, as though they can't possibly fathom anything is quite so good.

Four is definitely my favorite.

Two is a close second though, because he takes his time. His blond hair is a stark contrast to Four's inky black hair. The two side by side have no visible similarities, besides the fact they're carved like sexy stones.

Three is probably the most attractive—blindingly gorgeous, to be honest. But it's wasted because he's so selfish with his body, only touching but never letting anyone else touch.

His hair is almost as dark as Four's, but it's just a little lighter, always messier. But it's messy in a deliberate way that only spikes his appeal. And again...that body.

One, who is built just as freakishly perfect, has very light hair, but not quite blond. It also looks the softest, and I really want to get my fingers tangled in it one day.

Now, I know what you're thinking. I'm terrible for watching these people in their dirtiest, darkest, most intimate of times, when they're utterly clueless of my presence.

Yeah. I felt that way for the first little while.

During that time, I would flicker in and out. It seemed the longer I had my eyes on them, the longer I was able to stay in this place. Their world.

But when I would seal them out during these intimate times to give them their privacy whilst I called that nasty skank a string of names, I'd slowly start to fade.

What sort of self-respecting woman would allow four men touch her like

that? How sickeningly filthy would one have to be to partake in such acts of debauchery?

After years of *no one* being able to see you, hear you, smell you, feel you, or even sense you? You stop giving a damn about what other people might think of you, and you face the truth of who you really are and what your moral compass truly is.

Because your opinion becomes the only one that exists. No one else even knows *you* exist.

Turns out, I'm a shameless hussy.

I watched, I coveted, I even did some really questionable things to try and actually possess whatever woman they brought home with them. I'm apparently not the possessing type of ghost.

Or poltergeist? Am I a poltergeist?

If so, I'm terrible at it. I can't even rattle the electricity or change the channel on the television. Power surges are obviously way out of my league.

Anyway, I've since perfected my own personal fantasy. Living. Watching. Learning. I know all four of them as if they're my real life family.

Well, not family. My people. There.

But they have no clue I even exist.

When I'm watching them watch TV—*okay, that sounds creepier than it is*—I like watching their different reactions to the same thing. Four always likes the gory stuff. He actually grins when blood is slashed.

Three lights up like a horny teenager when anything to do with sex is on. Ironic, since he's the worst one at the act.

Two likes to watch with heat in his eyes instead of eager, unlike Three. He also likes to watch his friends—definitely not brothers, learned that—have fun with the girl of their combined choice.

One is the type to react differently the most to things. Sometimes he's into

gore. Sometimes the sex.

Jude is my favorite, of course. He's the one I would have first. I'd never settle for just one. I'm past all points of dignity or respectable difference. I'm not a lady anymore—possibly never was, since I can't remember.

I've endured this for over five years.

I've only caught glimpses of the other world they frequent. They're certainly not from America, it seems. No. They live in a rather elaborate place where the colors are brighter, the smells are stronger, and the people are really dark and scary.

Somehow it feels familiar too. Though I'm not sure how.

Hard to explain, since I'm a ghost with no knowledge of my past or other worldly things. I know a lot of useless things.

But I've found myself knowing things that I didn't realize were other-worldly until it was pointed out.

So whatever it is they are, I'm something similar. Though that is all real sketchy. I'm almost certain they're immortals of some kind, but that's all I've gathered. And not vampires; I'm certain of that.

Since I decided to keep eyes on them through all the dirty and the private, my presence has grown stronger. I'm able to stay all the time now. I can even let them out of my sight and not start fading away.

It's still hard to focus in that *other* place, though. And now they're about to start being there a lot more, since they've entered the trials. What trials? Hell if I know.

Since whatever I am doesn't sleep, I even have to watch them sleep.

Ten minutes is the longest I can keep my eyes off them. The second I feel the warning tingle, I'm practically on someone's lap, pretending he's soothing me as the strength slowly returns.

They're very comforting, though they don't know it.

Needless to say, it's been a long five and a half years.

There are a lot of others in this *other* place they visit. Others who also are possibly immortals. Those people are rather vicious. It's like a forbidden retreat. Ethereal, but full of debauchery and violence.

Seductive as it may be, it's still a very haunting place, and I have no idea why my boys insist on hanging around those terrible people.

Whatever celestial beings they are, they get tested every other year to see if they get some kind of spot on these trials. My boys have finally been selected.

I assume. I'm not really sure.

Things fade to a fuzz around the edges, and I mostly can't hear all the words and stuff when I'm there. So...an academy? Or a training facility? Who knows?

Anyway, they finally finish off the tonight's mushy girl with several more mind-blowing orgasms. She's practically worshiping them now, telling them she thinks she's finally in love.

I hate her. I hate all of them. And yes, I realize it's because of petty jealousy.

They send her on her way the second pizza arrives. I join them at the table, sitting in my seat on the end, pretending I'm eating a piece as well as Two speaks around a mouthful.

"It's my turn to choose the girl next. We haven't had a redhead in a while," he tells them.

I frown, looking at my very dark hair. "Nothing at all wrong with brunettes," I tell him, though he obviously doesn't hear me.

"Blondes are more fun," One states with a dark grin.

"Only because you haven't met *me* yet," I point out. "I'll be game for basically anything with the four of you the second I'm whole."

“Brunettes are the most tolerable,” Three says after draining a beer.

“Tolerable is not a very sexy way of describing the women with my hair color, Three” I say on an exasperated sigh. “Do you have to be so rude?”

“Brunettes are the ones who fake it the least,” Four says with a smirk, winking over at Three, who pointedly ignores him.

“Yeah, but the blondes I pick out are wildcats. Very little effort in convincing them to try a little bit of anything,” One goes on.

“Redheads are wildcats too. And they’re fucking vicious in the best way,” Two says as he grabs another piece of pizza. “Not to mention they make you work for it.”

“I find it rather annoying how you four classify women based on their hair color,” I primly state, pretending as though my opinion carries weight, when they can’t even see or hear me.

“How about we just get some rainbow-haired girls and call it a tie?” Three draws.

“I’ll change all of your minds on brunettes. Or I’ll just figure out a way to finally possess these women and be a little bit of everything,” I tell them absently, studying the types of pizza they ordered tonight.

I’ll try some of that pepperoni when I can.

The conversation shifts when they start discussing these trials I’m so curious about, so I perk up.

“Manella has something planned if he’s finally putting us in the trials. We should be ready for anything,” One states conversationally, as though they’re picking up a discussion they paused to sex up that very lucky girl.

“He’s an idiot if he does let us in. Whatever he doesn’t want us knowing will be easier for us to find,” Three says flippantly.

That has me inching forward.

“We’ve played our part. We’ve done our time. They’re running out of

reasons as to why we can't be there. They had to do this because everyone else was starting to have the same questions we were. We've excelled at everything, won time after time, yet never get into the trials. They can't cover it up if they make it so obvious," Two—I love his voice the most—says as he pours himself a drink.

Make what obvious? It would be awesome if they'd talk about this stuff here more than there.

"Not to mention the sheer volume of souls we've reaped. Our count is much higher than anyone else's," Four drawls.

Oh, I forgot to mention, they're sort of bad guys. I've been calling them reapers.

I mean, they send the bad souls to the bad place, so obviously they're bad guys if they're working for soul collectors or something.

I still want all four. Told you; you learn a lot about your moral compass when yours is the only opinion that matters. Turns out, I'm an unapologetic psychopath.

Not really. I'd just like to know why exactly they got into this line of work. As I said, they're immortal, which is totally mind-blowing until it's just sort of regular, everyday stuff.

I'm not even wowed by it anymore, but I can't be impressed by a mere mortal now either. Not after being around them so much.

I wonder if I was ever impressed by a mere mortal. I really hope I'm not a virgin—can't even touch myself in this state of being to do an inspection.

I don't want any awkwardness when I finally figure out how to touch them.

And I will figure it out.

They've fortunately had some women over who love their old collection of nineties movies. The ones they have to woo usually get to pick a movie

while they get over their nerves of being with four indecently sexy men at once. Some of the ones who've chosen *Ghost*? I love those women. They're totally awesome, even if I still hate them when they get to touch my men.

I've learned so much from that movie though.

It's not done me any good yet, but I hope to get stronger and stronger until I can possess every girl who walks through that door. Don't judge. You'd do it too.

Four's phone rings, and he answers it, cutting off the conversation. "Yeah. We're on the way," he says before hanging up.

"Job?" Two asks.

"Big one. Meet me at the cemetery," Four tells them, and I try to reach him in time to grab on.

Did I mention they can do this freaky disappearing thing? I learned if I'm close enough, it drags me with whichever one is doing it.

I miss Four, so settle for hopping a ride with One, managing to catch him before it's too late.

Just as we land in the cemetery, I see a horde of black souls escaping, trying to go back out into the world.

Four slices through the air with his silver bo staff, and it glows as it sucks in soul after soul.

The others use their own respective weapons, and I watch them as they storm the city, chasing all the deserters. I have no idea where they come from, or why so many come at once.

But every time I'm here in this cemetery, I feel something familiar about it.

It almost feels like home.

And I don't even know my name to check for it on headstones.

Chapter 2

As always, I walk from room to room, telling them all good night. They can't hear it, but I do things like that. It makes me feel a little more normal.

Whatever that is.

I always sit down with them when they eat, and I listen to them talk about random things and soul breaks—like the one tonight—that they have to clean up. I often offer my two cents on the conversation, but they talk over me, of course.

But my favorite part of the day is going room to room, making sure everyone is in bed, and telling them good night before I watch over them. Sounds less creepy than just *watching them*.

A creak so light I almost miss it manages to snag my attention away from Two—the one I've decided to watch tonight.

He sleeps so fitfully that I usually choose him just so I can feel like I'm consoling him, even though I can't do a thing.

Another barely-there creak has me on my feet and moving down the hall as Two wrestles with the sheets.

Rounding the bottom of the stairs, I expect to find Three, since he has trouble sleeping. He has full days where he crashes to make up for all the times he's been awake.

But it's not him.

I catch a glint of silver as a man passes right through me, the dark house hiding his face before I can even process what's going on. I turn to see him moving silently up the stairs, sans the occasional light creak that won't wake them.

They sleep heavier than that, even if they don't all sleep soundly.

The silver glistens again, and my heart catches in my throat when I realize it's a sword. I have no idea if a sword will kill them, but I sure as hell can't watch them die.

This house is enormous, and yet he's on the exact wing where they all four sleep? He knows his way around.

I pass right through him again, and he doesn't even blink. Walking backwards up the stairs to stay in front of him, I study his face, trying to see who he is. I have to find a way to stop him, and his identity won't help, but at least I'll know who to curse.

"Stop!" I shout.

He keeps walking, not seeing me or hearing me.

"Wake up!" I shout to the guys as I turn around. The man passes through me again, and my non-existent heart beats that much faster as it thumps in my ears, echoing the sound of a ticking clock.

Panic seizes me when I make an attempt to block him again, and almost scream when he barely cracks open the door to One's room.

He peers inside, and I rush through him and the door, looking around for anything I can find. I strain, needing something to happen, feeling completely useless and terrified as that door starts opening wider, the shred of hallway light spilling into the room more with each inch.

One doesn't even stir, even as I pass through him over and over, running through the bed and his body.

"Wake up! Wake up!"

Nothing.

Just as the man snakes into the room with the silence of a seasoned killer, he raises the sword.

I react without thinking, screaming as I launch myself at the man, putting every single bit of my fear into that one action as desperation chokes me.

His eyes widen seconds before the first thing I remember ever feeling comes in the form of blunt, mind-searing pain. Then just as quickly as it appeared, it's gone, as the man and I topple to the ground. I pass right through him, barely managing to stop myself from passing through the floor.

It took me a long time to get the hang of not falling through floors.

Then I dart to my feet, gasping. I just knocked him down! Holy shit! I did that!

The man is staring at me in wide-eyed horror, fear and recognition in the depths, until his throat suddenly starts bubbling blood from a slice I never saw.

One is standing over him, sword in hand, as the man's head starts to slide away.

I jerk my eyes away, not keen on watching a head fall off, even though I've seen them do this before. I've never actually been so close.

It figures the one person who I was able to touch, and the one person who has ever been able to see me, would be a monster who wanted my boys dead.

What a waste.

There's suddenly a sword swiping through me, and I look down, seeing it swipe thrice more before I peer up in confusion at One.

He stares at me like he's confused, and swipes again with that sword. I notice it's his weapon, the one he reaps souls with.

"What the hell?" he asks on a breath.

It's then I realize it's me he's trying to hack to bits, and my eyes widen as my heart thumps a little harder.

"You can see me?" I ask on a choked breath, cautious hope and tempered excitement bubbling inside me.

"What the fuck are you?" he snaps, swiping at me again.

I fling myself at him, ready to finally touch one of them! And, much to

my dismay, pass right through him. I should have known that since that sword was doing the exact same thing to my middle, but I got a little excited. Understandably so.

But it's the weird tingle I feel when I pass through him that has everything on me stir to attention.

I whirl around as his eyes glimmer with flakes of gold for a second, and his sword falls to his side as he cants his head.

"What are you?" he asks a little calmer, sounding more curious and less hostile.

"I don't know," I tell him, still entranced by the fact he can see me. Hear me. "You can really see me?" I ask, stepping closer.

He lets his gaze dip, and he bites down on his bottom lip. "I can definitely see you."

So much relief floods me at once that it's a little dizzying. After spending five years being completely invisible, I can finally be seen? I can talk to them?

Tears cloud my vision. How am I crying?

I never knew ghosts could faint.

At least not until it all goes black.

Chapter 3

“They sent one of their own assassins. This guy’s sword? It’s made from much better fire-metal than our weapons. It disappeared from sight the second he lost it. I barely saw it in time to know it was even here at all,” is the first thing I hear as I slowly come out of whatever just happened.

I didn’t fade. Otherwise, I’d hear that terrible buzzing sound for days as I came back. This is more of a drowsy feeling.

“And she saved you?” Three asks.

I can feel the weight of his gaze, and I swear, if I could have an orgasm, just the weight of someone’s gaze would give it to me.

I wonder if I’ve ever had an orgasm. I know it’s got to be amazing. I’ve heard the real moans, and I always feel warm when those moans are teasing me. It’s not a physical feeling like the one I had when I hit that man, but it’s a —

I hit that man! How did I forget?!

“Yeah. But she’s not a soul. It’s like she’s a being with a soul, but not alive or dead. I’ve never seen anything like it,” One tells them.

Oh, they’re talking about me. Because they see me. Because this is really happening.

On the verge of doing another ghostly faint, I open my eyes, and they all go stiff as they stare down at me.

“That’s fucking creepy,” Two says, eyebrows up as he studies me with wary eyes.

I guess, since I don’t breathe and I’m just staring at them with wide eyes in my transparent-ish form, I am creepy. But they can still see me, even if I am still mostly invisible.

I've always been able to see my reflection, though no one else could, but staring at the wall mirror across from me lets me see more of me. Less transparent than before, but still nowhere close to whole.

Somehow, I just leveled up. And now I need to figure out how to level up again.

"Someone needs to try and die again, so I can see if I can get whole," I tell the four guys who are staring at me as though I've sprouted a tail.

I check, since I feel like anything is possible these days. Nope. No tail.

"What the actual fuck?" Four asks.

"Those weren't the first words I ever planned to say to you, but seriously; someone try to die so I can save you and see if that helps me level up," I state again.

"Who the hell are you? What are you? And why the hell are you here?" One asks me, crossing his arms over his impressive, still bare chest.

They're all bare chested. That's not even distracting me, because I'm too excited about finally making progress.

"No clue who I am. I've been here for five years, and I just sort of appeared here. I have no memory of anything before that. I have no idea why I'm here, other than the fact I need the four of you to exist."

They give me a blank stare, all of them bristling. It's hard to see things from their point of view. I know so much about them. I've been watching them for years.

It feels like it's just finally my turn to talk and that they should be as comfortable and close to me as I am to them. When in reality, this is the first time they're meeting me.

One looks at Four, and Four shakes his head. "I've heard of every type of creature out there, and she's nothing like I've heard of. Her soul is intact and fused to this...state she's in."

“*She* can finally be seen, and would not like to be referred to as though she’s not in the room,” I say, holding a finger up as a small smile curves my lips.

Three’s eyes dip down my body, and he takes an unconscious step closer.

“Is she an illusion? Because if they wish to distract us, this would be the way to do it,” Three states absently.

“I can assure you that I am a real person. I’m not sure why I’m like this, or if I’m even alive or dead, but I’m definitely real. Until One was almost killed, you’ve never seen me. But I freaked out and had to save him, and somehow I leveled up to this. And I’ve been watching you for five years, but only recently have I been able to stay here for longer and longer periods of time. These past couple of years, I’ve been able to stay all the time.”

“One?” One asks me with an arched eyebrow, at the same time Two dubiously inquires, “All the time?”

“*All* the time,” I say with a little too much sassy enthusiasm. “Now I need you to try and die, so I can level up again. Then you four can do all those really fun looking things to me, though I think Three needs to sit out and just take notes for the first few times.”

Four’s lips curve in a grin. Three looks like he’s not happy, though I did just state he was out of the game, but he doesn’t know he’s Three. Two looks like he’s trying to figure me out. And One looks like he wants to lock me in a lab so they can study me from a safer distance.

“She’s certainly been watching us all the time,” Four says with a smirk and a dark glint in his eyes.

“I’m not sure a pretty apparition should win you over so easily,” One tells him. “Not when someone clearly wants us dead. They’re upping their game.”

“She saved your life,” Four reasonably points out.

“Yes, I did. And it was epic. Except for the part when it hurt to crash into

that guy. You have no idea how good it feels to finally be heard and seen. So who's going to put their life at risk so I can see if it'll propel me into the flesh state?" I ask, looking between them. "If we have a vote, I think it should be Three. He's quite lazy and lets you three do all the work in the bedroom, while he just has his fun and moves along. He'd bring less to this relationship."

Two's lips curve in a reluctant smile this time, as Four's grin spreads wider. One's lips barely twitch, and Three tilts his head.

"Why are you calling us by numbers? If you've been watching us, why haven't you learned our names?" Three asks.

"And who's three?" Four asks with a knowing grin.

"Jude is Four," I tell *Jude*.

I suppose it is rude to continue calling them by my pet names now that they can hear me. They don't realize it's a term of endearment.

I think I've sprang enough on them today.

I stand and walk over to Four, lifting my hand. The other three spread out, their weapons clutched in their hands, and I slip my fingers over Four's chest, not allowing them to pass through.

There's no actual feel or true physical contact, and I can press against him but he'll feel no pressure, since I can't move objects. I can only rest my fingers on the surface, just as I learned to rest my feet above ground.

Before then, I had to find iron to be around to keep me anchored enough to do it.

A little hum of electricity seems to pass between us, though it's so watered down I can't be sure. He tilts his head, his dark grin still fixed to his face.

"Four's my favorite," I decide to say honestly.

He releases a rumble of a laugh, as Two snorts derisively.

My eyes flick to Two, savoring this moment. I'm finally introducing myself to them. And I'm actually introducing who they are to me, since I know them and don't know myself.

It's sort of pathetically sweet.

"And Two is Ezekiel," I go on, eyeing him as I move closer.

His eyes run over my face, flicking to my lips once, as that steady hum of electricity changes just a little, and buzzes differently with him.

This is new. I like it.

"He loves nipples," I add. "He's the one who gets to touch me first, because I've spent a few years perfecting my fantasy. You're doing everything out of order," I go on.

Two finally smirks, his eyes lightening just a little as a hint of gold glistens in his eyes the way they did One's earlier.

On a whim, I step through him. He sucks in a surprised breath, and I feel some weird tingles this time, something much stronger than the hum.

That's interesting. I felt the same thing when I passed through One.

"Your eyes just did something," Three tells him, moving closer and frowning over at me. "What'd you do to him?"

"Do it to me," Four, my fearless boy, says to me, moving closer.

I pass through him, and I shudder at how good those tingles feel. It's like they're growing stronger.

"His eyes did it too," Three states seriously.

Four looks serious now too when he turns to face me, which is not a look I see on him too often.

Three stalks toward me, his little Rafael things in his hands. Sai, I think they're actually called. And it's one of those words where that's the plural and singular way to say it. I think.

Not the important part. The important part is that he's wanting to use one

of those sai to gut me. I can tell by that familiar murderous look in his eyes.

I've seen him use those weapons many times.

"Stop!" Four snaps, stepping in front of me before Three can pointlessly use those weapons.

"What's she doing to you? You're taking her side over mine?" Three growls.

"It's not like that," Four explains, as Two steps closer.

"I can't sense an ounce of threat on her," Two tells them. "She passed right through me, and you know I can feel a threat if I'm in close contact with it."

"That's why that guy went for One first, most likely. He sleeps the soundest, and you sleep like you're at war," I tell him.

"You watch us sleep?" Three asks incredulously.

"Don't look so creeped out when you share a woman between the four of you."

Four turns around to face me, his lips twitching again. "How often do you watch our *activities*?"

"Always, lately. The more I have eyes on you, the stronger I feel. I can stay longer that way. I fade away when I'm cut off from you for too long," I explain.

"Fade away?" Two asks. "Where do you go?"

Sighing, I take a seat, though the bed doesn't even dip or anything—again, I can't put pressure on anything. "Into nothingness," I answer. "There's nothing until I return. Then there's you. Since I can't do anything but talk to you, and I've wanted to do that for a while, I'll tell you all about it."

Chapter 4

“I’ve told you all this countless times, but this is obviously the first time you’ve heard me,” I decide to inform them at the end of my long monologue.

After recapping my walk down memory lane, telling them how I watched them, when I watched them, how I enjoyed it...I sound like a total crazy girl in the bushes with binoculars and a rabbit. Not that furry-friend kind of rabbit.

I’d like to be able to use that battery-operated-boyfriend I’ve only seen them use on other women. I bet it would be awesome.

But, fortunately, they seem to not give a damn about the creepy aspect.

“If you can’t remember anything, then how do you even know English?” Three asks me skeptically.

Shit. I need to start calling them by their *actual* names.

“I just know things. They’re not like memories. There’s no recalling a certain thing like that. It’s just like *bam*; the information is there like it’s been there all along, but I didn’t know I knew it. Sort of like having an emotion and knowing what it is, without having a single memory of when you experienced it before. Things like that.”

They exchange a look.

“She could be another piece of the puzzle,” One says thoughtfully.

“Or she could be here to sabotage us,” Three, the prick, volleys.

“If she was here to sabotage us, she wouldn’t have saved my life,” One, my third favorite, reminds him.

Three has no retort to that.

Damn it. No more numbers.

“You never told us who was who. Just Two and Four. That story was hard

to follow with all the numbers,” Jude says, smirking a little.

I told them who One was; they just weren’t paying attention when I referred to him, obviously.

“Are you in my head?” I ask him, since he sort of echoed my thoughts just now.

He frowns. “No.” Then he looks at them.

Then they all look at me.

“What?” I prompt.

“Why would you ask that?” Jude asks me.

“Because I was thinking I needed to start thinking about you with your names instead of your numbers. And you asked that.”

He bristles.

“Anyway, Two’s—I mean, Ezekiel’s room is where I usually stay at night, but I’ll start keeping watch in the hallway instead. Now that you can hear me, I’ll wake you up if I hear anything.”

Now I feel like I can finally do something for them. Protect them even.

“Who’s One?” Gage asks.

“You are,” I say without hesitation, causing his smile to grow as they all give Kai a look.

“I’m Three?” Kai asks dryly.

“The selfish one, yes,” I agree, even give him a little nod.

His eyes narrow, but I ignore him as I go on. “I’d ask you why you all need to share a woman when you have needs to sate, but I don’t really want to question my good luck. As soon as I’m whole, I’ll have you and see if it’s worth all the hype.”

Jude laughs quietly, his eyes raking over me.

“Any particular reason why you’re wearing that? Think it might be what you were wearing when this happened?” Kai asks me, gesturing to my

skimpy little lingerie.

It's been so long since someone could see me, that I forgot they could see what I'm also wearing. Or barely wearing.

"That's actually one neat thing I learned early on. When I think of something I want to wear, it seems to just be there."

I imagine a long, elegant silver gown, and it appears, making me look a little classier, if I do say so myself.

Kai takes a step back, and Jude takes a step closer, his eyes hungrily raking over me.

"It's been my one constant source of entertainment, because I can do it all day and never get tired. I usually dress in something very sexy, just in case my dreams came true of being whole. I wanted to be ready. You know."

I shrug a shoulder, and Ezekiel lets his eyes wander over me.

I remember that time he bought a girl a red lace slip, and I imagine it. The second it appears, he grips the chair he's in hard enough to cause it to whine.

That's certainly a confidence booster.

Jude is more into leather, so I imagine a saucy little leather underwear set that has some straps attached to the lace-trimmed thigh-highs I'm suddenly in.

He instantly grabs for me, cursing in frustration when his hand swipes right through me, and those tingles just tease me all over again.

"Something less alluring would be appreciated right now. If we get worked up, you'll have to watch us with yet another girl tonight before we even finish this conversation," Kai tells me flatly.

"I'm okay with watching," I say with a shrug. "Once you get over the indecency of it, it's actually pretty hot. Though I admit I won't be okay with watching once I'm able to be a participant."

Jude groans. "We have to figure out a way to make her whole."

“Just because you want to fuck her that doesn’t mean we need to be focusing on her right now. That’s probably what they want,” Kai growls.

“She has nothing to do with them. Whatever she is, it’s linked to our own mystery of who we are. Something is going on, and you know it. Everyone knows it.”

“I don’t know it,” I decide to point out as a pair of flannel pants and a T-shirt appear on me. “I’m actually a little fuzzy on the details of what it is you guys do and what you are. I see the souls and stuff that you take—”

“You see the souls but they don’t see you?” Kai interrupts, sounding more curious than hostile for a second.

“Yes. It’s why I have no idea what I am. Clearly I’m not the same as them. And I know you go to this other place, but I have no idea where it is. I just hop a ride when you do your disappearing thing.”

“You can trail our siphons?” Jude asks, interested.

“You call it a siphon? Then yeah; I can trail that. I just have to be close enough when you do it.”

He moves toward me. “Then hold on. We can just ask someone who might know what’s going on.”

My fingers go to his body without hesitation, and Kai snaps at him not to do it just as we disappear.

The wind whirs in my ears much louder than before, and we appear in the back of an alleyway.

“We’re seeing your pawn shop friend, aren’t we?” I ask him.

He doesn’t even bother asking me how I know that.

“Yes,” is his only reply as the other three join us.

Kai stalks forward. “Until we figure out what’s going on, we can’t risk our very important friends by exposing them to a possible threat.”

Jude ignores him, leading the way, and Ezekiel trails me as we walk out

of the alley.

I move through the wall of the pawn shop, causing Ezekiel to curse. “She’s going to draw attention. It’s not late enough for this,” he hisses.

Only a few people are on the street. I forgot I could be seen.

They, fortunately, seem too inebriated to notice an apparition passing through walls.

Jude doesn’t say a word, just walks to the back counter where the familiar older man with a broad grin greets him.

“Need another pint of the good stuff?” Harold asks, lifting a bottle of the clear liquid they buy a lot of from here.

Apparently it’s the only way they can get drunk.

“I’ll take two of those and some quick answers about what she might be. We’ll pay good,” Jude tells him.

Harold immediately looks around like he’s searching for something. His eyes pass right by me without so much as a second glance.

“Who?” he asks.

My heart stutters. Have I gone invisible again?

My four boys look at me, then at each other, then back at me.

“You can’t see her?” Jude asks, causing me to relax a little.

Wait, why can’t Harold see me if they can?

That man I crashed into certainly saw me. I swear he looked a little horrified. I must have had a seriously pissed-off expression on my face if he felt that threatened.

“See who?” Harold asks like he’s crazy.

Harold can see souls...

But he can’t see me?

“No one,” Jude says tightly. “Just had too much to drink, I suppose. But I’ll take two more,” he goes on.

The other three guys go along with it, even though I can see the way Kai is frowning at Jude and me.

Harold rolls his eyes, but sells him two bottles. We leave without a word, and Jude steps into me again. I feel the tingle of our electricity, and I breathe him in like I can touch him if I try hard enough.

Doesn't work.

Next thing I know, we're back in their monstrous home, and he's stepping away from me. The other three appear behind him, and all four study me.

"The assassin who broke in saw her," Gage, *One*, says. "He was so distracted by her that I was able to kill him before he even realized I was awake."

"The assassin was a high-level royal mercenary. The crest was on his skin before the body vanished," Kai says quietly, his eyes raking over me like he's seeking answers in my appearance.

"She also hit him. Maybe that had something to do with it," Ezekiel suggests.

"Maybe," Jude answers, no one sounding too attached to any particular theory.

"I need more sleep tonight. I'm not sure how well I'll sleep knowing we're being haunted by a possible threat," Kai says as he turns and walks out. "We have orientation for the trials tomorrow, and her as a distraction is going to get us killed," he adds on his way out.

"I'll stand watch while you all get some sleep," I tell them, burying my own selfish desire to talk to them until I can't possibly say anymore.

If the trials are that dangerous, I sure as hell don't want them distracted. I'll even wait until after they're rested to ask what the hell these trials are and why they need to do them. But not tonight.

Ezekiel yawns, but he turns and walks out next.

Jude and Gage just stand there studying me.

“You’re able to follow us into purgatory?” Gage finally asks.

Frowning, I tilt my head. “Purgatory is where you go? It’s way nicer than I expected it to be. It has some seriously bad PR. But the people there seem horrible, so that much now makes sense.”

Jude’s lips twitch, and even Gage appears amused.

“Purgatory is a little bigger than the section we’ve visited. That’s for special events. The inhabitants of purgatory who are forced there against their will wouldn’t agree that it’s just bad PR.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat. It didn’t seem as real before as it suddenly does now.

I have no idea what they even are.

“Tomorrow, you can explain what that means. It’s always very hard to focus there for me. But tonight, you need to sleep. I don’t want anyone getting hurt because I kept them awake to talk.”

Jude steps forward as Gage slowly starts walking backwards, moving toward the door, but holding my gaze for a moment longer. As soon as he’s finally out, Jude reaches for me.

His fingers pass right through me, but that strong tingle has me close my eyes as the pleasure washes over me. He moves in closer, lowering his head until his face is near mine, and I sway a little.

“There’s something about you that feels far too comfortable. But if you hurt my brothers, I’ll end you, somehow or another. And it’ll be painful.”

Now he’s not my favorite anymore. I thought we had something special going on.

He steps back, and I ignore the painful tug at my heart. He’s the one I just knew would be in my corner, though I have no idea why I thought such a thing.

They're not quite as awesome as I'd hoped they'd be if I ever got the chance to finally be seen and heard. I also thought touch would come with that, but now I'm glad it didn't.

I think they'd kill me.

Feeling like the air has just been sucked out of me, I don't say a word. Instead, I pass through the wall to go stand guard.

As long as I'm close, I can peek in and get my fix every ten minutes to keep from fading.

Jude really hurt me. I'm not sure why, but they all hurt me, if I'm being honest. I was amusing and then disposable.

I've waited five years to be able to speak to them, stupidly thought there'd be an instant friendship between us.

And no one even said good night.

Chapter 5

Nothing happens during the night. I mostly peeked in on Gage, since he sleeps the hardest and I knew he wouldn't notice me. I was afraid one of the others would wake up and be annoyed with my presence.

My confidence from yesterday to today is nilch, thanks to Jude bursting my little bubble and no one even being nice enough to say good night.

I can hear them all in the kitchen, but I'm sitting on the steps. I've spent so long wishing they could hear me and see me, and now that they can, I just want to be invisible again so I can go back to feeling like I'm part of the group. Instead of the weird interloper who needs them to even exist.

Ezekiel rounds the corner to find me, and he stumbles to a halt, eyeing me. "Where's all that spunk from yesterday?" he asks.

Like a petulant child, I don't answer. I pretend they're invisible to me now.

"Ah, this game? I'm good at this game," he says as he takes a seat by me. "Used to play it when I was three or something."

Dick.

I pointedly ignore that dig and him, and I continue staring at the wall like it's fascinating.

He rolls his eyes and stands.

"Whatever. I tried."

I'm being irrationally emotional over this. It really makes no sense.

Maybe it's because my emotions have heightened since leveling up. Everything seems twice as crucial as it did before.

I'll deal with sorting it out later. For now, my fantasy of these four guys being mine is done. I just want to be whole so I can exist without needing

them.

He blows out an annoyed breath before finally walking away, rejoining his brothers in the kitchen. I can barely see them if I poke my head out.

Which I'm doing. Every nine minutes and fifty-eight seconds.

"What the hell did you say to her last night after I left?" I hear Ezekiel asking.

"I went to bed too," Gage says to him in confusion.

I should probably tell them my hearing is exceptional. I hear whispers I don't think I'm supposed to be able to hear all the time. No one else seems to be able to hear quite so well.

But I keep that secret to myself.

"What did *you* say?" Gage asks someone, who I assume must be Jude.

"Just gave her a friendly warning," is Jude's response. "I was fine with everything until I realized it's just us who can see her. There's something going on here, and now I think Kai is right. It feels like a trick, and it's certainly something Manella would do to put us off our game."

Kai is next to jump in and start talking. Of course. "I vote we ignore her like she's not around until we get through the first round of the trials. Then we'll deal with her during the month long break."

"Her timing *is* suspicious," Gage says on a sigh.

Tears prick my eyes, though it's just transparent mist. Unlike the real tears I felt last night before fainting. Those stupid tears were happy tears, because this was *not* how this was supposed to go.

They're so nice to all the women who come and go. I assumed they'd be nice to me too.

"There's something about the way it feels when she tries to touch us. It's just...I don't know. I don't feel like ignoring her is going to do anything but hurt her feelings, and what happens if she's somehow linked to the answers

we're trying to find, and we piss her off enough that she—”

A phone rings, cutting Ezekiel off, thankfully.

Jude answers, and I hear the shuffling like they're about to leave. Shit.

Just as I stand and go to chase them down, I see Kai turn and smirk at me. They all disappear before I can reach one to hitch a ride with, and a sick feeling creeps in my stomach.

They just left me here.

I told them I'd fade if I went longer than ten minutes without them in my sight, and they left me here.

I let them know I hated the fade. That it was nothingness.

And, still, they left me here.

The lights flicker, and the house vibrates as tears cloud my vision and anger simmers close to the surface. Things rattle off the counter, and it distracts me enough that everything stops at once.

The lights start shining solidly, and the vibrations cease.

My breath catches in my throat as I look around at everything. From Casper to Poltergeist, it seems. Just didn't have the proper motivation until now.

But as time dwindles on, the stabbing pain catches me off guard. It's never hurt before. Why does it hurt so much now?

It feels like knives are being dragged from my toes to my thighs before a lancing pain shoots across my back like a whip has been cracked.

A scream is torn from my throat as my vision dims, but before I can fade into nothing, I suddenly feel myself moving. My breath comes back in a harsh rush as I suddenly find myself in a huge tree. At the top of it, actually.

Right above the four assholes who left me in pain.

Glaring down at them, I watch as Kai takes out his sword. “You two get the Falker twins into the gulley, and we'll herd the juggernauts in behind

them. It's the only way we're going to get out of this with the highest times."

I thought they were coming for orientation.

I'm only half listening as I gather back all my strength that they ripped from me. Apparently this new level I'm on comes with a perk.

It takes me a long second to realize that there's more than one perk.

Looking around, I can see...everything.

And my stomach sinks when I take in the prehistoric looking land that surrounds me, along with various hideous creatures that are lurking about.

Gage slashes his sword through a stringy corpse as it tries to grab him. The stringy corpse falls away, its head rolling off, as they go on like it never happened.

Why did I think these sociopaths were so great before?

We're in the middle of this forest or whatever you want to call it. I half expect a dinosaur or dragon to come barreling through the massive, elaborate trees that stretch on for as far as I can see.

The quad splits up, and I watch as Jude and Ezekiel dart to the right, running instead of siphoning. Kai and Gage are moving slower, so I follow them, sticking to my trees. They're so big and tightly interlocked together, that I can move effortlessly from one tree to another.

And I can jump really far when I need to. One perk of being weightless. Another is the fact I don't have any pressure under my feet when I walk, so they never hear me up here.

They crouch low just as two identical men move in from another angle. Taking a seat, I watch as the two men near them.

Just as they reach the canyon, Gage and Kai spring from their positions, and tackle them with so much force the twins barely have time to yelp before they're flying over the edge.

"That was easy enough," Kai mutters.

“We knew this would be easy to us. Everyone knew it. I told you that you’ve been stressing too much.”

A scream reaches the tip of my tongue, and I swallow it down just before it escapes.

A four-headed beast is running down that gulley, as the twins tumble down the side, finally landing in a heap on top of each other. One barely gets the sword drawn in time before the thing strikes at them. Right behind it, two more of those beasts with four heads are running down, almost as though someone rang the breakfast bell.

Kai and Gage start sprinting, and I have to turn away before I know if those guys survive, because I have to keep up with the two dicks instead.

One of my leaps tests me, because I’m airborne for a little longer than I ever have been and stretch my usual limits before landing on another limb and racing after them still.

The four of them are suddenly all together, and I have no idea where Jude and Ezekiel just came from. All the while, I race behind them. Staying close but not close enough to be seen.

Nothing eventful happens after that.

They’ve got blood all over them, so I’m assuming more eventful things happened before I got here. I’m not sure how. It was just over ten minutes when I ended up here behind them.

Before I can ask too many questions, a blast of light hits them, and they’re suddenly gone.

Cursing, I drop out of the tree, looking around aimlessly. Shit. Not again. What if I get stuck here? It’s not like I know how I even zapped myself here to begin with.

Just as I turn around, I meet a set of huge eyes. Eyes as tall as my body. And scales. And fur. There are scales and fur. It’s a hideous combination

right on the nose that is between the eyes that are in front of me.

A scream tears from my throat before I can remind myself that I can simply pass through the scaly fur best. It reels back like I've slapped it, and it leaps into the air before diving down.

All several hundred feet of it.

The entire earth moves and shakes as it burrows below, taking forever to get that entire, worm-like body down the hole. And I say worm-like instead of snake-like because worms don't scare me as much.

My legs are shaking even after the ground goes still again, and I stagger around, looking for a way out of here.

Just as the pain starts to form in my chest, I feel it happening again. Like a rubberband has been snapped, an unseen force violently yanks me away from monster land and tosses me back inside the quad's home.

"Think she faded?" I hear Gage asking.

He doesn't sound too torn up about that.

"No clue, but Neopold just called. He said since we easily crushed everyone else's times, they'll make the next trial harder."

Gibberish. It's all gibberish.

I poke my head through the wall just a little so I can see them. Fortunately, I pick a spot where no one is looking.

"Which means we can deal with the girl now," Jude says as I lean back before they spot me.

"Deal with her how? We can't touch her. We don't know what she is. And it's very likely we're the only ones who can see her if she's meant to be a hindrance to us," Gage states flatly.

They better be glad I can't hit them. I'd totally do it right now.

Without a word, I sit down on the stairs and listen to them dissect a hundred nefarious theories about my existence, while I peek in on occasion to

get my fix.

Never once in all those fantasies did I see them trying to figure out a way to get rid of me.

It makes me hate them a little.

Chapter 6

A week of trying to sneak around the house has left my stomach in knots. Every time I accidentally run into one of them, I quickly pass through a wall.

It's tense and awkward.

They're reading books on what I might be so they can evict me from their lives.

I'm mostly hiding because I'm worried they're going to succeed.

If I can go next level, I'll be whole. Surely my soul or whatever won't be attached to anything then, and I can run like a motherfucking freed animal who just escaped the cage of impending doom.

I've worked too hard to survive to die now by the hands of the ones who once gave me purpose and a reason to want to survive.

Fortunately, they've all gone to bed now. Like a bad habit, I go from room to room, muttering a 'good night.'

Tomorrow is apparently the gauntlet or whatever, so they turned in early. Even Kai is snoring for a change.

In fact, they're all sleeping heavily tonight. Ezekiel is also snoring.

He never snores.

I move to the bed, my hand scrolling over the side of his cheek as I study him in confusion. Never once in five years has he snored. He never gets that deep into sleep.

And Kai went to sleep really fast. Which is very unusual.

I move to Jude's room, finding him to be just as dead to the world as the others. He always sleeps on his back. Tonight he's on his stomach, and he's still in his clothes.

I know for a fact he can't stand sleeping in clothes. He always gets naked.

Backing out of his room, I look around.

Maybe they want to kill me, and maybe I hate them a little, but I can't stand the thought of someone hurting them.

Which is clearly about to happen.

I jog down the stairs, checking the doors and such. I spot the bottle on the counter they picked up from Harold today, and I freeze.

They only had one shot apiece. Not that I was watching. I just heard Kai telling them only one to douse the nerves and take the edge off.

My eyes hone in on the little swirls of green that I can barely see. It's almost like my ghostly reflection used to be—so transparent that only the best vision could catch a true glimpse.

Shit.

That's never been in those bottles before.

The smallest breeze stirs the paper on the counter, and I whirl around, seeing the window open.

Oh no.

I race up the stairs, not seeing anyone around. Then I quickly start shoving my head through the doors, peering in on everyone.

When I get to Jude's room, though, my heart almost flips out of my chest.

A man with a sword draws closer to Jude's bed, as another man grips his own sword by the door, holding it in front of him like he expects Jude to stop snoring and start fighting.

I run through the man, not feeling any of those tingles, and race to the bed, passing through it and Jude as I stare at the one who is warily approaching the sleeping Four.

"Stop!" I shout at the man, but he can't see me.

My eyes dart to the one by the door, but he seems unaware of my presence as well.

The second he draws that sword, I prepare to level up, diving at him just as I did the other one, as every ounce of fear propels my lunge.

But instead of me hitting him with my hand, something flies out of me, and it slams into him. I have no idea what invisible force just zipped through my fingertips, leaving a cold, familiar feeling behind.

His eyes widen as a yelp leaves his mouth, and he crashes into the other man. The other man who...was holding a sword in front of him.

That man looks too stunned to move, while the one with the sword sticking out of his chest opens his mouth in a silent scream. My stomach goes queasy when the veins in his body start turning black. The sword glows brighter and brighter, sucking whatever life is inside him out.

The not-dying guy jerks the sword out of the dying guy, and stares at him in horror as he darts a panicked gaze toward the sleeping man, looking right through me.

With a growl of frustration, he lunges, sword slicing down before I can process. That same familiar feeling crosses through my body and bursts out like an explosion.

The man's breath catches as he freezes midair, and I keep my hand out as I step closer, feeling whatever foreign power is radiating from me.

It feels like it takes forever, but it all really happens within a matter of seconds. He's launched across the room just like the other man, but when he collapses, he doesn't move.

I quickly rush over, fully prepared for him to throw that sword out at me. Instead, my breath hisses from me and I stagger back.

It looks like he has chemical burns all over his face and body. Like his insides were dipped in toxic waste, and now they're all oozing out of every orifice possible, and burning him away from the inside out.

The burns just get worse, and I have to turn away.

Mr. Dark Veins is on the cusp of death, and he stares directly at me now, when he couldn't see me earlier.

His lips curve in a slow grin as he coughs and laughs. He opens his mouth like he's going to speak, but his head falls to the side instead as he goes lifeless.

Dead.

In less than a few minutes, I managed to kill two people. One of which couldn't see me and then could.

I glance down, finding my hand still mostly transparent, even if my breaths do feel warmer as they stagger from my chest.

Maybe I was an assassin before I was this, because this was too easy. And it felt really right.

Which is seriously freaking disturbing.

I wish I could have a drink right now. I think I deserve it.

Glancing back, I look over at Jude and hear the light sounds of his snores as he sleeps peacefully.

"You're welcome," I grumble.

The sound of footsteps approaching sends a chill up my spine. Apparently this night isn't over.

Somebody really wants these boys—no longer *my* boys—dead.

My fingers tingle, ready for action. Just because I can, I change out of my normal attire and go for a more badass look, even though they can't see me.

Because priorities are important.

Chapter 7

I'm very annoyed with whatever show this is supposed to be. Fortunately, there seems to be a marathon of it.

That sounds like two odd sentences to press together, doesn't it?

While I can apparently toss grown men around when in panicked, protective mode, I still can't put any pressure on a TV remote to change the channel.

There were a lot more zombies when this show started. I'm quite confused by this entire second season. Admittedly I'm only watching because one of the side characters is actually a very badass woman.

Keyla saves these people time and time again, yet gets zero respect. It's like they take her for granted.

I sort of like the blood and gore though, so I continue to watch, learning a little about fighting for survival. These people do impossible things when their lives or other lives depend on it.

I suppose that gives me a kindred sort of feeling, especially with poor, underappreciated Keyla.

I had a very busy night, but I've still managed to watch this in between bouts of psychotic men who wanted to kill the boys while they slept.

Not that they'd ever believe such a thing. After all, the bodies seemed to disappear shortly after their deaths.

Either the guys will think I'm making it up to get them to like me—*I'm not that pathetic, thank you very much*—or they'll consider me even more of a threat for being able to achieve such heinous things.

I'll just keep it to myself.

The door beside me flies open, and I startle a little.

Usually they try to sneak in with stealth.

My eyes dart to it to see a haggard looking Harold as he collapses inside, his veins black, much like that one man who I knocked into that sword.

I'm on my feet and moving toward him, wondering if he's the one who dosed their bottle of liquor last night. It doesn't look like it, since it seems as though someone wants him dead as well.

His eyes fall on me, but I can tell he doesn't see me as he shakes his head, struggling to get up.

Leaning over, I stroke his arm, trying to comfort him, since it looks as though he'll be dying like that other fellow who disappeared.

His muscles strain as he curses, and the veins throb as he fights so hard to beat this poison. Whatever it may be.

Stroking his arm is silly, since he can't be comforted by my non-existent touch. But I feel like I know him, since they've been visiting him for years, and I can't just let him die alone.

Little by little, the black in his veins seems to lessen as he continues to fight it somehow. So Jude might have survived? Doubtful.

They've said Harold is very important and powerful numerous times, though I have no idea what exactly that means. Most of the time, they speak in what sounds like code, and until recently, I couldn't ask them to explain what that code meant.

And now they talk in even more code since learning of my existence.

Harold sits up suddenly, the black still present but not as fiercely roaming his veins as before. Struggling back up to his feet, I hear him shout a curse so loud the whole house nearly quakes.

I'd like to help him up the stairs, but you can't use a crutch you can't touch, so I follow him instead. As soon as he rounds the top of stairs, I hear a door fly open, and I decide my job with Harold is done.

I'd like to go finish my show if they're going to take care of him.

"Harold?" I hear Gage ask in confusion.

"You're alive," Harold says in sweet relief, collapsing. "Thank fuck for that. Where're your brothers? Are you the only one?"

I hear a lot of scurrying after that, and Gage shouting at them. They're all fine. I've kept a close watch on everyone during the night.

I take my seat on the couch, as Jude and Gage begin helping Harold back down the stairs.

Why isn't there any romance in this show? That's what's missing. A good ol' fashioned romance where the girl can only be rejected by *one* guy she's fantasized about instead of four.

Why do I know that's ol' fashioned romance? Hell if I know. It's just one of those things that is pointless for me to know, so I know it.

"What the hell happened to you?" Ezekiel asks as they get Harold situated in a chair near me.

Gage darts a suspicious glance at me, but I pretend not to notice as my attention seemingly stays fixed on the screen.

"Manella," Harold bites out.

I just keep hearing this Manella fellow's name. I think I'd like to kill him if he's the one behind this.

"Lamar came to the shop last night, stuck a Decay Dagger in my gut, and took over my identity long enough to pass you along some tainted spirits."

Jude goes to the kitchen, which is next to us and easy to see. He snatches the open bottle of liquor that left them so vulnerable and sniffs it.

"This is why I slept so hard," he growls.

"I've never slept as hard as I did last night, but it was like I was locked in a nightmare and couldn't escape. What the fuck is it?" Ezekiel asks him.

"It's noctem root found only in Purgatory. But's it's hard to find," Harold

says, snarling. “I had to watch Lamar put it into my spirit drinks. That dagger left me paralyzed. Then Lamar shifted to look like me, and you dicks didn’t know the difference.”

Kai takes a seat on the end of the couch, far away from me, as he faces Harold. “You’re in neutral territory. You’re supposed to be untouchable by law. We never thought we had to question if it was you,” Kai points out.

“Apparently Manella isn’t concerned with law right now. Whatever is going on, he wants you four out of the trials. Those questions you’ve been asking are definitely getting more interesting. How are you even alive right now? I had to listen to him call in a hit to any being with the balls to come after you. Once I managed to get that dagger out of my chest, I learned of at least seven who took the opportunity.”

Eleven men tried to cash in on that hit, to be exact. But who’s counting?

I feel the weight of four very intense stares swing toward me, but I pretend as though I find my nails to be fascinating.

“What are you looking at?” Harold asks, confusion in his tone.

“Nothing,” Kai grumbles, which digs that little knife of theirs a little deeper into my gut.

I spent my night killing men to save their lives, but I’m *nothing*.

Awesome guys I’ve somehow been tied to, huh?

Pricks.

“No one managed to kill us,” Gage states vaguely.

“Then I guess you were lucky, since you didn’t drink the root,” Harold says in a relieved breath, even though he knows they were lucky because they’re not dead. “I’ve spent the night trying to get that damn dagger free from my chest. I’m sure Lamar expected it to kill me on this plane.”

Jude lowers himself to a chair right beside me, his eyes raking over me. I continue to pretend as though I’m aloof and uninterested in their attention,

my eyes lifting to watch the show again when the commercial break is over.

Ezekiel takes a seat on the couch, his body almost touching mine. But I never lift my gaze from the TV, though I now have no clue what's going on.

"What do you two keep looking at?" Harold asks.

"If Manella is getting this desperate, then we need to do something about our security. Clearly the protection spell surrounding this place has been drained," Kai says to his brothers.

Even his gaze flicks to me momentarily, but I don't give him the satisfaction of looking his way.

"I need something to suck the last of this poison out of me. I've fought it all I can," Harold says on a weary breath.

"Shit. Of course," Gage says as he leaps to his feet and moves through the house.

I hear cupboards banging for a minute before he returns with something. I can't see it from my peripheral, and I'm still making a concentrated effort not to look at them.

As he gives Harold whatever it is, I stand, my eyes averting all of them, even as they all watch me.

I pass through the couch, moving toward the stairs. They'll be leaving for the gauntlet soon, and I'd like to hitch a ride this time, so I'm staying close so as not to get left behind again. I'll hide in the weapons closet, since they aren't wearing their weapons yet.

"I need to call Dominic. He needs to hear about this," Harold says. "Lamar will face consequences for touching an Elder on neutral ground, though I doubt he'll point a finger at Manella. But you boys need to be careful today. They'll come for you in there. Very few survive the gauntlet, and no one will think about it."

"I'll get you a ride," I hear Kai telling him.

They continue to talk about conspiracy theories, as I pass into the weapons closet and wait.

No more than ten minutes later, I hear, “Get out here, nameless girl. We need to speak to you.”

Kai doesn’t sound overly pleased to be summoning me, and I don’t particularly like being summoned. So I stay in my place.

“Where the fuck did she go?” Gage asks, sounding as though he’s in the hallway.

“She can pass through walls, so who fucking knows?” Jude growls.

“Come out...We really need a name to call her,” Ezekiel states.

Why give me a name when they simply plan to pretend I don’t exist?

“She looks like a Mary,” Jude deadpans.

The word *virgin* seems to accompany that name, and it doesn’t sound quite like me, since I don’t plan on being a virgin when I’m whole.

“Something a little edgier would better suit her if she’s killing assassins in our sleep,” Kai tells him, and I tilt my head, a little more interested.

The prospect of having a name does make my heart beat a little faster.

“Keyla,” Ezekiel says suddenly, and my heart all but sputters.

“Why that name?” Kai asks.

“Because of that show she was watching. Keyla is the one who is constantly fending off the worst of the attacks. Maybe our little haunter considers herself our protector. Not a scratch is on us after someone drugged us and left us to die. The protection spell has been drained, leaving us vulnerable in such a condition. We should be dead if Manella dropped a hit.”

It sounds like they’re moving closer to me.

“If she can’t touch things, as she claims, then how did she fend off seven highly trained assassins?” Jude asks skeptically.

Eleven, I silently amend. But again, who’s counting?

“She kept saying she ‘leveled up’ after saving me that first night,” Gage answers. “Maybe the same thing happened last night.”

“It’s doubtful Manella has anything to do with her being here if he just sacrificed Lamar’s life to set up this hit on us. Last time he sent one man, and that man died. This time, he sent a small army and attacked an elder on neutral ground. He wouldn’t have done that and then asked her to save us, knowing what his failure will cost him. Lamar is his lover as well as his most trusted man.”

Well, that’s downright intriguing drama. I lean forward, interested in this conversation.

“Maybe so, but her timing is still undeniably suspicious,” Kai reminds them.

They move away from the dark romance and back to the subject at hand. I lose interest again, for the most part.

“Regardless, we should at least ask her about the men who came here last night,” Ezekiel says quietly. “Keyla! We have you a name,” he yells, like he’s trying to make sure I hear him throughout the massive home.

Rolling my eyes, I stay hidden, even though I do like having a name now.

“She only has ten minutes where she doesn’t have to see us,” Kai points out.

My smile spreads. It’s been over ten minutes since I laid eyes on them, but I’m still not in pain or desperate to peek out. Just their presence being so close seems to sate my need for them.

How did I not notice sooner?

In fact, it was like that all night, but I didn’t notice then either, since I was sort of distracted. Maybe I did level up, just not the way I thought I would. Well, clearly I leveled up with the weird ways the assassins seemed to die, but I’m talking about a personal level-up.

“Well, then, where the hell is she? Because it’s been at least twenty minutes since I saw her last,” Jude states, frustrated.

When I see the handle of the weapons closet start to turn, I step through the back, passing through that wall, and end up in Ezekiel’s bedroom.

Staring at the wall, I continue to listen as the door opens, waiting for my chance to dive through and trail their siphon.

“Found her,” comes a voice far too close to my back, causing me to jump and whirl around.

Ezekiel is smirking as he stares down at me with his arms crossed over his chest.

His hair is the lightest, a rich blond hue that highlights his tan. His eyes sparkle with that gold hue that happened when I passed through him.

His broad shoulders lead down to a very impressive chest, and all that leads down to a tapered waist full of ab muscles. Which are easy to count, since he’s shirtless.

Why did he take off his shirt?

Before I can slap myself back to my senses—which I can’t literally do—three other shirted men are in here with us, fortunately covering up their distracting bodies.

“What happened last night?” Kai asks me seriously, skipping pleasantries.

“You drank some spiked rum; I watched some TV and killed some men. Other than that, not much,” I say with a shrug, averting my gaze.

A hand passes through me when Jude tries to grab me. He curses as those wonderful little tingles slither over my body. Funny how none of that happened with the numerous men I passed through last night.

“What happened?” Gage asks me this time, his gaze on my face.

“I just told you,” I say with a tight smile. “But just so you have the facts, it was eleven men. Not seven.”

I act like I'm counting my fingers, then lift only middle ones when I give them a cruel smile. Gage's lips do that twitching thing they do when he's trying to suppress a smile.

"You killed eleven men yet claim to have no ability to—"

"Just stop there. I've already heard these discussions," I state dryly, holding a hand up in front of Kai's face. "For whatever reason, my protective instincts are on overdrive with you four. Things I can't do normally come a little too easily when I'm saving your lives."

I take a step back, almost passing through the wall again, and they all four crowd my space like they can stop me.

"Here's the new arrangement," I say to them, crossing my arms over my chest. "You don't leave without me. It fucking hurts when you do," I tell them, certain that will still be an issue if their presence is gone. "Or I'll let the next team of ruthless assassins kill you while you dream of ponies or whatever it is you dream of. You need to give me a reason to want to save you."

"You supposedly need us," Ezekiel reminds me.

"Yes, but what's the point in existing if it's just to feel like an unwanted burden? I need a reason to want to keep from fading into nothing, because honestly? Nothingness is sounding better than this hell you four are putting me through."

They exchange a look, and Jude's jaw tightens as he looks back at me and speaks. "We'll have a new spell up by nightfall. I'm not sure that it won't evict you as well."

"You can try. I'm sure you're dying to get rid of me even as I save your ungrateful lives over and over," I tell him as I pass through the wall.

They appear in the room just as I finish, and I barely stop myself from making some embarrassing noise of surprise.

Jude's eyes darken as his smirk forms. He likes scaring the shit out of me, it seems. He's the one who has cut me the deepest, so I look over to Ezekiel, breaking up the eye contact.

Ezekiel steps closer, his eyes wandering over me. "What in hell are you wearing?" he asks incredulously.

I look down at my warrior princess outfit. It's leather, a little sexy, and downright awesome. It also has the illusion of a bunch of weapons strapped to me, even though they're not real.

"Something a badass wears when she's saving lives all night and about to go to a gauntlet of unforetold dangers," I deadpan.

"Is so much cleavage necessary?" Kai asks, his eyes a little distracted as they continue to trail down.

"And does the leather have to be so tight?" Jude asks from behind me, sending chills throughout me when his hand passes over my ass.

"I prefer to feel pretty when killing. Not sure why, but it seemed to be ideal last night," I state as I look around. "By the way, my terms also include the four of you not ignoring me and not being cruel to me anymore. Either fake being nice and treat me better, or I'll take a spectator's seat the next time men with enchanted swords try to drain you, cut off your heads, stab you, or cut off your junk." They all give me an incredulous look, so I add, "Yes, a lot happened last night."

Jude adjusts his cock in his pants as he arches an eyebrow at me.

"You're asking us to trust you, acting as though we owe it to you. Surely you understand our reservations," Gage tells me, regarding me warily.

Something cold and detached washes over me as I drop my hands to my sides.

"I told you all my story. I explained I've spent five years able to do nothing but watch you. Without you, I faded. Without you, I didn't exist.

Only in your presence did I seem to have a purpose. I exposed a vein when I cut open so many vulnerable details of my very lonely existence, laid it all out there for you like my most precious secret. Naively, I expected you all to welcome me with open arms, telling me I was no longer alone. Yet none of you could spare a second to put yourself in my shoes. None of you had an ounce of concern for the fact that I've held on by a thin thread all these years, not knowing anything about anyone else but the four of you—I didn't even know myself, but I knew *you*. You've been all I've had."

My gaze flicks from one set of eyes to another as they all stay quiet.

"Not one of you bothered to tell me good night, or even good morning," I go on, admittedly getting just a little choked up, much to my chagrin.

A few surprised and very bewildered expressions don their faces, but I clear my throat and go on.

"The only thing you're concerned about is how my presence affects you, while I've spent my entire existence thinking of nothing but the four of you. Not one of you could spare me a single thought."

Again, I'm forced to clear my throat of any emotion, refusing to let these assholes see me do my ghostly cry.

"Not everything is about the four of you. I exist too. Now you can see me. In fact, you're the only ones who seem to be able to, mostly. And you treat me like shit. So, no, I can't be bothered to understand your reservations if you can't spare a single minute to view me as an actual person instead of a *thing* you don't trust."

They say nothing, and I grow tired of the intense silence.

"Who's taking me to the gauntlet?" I ask, looking at the four of them. "With any luck, I'll be able to stop someone from killing you when your backs are turned today. And then you can all bypass any gratitude and start wondering how I benefit from that as well."

Ezekiel blows out a breath before he grabs a weapon from the closet, since we're back in the weapons room. Then he steps into me, and I feel the tug of the siphon.

When we reappear, we're in the middle of a huge, gorgeous room full of elegantly dressed people. Meanwhile, I'm next to a shirtless barbarian by comparison.

The other three boys appear around us, and they all start walking.

When I'm certain eyes aren't landing on me or noticing my presence, I follow close behind them.

Today, I learn what the hell a gauntlet is.

Chapter 8

A gauntlet, as it turns out, is an inhumane, monstrous death trap designed to cull the weak from the herd.

Yay me.

This sucks big donkey balls.

It's like a protective spirit's nightmare, since my four ungrateful charges are about to run this thing.

I've decided that's what I must be—a protective spirit who has been cursed to watch over the most self-centered brats in history, who are willingly about to run through this deadly thing.

It's a long, seemingly endless crater. And in it are monsters I don't even have a name for, and they're crawling around everywhere below. It's also filled with blades that swing, fire that shoots out of unseen crevices, and something I assume must be acid, since when the mist sprays, it destroys anything in its path.

We're in a half arena type thing, standing on a platform far above it, as the crowd fills into the stadium seats behind us like they're readying for a show.

“What's the point of this?” I ask, not expecting an answer.

“To see who ascends and gains access to the underworld,” Gage answers automatically.

A little surprised, I turn to face him. “Why would you want to go to the underworld?”

“To gain a boost in power and find out what we really are,” Jude says from beside me.

“You don't know who you are?” I ask, confused.

They continue to talk quietly so as to escape the ears of others, surprisingly answering some of my questions.

“A while back, we found each other by accident, all of us ending up in the same place at the same time on the same day like we were compelled to go there. When we did, our souls bonded, and we gained access to our powers just before someone tried to kill us,” Kai tells me as he moves in from behind.

Ezekiel picks up where he left off. “Whatever we are, no one ever wanted us to find each other, because they’ve been trying to keep us out of the underworld ever since. And we’re different from all of them.”

“How so?” I ask, confused.

“To become one of them, you have to die first and endure the underworld from the less privileged side,” Kai explains.

“Demons? They’re demons?” I whisper-yell, acting like someone other than them can hear me.

Jude’s lips twitch. “Demons have no mind or capacity for reason, emotion, or even individual thought,” he goes on. “These are upper level dark angels. There are hundreds of varieties, but they fall into two categories: Righteous and Damned. We’re of the damned, yet we never died,” Gage whispers softly, his eyes shifting as though he’s seeing if anyone can hear us.

His lighter brown hair is so smooth and sexy with the way it spikes up. The piercing in his tongue is always a fascinating focal point for me. Maybe Ezekiel should get one of those, since he’s the nipple lover.

“Purgatory is where ascension is decided. We’ve had access to purgatory for almost a decade, but we haven’t been able to get chosen for the trials until this year. They’ve tried to keep us away from here, because they’re terrified we’ll win. If we get below and get our power boost, we’ll also have access to people who might can tell us what’s going on,” Ezekiel states quietly.

“We’ll discuss this more later,” Jude says quickly. “Manella just arrived.”

My eyes swing up to find a set of fully black eyes glaring down at my boys. Thank goodness he’s unable to see me. I’m thankful for my spirit-body right now.

“Stop staring at him,” Kai tells me.

“It’s not like he can see me staring. His eyes have passed over me a number of times so he can glare at you assholes. I’m wondering if I can channel some of that protective mojo to kill him.”

Before they can say a word, I’m suddenly behind Manella, dizzy with how fast that just happened.

I’m up in the stands, my legs passing through the body of a man who has no idea I’m standing *through* him.

Manella turns like he feels me, his eyes searching briefly behind him, trailing past me without an ounce of recognition.

I can see the guys below staring at me with wide eyes before they school their features and look away. When Manella turns back around, I hold my hand out, straining, feeling...nothing.

No great power surges from my hand to make toxins appear inside him and burn him inside-out the way it did the others.

“Several groups of quads survived the night, I see,” a woman with bright red hair states in an almost muted tone as she joins him at his side, smiling graciously at the people around.

I smell a snake.

I hate snakes.

“It appears so,” Manella says with a cold smile. “I heard there was a hit for some of them.”

“Lamar has been taken into custody. Rumor has it he attacked an Elder last night.”

Manella stiffens, his hands closing into fists.

“One said he might be recycled,” she goes on.

I’m assuming their version of recycling is a little less green and a lot gorier than the human definition.

My eyes keep moving to the guys, worried they’ll leave and I’ll lose sight of them.

Before I can hear Manella’s response, I’m suddenly surrounded by the quad once again.

“What the hell?” Kai hisses.

“Seems like I can move places if I think a little too hard about it,” I tell them on a shaky breath. “And it makes me dizzy, just for the record, so I’m going to try really hard not to do it again until I can work my powers and kill him. But he’s definitely the one who wants you dead. I think.”

“That much we already know. Manella has been the one holding us back from the trials for some time,” Gage states in a whispered tone.

“What happens if you win the gauntlet today?” I ask.

“We go back home, continue to reap souls, and wait for the last of the trials,” Jude answers with no emotion.

“And the soul reaping is your job?”

“We’re surface guardians,” Kai tells me as more and more people crowd in, the stadium getting louder as the obstacle course goes eerily silent, a slight fog creeping over it to hide things.

“What just happened? And what are surface guardians?” I ask, staring uneasily at this unnatural fog.

“They’re moving the obstacles around and don’t want us seeing where they’re going,” Kai explains.

“And surface guardians stop the breaches so the damaged souls can’t possess a human and run around freely. When demons expose us, then we run

into a lot of issues between us and the other side.”

“I’m going to pretend you don’t mean heaven,” I say with a nervous laugh, looking up at Gage.

He just stares blankly at me.

“There has to be a balance. Yin and yang. Good and bad. But there are rules constantly being broken by both sides to keep things tilted instead of balanced. It’s something that happens from time to time, but never this often. Lately, more and more souls are breaching the surface. The escapes are becoming so frequent that we’re possibly on the verge of being purged.”

“Purged?” I ask, looking at Jude since he’s the one who said that.

“It means someone is setting these breaches to force our hand. If it looks like Lucifer can no longer control the underworld, he’ll lose his crown and his six heirs will battle to see who takes control.”

I swallow thickly as my gaze shifts to Ezekiel. “Lucifer? As in the devil?”

He smirks. “They’re breaching from hell’s mouth. We’re the main thing holding the purge at bay, because we’re sending the souls back before they can possess a human or before they can expose us if they do manage to possess one. But if we can get underground, we can get closer to proving Manella is the one doing all this. He knows we’re trying to out him to his father, so he’s trying to eliminate us before we can get below and meet the devil.”

“Life goals, I guess,” I state uneasily.

“Better the devil you know than the one you don’t,” Jude says with a shrug.

“In this case, quite literally. If Manella takes the crown, he’ll release the souls into the world himself, and life as we know it will cease to exist. Hell on earth will become very literal, and from what I’ve heard, the non-royal areas of hell are quite distasteful,” Gage goes on conversationally.

A hand passes through my hip, like Ezekiel is trying to get closer but can't.

“Now you know why we're questioning your timing,” Ezekiel says so close to my ear. “Are you part of the problem or the solution?”

Rolling my eyes and not letting him know how much his proximity affects me, I answer, “Considering I've kept you jerks alive, I'd say I'm helping you save the devil. Though I admit, now even I have reservations. I didn't sign on to save hell. Maybe we should discuss you lot finding healthier life goals.”

Chapter 9

“The first twenty to emerge will go onto the final round in one month,” the weird little troll guy announces.

If he’s the same thing as my guys, he has to be hating life, because life has certainly not been fair to him in the attractiveness department. His face looks like the inside-bend of an elephant’s leg. I’m not even sure where his eyes are, if I’m being honest.

“He’s an angel?” I ask dubiously.

“He’s a form of angel,” Jude states absently as the man drones on.

“He totally got gipped,” I say on a sympathetic sigh.

Gage chokes down whatever sound just tried to escape him.

“The rules are written in the devil’s blood. No competitor may use lethal force against another competitor while in the gauntlet,” the elephant man goes on.

I glance around, seeing a lot of really hard, nasty people also around us, all of them glaring at the four guys surrounding me. Apparently they don’t like that rule, since it looks like they want to break it.

The guys don’t notice the angry glares or just simply don’t care.

“No competitor can use any form of teleportation to get from one area to another. Doing so will have you immediately disqualified,” the man states, facing one woman in particular before dropping his eyes—well, the area where I think his eyes are—to the scroll he’s holding.

“No competitor may leave the gauntlet until they’ve completed it, or they forfeit their chance at ascension and go back to the surface to complete their tasks until someone comes to reap them.”

“What?” I hiss, jerking my gaze to Jude.

“The trials are to thin the crop of the weaker links, so that only the strongest guard the surface,” Ezekiel answers at my back. “Getting reaped puts you back at the throat to grow stronger again.”

I’m not sure I want to know what the throat is.

“Your teams, as you know, can change, should you decide to shift alliances. But only if the other team accepts you.”

There’re only two other four-man teams. Judging by the groupings, everyone else is solo or in twos, I notice.

I suppose if you can change teams mid competition, it’d be hard to trust someone who might stab you in the back. Unless you’re as close this quad.

“If one member of your team is left behind, your team forfeits the thirty bonus points, and that member is disqualified for not crossing the line with you.”

“Glad I’m not part of the team,” I grumble. They’d totally leave me behind if they could.

Kai snorts when he hears that.

The man rolls the scroll up very slowly, staring up at the stands over our heads as he does so.

I follow his gaze, seeing him look up to the box where there are six people in ornate, golden chairs, set up like royalty. Manella is among them.

“Is Lucifer here?”

“Never. It’s too risky for him to leave the underworld. He’s untouchable there. Not so much here,” Jude answers.

So those must be the six heirs.

The woman with red hair who spoke to Manella is sitting down, her hand on her chin as she smirks down at the world with her red-painted lips and scarlet red dress.

Manella is beside her in a black suit, his long black hair tied back.

A blonde woman is dressed in a sparkly silver dress on the other side of Manella. And to the right of her are two men dressed like they're here to slay. And lastly a man with such dark hair and eyes that *black* isn't black enough to describe them.

All of them are stunning. All of them look pure evil too.

Which, obviously they're the devil's children, so that makes sense.

"Manella, you already know. He's the one who has evaded history, and has the most discretion. Hence the reason he's the trickiest to deal with and the reason we need to get underground to learn more about him," Jude explains.

"The redhead who looks like she can't wait to see blood being spilled is Lilith," Gage tells me.

"As in the vampire?" I hiss.

"As in the devil's firstborn," Jude tells me as though he's exasperated. "After announcing herself to the world as Lilith, she made a few other appearances as women you might have heard of."

"The twins are the Gemini twins—Collin and Marcus," Gage goes on. "They prefer the second round of the trials, since that's when mortal combat comes into play."

I hate these damn trials.

"There are two hundred competitors here today," the man goes on, his eyes staying fixed to the evil royalty in the stands. "The horn of Jericho will blow every time the gauntlet claims a life."

"The blonde is Hera," Kai tells me, resuming the interrupted conversation, and when I open my mouth, he adds, "Yes, *that* Hera, and yes, she posed as a Greek Goddess for a while. She's vain like that. They all are."

Just...mind-fucking.

"And the last guy is Cain. The same Cain who killed his brother—Abel.

The same one born to Eve, after Lucifer deployed his plan to corrupt humanity and prove he was right all along, sending his own son into the womb of Eve, just before he was cast from the heavens,” Ezekiel tells me.

They don’t even have to look back to see these people. They just know them, probably have them memorized.

The elephant man looks away when all six heirs give one nod of approval in eerily timed unison.

“The day of the gauntlet begins now!” the man shouts.

Without a second of hesitation, everyone on this platform starts racing through me, rushing toward the drop. My guys are the first to drop off the side. That’s at least a hundred feet worth of drop zone!

I dive to the edge, even as people continue to pass through me en masse.

I watch as they land on their feet, and I curse when they propel themselves into the thick fog cloaking the gauntlet.

The horn is already blowing, signaling a death so soon, and my heart beats in my ears as panic consumes me. Was it one of them?

Before I can even think about it, I’m suddenly dizzy, and I’m spinning around, seeing all four of my guys cut through the fog as they charge right toward me. Shit. I somehow ended up in the gauntlet.

In front of them.

I turn and run with them, easily keeping up, since my spirit body happens to be very fast and nimble. It helps that I can run right through many of the obstacles they’re having to avoid.

The blades shoot out, nearly decapitating Jude before he can dodge it like it’s no big deal. If protective spirits can suffer cardiac arrest, then it damn near just happened to me.

The acid spray mist takes out several of the men behind us, their screams of agony piercing the air as that horn of death blows twice.

Fire shoots up into the air, and Ezekiel barely stops in time. Another man can't stop so quickly, and a bloodcurdling scream rises into the air as the skin melts from his body.

I cut my gaze away, unable to watch. "That's hellfire instead of fucking eternal flames," Jude growls. "That's supposed to be outlawed."

"Hell on earth better not happen if I turn whole," I grumble as I leap through it, trying to find a way to let them pass.

I finally find a boulder and stare at it, because it would be perfect to create a path. It's just big enough that it would take it a minute to melt, and they're fast enough to use it before it's gone.

Now...how do I get it to move?

Ghost girl problems.

Several more screams erupt when more people dive into it. I hear someone shouting, "It's hellfire! Not eternal flames!"

They came to the conclusion a little later than my guys, it seems.

"They're trying to kill us all. How are we supposed to break through hellfire?" a woman shouts.

Meanwhile, I'm back to staring at the boulder, wondering if I concentrate hard enough, if it'll move into the flames. The fire has gotten closer to it, and it doesn't seem to be affected by the flames.

The ground rumbles under me, and I whirl around and sway a little as I see that giant, scaly, furry worm thing leap out of the ground, a blackened soot color giving it an all the more ominous appearance.

It roars into the air as a spiraled mouthful of teeth protrude from its huge mouth.

Holy deadly centipede.

But the creepiest part is when three more heads suddenly appear, popping out of its neck with gooey strands attached to them. And the new heads are

carrying the same razor sharp teeth.

“Hydra!” someone shouts just as the centipede from hell—*huh, that might be literal*—dives and swallows a mouthful...of people.

My heart almost kicks my chest when I see Ezekiel fly over the top of the centipede’s back, now that it’s blocking some of the flames, and his eyes widen on me.

“That thing seemed a lot more skittish the last time I was here,” I say on a shaky breath.

“You walked through hellfire,” he tells me, but before I can remind him that nothing can touch me, the centipede rears back, and Ezekiel draws his sword.

“E! Just go! We’ll catch up when we find a break in the fire,” Jude shouts.

Ezekiel smirks as he pulls his sword back. “I’ll make you a break in the fire.”

I hear Gage cursing, and Kai calling him a string of names, as the centipede roars again.

But the giant monster thingy suddenly reels back, much like it did the last time it saw me. Three of the four heads slink back inside its body so fast that I almost don’t register the action.

Then it turns and dives into the ground, just as it did the last time, running like it’s fleeing.

“What the hell?” Ezekiel asks incredulously.

“The boulder!” I snap. “The fire is touching it but it’s not burning it, so I assume it’s something special and can block the flames.”

He stares at it, glances at me, then goes behind it. Like he has all the strength in the world, he shoves that boulder hard, and it rolls, cutting through the flames.

Jude is the first to fly over the boulder, but when Gage starts to follow, I

see the glint of a red sword as it swings down. My hand flies out so fast as fear pumps through me, and the woman holding the sword is launched backwards.

Her back slams into the wall, and the head of that giant centipede bursts out, snatching her and dragging her inside it as she screams in vain.

Gage's eyes are on mine, and right behind him is Kai. They've made it past the boulder, and they're just staring at me as others pass them by.

"If you idiots keep staring at me like I'm the centipede monster, you're going to lose this life-and-death race, and then you'll get your shot at seeing hell from the wrong side of things."

Jude's dark grin slowly grows, resembling the man I met on that first night before he was a total dick. I turn and start running ahead before I forget he threatened me later that night.

"You're lucky I must be some type of giant bug repellent," I call over my shoulder.

None of them say anything in response to that. Which they are a little busy dodging more of those blades that I just run right through.

"Right now, I wish we had her ability," Jude growls as he slices through one of the blades just before it can take his head off.

By comparison his sword is tiny, but it has no trouble splitting the giant saw blade in half. He dives and rolls, putting his sword up and grabbing his two piece bo staff out like he's about to fight something.

The rest of the people who aren't them are lagging way behind, struggling with the reemergence of that giant bug from hell.

Again, that might be a literal reference.

I turn around just as Jude leaps into the air. A true giant beast—not exactly a man—with one eye and veiny skin is bringing his fist down.

Jude spins in the air, coming down with just one part of the bo staff,

hitting the monster in the face so hard he flies backwards. Dirt scatters into the air, causing some of the fog to lift and make room.

Tingles spread over me as Ezekiel runs right through me, launching himself into the air and coming down with his sword. It slashes the cyclops's chest, spilling blood everywhere, and then Jude shoves his hand into the fresh hole.

My mouth goes slack as the giant's eye bulges, and his body turns to ash that Jude breaks through. He walks away like it's a common occurrence.

They slice through about five more of those, and Jude keeps turning them to ash.

A shot of fire launches out, almost connecting with Kai's head, and my hand flies up on instinct. The fire diverts, shooting backwards. I hear screams in the background and grimace, but I drop my hold on the fire the second Kai is out of the path.

The fire shoots through me, and I run out to see Kai's jaw hard while he studies me.

"Feel free to start sharing some gratitude when I save your lives," I grumble, passing through him and the wall behind him.

It's all dirt and bugs and holey canals where creatures live, as I run through the wall they'll have to go all the way around. Surely they can survive while I scout ahead.

Just as I burst through to the other side, my stomach sinks. I can't see them at first, but I sense their dark presence. Things become more obvious as I stare at the walls, seeing the subtle differences in the rocks.

Ten men at least.

I turn and run back, catching the guys before they're about to come around the corner.

"Stop!" I shout, and the four of them come to an abrupt halt.

It surprises me so much that they listen that I almost forget they're waiting on me to tell them *why* I just screamed stop.

"At least ten men are waiting to ambush someone, likely the four of you because of that conspiracy stuff you were spilling on about."

The horn to announce deaths blows four times, as though it wanted to make this moment more ominous.

"They blend in perfectly with the walls. There could be more that I didn't see," I go on.

"Chameleons," Jude says to the other guys.

"There's only one reason why upper level assassins would be in the gauntlet," Ezekiel groans.

Jude puts his two pieces of his bo staff together to create the long, shimmering metal stick, and he spins it in his hand as a dark smile curves his lips.

"I think we can handle ten of them," Kai says as he pulls out his swords, not his sai.

"There could be more," I remind him.

I'm ignored. I guess they're done listening to me.

"On one," Ezekiel says with a grin that matches Jude's.

"One?" I ask, confused.

They all dart through me or by me, and my breath rushes out as I turn to chase them. Apparently I said the magic word.

Jude is already throwing the bo staff through the chest of one as he breaks away from the wall, coming after him.

His eyes widen as the staff breaks through the skin, and he drops to the ground, a look of pure disbelief on his face. Then his gaze lands on me as the life drains from his eyes.

He holds my stare, and I freeze, certain he sees me. But as he collapses to

the side, lifeless, I return my attention to the guys. An awed breath escapes me at how they seem to fight like they can read each other's minds.

Jude ducks as Kai swings a sword, decapitating two of the men rushing Jude from behind. Jude snatches his bo staff out of the other guy's chest, and spins it, putting it through the neck of one guy who is still hidden against the wall.

Ezekiel takes a hard hit to his side, but he immediately slams a sword through the guy's chest and twists it as the guy screams in pain. His head dips as Gage's sword swings by, catching the throat of another attacker.

The four of them work like their own well-oiled army. I prop up and watch, unable to look away.

A man runs right through me, charging Ezekiel from behind, but Gage throws his sword, catching the guy in the face.

He drops, and I frown.

"I thought these were upper level assassins," I state as the final one lands in a heap. More than ten. Definitely more than ten.

"They are," Ezekiel says as he jerks his sword out of a man's body that is pinned to the rocks.

The body drops lifelessly as he wipes the blood off his sword.

"The reason they want us dead so badly, is because we're far stronger than we should be. And if we can get into the underworld, we might be able to stop the coup before there's a purge," Jude answers as he starts stalking down the gauntlet again.

We're now way ahead of the other competitors.

"There's a moment between life and death when people seem to be able to see me. Other than that guy I touched. Clearly upper level royalty can't even see me unless that moment occurs, since the heirs couldn't. So I'm assuming my touch had something to do with that one guy, because aside from the four

of you, he's the only one who has seen me outside of the in-between moment of life and death," I state more to myself than anyone.

I'm used to talking aloud to them, expecting them not to answer because they can't hear me.

I'm surprised when Kai speaks. "It would make sense if you're suspended in the same state. But it doesn't explain how you're getting stronger instead of weaker."

"Maybe I'm just really hard to kill," I suggest.

A sword slices through me as if summoned by that brazen proclamation, and my eyes widen as a man charges by, that sword aimed at Jude.

He dispatches him quickly, and my heart slows down again.

"Eyes open in case we missed more," Kai says, rotating his sword in his hand as he looks around, still walking.

I move way out ahead, growing queasy when I see a massive pit of moving lava blocking the path. The volcanic river that floats through probably isn't very inviting.

The guys join me at the ledge, viewing the hundred or more feet in front of us.

"Can't go around this," Jude curses. "We'd have to leave the gauntlet to do that."

"How the hell do they expect us to cross this? What if it's more hellfire instead of eternal flame?" Ezekiel growls.

I can just walk on top of it, since I'm weightless. I move out onto it, trying to study it better. As I tap my foot, I find all four of them studying me.

"What?" I ask, feeling uncomfortable being the subject of all those intense stares.

I guess that shows I was an idiot to think I could handle an intense foursome. Well, *fivesome*—whatever that is.

I still want to try it. Just not with these assholes. I saw some other quad teams up there who looked fierce but still high on the list of sexy. Maybe I can attach myself to them and grow whole enough to finally get my fantasy.

I bet their Three wouldn't even be selfish.

"Is it hellfire or eternal flame? One we'll survive. The other we won't," Gage states dryly.

I look down and back up. "How would I know? I can't feel anything physical."

Ezekiel runs a hand through his hair. "They'd have had to put hell stone up here to hold all this lava. The fire beds would have taken a while to prepare, but something of this caliber would take much longer, and it would have drained the individual a large amount. How badly do they really want us dead?" he asks the other three.

"They knew there'd be no way across without running out of the gauntlet or siphoning. Both would disqualify us and likely cost us our lives. What happens when dark angels who never died before finally do die? What if that's what all this is about, and they *need* us to die?" Gage asks.

"If anyone cares, I vote you stay there while I try to channel enough protective mojo to knock some of this away or something."

They ignore me, since they likely know that's a last ditch effort.

"I doubt anyone could want us dead this badly," Kai says, deciding to risk it.

"No!" I shout too late as he steps onto the fire.

It happens so slow and so fast, all at once. The fire rushes up his leg, and a feral sound of agony explodes from him. The guys rush to grab him, just as the lava evaporates, a path around us quickly being carved out and stretching across the fiery lake.

The fire is still licking up Kai's leg, and I dive, landing on him. The

flames extinguish along his leg, and he roars that same inhumanly sound again as his body tenses and contorts with excruciating pain.

I push off him, my eyes tracking the lava that continues to retreat as though someone is peeling it away now.

None of that power is coming from me. That's way above my fear-induced, what-will-happen-this-time, beginner's level. It's an intricate and complex power that hums through me and makes me envious, almost covetous.

I have to blink a few times to keep from going into a rage about it. It makes no sense, since I'm really grateful someone is helping out.

I whirl around, finding a familiar redhead perched on a rock like it's her favorite seat in the house, as she chews a piece of gum around a smile.

Lilith.

Why the hell did she just save them?

The guys start carrying Kai, rushing across before the devil's eldest daughter changes her mind. I watch her, even as she never sees me. She stands and spins in a circle, twirling her hair around her fingers as she walks away with an exaggerated hip shake.

I turn around, watching as the lava starts closing back in, slowly at first, but steadily growing speed the longer she's away.

My gaze snaps back to see them running faster now. Jude turns and grabs Kai, putting him over his shoulder and running behind them, but losing a little too much ground.

The other two turn to grab them, and launch them way ahead. By some miracle, they manage to make it across just in time, and all of them collapse a great distance away from the lava.

"Energy sucking fucking rocks," Jude groans, arching his back like he's in pain.

“They don’t just want us dead; they want us fucking tortured too,” Kai bites out, his leg still charred and slow to heal.

“I’ve seen him slice a thumb off with one of his soul sucking blades, and the damn thing healed back immediately. What’s taking it so long this time?” I ask aloud, again forgetting they can hear me now.

“Hellfire,” Ezekiel answers, kneeling to rip the jeans up and away from the worst part of the leg. “It’ll take days for this to heal. We still have to cross over the last ridge, that will likely have lethal monsters, and dragging him up there is going to take a lot more energy than those rocks left us with.”

“Lilith never bestows a gift without offering a curse with it. It’s how she maintains balance,” Jude says as he tears his shirt off and starts putting more pressure on Kai’s leg when he bleeds through the first one.

“She wants us to have to choose to attempt to make it by dragging him to the line, knowing there are only twenty places available. We might all die if we’re slowed down too much. Or we could leave Kai behind so we can occupy three of those spots and ensure we survive, even if it means sacrificing his life,” Ezekiel goes on.

My heart sinks.

“Is there a way to speed up the healing?” I ask, getting closer and kneeling beside his leg.

He hisses out a sound that tells me he really doesn’t want me this close right now. Since he hates me and all.

“No, not in here, and we can’t waste anymore time. Tie it off and cut it off. It’ll grow back in a couple of weeks. We have time before the second trials. It’ll make it easier on him that way. The hellfire hurts worse than amput—”

Gage’s words cut off as I run my hand along the wound, tears in my eyes for no reason at all. I really don’t like Three. He doesn’t like me. But it still

feels like my heart is breaking.

So much pain.

It's almost like I can feel it too.

I look down as the skin tries tugging together under every swipe of my hand, and my spine stiffens. My hand freezes against his leg, and he hisses out another sound as the skin starts to slowly pull together, the charred pieces breaking apart like brittle fragments hiding new skin.

It's a little slow, but it keeps going, and he sucks in a breath of what sounds like relief as his body relaxes. It's not completely healed, but the burns are gone, and the skin is healing faster on its own now.

He darts a gaze to me—a mix of wary curiosity and guarded appreciation, but it's gone before I can be sure.

“She put the fire out, and she healed his leg. I'm starting to think she really is a damn protective spirit to balance out the scales that have been tipped against us,” Ezekiel says as he studies me with narrowed eyes.

One corner of my mouth tugs in a grin.

“Let's run then discuss what she is or isn't,” Jude says as he helps Kai to his feet.

Kai is able to run now, not slowing anyone down. I look around for the woman in red, curious if she's still watching. Fortunately, no one is.

I don't really want anyone knowing they have a protective spirit.

That'll mean more people than them trying to figure out a way to get rid of me.

I look back and quickly cover the same ground they just made in half the time. Kai looks over at me as I run beside him, but I don't meet his gaze.

If he's nice right now, I'll rant about what a jerk he's been. If he looks at me like I'm still gum on his shoe, I might just let them all die the next time and not give a damn.

Either way, it's not a good time for either.

Running through Ezekiel and stealing some of those tingles, I keep going until they finally stop, heaving for air.

"What're you doing? We still have to climb over the ridge," I remind them.

"We're lucky we haven't come across any hell beasts yet, but we're about to go up a ridge that is notorious for them. Those stones stole a lot of our energy, so we need a break before we climb that thing."

My eyes lift, seeing the lava evaporate, and then sensing lives before I see them. A massive spiel of people who were likely trapped there are being let through, but this time it's the Gemini twins who are atop a rock and grinning.

"I'm not sure how many are going to survive, but I strongly suggest running again just in case it's more than twenty," I point out.

"Shit," Kai groans, turning to start climbing.

A surprise burst of tingles happen down below, and my eyes dart down to see a hand poking out of my pubic bone.

"What are you doing?" I ask Jude, knowing without a doubt those dark tingles are his.

"Seeing if you somehow offer a power charge too. Unfortunately, the answer is no."

"Then can you withdraw your hand? At the rate I've been saving your lives, I'll be powering up anytime now, surely. I'd rather not turn whole while your hand is in my vagina."

Gage grins, and Jude laughs under his breath as he withdraws his hand. I stare at the ridge before us. It's really like a thousand feet of mountainside that mostly goes straight up with a few ledges where you can hike instead of climb for a bit.

Already I see something scurrying into a dark cave on the side, a long tail

whipping behind it a second before it darts out of sight.

A chill runs along my spine. Not cool.

That looked way too snake-like.

“What kind of monsters are we talking about?” I ask them as they start ascending, looking for footholds and such.

The horn of death wails loudly in the background, announcing a lot of fallen competitors. I suppose the Geminis are a little crueler than Lilith.

“What are the point of these trials? Other than to cull the weak? To show everyone how cold they can be?” I ask, turning to start scaling the mountain beside them.

“It’s another balance system. They can’t have the weak. The weak will betray far faster than the strong. They want to know who sticks with their team. They want to see how many will cheat. It’s called hell for a reason. Not the most trustworthy applicants are applying for these jobs,” Kai explains through strain as he hauls himself up.

It’s way easier for me to climb. I’m not pulling a muscled body up the oddly angled side.

“But some will always have favorites they want to succeed, because they usually already know the ones they don’t trust,” Ezekiel adds.

Another long tail whips over my head, and an embarrassing squeal shoots out of me before I can help it. It’s just a tiny lizard. In my head, that tail was forty feet long.

“Good thing you look like a leather-wearing badass today,” Jude says from above me.

“Fully equipped with unusable weapons,” Kai adds.

“Fake it until you make it. I’ve saved your lives more than once. Speaking of which, why was that girl going to stab one of you? That’s breaking the rules.”

“Like we said, they want to know who will disrespect tradition. Bad applicants don’t make it past purgatory.”

The clang of a sword has my gaze darting up, and I get a little queasy when I see the huge lizard snapping at Jude, raising a scorpion-like tail like it’s about to strike.

“No!” I shout, just as Kai launches his sword into the air.

The beast screeches and darts away, scurrying into a hole as the sword flies up.

“Yelling brings more,” Kai growls.

My eyes dart around in a panic, and I look around, worrying the entire climb where the rest are.

Screams from below me have me looking down—terrible idea, by the way.

I get dizzy as I stare below, watching the monsters pile all over the men and women, ripping things to shreds.

“At least it called them down there instead of to us,” Gage says, a hint of sadistic delight in his tone.

I’m busy staring down still, unmoving. I never knew I had an issue with being on the side of the mountain until this moment. Then again, it is the first time I’ve found myself in this predicament.

For a moment, I don’t realize I’m falling until the world is whirring by me. My eyes come up in a panic as I see Kai grab for me, his hand slipping through my body on my way down.

In the next breath, I’m suddenly clinging to the wall again like a wet cat dangling above water, my whole body shaking as I clutch it for dear life.

Jude’s chuckle comes right beside me when I see it’s him I’ve just landed by. I really like this being able to move without actually moving thing right now, even if it does leave me a dizzy and disoriented.

“A protective spirit who’s afraid of heights,” Jude mutters under his breath, still laughing a little as he pulls himself over a ledge.

I zap there too, happy that I seem to have that down pat, at the moment.

“It’s more of an aversion to being on the side of a mountain than it is the actual height,” I correct.

“We’re almost there. The second we reach the top, stay close. They kick us out when we cross the finish line,” Gage says as he leaps over the edge, joining us.

The other two join us as well.

At least they gave me a warning.

The mountain turns into more of a hiking trail that I managed to glimpse from the ground earlier, but it’s a lot higher up than I realized.

We cut through a huge forest I never would have known was up here, keeping a quick pace. I warily cast a glance in the direction of every sound.

I follow closely, since I have no idea what a finish line even looks like. I doubt there will be a bright red ribbon to run through.

May have to jump through a fire hoop or something.

Something loud roars, and the guys start moving a lot faster as the trees behind us start shaking fiercely.

It’s like a spike of adrenaline hits them, and they move twice as fast, causing me to struggle to keep up.

I see trees flying up as something massive barrels through the forest, a hint of dark fur peeking through the top of the tree-line as we start hiking a steep incline.

That’s not good.

A hellacious roar almost deafens me even in spirit form.

Just as it crashes through the trees and I get a glimpse of a mouthful of teeth, tingles shoot through my hand, and a white light blasts.

Chapter 10

Stumbling into Ezekiel's bedroom, I look around. I'm not sure how I just ended up here, but a sense of panic hits me when I don't sense the boys.

Then their presence washes over me, and I relax.

"Where'd she go?" I hear Kai ask.

"Did she make it?" Ezekiel this time.

"I grabbed her hand," Jude tells someone.

I start to go to them, then realize I'm actually a little drained. Emotionally drained that is.

I'll wait until tomorrow for the inquisition into all I did today and what nefarious reasoning might have led to it. Or maybe they think I'm their protective spirit now, but doubtful. Jude even mocked it himself.

I'll save the verbal sparring for tomorrow, because saving their lives has quite honestly exhausted me. I've never been exhausted before.

I move through the walls until I reach the third staircase that takes me to the west wing.

Humming softly, I walk down the beautiful halls that go unappreciated. I'd planned on making my bedroom one of the ones on this side, just to show this side some love.

There's one with a beautiful view of a rose garden so lavish that it's fit for a king. It was going to be my room if I ever turned whole. They could visit me and sleep there when they wanted.

Back in fantasy land.

In hindsight, it was rather silly to think I'd just be part of the group and fill all their needs.

It's the first time I've been able to stay in this room past ten minutes

without revisiting them to put my eyes on them. I soak it in, giving into the illusion once more of having the four of them in here.

All of us a tangle of naked limbs and whispered words...

Still sated with just their presence nearby, I spend the rest of the evening in my fantasy room, kept company by the dust and occasional creepy spider.

By the time it grows late and I assume they're all in bed, I make my way through the quiet house.

Unable to help myself, I poke my head in Kai's door, and mutter, "Good night."

Just as I almost get my head pulled back through, I hear, "Good night."

I'm not sure why my heart acts like it's way more excited than it should be. I withdraw completely, trying not to read too much into it.

Moving to Gage's room, I stick my head through the door, and say, "Good night."

"Good night," finds me before I get my head out of his door, and a small smile curves my lips.

They're a little late, but at least I don't feel as miserable about being tethered to them at the moment.

Poking my head in Jude's door, I whisper, "Good night."

I wait for a moment, unable to see even an outline of him in the jet-black room, and then blow out a breath. I guess two out of three is better than I realistically expected.

When I turn around, I squeal a little, because Jude is leaned against the wall in the hallway, his hands in his jean pockets as he studies me.

His black T-shirt smells like it just came out of the dryer, and his hair is still damp like he's just left the shower.

"The spell has been replaced. It should last a while before someone manages to drain it," he tells me.

“Guess you couldn’t get rid of me like you hoped, huh?” I ask through a dark smile.

“Didn’t try. It’s to keep out harmful intent. Not actual beings. It’s a much more costly upgrade,” he tells me with a shrug.

I say nothing, just stand here awkwardly for a moment.

“You can stay away from us longer now, can’t you?” he asks.

“Seems to be a major perk from my last level-up. All I need is the comfort of your presence to stay anchored now. Major bonus for you guys with your privacy.” I walk by him, and he laughs under his breath.

“Is it necessary to prance around in outfits you know we like to see on women, when you know we can’t touch you?” he calls to my back.

I walk a little higher in my tall boots and go-go dancer skirt that shows hints of my ass with each step.

“I’ve learned I’m an unapologetic tease when men are assholes,” I retort, moving toward Ezekiel’s room.

My outfit changes into a thin, pretty nightgown that stops at my knees.

Before I can poke my head through Ezekiel’s door, Jude is suddenly behind me, his tingles riding all down the length of my back as his lips make my ear tingle.

“Good night,” he whispers, then he’s gone, and I breathe out shakily while fighting a smile.

Instead of poking my head into Ezekiel’s door, I pass through it. Maybe I shouldn’t care that he’s violently thrashing in the bed like he’s in physical pain. But I do.

I move to the bed, planning to lie beside him as I have hundreds of times. As soon as I’m on the bed, my hand goes to his side, resting there.

Those tingles are more pronounced than usual, and he goes instantly still, his body relaxing as he seems to drift off into a more peaceful sleep. My lips

curl in a grin.

I never see him sleep peacefully. Even under the influence of that drug, his face was scrunched in agony. Peering over him, I see a calm, serene look on his face as his breathing evens out.

I start to pull away, and his face hardens. Curious, I place my hand on him once more, and he falls back into a peaceful sleep.

Since there's a new spell in place for protection, I'm a little less on alert, but I'm still wary. Each sound captures my attention until I can isolate what exactly it is.

“Good night,” I whisper to Ezekiel.

I shut my eyes, pretending I can sleep as well. I wonder what rest would feel like.

Those tingles continue to spread when he rolls over, his arm crossing through me.

The longer I feel those sweet sensations, the more relaxed I become. So relaxed, that when I close my eyes again, they almost feel heavy.

Chapter 11

The sound of a groan startles me awake. Awake? I don't sleep, so why am I jerking awake to sunlight when it was clearly dark just a second ago.

My head aches a little as something tickles my cheek. I dust it off, feeling the swipe of my fingers, and jerking my hand back to stare at it in horror.

Eyes widening, I study the very whole hand in front of me, then take in the very new sensations surrounding me.

Warmth. Softness. Hardness. A slight chill in the air. The whisper of wind rushing over my skin. But I concentrate primarily on the warmth, because a large, heavy hand is spanned across my stomach, the heat of it carrying through the thin gown that is actually real now.

Soft. Silky. Smooth.

I moan before I can stop myself because of all the sensations washing over me at once.

I can fucking feel...

And I had no idea what I was missing.

My legs glide over the sheets, feeling the exquisite softness beneath me. It's absolutely amazing. Almost overwhelming.

The hand on my stomach tenses, slowly squeezing just enough to wrinkle my gown. Then Ezekiel's head pops up, his eyes widen on me, and those gold flakes almost dance with excitement.

That warmth floods me, and something akin to a dull ache moves between my thighs as I try to get my rapid breathing under control. I only thought I knew what arousal was until this moment.

It's a consuming, burning desire that swarms you, making you desperate for touch like I never imagined possible. And if he doesn't touch me

everywhere—every inch of my skin—soon, I’m afraid I might actually cry.

His eyes do a quick sweep of my body, and a dark, daring grin tugs at one corner of his mouth before his eyes come back up.

His hand darts out, and I scream, just knowing he’s about to kill me on my first day being whole. Instead, he grabs the front of my gown and rips it down to my waist, baring my breasts to him.

Sensation washes over me, stealing my scream as my nipples harden almost painfully, and that ache intensifies as my body continues to heat.

I suck in a breath as he suddenly comes down on top of me, and shoves the rest of the gown up. Without warning, his lips come down on mine, hard and demanding as my eyes cross and I arch against him, needing contact. It feels like a jolt of electricity shoots through me when his daring tongue slips in and starts doing incredible things, electrifying every dormant nerve so that it wakes up and soaks in every feeling for the first time.

I’m moaning like an idiot just from him kissing me, grinding against nothing as I try to get as close as possible, touching everything at once. My hands glide over his strong, smooth back, and he reaches between us, his hand brushing my pussy as he rips down the front of his boxers.

The door flies open, and I jump, panicking a little as it crashes into the wall. A squeal pops out of me like a surprise hiccup, and I drop through the bed, the floor, and almost drop through the next floor before I remember how to stop.

I lie on the ground, panting heavily, Ezekiel’s touch still ghosting over me as a teasing reminder of what it’s like to actually feel. The thunderous sound of rushing footsteps come barreling down the stairs. I’m still dazed and confused, staring at my mostly transparent hand as my entire body throbs with need I can’t sate in this form.

I never had any idea just a kiss could be so drugging.

“Fucking get off me,” I hear Ezekiel bark.

“What the hell was going on? How did she turn whole?” Jude is snapping.

They all swing their gazes to me the second they finally reach the room where I am.

“What the hell is going on?” Kai asks, his eyes narrowing on me.

“I...I don't sleep. Somehow I fell asleep next to Ezekiel, because he quit thrashing around when I touched him,” I babble.

Ezekiel shoves through Kai and Gage, moving toward me with eyes so gold it looks like his natural color.

He makes a grab for me, but his hand passes right through me, igniting those tingles that only serve to tease me more now.

The gown is still ripped down the front, and Jude is staring very obviously at where it's still hanging above my hips as well.

“Just what the hell were you going to do with her, E? You know you can't fuck her without us. All that bonding stuff or whatever,” Kai drawls.

“I could have fucked her,” he growls, looking over at them.

Confusion crosses their faces.

“First morning wood of my entire life,” he says, his eyes moving back to mine as frustration creases his brow.

“What's going on?” I ask, imagining a pair of leggings and a long T-shirt that appears on my body, reeling back their distraction as I jump to my feet, still a little high on the rush of feeling so much at once.

“We can't have a woman unless we share her,” Kai says, his jaw grinding as he looks at me then to Ezekiel. “We were impotent before—”

“Clearly not the thing to tell a woman,” Gage drawls.

“—but after we met,” Kai goes on, not acting like he was interrupted, “we felt the bond form. We've learned it's a quad thing. There are several groups of four throughout the trials every year, and they experience the same little

issue. They also always have the worst obstacles thrown at them before they can make it into the trials. We want to know why.”

“Sidetracked,” Jude butts in. “The point is, we can’t enjoy a woman, unless we enjoy her together. It’s part of the bond. None of us have ever had a woman on our own.”

“So if you were a boy band, you’d be One Erection,” I state, rambling because they have me nervous.

They don’t even acknowledge that. Kai eyes Ezekiel, who is straining to refrain from touching me, while the other two just glare at me.

“You’re sure?” Kai asks him, not sounding convinced or concerned.

“Fucking positive. Turn whole again,” Ezekiel spits out, turning that last part on me like an order.

“Gee, with that attitude, I’ll hop right on it,” I grumble, moving over to a couch. “You’re really ruining the first time I’ve felt touch like that by freaking out so much. All of you.”

“Touching him all night might have had something to do with it,” Kai suggests, his eyes raking over me differently for once.

“If we get her whole, I’m going first. You have no idea how worked up I am right now,” Ezekiel says, running a hand over the back of his neck as he starts pacing. “It’s never been this bad before.”

Well, that makes me a hint smug. Especially since he prefers redheads. But he’s also a little too scary now.

“Or you could fuck your hand,” I point out, frowning as I take a seat on the ground again. “I’m not sure I want you unleashed on me with all your strength while I’m whole. What if you break me?”

Ezekiel stops pacing to turn and arch an eyebrow at me.

“Touch us. Just try it,” Gage says as he kneels between my legs and looms over me.

“We’ll give you everything you’ve been fantasizing about if you get whole,” Jude says next to my ear.

When did he get behind me? And why does it sound like he is most certainly using his liar-voice?

Hands move over me, through me, stirring all those tingles to life. Nothing happens though. I feel like these savage beasts are trying to lure me out so they can kill me, which has my self-preservation skills likely hosing up my new level-up.

“Shit,” Gage groans when nothing happens for a while.

“I’m worked up and I didn’t even get to have my damn hands on her,” Jude says with a huff as he walks off.

“No erections without each other? So how do you get worked up?” I ask, trying to distract them.

“Usually, we want sex but can’t get aroused on our own. A date with the hand only works in the presence of each other, and it’s not as much fun without a—”

The doorbell rings, which is a first for me. No one ever rings the doorbell. I didn’t know we had one.

Gage jogs out of the room, and Ezekiel stalks out behind him. Jude takes a seat beside me, his arm going behind my head. I lean back on it like he’s doing it to offer me comfort, though I highly doubt it.

When they return, Ezekiel walks over, holding two envelopes. Gage has two as well, handing one off to Kai.

Ezekiel hands over the other one, and he sits down really close to me, our sides touching and creating that tingle.

Jude and Kai exchange a look before casting a glance at our connection. Slowly, Jude withdraws his arm from around me, eyes still suspicious as he opens the envelope.

“So it’s official,” Jude says, closing the envelope as a calculated grin plays on his lips.

“What’s official?” I ask, confused.

Frankly, I need a distraction so I don’t sink into a depression about finally being able to feel something and having it ripped away. It’s much better to not know what you’re missing than to be tortured with just a teasing touch.

“We’ve been invited to the royal palace of the underworld. We’ll be collected in one month,” Kai answers, putting the invitation to the side.

“Why a month?” Still needing that distraction.

“Because it takes time to set up the next obstacle, and they make it as hard as possible for the twenty competitors based on how well they did in the first two rounds,” Ezekiel answers, not budging an inch from my side.

Gage studies Ezekiel, the way he’s unconsciously drawing so close that I’m passing through his body.

“Two other quad sets made it through to the next round as well,” Gage says as he closes his invitation and puts it aside.

“So twelve out of twenty are part of a quad group? Why is this done by teams? Someone needs to start at the beginning and explain all this to me,” I grumble.

“It’s done by teams because you’re going to be a part of a larger team,” Ezekiel says immediately. “You’ll become one of the elite who has access to Lucifer on occasion, and—”

“And there are some things that don’t need to be told,” Jude interrupts, arching an eyebrow at Ezekiel.

Ezekiel’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t say anything else. I roll my eyes, because that means I’m still not trusted. I half suspect they find my vagina to also be evil now.

“Okay, so what can you tell me? Since my level-up, I can see and hear

things in Purgatory, unlike before when I didn't even know where we were going because focusing was so hard. And you guys never really talk about any of this here," I go on.

"We used to. There's no reason to discuss things unless we have new developments now," Kai says with a shrug.

"We've been working toward this goal for a couple of centuries now," Ezekiel goes on.

"Centuries?" I ask, my eyes widening.

"Really? Little much information," Gage tells him, narrowing his eyes.

Ezekiel flips him off. "We told her the highlights in Purgatory."

"Highlights and details are two very different things," Kai points out.

Ezekiel looks at me. "A few centuries ago, we were all four born to different mortal families involved with the underworld in some way—imps, lawyers, and some media—"

"For fuck's sake, E, not that much information," Jude says incredulously, looking at Ezekiel like he's lost his mind.

Ezekiel ignores him, and my gaze returns to him as he continues.

"By twenty-six, we were all going a little crazy. Actually crazy. Hearing things, seeing things, always paranoid we were being targeted or watched. I was ahead of them by several decades, and though I'd stopped aging, I wasn't really immortal."

"Ezekiel!" Kai snaps.

Ezekiel doesn't even glance in his direction. His eyes stay fixed on mine.

"That's the reason my dreams are the worst. The madness tries to return when I let my guard down. When we sleep, the bond is the weakest for some reason. It's why Kai struggles to sleep. It's why Jude is so pissed most of the time. Gage may seem to sleep soundly, but he's frozen in the places his mind visits, and he becomes a prisoner until his eyes—"

Gage is suddenly grabbing Ezekiel by the shirt and ripping him up from the couch. “That’s enough!” Gage barks in his face.

Ezekiel shoves him off, and then suddenly they’re tackling each other, fists flying.

“Stop!” I snap, jumping up from the couch.

An ache lances through me when Ezekiel takes a hit to his face. And sickening dread surges when Ezekiel hits Gage so hard that blood flies.

Kai and Jude take their sweet fucking time coming to break them up, both of them glaring at me as they struggle to pull them apart.

“You don’t get to fucking tell her *our* secrets. That’s a group decision!” Gage snaps at him.

Ezekiel shrugs Jude off him, and without another word, he turns and stalks out of the room.

Three pairs of accusatory eyes turn and narrow on me.

Ah, great. Well, having them be semi-nice was fun while it lasted.

“What’d you do to him?” Gage growls.

“I told you she was singling him out because he didn’t find her to be a threat. Now she’s tearing us down by using our connection against us,” Kai states.

“How’s your leg, Kai?” I ask with a tight smile, my eyes dipping to the fully healed leg that *I* helped heal. Somehow. “Was I a threat when I was scrambling to save your life so you all wouldn’t die? I certainly wasn’t trying to separate the four of you then or pit you against each other. Wouldn’t it have made sense to do it then?”

“You’d know you couldn’t be so obvious about it. You’ve been studying us for who knows how long?” he growls.

“Five-and-a-half years I’ve been studying you. It’s not like the four of you told me before today that you couldn’t get it up without each other in the

room. As you stated, there are some things you don't feel the need to discuss after so much time together. I only heard what you shared with each other. It was usually dark jokes, women, and some killing I witnessed. That's about it."

He starts to speak, but I hold my hand up.

"You know what? Forget it. You can't touch me. None of you can. Whatever happened this morning was probably another form of torture to show me what I've been missing, because it's become clear to me that whatever I am is a punishment of some sort. Why else would I be stuck with the four of you?"

I turn to walk up the stairs, but Gage is suddenly in front of me.

"Leave Ezekiel alone. The last thing he needs is you tearing him away from us when our lives are at stake. You want to prove you care? Fucking care by staying away from him."

I pass through him without another word. Just to be spiteful, I almost walk through Ezekiel's door, but I stop myself.

For five years, I've stalked their lives. Today is the first time I've ever seen them fight.

A sick feeling forms in the pit of my stomach, and I bite back an angry curse as I spin and stalk away, moving toward the west wing and my self-proclaimed bedroom.

Right now, I really wish I could touch things, just so I could slam a freaking door.

I could hang out in my room, but instead, I zap myself back, swaying a little but not as bad as usual. Like the stalker I used to be, I hide out in the room beside them as they argue.

They all, of course, went to Ezekiel's room.

"I get it. I get the temptation that would present. But remember what

makes us the way we are,” Kai is saying.

“You don’t have a clue what it felt like, and I don’t know how to explain it without sounding completely fucking insane,” Ezekiel grumbles.

“You turned on us. Do you see the problem here?” Gage asks.

A harsh breath follows that. “Fuck!” Ezekiel shouts before something crashes to the ground.

“I don’t know if she’s here to sabotage us or just here with some really bad fucking timing, but I do know we can’t risk her severing our bond,” Jude tells them.

“So we keep our hands off her. We let her hang around, since she has saved us a time or two. Until we really know what the hell is going on and why she’s attached to us, we have to be more cautious,” Kai says on a long sigh. “Trust me, I get wanting to trust her. When she took away the pain left behind from the hellfire, all I wanted to do was fuck her, kiss her, touch her. Never wanted anything so bad in all my life.”

“But usually the things we want despite the consequences is a trick straight from hell,” Jude goes on.

Great.

Absolutely terrific.

One step forward, eighty steps back. It’s the status quo for my relationship with them.

This time, when I return to my room, I don’t wish to be able to slam the door. Because I’m starting to think they may be right.

They fought. Because of me.

Maybe I’m not the blessing to them I thought I was. Maybe I’m their curse.

Perspective is a real bitch.

Chapter 12

After a week of avoiding them, even though they've remained at the house, I've gotten used to not having my eyes on them. It was a rough withdrawal, but I still managed.

The media room TV was accidentally left on when they watched a movie a few nights ago. As soon as they left, I quickly occupied a seat and watched the next movie on.

I've never gotten to watch a whole movie without them in here, because they always remember to turn it off, usually. I'm liking my newfound freedom a little.

But for two days, I've been counting down the minutes for the movie that is on right now.

I'm even dressed for the occasion, sitting in the front row, wishing I could eat popcorn. That's the first thing I'm eating when I'm whole.

Just sayin'.

I've been on the edge of my seat the entire movie, glued to the screen like my life depends on it.

Just as the sad, lonely little fella gets screwed over by the ones he thought were his friends, and they get turned into literal jackasses, the door to the media room is thrown open, and the sound of laughter fills the room.

Speaking of jackasses...

I look behind me as all four of them come to an abrupt stop, all eyes on me like they knew I was in here. Ezekiel's eyes have lost their golden hue over the week, and he looks away from me like he's making sure not to fall into my sticky trap of doom and manipulation or whatever.

My feminine wiles have these guys on cock-block overdrive.

Considering I was here first and have been dying to watch this movie since I saw it advertised, I turn back around and concentrate on what's going on.

“What the actual hell are you watching?” Jude finally asks me.

Damn bipolar, annoying, self-centered, arrogant, distrusting pricks.

All of them.

Now they're just being rude for talking during the movie.

Ignoring them, I try to focus on the movie and nothing else. I've waited too long to—

“And what the fuck are you wearing?” Kai asks as he walks to be in front of the huge screen, his head cutting off my view.

I try to peer around him, but he deliberately steps into my view again.

Blowing out a frustrated breath because I'm near the big climax, I glare at him. “What exactly do you want? And can you hurry up and say it so I can get back to my movie before it ends?”

The screen pauses, and I look back as Jude's lips twitch, the remote in his hand.

“Seriously...what are you wearing?” Kai asks again, his eyebrows up as he stares at my dressy, blue bow tied at the top of my yellow shirt that is buttoned all the way up.

Jude steps forward, his eyes scanning over my red shorts and red suspenders. Don't forget the wooden Dutch shoes.

When Gage joins the gawking fest, he focuses primarily on my yellow hat and bright red feather that is proudly sticking out.

“This is a movie that is resonating very deeply with me, and it needed the proper outfit to enjoy it with,” I dutifully explain, hoping they just leave me in peace.

“Pinocchio is a movie that resonates very deeply with you?” Ezekiel asks

from far behind me, probably cautioned not to get too close so I can't whammy him with my evil vagina powers.

Evil. Isn't that ironic, considering they're literally trying to save the devil. Take away the D in devil and what are you left with?

"Does your nose grow when you tell a lie? Because that would be helpful to us," Gage states dryly.

"He wants to be a real boy. I want to be a real girl," I point out, even though it really should be obvious.

They exchange a look that makes me feel like they might believe I'm crazy. Of course I'm crazy. Five and a half years of not being seen or heard, then getting treated like a disease when I can be seen and heard...anyone would be crazy.

"Is the outfit supposed to make all your dreams come true?" Kai asks incredulously.

"I have no idea," I say on a long sigh. "I've never seen the movie. I've yet to discover what, if anything, turns Pinocchio into a real boy."

"Spoiler alert, it's the blue fairy," Jude states with a smirk.

I cut my eyes on him, imagining the ways I'd like to kick his ass right now.

"Any chance you can help me find the blue fairy equivalent now that you've ruined my movie?" I ask him through gritted teeth.

"There's no such thing," he answers with a shrug, seeming to enjoy the fact he's pissed me off.

Their phones all start going off, which means a job.

Pulling my knees up to my chest, I silently fume.

"I'm not taking her anywhere in that outfit," Jude says as he disappears from sight.

Kai rolls his eyes and steps in front of me. I just glare up at him as I reach

out my hand, feeling the tips of my fingers swipe through his shirt just before he siphons.

We land in the middle of the graveyard, and the others start trying to catch the black shadows of souls that are racing away. Me? I decide to be a pain in the ass tonight, since they're assholes who ruined my movie for no reason.

Jude is my first target.

One of the souls dives for him, trying to invade his body, and I turn around in a Little Bo Peep outfit, sheep hook in hand and obnoxiously large bonnet on my head.

He stumbles, his eyes widening as his mouth twists in a cringe. The soul runs through him, and he curses as he doubles over. The soul is forced back out, and he swipes his bo staff, absorbing the soul until the metal lights up.

My next outfit is a cheerleader outfit, with my hair in pigtails. Midriff showing and short skirt barely covering my bare ass, I lift my pompoms in the air and start exaggerating a cheer.

"J! U! D! E! What's that spell?! Major dick, yes, sir-ree!" My cheer involves a one-finger salute.

Kai snorts, then curses me as he struggles to recover from his accidental burst of laughter.

I chase them through the streets, as they diligently avoid the humans, trying to capture the souls without being caught on film.

The humans can't see the souls, obviously.

"U-G-L-Y, you ain't got no alibi, you ugly, yeah, you're all ugly!" I cheer, appearing just in front of Gage, who runs through me, cursing me the entire time.

Switching to referee attire, I go to where Ezekiel is fighting hard against three particularly crafty souls that keep evading him. He takes a run and leaps to one side of the building, then flips to the building beside him, before

pushing off the second building when his feet hit, and finally lands on the first building's roof, managing to snag a soul in the process.

I zap myself up there, finding the dizziness fading with each time I do this. "Foul on the play!" I shout, startling him so much he trips before crashing through me.

"Damn it! What the hell is your problem?" he shouts to my back, before I zap myself back down to where Jude is.

I change my attire into a very skimpy bikini. Big sunglasses frame my face as I lie down and pretend I'm sunning under the moonlight, putting myself directly in the path of Jude.

He almost trips himself up, trying to avoid stepping on me, before finally remembering he can't actually step on me.

His foot swipes through my vagina as he races on, and I don't think that was an accident.

I give a little wave to Kai when I catch him staring for a minute. When a soul crashes into him during its attempt to escape Jude, I smirk.

Then I outright laugh a little when Jude also crashes into him while chasing the soul.

"What the fucking hell are you doing?" Gage snaps, standing over me.

"Careful, pretty boy. It looks like you're talking to yourself," I say as he looks up, seeing the homeless gawking at him and the others like they're all insane.

Grown men with weapons they're swinging at air and yelling at a girl no one else can see? Now who looks crazy?

A little triumphant grin toys with my lips.

Last year, he bought a very pretty girl a black, sheer slip of lingerie, and he had her wear it with some really sexy high heels.

That's what my next outfit is, and he stares down at me with intense, hard

eyes. There's almost a palpable energy between us when he reaches down and adjusts himself.

My lips curl in a knowing grin. He can get aroused easily with the others so close.

Why haven't I done this sooner? They've been cruel. So I should be as well.

"This just got interesting," I say to myself as Gage stalks off.

Score one for the phantom girl with no memory.

Chapter 13

“Are you trying to get us killed?” Gage snaps, throwing his swords to the ground as he stalks toward me.

I’m already dropping to the couch of our house, wearing nothing but some more sexy lingerie. I’m calling it their hit-list. All the things they requested girls wear is all I’m wearing from now on.

“Even when I’m saving your lives you apparently think I’m trying to get you killed, so I had an epiphany,” I state, shrugging.

“Your epiphany involved stupid outfits and distracting tactics when we’re chasing souls that could have escaped us tonight because of you?” Jude snaps, getting right in my face.

“No,” I say as I stand and pass through him, ignoring the tingles as I strut through the room with the lacy ensemble showing off all the goods.

As I pass through Gage, I notice Kai’s eyes hungrily raking over me, his breathing coming a little quicker. This was one of his favorite outfits on a girl, because when it was his turn, he bought this one several times for several different women.

“Over the years, I told you I perfected my fantasy,” I remind them.

“We’ve decided we’re never going to—”

I interrupt Kai, since it’s my turn to talk. “There are two types of people,” I say to him, and he narrows his eyes on me. “Those who listen, and those who merely wait for their turn to talk.”

My eyes move around the room.

“None of you are listeners. None of you care that I can’t change the channels on the TV, nor do you ever ask me if you can do something for me.”

“You never ask for anything,” Kai points out with a roll of his eyes.

“Exactly! I ask for nothing! And you inconsiderate assholes never bother to take that into consideration. I don’t even have a light on in my bedroom. I’ve been dying to watch that movie, and *you* ruined it,” I rant on, darting an annoyed gaze at Jude.

His lips merely twitch because he’s an unapologetic dick.

“And therefore, my epiphany has been that none of you deserve me. You can look. You can fantasize. Like I’ve had to. Try to bring home a woman, and I’ll make farting noises while wearing a dolphin costume and acting like I’m humping each of you. See how long you can hold an erection then,” I carry on, feeling a little proud of that threat as they all eye me like the psychotic girl in the room. “But even if I get whole and you beg, I’d never give in. In fact, I’m going to see if I can’t figure out how to attach myself to one of the other quads the next time we’re around some.”

Ezekiel turns and stalks out, not saying anything.

As I take a seat, Jude leans over me, caging me in as I stare up at him, unafraid.

“You’re trying to fuck with us again right now, aren’t you? See if you can make us jealous?”

I snort derisively, then outright laugh. “Make you jealous?” I ask around my laughter.

He backs up, a confused expression on his face.

“Why in the hell would I attempt to make you jealous? You don’t even like me! You play head games. Three of you finally tell me good night, only to act like I’m the devil’s advocate the next day just because I had a fluke where I finally got to feel someone, and surprise surprise, there was almost sex involved. That was apparently me trying to break you up, even though I’ve been quite shameless in voicing what I want the second I get whole, and I’ve been voicing it from the very beginning.”

They all look a little confused for a second.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, there are a few books open in the library where you guys were trying to research me. I’m going to go see if any of those books hold the secrets to getting myself hitched to four guys who appreciate how awesome I really am. Ghost girl out.”

I should have left off the *ghost girl out* part. My speech was epic until then.

Hands shaking and heart thumping in my chest, I stalk up the stairs, ready to commit to this new plan of action. I’ve been toying with the idea since the gauntlet, but until now, I didn’t have the lady ghost balls to go through with it.

As soon as I pass through the door in the library, I see a book shutting. Jude is smirking, his fingers closing another book.

Kai closes a few as well, since they apparently siphoned in here.

Gage props his feet up on a few open books, before shutting a few more beside him, challenging eyes on me the entire time.

“Real mature,” I grumble. “If you want me gone so bad, then why would you shut all the books?”

Gage toys with an ink pen, smirking and not looking at me.

“All the better to annoy you with, my dear,” Jude drawls.

“We’re not letting you go until we understand what it is you really are,” Kai goes on with a shrug.

“Fine,” I bite out with a fake smile on my face as I cross my arms over my chest.

My outfit changes to the sexiest one yet. It’s a little Egyptian Princess in style, gold and alluring. Ornate gold sleeves wrap up my arms, and the laces of the sexy shoes go all the way up to my thighs.

The bodysuit-ish outfit has a neckline that dips all the way to my stomach.

The bottom has a touch of long, light, gold chains that hang to the knees, but is spaced apart so you can still see all the way up.

I'm not sure why it's the one that I choose, but it pops into my mind, so I go with it.

Gage falls out of the chair.

Guess I have a winning outfit for him.

Kai sucks in a sharp breath, and Jude is suddenly in front of me, trying to snatch me. All of their eyes light up gold, and I take a wary step back as they start coming toward me like mindless drones.

“Okay. Not funny anymore. What’s wrong with—”

I squeal when Kai lunges, but when he passes through me, I roll my eyes at myself for being an idiot. I whirl around just as Gage tries to tackle me.

Shit.

For whatever reason, they really like this outfit, or they seriously hate it.

Because they look feral. Ruthless. Savage even.

I'm suddenly in that dolphin costume I threatened them with for a whole new reason, my head poking out the dolphin's belly, and they all blink like they're waking from a trance.

“What the hell is wrong with you idiots? It was just an outfit. And so help me, if you blame me for that, I will—”

They all disappear from the room at once, and I curse, losing the dolphin costume and donning some normal, very respectable clothing.

I almost don't go look for them, because I know they're going to be doubly suspicious of me. But unfortunately, I'm worried about them, because that clearly wasn't natural.

I really need to detach myself before my attachment gets me killed.

My hurried steps slow when I hear them talking in the kitchen.

“You saw that,” Jude is saying.

“I saw that she freaked out and turned into a dolphin to snap us out of that shit. She definitely didn’t want us in that trance. Whatever in the hell it was,” Kai grumbles.

“She’s all I could see for a minute. It was...not the outfit. It was something else. Something in the air,” Jude goes on.

“Why a dolphin?” Gage asks.

“Really not the important part,” Ezekiel says. “What happened?”

Before the guys can explain to him that once again I did something suspicious, the door swings open.

Five men come walking in, and my heart stutters. Why isn’t the spell keeping them out of they mean them harm?

Leaping off the rest of the steps, I race to follow them.

“Hands on your heads,” one of the men shouts.

Running up behind them, my hand comes up reflexively, but Jude’s eyes meet mine, and he gives me a subtle, but still distinguishable, shake of his head.

His hands go to the top of his head, jaw tensing as he holds my eyes for a minute longer. I barely manage to stop the power on the tip of my fingers, because it knows something is wrong. And it only works when they’re in trouble.

Life threatening trouble.

And I really want to use the power. It almost hurts not to when it’s so close to the surface and begging to be set free.

Kai gives me the same barely-there headshake, also telling me to stand down.

My hand falls to my side, and I ignore the annoying prickles that spread over me, punishment for denying whatever this power inside me is.

Ezekiel’s gaze meets and holds mine as the men start walking behind all

of them. They pull out cuffs, and Gage glances my way before speaking.

“What are we being taken in for?” Gage asks.

I wish they weren't all staring at me like they're worried I'm about to save them—as though it would be the worst thing ever. Don't they want to be saved?

When no one answers him, Kai speaks, even as they continue to pull their hands into some weird black cuffs one at a time.

“Under the guardian's privilege rules, you're required to tell four guardians who've entered the trials the reason they're being taken in,” Kai tells them dryly.

“It's protective custody,” one of the guards tells him flippantly. “There's still a hit out on your names, and as contenders in the second round of the trials, we're required to offer you protection under the crown.”

The guys all stare at me, until Ezekiel finally makes a subtle gesture with his head for me to join them. Right. They're about to be zapped out of here, no doubt.

I barely make it to him in time to stick my hand out, and then we're suddenly inside a cell. The men who cuffed them are nowhere to be seen, and I whirl around, taking in the blackened stones surrounding us.

The iron door will be twice as hard to pass through, so I opt to go through the creepy stone, poking my head through to see what's around us.

Bad idea.

My breath runs out in a rush when a flame shoots straight up into the air like it's trying to take my face off. I reel back, but carefully peer back out to take in the cylinder prison we're in.

All the many pointless cell doors are visible in this large circle tower. Right in the middle of us is an endless pit of fire that shoots straight up whenever it has to hiccup or fart or something.

I'm assuming we're in hell right now.

Just a guess.

Why even have the doors when you clearly can't walk out of them?

"Not even the soul stones stop her from passing through," Gage muses, not sounding even the least bit distressed by the fact we're literally in a hell cell.

"I thought nothing could breach them," Ezekiel immediately adds.

Pulling my head back in, I look at the four of them in all their relaxed glory like they're idiots.

Kai pulls his cuffed hands under his legs and works them down until they're in front of him. The other three do the same—like they've done this a hundred times.

"Just curious if the four of you have figured out Manella has put you in here to kill you finally, since you've managed to thwart his attempts in the other world," I decide to point out.

"Of course we've figured it out. It's also why they've cuffed us, so we can't use our *abilities*," Jude states with a shrug.

"I'm not even sure what your abilities are," I tell him honestly as I turn around and poke my head through another wall, hoping to find a hallway or something.

No such luck. It's another big pit of fire in the center, cells lining up as high as I can see to a fiery ceiling as well.

So I stick my head beside us, finding another cell and a very gnarly looking occupant.

Both of his eyes are dangling, and he's hunched over like he's looking for his *precious*, while chewing on a mangled piece of meat that smells rancid even from here.

Pulling my head back in, I shudder.

“Doesn’t matter what our abilities are,” Gage says.

“The cuffs keep them contained. It’s sealed with the devil’s crest.”

“How do you get the cuffs off?” I ask them when they withhold any answers about their abilities.

I turn around as Kai shrugs. “They’ll wait a few days before attempting to kill us. It’d be too obvious to kill us too soon, so we have time to figure it out. It’s easiest to trick a guard into taking them off, since they know the words to speak.”

“There are words to speak?” I ask, perking up. I can go find these.

“Not just anyone can say them. They have to be spoken by the chosen guards who’ve been blessed,” Ezekiel calls to my back, but I’m already passing through to Smeagol’s cage.

“We could use a protective spirit right now,” Jude calls out, acting amused.

I step back in immediately, then see their mocking grins.

“Real funny. Why does this guy next to us look like a Gollum? Are those real?”

“No,” Ezekiel says, his eyes dancing with humor. “It’s hell, Keyla. If you’re cast here after death, your soul starts transforming, morphing into the monster you really are, depending on your transgressions. Once the metamorphosis is complete and a physical form has manifested, they decide what to do with you, based on what you are.”

“What’s Smeagol’s role gonna be?” I ask, curious.

“Likely, he’ll be a food distributor to the prison cells. We’re in hell’s throat right now. It waits until you’re finished devolving or evolving before it spits you out or swallows you. The worst of the monsters get sent below or to Purgatory to guard it.”

Good to know. I’ll be a damn good girl when I get whole. Neither of these

places seem like a life choice I want to make.

“She’s thinking about being a good girl right now, even though she’s admitted she wants a four-way tag from a quad hell squad,” Jude says, grinning like the asshole he is.

Rolling my eyes, I leave them to mock me, and scamper past Smeagol to see where this circle leads. Eventually, I have to find a hall. Surely it can’t all be pits of flames in the middle of a cylinder prison tower.

I pass through another cell, and stifle a scream. There’s a hairy beastly thing that looks like he used to be human. He snarls and tears at the sides of the stone walls. His sharp claws don’t even leave a scratch behind.

Hell is so not cool. Which I guess is obvious.

A few cells have these dark shadows bouncing around like pin balls. Apparently they can’t pass through the stones as easily as I can.

Don’t even get me started on the guy who looks like he has a sledgehammer sticking through his face.

I keep poking my head through the walls on either side, and only keep finding fire.

Several have actual people in it. I suppose they’re going to be used like my guys who never died but still turned into whatever these people are once their soul finds a new, mostly immortal body to attach to.

One cell has a fairly attractive man in it, and I linger, trying to see if he can see me like my guys can. But he can't. I'm not sure who he is, but he looks a little broken. For whatever reason, I sort of feel sad for him, and I hang out beside him like I'm commiserating with him.

He curses before running a hand through his hair. He looks exhausted, almost as though he's lost all hope. Not like the other men in here I've seen. His hands are cuffed, just like the guys. I'm assuming he's not a soul in transition.

"I didn't do it!" he shouts suddenly, as though he expects someone to hear him. "I'm being framed!"

Frowning, I study him. For no reason I can think of, I find myself believing him. I don't even know what he's referring to, yet I'm convinced he's innocent just by the compelling look in his tortured blue eyes.

"We have nothing to gain from this! *I* have nothing to gain from this! Why would I risk such a thing?" he goes on.

When I figure out how to free the guys, I'll return to free him as well.

Getting up, I start going from cell to cell again, collecting nightmares for the day I can finally sleep. Again. I only got to experience it that once, and apparently I'm a damn sound sleeper. I didn't even dream.

And I would love to know what the actual hell happened.

Anyway, a few more monsters make me swallow a scream, and idly wonder just how wretched and foul they must have been.

Next thing I know, I'm suddenly bursting back into the cell with all the guys, who are staring at me like they're not surprised.

"How can there be no hallway? Why have doors if there's nowhere to escape to?" I groan.

"The door is to give you false hope," Kai says with a shrug. "You manage to somehow turn into something strong enough to break down that door, iron

forged in hellfire, then you find there's nowhere for you to go. It's the moment you're defeated, and they can sink their claws in and own you."

"And you want to work for such a lovely establishment," I state dryly.

Ezekiel shrugs. "We had no say in the matter. Regardless, our special skills require such a thing. They'd be useless elsewhere."

"But I'm not allowed to know what these skills are?"

"Besides being awesome at killing things?" Jude asks, getting comfortable on the ground and putting his hands behind his head as his eyes shut.

I glare at him for a second, though he's oblivious since he's already trying to fall asleep. Instead, I look over at Ezekiel as he rips his shirt off—since he can't just take it off with the cuffs in the way—and rolls it up like it's a pillow as he lies down as well.

With his cuffs still binding his wrists, Kai starts doing awkward pushups in the corner, as though he's trying to tire himself out. No one is going to answer me.

"Don't feel bad, spirit girl," Ezekiel says as his eyes close as well, our special connection severed since that one moment. "They don't know either."

"We don't fully know ourselves," Kai adds, grunting as he starts adding a hop in on every other push up. "Hence the reason we want the power boost. We figure it'll open us up more."

"How do the monsters get out if there's no way to them?" I ask.

"The same way we got in, Einstein," Jude retorts. "Escorts. They have the ability to send you anywhere once you're restrained."

He lazily lifts his cuffed hands as though I need a reminder, then drops them back down, never opening his eyes. "And they can send you anywhere if you were originally a soul here."

Gage is studying me, his hand rubbing his jaw as though he's thinking of

something. “You aren’t even reacting to being in hell,” he finally says.

“Five years of talking to yourself when you don’t even know yourself, what you are, or even how you came to be will make you quite impervious to essentially everything. Even the four-dick monster twenty-two cells over if you start that way,” I tell him, gesturing the way I started.

His lips curve into a slow grin.

“Four dicks and only one monster to deal with. Sounds like you’ve found your perfect beast,” Kai says through short breaths.

“Keep being an ass to me. I’m this close to saying fuck you all and hanging out with another fellow I found interesting.” I pinch my fingers really close together for demonstration. “Maybe I’ll help him instead, and leave the four of you in here to turn into something hideous.”

Jude just grins, eyes still closed.

Ezekiel snorts while smirking.

“What?” I prompt.

“We’re not souls in need of a form. We’re not going to turn into anything,” he answers flippantly.

“And we don’t need your help,” Gage adds. “Because you won’t be able to get us out of this one.”

“So why are you so calm?” I ask as I take a seat in the open corner where none of them are.

“Because we’ve gotten ourselves out of some really shitty predicaments in the past,” Ezekiel tells me with a shrug. “It’s amazing what you can do when your survival instincts kick in.”

The way he says it makes it sound like it’s pointed at me. His eyes hold mine for a moment, and it feels like he’s trying to tell me something he’s not supposed to tell me.

When Gage darts a look his way, Ezekiel breaks eye contact with me and

closes his eyes. I'm now tempted to go lie down beside him, but the other three would flip out.

Just as Kai starts speaking, I shush him, straining to hear something.

"What?" one of them asks me, but I'm too distracted to know which.

Without thinking too much about it, I take off sprinting through the cells all the way back down to the mystery man that I feel an odd sort of sympathy for.

"I told you it wasn't me!" he shouts.

"You're getting a moment with your prince. Be thankful for that," a guard with a solid black leather mask over his face says. How can he even see?

Whatever is about to happen, I hurry myself over to Mr. Mysterious, hoping it works the same way, and really hoping I don't get too far out of range from the boys.

A feeling of something powerful flashes through my core the second I touch him, and in less than a blink, we're standing in what looks like a marble hall.

Glass chandeliers hang above me, and I spin in a circle, taking in all the gold and lavish surroundings.

Mr. Mystery drops to his knees, bowing his head as soon as a familiar face comes around the corner. My breath catches in my throat when I see who is stalking toward us.

Manella.

Chapter 14

My eyes move between them a few times before a sick feeling sinks inside me. This mystery guy is Lamar...

“My prince,” Lamar says, choking back emotion as tears start sliding down his face, but he keeps his head bowed.

Manella turns and looks at the numerous guards behind him. “Privacy. Now.”

They all exchange a look.

“When a dark prince tells you to get the hell out, you turn and walk away. You don’t look around for someone with more authority, because it *will* cost you a trip to hellfire,” he growls.

They all disappear without missing a beat. Manella’s harsh expression crumples, and he turns, grabbing Lamar by the shoulders and lifting him until he can hug him.

“I didn’t do it, my prince,” Lamar says on a choked sob. “I have no reason to.”

That’s...confusing.

“I know,” Manella says, soothing him as he strokes his hair.

I stare, unable to look away, at the clear devotion and genuine concern etched in Manella’s tired and exhausted face, as though he’s lived days in a tortured nightmare.

He kisses the top of Lamar’s head, and pulls back before saying, “*Un Bracco.*”

The cuffs fall away, and suddenly Lamar is shoving his hands into Manella’s hair, dragging him down to kiss him the most passionately I’ve ever seen anyone kissed.

I turn away to give them privacy, since this feels far more intimate than anything I've ever witnessed the guys do. And I've seen them do far more scandalous things than simply kiss.

Since I can still feel the comforting presence of the guys, I'm assuming we're still in hell, even if this side of hell is a lot more glamorous.

When I hear the kiss break, both of them panting for air, I turn around to see their foreheads pressed together, each clinging to the other.

"You have to run," Manella says, looking over his shoulder before his eyes meet Lamar's again.

My heart stutters.

"I can't," Lamar says with a sad smile. "They'll believe I'm guilty then."

Manella shakes his head. "You don't understand; someone is in my father's ear right now. Whatever is going on with the three remaining quads in the group has him on high alert. He's brought all three sets here to stay hidden in the throat, convinced they'll all be safe. Someone put that idea into his ever maddening head."

I take a seat, because this just got good.

I can't wait until the day I can have popcorn for moments like these.

"Which means someone is setting the quads up to die in here. The guards can't be trusted, if that's the case, because they'll be the only ones able to get in there besides the escorts," Manella goes on, staring Lamar in the eye. "They'll come for you too. This is an attack on the family."

Lamar shakes his head, clasping Manella's hand. "If I run right now, they'll know you set me free. Lucifer will believe you're the one behind all this."

"He already suspects as much. I have no envy and no greed—he knows this when he's rational. I pointed out it made no sense for you to stab an elder and not ensure his death *while* wearing your true form. Why wouldn't you

conceal your identity? I've asked all the obvious questions to my father, and still he insists it was you, and no doubt he believes you were acting on my behalf. I'd rather him banish me than allow you to be killed," Manella continues.

Those are actually good questions. If he could change into anyone, then why wouldn't he just look like someone else in front of Harold, in the event the elder survived? Especially since he didn't stick around to see if Harold died.

Another shape shifter would have a lot more to gain by framing Manella, who was already a suspect.

"I have no clue who is doing this, or they'd already be dead," Manella continues, a growl to his words.

"It doesn't matter," Lamar says, his jaw tightening as determination steals his features. "I'll continue to proclaim my innocence until they silence me. I'll never let them take you down with me. I've already proven I never confessed as they tried to claim I did."

Manella whispers some words, and a small grouping of words appear on Lamar's forearm.

"Use that. Get out of here if they come for you. *Do not* die. That's a direct order from your prince," Manella says, clearing his throat as though he's trying to rein in his emotions.

I bounce out of my seat, seeing the weird words. I'm not sure what language this is, but I hope I can say those words close enough to get the guys out.

Lamar bends, picking up his cuffs and begins putting them back on.

"Say you understand me," Manella snaps.

Lamar gives him a watery smile.

"My time is up, my prince. I'll see you soon."

Before Manella can argue, the doors open, and Lamar disappears, even though another person never comes in here. Well, shit.

That's not good. How the hell am I supposed to get back to the throat?

Then again, I found the answers to escape, discovered Manella and Lamar look to be getting framed, all in less than ten minutes of being down here. It's likely I could discover so much more down here if I had more time.

That explains why the guys want access to this area so badly.

The doors slam shut, sealing me inside with Manella. And I watch as the dark prince sags to a chair...and cries. He seems far less evil when he's a man weeping with a broken heart.

No way would he send his love to go after the guys if the price would be his life. He's not willing to sacrifice anything so important to him.

Manella stands, slinging a lamp across the room. It passes through me and shatters on the wall at my back. Then he breaks.

He drops to the ground, sobbing so fiercely that it's impossibly painful to watch. My chest feels like it's going to cave in on itself just to help bear some of the weight of his misery.

"I'm going to help you too," I groan aloud, hating myself as I turn to pass through the wall beside me and give him his privacy in this moment.

I can't believe I'm going to help the son of the devil that my guys are convinced is working against them. I was convinced of it too...until today.

Blowing out a breath, I ignore my own mist of ghostly tears. They're definitely going to hate me once I defend Manella and Lamar.

The sooner I can sever this link between us, the better. Even if it does feel like excruciating fire in my chest to even think about.

Chapter 15

So...hell is massive and confusing. I've walked in a circle half a dozen times, haven't seen another soul—ha!—since I left Manella, and even passing through walls seems to get me lost and spin me back around.

It makes no sense.

I have no real concept of time, but I'm almost positive I've been tangled up in this optical illusion of a maze for hours.

So much for this place having all the answers at easily accessible points.

Just as I pass through another wall, beginning my loop again, two guards with the leather masks appear.

One hands the other what looks like a white key card, and the key card holder disappears from sight.

The one still lingering looks around before pulling out some type of compass looking thing.

"It's done," the guy states into the compass. "The prince's lover won't survive beyond the night."

Shit! Now I have to hopefully conjure enough power to also protect Lamar, even though I have no idea how to even access my power. Damn it.

Cursing, I sit down and start concentrating on the guys, wondering if I can zap myself to them even though I can't see them. It wouldn't be the first time I've done it, but definitely the first time I've done it on my own.

I picture Ezekiel first, thinking of how he touched me and let me feel. Then I go through the routine of thinking of each of them, feeling their presence grow stronger in my mind.

"Where the fuck have you been?" I hear Kai snap, causing my eyes to fly open and take in the fact I am most definitely back in their cell.

Whew.

Grinning, I look over, but my smile falls from my face when I see four angry glares on me.

“What?” I ask innocently, as Jude jerks his gaze away, his jaw ticking as his hands stay balled in fists.

Ezekiel gets in my face. “Where have you been?”

“I hitched a ride out of here and into the royal suite to get the release switch for these,” I say with a shrug as I gesture toward their cuffs.

Just as Ezekiel opens his mouth to say something I probably don’t want to hear, I say, “*Un bracco.*”

The cuffs all open and fall off, and four surly men just stare at me like I’ve sprouted a second head.

“Now that you’re free, does that mean you can siphon out of here?” I ask, even though I’m pretty sure they can’t.

“No,” Jude tells me warily.

“The soul stones,” Gage reminds me, eyes narrowing.

“I think Gage’s theory on her is definitely the most plausible at this point,” Kai mutters, running a hand through his hair like he’s frustrated.

No clue what that means, and it’s doubtful they’ll elaborate.

“Now that you’re free, you can take turns watching each other’s back and sleep in twos or something,” I tell them, turning to walk through Smeagol’s cage again.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” Ezekiel asks as he blocks my path.

My eyebrows go up. “To help someone who doesn’t have three others already looking after him. If I can. I’m not really sure if it’s because I’m linked to the four of you that I can protect you, or if I’m just naturally protective of anyone I feel an attachment to. Hopefully it’s the latter, because

he's going to need my help."

I expect him to move aside, but he doesn't. And since I promised not to touch him, I don't pass through him either. When I start to sidestep him, Kai blocks my path, an angry glare on me again.

These guys are so frustrating.

"What'd I do now? Did I make myself look really suspicious because I got those cuffs off even though only guards or escorts or what-the-hell ever can do it? Well, I think you're wrong on that, or maybe—"

"I think you're a gift to us from Lilith," Gage says from behind me, causing me to spin around and look at him like he's crazy.

"The rest of us are leaning toward that now," Jude adds, tossing aside the cuffs.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"The timing, the ability to withstand hellfire and pass through soul stones, not to mention the fact our spell had been drained without our knowledge," Kai states randomly. "It all adds up."

"Then I apparently don't know devil math," I decide to point out.

"Lilith has a special interest in us for whatever reason. But as we've stated, a gift from Lilith is wrapped in a curse. By the time you reach the gift, you've already torn open the curse," Gage goes on.

I just stare at him for a minute, looking over my shoulder at him as I wait expectantly on him to elaborate. When he doesn't, I nod once.

"Right. I'm a curse, and the fact I've saved your lives is the gift." Totally bitter, by the way. But it does line up with the private thoughts I've had since their fight with Ezekiel.

Jude snorts.

"Not what he's saying," Ezekiel says, causing me to look back at him. "The gift is protection and exactly what we want," he adds, his eyes leisurely

raking over me.

That gets an eyebrow arch from me.

“One woman able to handle all four of us, and someone who can fit...in,” Jude goes on, causing me to look back at him as he stares directly at my ass with a smirk on his lips.

I know what he likes, and I wanted it really damn bad, until...he was a total dick. All of them have been.

“But we can’t touch you yet,” Gage resumes. “And we can also apparently touch you without each other when you are whole, which could harm the bond we’ve built over centuries.”

I open my mouth to ask how, when Kai takes over.

“Because there’s never been any jealousy before. Already you’ve stirred that. And that’s sure as hell not something we can afford. Everything has a price, Keyla. We’re trying to determine yours,” Kai continues.

“More than you can afford, as you’ve told me multiple times,” I grumble. “Don’t worry. I’m almost positive I’ll find a way to detach myself from you and become someone else’s curse, because I’m about to do something that will definitely make me a hot suspect in your never-ending conspiracy theories.”

Just as Ezekiel tries to grab at me, I pass through Kai and start moving through the walls.

“Keyla!” Gage’s voice booms.

Obviously I ignore him. I have one of their sworn enemies to protect tonight.

They can spend a night without a cursed gift.

Chapter 16

I never realized the perks to seeing but not being seen until the quad hell squad, as they called themselves, failed to live up to my very dreamy and super high expectations.

Lamar, however, is excellent company.

We like chilling in companionable silence.

Of course, he has no idea we're chilling at all.

Since seeing Manella, he hasn't been shouting for someone to hear about his innocence. It's like he's defeated, resigned to die whatever death is coming for him, just so he can save his love.

Who happens to be a child of the devil.

The devil's son has a more devoted lover than I've ever even dreamed of having.

Regardless of their lineage, I'm a sucker for a good romance, and I'm determined to make sure this one stays put together. Love like this doesn't deserve to be sabotaged.

"Any chance you could tell me how to fall in love? I mean, you chose the devil's son and still have more love than anyone else I've ever come across. Clearly you know what you're doing," I go on, striking up a one-sided conversation.

Lamar glances around, going on alert suddenly. I almost think he's heard me when he stands up and pales a little.

Without any warning, three men are suddenly in the room with us, and my breath leaves in a rush. Lamar straightens, staring at them with his wrists bound by cuffs like he's prepared to die with dignity.

The first one lunges, and my heart hits my chest as I dive in front of him.

I'm not sure what exactly flies out of me, but all three men are blown into the cell wall so hard that it thunders with a metallic echo around us.

I stagger back, taking a major hit from that surge.

Lamar's eyes widen, but I barely glimpse him as the first leather-mask-wearing ghoul charges again.

"*Un bracco!*" I shout, and Lamar's cuffs fall away just in time for him to slam his fist through the heart of the man.

His power pulses with an eerie, ominous warning before a dark smile graces his lips. Gone is the man who was willing to accept death. This version of Lamar seems more fitting for an occupant of hell.

"Releasing me might give you honor in death, but it will definitely assure your death," Lamar tells them, not realizing it wasn't them.

I dive out of the way on instinct as a burst of energy booms from him, and three screams of agony tear through the air.

Well, then. I guess he doesn't really need my help. He just needed those cuffs off.

One of the guards manages to disappear in time to save his own life, but the other two are basically roasted, unable to get out.

I take a seat and watch the show.

I'm telling you, I'm going to eat the hell out of some popcorn one day.

As soon as there's nothing left but the dying echo of their screams and some ashes, Lamar reaches down and lifts his cuffs, breaking them with little effort. The crumpled heap is dropped near the door, and he takes a seat, sitting a little higher.

I get the feeling he left one alive for a reason.

I pat his shoulder, as though he can actually feel it, and he goes utterly stiff before looking directly through me. Did he feel that?

His eyes don't meet mine, since they're shifting back and forth in my

direction like he's searching for something, meaning he can't see me.

Deciding to test my theory, I reach down and pat his hand. He jerks his hand aside, and growls. "What's in here? Show yourself, demon."

Demon? I think not. I've heard about demons.

After a few minutes of me keeping my hands to myself, I pull my knees to my chest. Not even he likes help from the unknown. I'm the reason he's alive, and whether he knows it or not, he's just like the hell squad.

In the devil's league, no one trusts anyone.

I guess I shouldn't take it personally.

Chapter 17

“Keyla!” I hear Kai shouting a few days later. Or maybe it’s been a week. Hard to tell.

There’s no sunlight in hell. The only illumination is compliments of the pit of fire that loves to shoot up and hiss a warning to all the occupants. It lights the cells up through the stones, causing them to glow on occasion.

Lamar hasn’t had any more visitors. He also can’t seem to hear the guys when they shout my name on occasion. And they can’t hear me when I try to answer, even though I haven’t left Lamar to go to them just because they want to summon me.

I also haven’t announced my presence to him again by touching him. I’ve gone out of my way to stay out of his way.

But now, for some reason, Kai’s voice sounds extra urgent.

Lamar is sleeping at the moment, and since he’s had a good eight hours, I pat his back. He immediately jerks upright, looking around as he blinks rapidly.

“Foolish, Lamar,” he growls to himself. I get talking to yourself. It keeps you from going too loco when you’re on your own. “You can live without sleep,” he adds, shaking his head and slapping the side of his face to wake himself up properly.

Once I’m certain he’s not going to doze back off, I pass through the cells until I’m finally back in with the guys.

“Just curious, how do you guys keep it from smelling like piss in here?” I ask as I step in, seeing them all staring at the wall I normally come back in through. “Not to mention the other gross bodily—”

They all turn as one, and Ezekiel snaps his teeth, eyes feral, as Kai and

Gage curse and grapple him back before he can lunge at me.

“What the hell?” I ask, rushing toward him even as they try to keep him back. It’s not like he can hurt me.

“He’s been getting worse, but today he’s fucking lost it. This is what we meant by the damn gifted curse,” Gage gripes, struggling to restrain Ezekiel.

His pupils are almost taking up his entire eyes that are normally a blue color when gold isn’t speckling his vision.

My hands go to his face, and I hold either side to the best of my phantom ability, even as he snaps his teeth through my face. This is one of those rare times where I’m thankful to not be a real girl.

“You’re blaming me for this?” I ask absently.

“No. We’re blaming Lilith,” Kai says hesitantly, like he’s worried I’ll bail again if they piss me off. Accurate assumption, at the moment.

“He looks in on you all the time at the house when you disappear. He just does it without you knowing,” Jude tells me before he winds up and punches Ezekiel so hard that it lays him out.

It’s almost like I feel that punch too, and I go down with him, crashing to my knees at Ezekiel’s side as his eyes roll back in his head.

“It’s been bad since he was finally able to touch you,” Kai says on a labored breath as he sinks to the floor next to Ezekiel. “I think it’s dangerous for him to be separated too long for right now.”

I mimic the motions of running my fingers through Ezekiel’s hair, even though not a single strand gets pushed out of place.

“Keyla, don’t—”

“I’ve not touched him since you all ganged up on me and told me not to, but right now, I’ll touch him if I damn well please. If you don’t want me consoling him when he’s clearly hurting, don’t fucking yell for me to come in here and witness it,” I interrupt, glaring over at Jude.

His lips curve into a slow grin.

“I was going to say don’t leave for a while. What the hell are you doing anyway?”

“Looking for a new quad,” I lie without hesitation.

Kai narrows his eyes on me, and Jude laughs under his breath.

“What are you really doing?” Gage asks seriously.

“Something you’ll all hate me for, but I really don’t care about your opinions anymore,” I say with a cold smile, then return my attention to Ezekiel as his sleeping evens out.

Without giving a damn about their objections, I curl up next to him.

“I think I know how to get you out of here, but you should know Lucifer is the one who put you in here. And his reasoning really is to keep you safe, but it’s believed to be because someone else is whispering ideas into his ear that he, in his apparently maddening state, is listening to without fail,” I tell them as I prop my head on Ezekiel’s chest, making sure I don’t pass through it as I lay against his side.

Jude watches me, his eyes running the full length of our contact before his jaw tightens.

“How could you possibly know that?” Kai asks me, taking a seat right next to me, his body so close it almost passes through me.

“I spied on Manella while he was talking to Lamar,” I say honestly.

Gage sucks in a breath, as Jude’s tight jaw relaxes once again to make room for his smile.

“Lamar is out?” Gage asks.

“No. He’s several cells over. Manella pulled strings to speak with him, and I listened to their very private exchange. Manella isn’t the one trying to kill you, and Lamar was set up.”

Jude’s smile disappears so he can groan. “You don’t seriously believe

that, do you?”

“Unlike all of you, I trust that some things are exactly as they seem. They had no reason to put on a show for a ghost they didn’t know was watching them.”

Even though it feels wrong to share so many intimate details about Manella and his true love that I spied on, I still do. They don’t have the capacity to believe in people, for whatever reason, but even I know love like that can’t be faked.

I’ve watched a lot of romances. Nothing has ever felt that powerful and real. I envied each touch, each caress, and each heartbreaking moment of longing.

After I finish explaining the encounter, Jude runs a hand through his hair.

“If it’s not Manella, who else would it be?” he growls, looking at the others.

“How do we know it’s not Manella faking it in front of Lamar so that Lamar takes the fall?” Gage asks.

“He put some words on his arm and told him to run if he had to,” I decide to add.

“And you haven’t told us these words?” Kai snaps.

“I don’t know the language, and I also wanted to stick around to make sure Lamar doesn’t need more help, since he won’t run. And Manella isn’t faking it. I watched him sob uncontrollably after they took Lamar away. He’d never put him in this position willingly. Some people have hearts. Even the devil’s most mysterious son, apparently.”

They all stare at me like they don’t know whether they’re confused or pissed.

“You’ve kept us in here so you can keep an eye on Lamar, because you believe him and you’ve been protecting him, while Ezekiel was going

through this internal riot?” Gage bites out.

“I had no idea Ezekiel was hurting. As for the four of you, you owe me. A lot. And you treat me like shit. I don’t give a damn if I’ve inconvenienced you by making sure someone else just as ungrateful for my help stayed alive.”

“At least she’s proving she’s honest,” Jude drawls, even as he takes a seat at my feet before stretching out so that his head is passing through my ankles.

Rude much?

Rolling my eyes, I shrug. “I’ve never had a reason to be dishonest. It’s not like you can kill me.”

Kai makes a sound of amusement, and Gage shakes his head as he stretches out along the top, his head almost touching mine. We’re in an odd, uneven square right now, with me trapped in the middle as I press against Ezekiel.

He’s asleep, not just knocked out. I can tell by the steady rhythm of his breathing. It’s a lot like the last time I slept with him.

“I don’t understand you, little spirit,” Kai says on a long breath.

“I don’t understand me either,” I confess.

A silence falls over us, and though I’m tempted to go check on Lamar, since he’s alone, unlike the quad, I can’t bring myself to leave. Guess that makes me a masochist.

Tingles course through my body from all four of them as they get more comfortable. I keep my eyes trained on the cell walls. For whatever reason they haven’t been attacked yet.

That might have something to do with Lamar’s botched attack. Maybe since their cuffs have popped off, no one—or *nothing*—has been brave enough to attack them.

With the cuffs, they should have been easily dispatched, even with all

four locked in the same spot at the same time.

A weird sense of peace settles over me the longer the tingles last. Even Kai falls fast asleep. Though I'm sure none of them have slept much.

After all, it's hell in here.

Chapter 18

The guys have all fallen asleep, and it's another one of those times where I feel sleepy. Last time I felt that, I woke up a whole girl.

My eyes move around the stone cell, and I think about what a terrible idea being whole would be right now.

Something clanking heavily draws my attention, and I sit straight up when I strain enough to hear Lamar through the cells.

“Is that all you got?!”

Looking around, I get in Gage's ear—since he's the one who sleeps the most in this lot—and whisper, “Sorry. I need you awake.”

He jerks, his hand rubbing his eyes as he frowns and looks around. “What the hell? I was finally sleeping without the nightmares for a change,” he growls.

“Well, good. But do it when I get back. Something's going on, and I can't leave with all of you asleep.”

I stand to my feet, and he leaps to his. “You can't leave at all,” he tells me, eyes narrowing as he glares at me.

“Actually, I'm the only one who can,” I tell him as I pass right through him.

He still tries to grab me, knowing he can't.

“Don't fucking leave, Keyla,” he gripes, but I rush through the walls anyway.

Just as I land in Lamar's cell, another man appears. This one is a different kind of guard. His mask is white leather, and his wardrobe is red.

Lamar starts to do something, but the guy holds up his hands as a show of surrender. “I'm here on your prince's behest,” the man states, tearing his

sleeve up to show some sort of marking. “Lucifer has requested an audience with the two of you.”

I quickly pat Lamar’s arm, reminding him of the fact he’s got those escape words and he’s about to go before the devil, who might find that very suspicious if he’s so innocent.

Though I feel absolutely nothing, Lamar subtly startles and tugs down his sleeve to cover the markings before the man sees them.

“Try something and I will kill you,” Lamar cautions.

The man in the white mask nods, then his mask turns red. Totally creepy.

I reach for Lamar, touching his back, and finding it peculiar he stays relaxed instead of stiffened.

In a blink, we’re out of the room, and suddenly we’re alone with Manella, who is walking toward us in a brightly lit, elegant red room. He runs a hand through his hair, a small smile on his lips.

“My father has agreed to a meeting, and he seems fairly lucid today. He even called for me himself, and asked me to once again tell him about the night you were accused and your alleged true whereabouts. After I told him, he nodded and immediately sent for you.”

Lamar doesn’t look as excited as Manella, and that sends a prickle of dread up my spine.

“If he’s lucid enough to read lies, he’ll release you,” Manella goes on.

Lamar gives him a tight smile. “We can only hope, my prince.”

Manella jerks Lamar to him in a pre-celebratory embrace, and Lamar hugs him back, though his is a sadder, more desperate hold.

It makes me almost suspicious, but yet there’s no guilt in his eyes. Only trepidation.

Manella pulls back, clearing his throat even as he keeps that boyish, carefree smile on his face. He looks like a completely different man.

“They’ll send for you when it’s your time to join us,” he says, then grabs Lamar’s face between both his hands and kisses him hard before jerking back again, that smile spreading.

Lamar just returns a smile that’s so beautifully tragic it makes my heart hurt. Manella, oblivious, turns and darts out the doors, leaving them wide open as he vanishes from sight.

As soon as he’s gone, Lamar clears his throat and straightens his clothing out in front of the mirror. In a blink, he looks clean and pressed, not a wrinkle on the clothes that were tattered only seconds ago.

“I’m not sure what you are,” he says, causing me to look around for someone else in the room. It’s just me. My gaze swings back as he blows out a breath and continues. “But if you’re a gift from Lilith, I can only assume today I pay the price. Lucifer hasn’t been lucid in many decades. It’d be much too hopeful to believe it’s as Manella believes today.”

Is he really talking to me right now?

“If you’re my gift, I will pay the price without falter. But I only request that my damnation be his salvation, and you move onto protecting him without penalty.”

That really makes my heart hurt.

He believes Lilith’s price for protection is now the cost of his life. The true gift was borrowed time with Manella and seeing him happy one last time.

As happy as a man who is certain his true love is about to be his again.

I hate Lilith.

If I’m everyone’s gift and curse, I hope a day comes when I’m able to save her, just so she can be damned in one way or another.

But as it stands, everyone I’ve protected has faced a consequence.

Five men I’ve saved. Five men have been locked in hell’s throat. One of

those men may die today.

Now his last wish is that I protect the one he's leaving behind without consequence. And I have no way of telling him that if I could control it, none of them would suffer.

"You will be busy in this trying time, I'm afraid," he says a little quieter.

I wonder if I'll be able to stop the devil from killing him.

Highly doubtful.

Furious and hurting, I follow him when a red masked man comes to collect. I'm assuming these are the royal guards, unlike the hell guards with black masks.

It's like the death mile with all the eerie paintings of the six royal devil spawns hanging every few inches. Paintings of them throughout time. One has Hera and all her blonde haired beautiful glory in front of the Trojan horse with a deviant smirk on her face.

I stop to try and make sense of the plaque underneath, and the weird symbols turn into actual words. Blinking, I hurry and read, in case the words disappear again.

Helen of Troy. A great war between two great countries, and the ruin of two feared or deeply respected kings.

Body count—massacre

Fear factor—little to none

Historical presence—heavy impact

Is this their weird Hall of Sick Fame dedicated to their earthly visits or whatever? Was she seriously Helen of Troy at one point?

I jog down the hall, but halt when I see another plaque hanging under a picture of a very sinister, yet highly sophisticated portrait of Cain in a top hat. He's tipping the hat with very bloody hands.

Jack the Ripper. Leaving behind a legacy that still lives on even in new

generations, and haunting of the minds of everyone once they hear the tale.

Body count—low

Fear factor—deadly hysteria

Historical presence—notorious impact

Considering I'd rather not add more reasons to make a run for it before I meet the maker of those psychotic people, I decide not to read anymore plaques.

I also quit looking at the pictures so that I don't get curious.

Out of place in the otherwise white décor, two massive, coal-black doors that tower over me slowly start to open. *Sure. Not ominous at all.*

Lamar takes a shaky breath, and then he steps inside.

I try not to piss my pants, because I'm about to be in front of the motherfucking devil.

Chapter 19

We move through a short hallway, and Lamar navigates the bit of a maze we're in like he's done this countless times. With one quick inhale, he steps into another room, and I follow him.

My eyes take in the red and black décor, almost feeling cheated with how cliché and obvious it all is. It looks like an office, and the walls are lined with floor-to-ceiling shelves full of books. The room stretches up at least fifty feet, and I spin around, a little overwhelmed by the sheer wealth of knowledge concealed at the fingertips of the devil himself.

Sensing a presence, I look over just as another set of doors open, and in walks Manella, his bright smile still fixed to his relaxed face. Lamar is so rigid he looks ready to break.

Manella doesn't say anything, but he reaches over and grabs Lamar's hand, his excitement spilling over noticeably.

My eyes come up just as a debonair, regal man emerges from the same room Manella just exited. Dressed in black slacks and a white silk shirt, he moves toward us, his hands in his pockets as he gracefully glides across the floor, his steps fluid and effortless.

It's almost captivating how commanding his presence is.

I quickly move in front of Lamar on reflex when he steps toward him. A harsh burn spikes through my arms and chest, and I suck in a breath, caught off guard, when he passes through me.

He stills, and I jerk away from the painful heat he radiates even in my form. Hellfire was doable. Devil fire? Apparently fucking not.

Whirling around, I see him completely stiffened, unmoving as Manella stares at him with a curious expression.

Oh no. Oh no no no.

The devil knows I'm here. Why did I think he wouldn't be able to at least sense me if I touched him, since Lamar can apparently sense me now?

Lucifer's head subtly tilts to the side. His eyes aren't on Lamar, just staring at nothing in particular, when he asks, "What have you brought to our meeting?"

Lamar clears his throat. "I believe it to be some protective gift, though I'm not sure who pressed it upon me," he says, bowing his head before adding, "my king. I can only assume it to be a gift from Lilith."

Slowly, Lamar lowers to his knees, and he presses his hands to the floor in a complete bow.

"You can stand, Lamar. This is a rather informal meeting," Lucifer states absently, almost as though he remains distracted. By me. The fact I'm in here and the devil knows it.

I'm going to die the second I get whole, because I'm a freaking idiot.

Lucifer rubs his chin pensively as he turns to face my direction. I freeze like a deer caught in headlights, but his eyes pass right over me.

To the untrained eye, he'd look like a refined man in his early forties, with the shine of an old, insightful soul in his eyes. It's not the feral, evil black eyes you expect to find when you meet the devil. It's very misleading.

"Very interesting. I caught wind of some of my guards attacking you in my custody." He says the words like they're of no real importance, and that knot of dread increasingly grows in my stomach.

Lamar frowns, but nods, even though he still hasn't gotten up from the floor. "Yes, my king," he states affirmatively.

"I've told you once to stand. I'd rather not repeat myself," Lucifer drawls.

Lamar slowly rises to his feet, keeping his eyes lowered as his body visibly vibrates with tension.

“I don’t particularly enjoy my custody being violated,” Lucifer goes on. “If any custody is protected, it most certainly should be mine. Wouldn’t you think?”

I can’t tell by his tone if he’s being rhetorical, underhandedly vapid, or just curious.

Lamar just remains a block of stone, unmoving and silent.

“Well?” he prompts, casting a sideways glance to Lamar.

“Father, what are you—”

“Silence, Manella. I told you not to speak, or I’d ask you to leave,” Lucifer interrupts with an eerily calm tone.

Manella swallows his words, casting a less certain look toward Lamar.

“Yes, my king, I would assume your custody would receive the highest protection.”

Lucifer nods, clapping his hands together once. “I agree.”

With a wave of his hand, ten men appear in shackles, all of them unmasked to show the horrifying faces. They look to have been burned off and scarred over. I have to look away from the hideously disfigured bodies as well, because those burns scrape every bit of flesh.

“These ten prison guards had access to your cell. I granted none of them access,” Lucifer says with a bored tone and a lazy shrug.

Five more men appear in shackles, all of them looking just as gnarled and disfigured as the others. Humans wouldn’t be able to survive such damage. Did this happen recently? Or is this their form after transition?

I totally get the masks now.

“These five are the ones I gave access to. One of my most trusted escorts, and four of my most trusted throat guards,” Lucifer goes on.

He moves closer to the line of ten men. With a dark smirk, he winks, and the men drop to the ground, screams of agony ripping from their throats as

they start convulsing. Black liquid oozes from their mouths, eyes and ears as they start gurgling, their screams being silenced as they drown internally.

Lucifer wipes a bit of black liquid away as though it's a cumbersome piece of dirt. The droplet falls from his sleeve and splatters to the ground before it's absorbed and lost from sight.

The ten dead men disappear from the room, an ominous silence falling over us in their tortured wake.

Swallowing thickly, I take a step away from the devil. Then another. And another. Until I'm against the wall.

Lucifer grins wickedly at Lamar. "Now to find out who exactly gave them access. It's been a long while since I had the ability to hear the lies so easily," he goes on, turning his attention to the five men.

The men have no expression as they remain shackled, since their faces are too distorted to relay any sort of emotion.

"What about you?" he asks the first one.

"No, my king," the man immediately says, bowing his head and exposing his throat.

Lucifer smiles broadly. "Truth," he says, moving down to the next one.

The same question and answer are repeated, and this one bows and exposes his throat as well.

When he moves to the third one, I notice a subtle tension spread through the guard.

"And you?"

The guard doesn't answer as quickly. "No, my king. Never," he says, bowing his head and exposing his throat.

"Lie," the devil says seconds before the man's head goes rolling.

Silence again.

There's no spraying of blood. No scream of warning. Once second there's

a head, and the next second it's bouncing around on the ground and rolling to a stop at Lamar's feet.

The body falls, jerking the line of shackled men around him closer together, since they're all chained to each other.

I follow Lucifer's gaze to Lamar, and the relief on the prince's lover's face is almost instant. The devil can hear a lie, which means he'll know it was never him.

The chains disappear, and the men step away from the fallen body before it also vanishes from sight.

Lucifer shifts his gaze and studies them briefly, before turning his attention to Lamar.

The four remaining men stand at a militant position, likely waiting to be dismissed.

"What were your whereabouts on the night the elder was attacked in neutral sanctuary territory?" Lucifer asks him.

Tears of pure relief cloud Lamar's vision as a smile spreads across his lips. "With my prince, my king. I spent the night in his chambers, and woke with him that next morning," he says, then swiftly bows, his entire body relaxed as he exposes his throat.

Lucifer glances to Manella. "He is cleared of the charges against him and remains under royal protection. An attack on him is an attack on us all," Lucifer adds.

Lamar barely manages to keep from sobbing, remaining in his bowed state. Manella's eyes glisten as he bows at the waist to his father. "Thank you, Father. Thank you."

Lucifer snaps his fingers, and five men walk in. All their gazes search the room, seeing the four men instead of the fifteen originally sent in here. They stiffen and go to attention.

“Make sure it’s recorded that my son’s lover is exonerated of all charges. And place a royal inquiry into the true killer of the elder. Lamar is being framed, and I’ll not tolerate these games,” Lucifer drawls in a bored tone.

They all bow, then turn and swiftly walk out the way they came in. The four remaining fellows stay at attention, still waiting to be dismissed.

“You may return to your chambers with full pardon,” Lucifer says to Lamar. “I’m sure Manella will join you shortly.”

Lamar moves to his feet slowly, staying bowed at the waist. “Thank you, my king,” he says as he darts a look full of relief and pure joy to Manella.

Manella nods subtly, his face remaining a stoic mask in front of the devil, though I know he wants to run out with Lamar.

“You’re dismissed,” Lucifer says to Lamar.

Lamar bows again, turning to walk out, giving the devil the last word. I quickly follow him out, and watch with a curse as he disappears from sight, likely going to Manella’s chambers.

Shit.

Not this again.

Frustrated, I poke my head back through the door just as Lucifer holds a hand up. All four remaining men burst into flames, and their screams have me jerking my head back, unable to watch.

Why did he do that?

I wait until the screams go instantly silent before I peek back in, seeing nothing but ash before it disappears. Lucifer goes to a throne-like chair and takes a seat, getting comfortable as a dark smirk emerges to his lips.

“You knew nothing of the protective gift your lover had. I could see it in your reaction to that conversation,” Lucifer tells Manella.

“No, sir,” Manella answers absently. “Are you certain it’s not something else? Is it still with us?”

Reeling back, I groan. I forgot the devil knew I was there.

Unable to help myself, I poke my head back in, but find the devil studying the spot where I was earlier.

“I’m not concerned with it, so speak freely,” Lucifer finally says with a shrug, returning his attention to his son. “Though, if it is a gift from Lilith, you might want to visit with her and have her revoke it before the curse takes effect. If it hasn’t already.”

He, for some reason, stares absently at my spot again. I swallow audibly.

“You weren’t able to read their lies, were you?” Manella asks him candidly.

Lucifer gives him the creepiest smile I’ve ever seen. “I’m afraid that gift has not returned. Though I did wake up a few months ago without the breaches of darkness clouding my mind. I’ve been trying to ascertain who has been taking advantage of my weakened state. Certainly none of your lovers. Lamar clearly believed I could read the truth, and was eager to spill it to me. Let’s let him continue believing in such, along with all the others. As far as anyone is concerned, these four died for their own failure to see the traitor in their midst.”

He claps his hands together as Manella smirks, looking more like the devil’s son than I’ve ever seen him.

“You’re finally back,” Manella says like he’s pleased.

“I certainly am,” Lucifer says darkly. “And the devil isn’t too happy with the traitors among us. Your siblings should not be suspect, though I’m sure you already suspect them.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time they’ve taken something precious from me,” Manella growls.

“None so precious as your Lamar. None so powerful either,” Lucifer states absently. “And they’d never create a mess such as this for me,

especially not in the state I've been reduced to these past few centuries."

He does realize they're devil-spawn, right?

Manella bristles. "Tensions are high between the six of us right now. I'm afraid you'll be disappointed when you see us together now."

He nods, but a grin still stays fixed to his lips. "That's all going to change, my son. Everything is about to change."

The certainty and malice rolling off him sets my stomach into waves. I don't like how sure he sounds of himself. It can't be good when the devil is excited.

"Tell your siblings to look forward to a reunion." Lucifer shifts his gaze toward Manella again, the corners of his mouth turning out like the Grinch's as he adds, "Daddy's home."

A chill shoots through my spine, and I move back. Focusing hard, I find the boys presence, and I start to zap myself there, when they're suddenly standing right behind me.

I squeal a little, and Jude's wide eyes meet mine. Ezekiel looks half dazed, but his eyes clear when he spots me. Gage blows out a shaky breath, shaking his head as he runs a hand through his hair.

Kai opens his mouth like he's about to speak to me, when the two large doors open on their own.

"What are you doing here?" I hiss, freaking out. "The devil is in there."

The suicidal idiots just smirk at me. Jude even winks at me.

"Come on in, boys," I hear Lucifer drawl, and my entire body goes awash with cold.

Ezekiel passes through me, his eyes closing briefly as he breathes in deep, and I whirl around to follow them.

I really will try to kill the devil if he attempts to harm them.

And I'll find out just how good of a protective spirit I really am.

Or have my heart split four ways and set on fire.
One of the two.

Chapter 20

Another, smaller throne has appeared, and Manella is lazily lounging next to Lucifer. The devil is casually sipping from a champagne flute that I don't recall him having earlier, as we step forward.

The doors slam shut, and I step up behind them, ready for whatever.

“Rather interesting quad you fellas must be to keep getting so much attention,” Lucifer drawls.

The guys all seem a little too freaking relaxed for my taste.

They bow as one, all of them folding at the waist but not dropping to their knees the way Lamar did.

“All the way to the ground,” I hiss, worrying about the respect level.

Lucifer's lips just twitch when they remain bowed at the waist.

“This is informal. You may stand,” Lucifer says, not seeming disrespected or offended.

They straighten with the same synchronization as they bowed.

They all take a stance with their arms behind their back and their legs spread shoulder-width apart—a militant stance resembling the one the guards used.

“What's so special about you?” Lucifer asks, his eyes drifting from one to the other.

“We never died,” Ezekiel answers without hesitation.

It's subtle, but I notice the slight widening of the devil's eyes, as though that surprises him. He darts a look to Manella, and Manella nods once.

Lucifer's grin curls like he's delighted before he returns his gaze to them.

“Yet you're in the underworld, able to breathe, able to move about like all the others. Very interesting indeed. How did you transition?” he muses.

“We’re not wholly sure about those details,” Jude answers a little too easily. “We were hoping to earn our ticket here and discover those answers from you.”

Lucifer grins, swirling the champagne once before finishing it off. The glass disappears once it’s empty, and he leans up, steepling his hands in front of his face as he studies them with renewed interest.

“And it took you some centuries to earn a spot in the trials, from what I’ve learned. I assumed the documents were just lazily prepared when I didn’t discover a previous stay in hell’s throat,” Lucifer says, almost as though he’s a little excited.

I glance at the four of them, seeing their faces stoic and unnervingly calm. The devil is excited about them? That’s...terrifying. Just what sort of guys did I go and get myself tethered to?

I know they’re lethal, unapologetic, certainly psychotic, and inherently dangerous, but I didn’t know they’d get the devil giddy.

“We had assumptions we were being kept out intentionally, given our consistently high rankings with the surface guardians,” Kai states honestly.

Manella smirks. So does the devil.

I hate this.

I hate this a lot.

The devil cuts his eyes toward Manella, but Manella pointedly ignores him, never losing his secretive smirk.

“I’ve heard you were under the assumptions Manella was the one doing so,” Lucifer tells them.

They say nothing.

Lucifer’s grin grows, and Manella rolls his eyes.

“I can assure you that the royal family has no interest in who makes the trials. Our guards are hand-selected, and the trials are just for the lower levels

starting out in the underworld,” Lucifer goes on. “In fact, the four of you are the first-ever trial runners that any of us have taken an interest in.”

That has the four of them stiffening ever so slightly. Me? I’m a fucking mess right now.

If I had tangible fingernails, I’d have chewed them off. I’m pacing back and forth behind them as it is.

“Of course all the quads rouse interest, so I suppose that’s not entirely true,” the devil goes on, contradicting himself with weird double-talk.

I remind myself the devil is tricky.

“My interests lie in the fact that someone certainly did try to keep you four away from hell. In fact, it was so imperative that you transitioned without death. A feat never heard of before.”

He stands, and I go still, my eyes warily on him as he stretches like he’s been sitting for too long. Lazily, he fingers the buttons on his sleeve before rolling it up to his elbow. Then does the same to the other.

The devil likes suspense.

“I’m interested in knowing how you came to believe it was Manella who was against you,” he says, placing his hands on his hips.

Jude is the one to answer. “He’s in charge of the trials.”

That’s it?

That’s their whole point of conjecture?

“If you have a little more evidence, now would be the time to share it,” I whisper-yell at them. “You’re accusing the devil’s son of a crime,” I remind them.

They do nothing.

“He’s only in charge of the fun stuff,” the devil states dismissively, once again not seeming offended. If anything, he’s amused.

“I had no idea you even existed until you were entered into the trials,”

Manella says on a sigh.

“That’s a lie. He and Lilith discussed the quads making it through the night, and a hit that was out on you during the gauntlet run.” Then I pause. “Well, that was after the first part of the trials, though, wasn’t it?” I muse aloud.

Kai gives me a shut-the-hell-up side eye before returning his attention to Lucifer.

Right. Talking aloud is just distracting, since the four of them are the only ones who can hear it.

“Surface guardians, though greatly appreciated, especially in such trying times as we currently face, are not exactly under royal view,” Manella goes on. “We rarely know what they’re doing up there unless one of us has gone back as a mortal.”

The guys exchange a brief look, but their expressions give nothing away.

“Whoever has been trying their damndest to keep you out of hell has been very influential in the part of the equation we’re very lax in,” Lucifer goes on. “Perhaps we should pay better attention to the surface guardians after all.”

Manella groans like that task has just been pressed upon him.

“Would you rather Lilith or Cain be the ones to oversee it?” Lucifer asks him, eyebrow arched. “Perhaps the twins or Hera?”

Manella curses under his breath. “I’ll start it as soon as the trials are complete,” Manella relents grudgingly.

When the devil steps down, he’s suddenly right in their faces. I pass through the guys immediately, stepping between the devil and them like I’m ready for anything.

Lucifer immediately takes a step back, a knowing smile gracing his lips when his eyes settle on me. He doesn’t meet my gaze, so I really hope that

means he can't see me.

"There you are again," he tells me, still grinning. "You do like to protect the weaker from me, don't you?"

The guys, for the first time, seem a little worried. At least I think so. I can feel their tension more than I can see it, because I'm not taking my eyes off the devil.

"Just where did you stumble across this thing that guards you?" he asks them.

I'm assuming he certainly can't see me if he's not referring to me as a woman. It'd be rude to call me a *thing* otherwise, and though the devil is evil, he's not overtly rude. At least not from my observations.

Though he did kill a bunch of guys just because he couldn't sense a lie.

I suppose they probably found that rude.

The guys hesitate for too long, and a bit of pride swells in me when I think they're not going to tell him.

"He already knows I exist. Just be honest," I say to them, my eyes still on the devil.

He tilts his head, studying them, that smile lifting more as they all give him their attention again.

"A little over a month ago we discovered...*it*," Kai tells him.

I turn and glare at him. "It? Fucking really?" I snap.

His lips twitch, but his eyes remain on the devil.

Muttering a few choice words, I face the devil again, only to see him too intrigued.

"Very interesting indeed," he says, stroking his jaw thoughtfully. Manella has sat up straighter, his eyes passing over me like he's searching for me as well. "And has it protected you?" he asks.

Jude clears his throat. Ezekiel answers, "Yes." No elaboration.

“A gift from my eldest, I presume?” Lucifer asks, his eyes on my forehead, though they pass over me a couple of times too.

“Lilith has taken a special interest in us these past several years. It’s the reason we assumed the royal family held an interest in surface guardians,” Gage answers.

The devil tilts his head. “I suppose I need to convene with my eldest.”

He claps his hands together, his eyes flitting over the four of them. “As of now, I don’t find it in your best interests to keep you protected in the throat. You’ll return to the surface until the trials commence. I’ll grant you some parting gifts that will certainly protect you up there.” His eyes pass over me again. “Though it’s clear you already have one form of protection.”

He turns and walks back toward his throne, sitting down with flourish and that same enigmatic grin as the boys neglect to show gratitude.

At least it’s not just me they don’t thank.

I’m distracted by the sound of a cry of pain, and my breath catches as I strain to listen.

The devil starts talking again, but I tune him out, listening as Lamar shouts.

“Lamar is under attack!” I shout, rushing out, passing through the walls and following the sound of his voice as it grows louder.

“I’ve been exonerated!” he shouts.

Just as I pass through a room full of black décor, my eyes widen.

Fifteen or more guards are surrounding a bleeding, weak Lamar who is bruised and battered, staggering as he clutches his wounded gut. I dive to his side, my heart hammering in my chest now.

He’s in his boxers, seemingly caught unaware while his guard was finally down.

They all charge forth, and the power shoots from me with so much force

that it blows them all back. Some even crash through the walls, and I whirl around, feeling that acidic power rattling around in my veins, hungry to deliver death instead of just disorientation.

Some scatter and disappear, even as Lamar struggles to use his power. His veins are turning the same black I've seen before, and I try to heal him the way I did Kai.

It doesn't work. No tingles are present.

Just as another man charges forward, I send him flying back again with one harsh wave of my hand. The acidic power remains burning in my veins, wishing to be used.

I'm terrified to use it so close to Lamar though, especially with him already in the process of dying.

By the time the rest of them leap to their feet, my guys are bursting forth, and Jude blurs to two of them, his fists hitting them so hard in their chests that the fists go through the bodies. They shake violently and collapse to the ground, their bodies instantly turning to ash.

Kai grabs two by the heads, and their veins turn red as they start to convulse. My mouth dries when I see Jude's and Kai's blackened eyes.

Gage and Ezekiel trot in and prop against the walls, unaffected by the whole thing.

But just as more appear, they all burst into flames. My heart pummels my chest, worried the guys are next, but it's only the traitorous guards who scream in agony.

Lamar is on the ground, and I drop to be beside him as the devil walks in. Manella charges into the room, rushing to Lamar's side. His hands go to him as Lamar starts to shake violently, the poison eating away at him.

Manella whispers a few words, and Lamar's eyes roll back in his head as the veins in his body start to slowly push the black out. It comes out through

his nose like it's running away, puddling on the ground as it vacates his body.

Manella blows out a breath of relief as he cradles his lover's head in his lap.

Lucifer takes in the scene curiously, his eyes flicking to me again like he can sense my presence more.

"I'm afraid it's time for you boys to resurface. I'm going to have to restrict access to these floors," Lucifer announces dispassionately, never looking at them. "It'll cost you your lives if you tell anyone what happened here today."

He gives them a dark grin. "Wouldn't want someone thinking I'm so weak that I can't even control my guards anymore."

The guys all give one nod of understanding.

Lucifer returns his gaze to Manella, as Lamar takes his first easy breath, groggily waking up as his body continues to heal.

"Thank you," Lamar chokes out, looking around like he's searching for someone.

My stupid smile spreads when I realize he's seeking me out to offer gratitude.

Kai arches an eyebrow at me, and I wipe the grin from my face. Ezekiel smirks at me, and I roll my eyes as I turn and pass through the wall, ready to return home.

"Don't forget your spirit when you go," the devil says. "You'll need it more than Lamar will. And apparently there's only one to go around."

Jude casts me a curious gaze as he walks out and steps into me, but I say nothing as we vanish from hell with the devil's blessing.

I'm not sure what the devil's blessing incurs, and I dread finding out.

Chapter 21

The second we're back in their massive excuse for a home, Jude steps away from me, going to the fridge to grab a beer. The other three appear, and he tosses them all a beer as well.

Ezekiel goes to grab his phone from the kitchen island as it appears as well, and he immediately orders several pizzas. The rest of them are already drinking, and I stand off to the side, now feeling like the awkward outsider again.

I can't believe they're not even discussing anything, and I'm scared to be the one to broach the conversation.

They sit down at their table, and I just watch from my spot, wanting to go to my chair, but worried they'll ask me to leave.

They quietly sit in their normal places, elbows resting on the table as they drink their beers. Every time they finish a beer, one gets up and goes to pass out new ones.

Several empty beer bottles pile up in no time, as they just keep on drinking in weird silence.

When the pizza arrives, Ezekiel leaves, going to greet the delivery guy at the door before he can even knock.

I continue just lingering in my spot, watching them even as they elect to ignore me.

Their gazes are all absently fixed on the dining room table as Ezekiel returns with the pizzas, acting as though they're comfortable just resting in peace. They all eat from their own box, still not speaking.

It's all rather underwhelming. I'm tempted to leave, but I'm curious what they're going to say when they finally do speak.

As Jude drains the last of his beer, Gage pushes aside the little bit of pizza he has left. Ezekiel is the one to finally break the silence.

“We really just held a private audience with the motherfucking devil.”

Kai’s beer pauses at his lips for a moment, then he drinks the rest of it. Jude starts laughing humorlessly, looking exhausted as he scrubs his face with a hand.

I look at all of them when they start laughing with him.

Psychos. I knew it.

“I’m not sure what’s so funny about now being on the devil’s radar,” I dryly point out.

The laughter cuts off immediately, and they all turn to look at me like they just remembered I’m in the room.

Shrinking under their intense stares, I clear my throat. “I think I’ll go to my room. Try not to get killed or anything.”

They say nothing, and I mutter, “Good night,” without turning around.

It’s actually day time, but I assume they’ll be crashing for several long hours, considering the events that have happened over the course of the last few days or weeks or however long we’ve been gone.

My room is predictably unchanged, and I lie down on my bed, sighing as I stare up at the ceiling.

The outfit I’m wearing turns into an elegant dress, fully equipped with diamond studded shoes. It’s an odd lounging outfit, but it makes me feel important. Dress for the role you want instead of the role you have, right?

I wonder what it’s like to be a part of something. To feel as though you know your purpose and have your people.

“How did Lucifer know you were there?”

Ezekiel’s voice startles me, and I look at the entryway to see all four of them propped up inside my room, staring at me like they’ve been there for a

while.

Jude is drinking another beer, his eyes leisurely raking over me.

“Lamar could sense me, but he couldn’t see me or hear me. Same thing with the devil,” I answer automatically.

They continue to stare at me with no expressions on their unreadable faces.

“It was sort of cute how she stepped in front of us when he advanced on us,” Gage says with a smirk forming.

I bristle. It was badass. Not *cute*.

“Like she could take down the devil if he saw it fit to end our lives for the trouble he’s dealing with,” Jude adds, the beginnings of a mocking grin toying with the edges of his lips.

Dicks.

“*It* was even interesting to the devil himself,” Kai adds, a taunting glint in his arrogant eyes.

Lounging comfortably, I give them all a wry look.

“It’s been a rather tiring experience. If you’re done making a mockery of me, I’ll take some peace and quiet now,” I retort, eyeing my fingernails like they’re far more interesting than the sexy, deviant pricks in my room.

“Why’d you choose the room farthest from ours?” Ezekiel muses, seeming just as entertained as all of them. I suppose he’s out of his feral trance for good, at least for now.

“You’re smart boys. I’m sure you can figure it out,” I tell them, alluding to a lie. But they don’t get to hear the truth.

Their amusement dies, and they all level me with a hard glare.

“Bipolar much? Or do you just prefer to dish it, yet have the inability to receive?” I ask idly, smirking like I’m winning this game of tongue.

Jude’s smirk returns as a dark look passes his face. “We all enjoy

receiving, little spirit.”

Admittedly, my temperature rises, but I play it cool, aiming for aloof. How exactly does one achieve aloofness?

Ezekiel looks around my room, stepping away from the wall. It’s a rather large room. If I had any toiletry needs, I’d have my own private bathroom as well.

“Why does a spirit need a bedroom?” he asks. “Especially when she doesn’t sleep?”

“*She* has never been able to stay away from the lot of you for longer than ten minutes in the past. Now *she* prefers her space while *she* tries to figure out how to attach herself to a new quad.”

His eyes darken on me, but Kai just releases a rumble of laughter.

“That threat is getting a little tired, don’t you think?” Gage drawls.

“Not sure exactly how that’s a *threat*. A threat would be warning you that *it’s* going to put the damn lotion on you before hacking you to bits and feeding you to ravenous cannibals,” I point out, feeling rather impressed by my creative threat.

They all look amused now.

I give up.

I never know how they’re going to react to any given situation.

“Is that all?” I groan. “I would think you’d all be too tired for this pointless banter.”

Ezekiel picks up the remote, turning on the TV, and my eyes widen. I had no idea that even worked. Hell, when did it even get in here? It didn’t used to be. It looks brand new.

He pulls up a familiar movie, and my heart beats a little faster as he starts Pinocchio a little before the spot I got to when they interrupted me.

I get ghostly tears in my eyes as a smile stretches across my face. He

doesn't meet my gaze as he tugs his shirt over his head, and my smile evaporates.

"What are you doing?" Gage and I both ask him at the same time.

"I'm sleeping in here," he answers absently, coming and beginning to strip the bed out from under me, pulling off the dusty covers.

The sheets and blankets pass through me, as he moves to a drawer and pulls out some clean replacements.

The other three exchange a look, and I try not to let my attention be divided between the jackasses on TV and the ones in my room.

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," Kai tells him warily.

"I've stayed away from her like all of you wanted, and it drove me mad when I couldn't see her at all. Doesn't matter what's going on or what she is, it's clear I'm already stuck. I'm going to at least get some good fucking sleep while I can," he answers them as he quickly makes the bed.

I never move from the bed, just allowing the sheets to pass through me. They really have no personal boundaries where I'm concerned and take complete, borderline rude, advantage of my translucent form.

"I didn't agree to that, and this is my room," I point out, holding my finger up.

He ignores me, sliding into the bed beside me.

"What happens if she goes whole again?" Gage points out.

Jude smirks as he comes forward. "I'll stick around and make sure he doesn't do anything to make his affliction worse."

Kai rolls his eyes, dragging him back by his shirt.

"Gage will stay to run interference," Kai argues.

"Why the fuck would I stay?" Gage growls as Jude rolls his eyes and turns to walk out.

"Because you're the only one who doesn't want to see what she feels

like,” Kai says, clapping Gage on the shoulder.

Nervousness wads in my stomach. What if it does make me whole? That’s such a double-edged sword. On one hand, it’d be a dream come true. On the other, it’s a death sentence with these four.

I’m not convinced they won’t fuck me and then kill me while I’m still stuck in that dopey orgasm haze they leave women in.

“No one is sleeping in here. I don’t want to turn whole just to make my death easier for you,” I gripe. “And I’m not entirely convinced that had anything to do with it.”

Considering I was feeling the overwhelming urge to close my eyes and rest in the cells when they were all touching me, I’m almost positive that’s how I turned whole.

I’ve just been in denial.

Damn Lilith. I still hate her.

Ezekiel’s arm passes through my waist as he gets comfortable, his eyes already closing as he settles down, not even acknowledging my refusal.

Cursing, Gage shoulders by Kai, tearing his shirt over his head on his way toward the bed.

Kai smirks over his shoulder at me. “If she turns whole, restrain her. Don’t kill her. Maybe we can figure out what’s really going on once we have a way to pry answers out of her.”

I flip him off, and he chuckles as he turns and leaves me with Gage and Ezekiel. Gage strips down to his boxers, like Ezekiel already is, and he climbs into bed on the other side of me.

Gage makes a conscious effort not to touch me, and I roll my eyes. “Just take him out of here after he goes to sleep, and we both get what we want,” I tell *One*.

“Do it, and I’ll punch you when I wake up,” Ezekiel says in a muffled

voice against his pillow.

Gage snorts derisively, rolling over to put his back to me.

I stare at the TV, as Ezekiel picks up the remote and rewinds it, not even looking. Somehow, he starts the movie at the exact right part. It distracts me from the fact I really don't want them in my room, and I sit up as my clothes change.

Ezekiel lifts his head, then laughs under his breath before shaking his head. Gage turns his head to look at me, then rolls his eyes as I sit in my Pinocchio outfit.

"Tell me what popcorn is like," I say absently, riveted as poor Pinocchio barely escapes. But I can feel his heavy heart from here. It's like he can't catch a break.

I know the feeling, little guy.

"Salty, gets stuck in your teeth, and not really all that filling, but weirdly addictive," Ezekiel answers in a quiet, almost sleep-rasp voice.

"Sounds perfect," I say with a small grin.

Gage is already sleeping, I realize, when he subconsciously rolls over, his hand slipping through my waist. The peaceful expression on his face has me rolling my eyes and feeling rooted to this spot regardless of the dire consequences.

"If I turn whole and you guys tie me up, I can promise I'll use my protective powers to protect myself. And I won't even feel bad about it."

Ezekiel smiles lazily, his eyes never opening. "If I tie you up, I can promise you that you'll enjoy every fucking moment of it."

Not sure why I feel a wicked little shiver up my spine, considering I've already decided I'm too good for them.

Deciding it's safer to stare at the TV than talk to Ezekiel, I sit rigidly. I'll get up if my eyes feel heavy again.

My mouth opens for a yawn, weirdly enough. But no way will I...fall...
asleep.

Chapter 22

My eyes fly open, and I hold really still as the pressure on my waist has my entire body warming up. Two different hands are touching me there, holding me to them, as two very hard bodies press against my sides.

I fell asleep.

Watching Pinocchio.

And now I'm a real girl.

Between two real killers.

And I'm frozen in place, because I don't want to be tied up or killed.

Trying not to breathe too heavily, I start to sit up, careful not to disturb them.

The hands on my waist tighten, as I struggle to do the simple task of lifting my body. This...is not what I expected. Gravity is a real bitch, and I'm not used to feeling it.

It takes more effort to rise up than I expected, and the hands slide to my lap abruptly when I forget about them—and gravity. I go still, not even breathing, as the two men on either side of me stir ever so slightly.

There's a back door on this wing. I can slip down the stairs back here and be out before they even notice me missing. I'm also faster than them, so that shouldn't be an issue.

Except...gravity. I hope that doesn't affect my speed.

Ignoring all the raging hormones in my suicidal, traitorous body, I carefully remove their hands from my lap, gently placing them on the bed.

Just as I'm about to try to slide down the bed, a hand darts out and snags my arm so unexpectedly and roughly that I cry out.

Ezekiel jerks awake, and I turn to look at Gage as he stares at me with

wide, wild, hungry eyes, his grip on my arm tightening to be almost bruising.

Our eyes stay locked, as I accidentally stay frozen in horror like a statue. His nostrils flare, and he looks to be visibly straining not to do something terrible.

“Tell me that’s bad, and I won’t touch her,” Ezekiel says, his breath whispering across my shoulder, the heat of it causing my eyes to roll back in my head as a full body shiver wracks me.

Now is so not the time to be a woman. I’m almost certain it’s unnatural to forget one’s life is in danger at a moment like this.

A groan is pulled from Gage’s throat, and before I can blink, he moves in a blur, coming at me so fast I can’t stop him.

His lips crash against mine almost violently, and I try to bite him, only to have him shove his hand in my hair, aggressively turning my head to give him better access as his tongue sweeps in and steals my fight.

My hands fly to his shoulders, and two other hands move to my waist, as a set of incredible lips find my neck. Both of them touching me, surrounding me, intoxicating me with sensory overload...is almost too much.

Gage’s hand starts tearing open the buttons of my shirt, when reality smashes back in.

Fear spikes my blood, and I shove him them both off, stunning them for just a second as I throw myself off the bed...and crash through the floor in my phantom form, falling all the way downstairs.

A scream leaves my lips when I go from ghost to whole again, and land hard on my side in the downstairs library. Pain shoots up my side, and I groan while cursing my luck.

“Did you hear that thump?” Ezekiel says from above me as feet hit the floor.

“She’s whole again,” Gage answers, dark excitement in his tone.

Feet start pounding down the staircase immediately, as Gage shouts, “She’s a real fucking girl, boys!”

Ezekiel’s dark laughter follows that. With every ounce of strength I have, I push to my feet, and I...stumble around like a baby deer on one of those nature shows.

My legs feel weak, shaky, and not at all like I expected. Everyone makes walking seem so easy.

I kick out of the ridiculously uncomfortable wooden shoes, since those seem to be wreaking havoc on my flimsy ankles.

I barely catch myself against the desk, and I push my knees back straight, straining as a cold sweat breaks out over my skin. Fear prickles the back of my neck as they near the door, and suddenly I feel the weight leave me as gravity ceases to exist.

Looking down, I fist pump the air, seeing my phantom body is back, and I race through the library wall, darting toward the back door. But then...I’m falling and sliding, pain shooting through me again.

A silent curse gets swallowed when I look down at the useless piece of shit legs that are flesh again.

What the hell is going on?!

I can’t tell if I’m leveling up or short circuiting.

When I get my glorious, weightless body back, I push up and race through the walls, getting as far away from the nearing voices as possible.

“Where the fuck is she?” I hear Gage snap.

“What the hell is going on?” Kai snaps, his voice muffled through the many layers of walls between us.

I’m mid-stumble all of the sudden, once again on those baby deer legs. Barely restraining the cry of frustration, I clutch the dining room table, looking at the closet in the living room.

But before I can make it, Kai is suddenly appearing in front of me, a dark smile twisting his lips as he rakes his eyes over me. “Not exactly the sexiest thing you could be wearing, but clothes are always optional.”

He’s suddenly on me, shoving me against the wall, and becomes the only thing holding me up when his lips find mine. He groans into my mouth as he presses against me, and through his thin boxers, I can feel just how turned on he is.

I kiss him back, my hands sliding up to the back of his neck, as I pull back my knee and shove it up as hard as I can.

With a cry, Kai breaks the kiss and stumbles back, doubling over as he cups his balls and groans.

“Tie me up now, dickhead,” I gloat, then squeal when he lunges at me again.

I feel it when my body shifts this time, turning into my phantom phase, and he passes right through me, crashing against the wall so hard plaster falls off in clumps. Then he turns his narrowed gaze at me.

I flip him off with both fingers, then run like hell before I can get cursed with those useless legs again.

“She’s down here!” he calls out.

I dive into the closet in the billiard room just before I turn whole again, and I wobble on unsteady legs as I hang out with all the pool sticks and stuff, panting heavily.

Running is tiring when you can feel gravity, damn it. My phantom form was just dense enough to keep me from floating away, but I was still effectively weightless. I hate gravity. It’s a total pain in the ass. And I need more practice with my legs before I have to run for my life.

“Where the fuck did she go?” I hear Jude snap, and Kai laughs darkly.

“I don’t know, but she tastes too damn good to be anything less than

terrible for us.”

“You fucking idiot, you kissed her?” Jude groans.

“My dick still hurts from how good she felt. And from how painful she felt too. Vicious little thing,” Kai adds.

“Where’d she go?” I hear Gage snap.

Focusing really hard, I try to single out the feeling of transitioning from one form to another, harnessing the emotions that led to each. If I’m not short circuiting, maybe my level-up includes a package where I can be either or.

I’d really like to be untouchable in this moment.

It’s hard to concentrate when they’re tearing the house apart in search of me, but when I feel myself go weightless, I open my eyes and breathe out a sigh of relief, seeing right through my hand.

Concentrating again, I manage to turn back whole, feeling the energy surge through me with the awareness and crisp senses that come with it. It feels good to be a real fucking girl, but it’s also terrifying.

The door swings open, and my gaze darts up as Jude releases a slow, dark grin. Before the worst of them can get his hands on me, I smirk, and he passes right through me the second he lunges.

I strut out in my untouchable form, now feeling as though I have control, and I grin at them as they all barge into the room. I feel the glares before I see all four of them.

“Guess what, boys? I just leveled up.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I force the flesh to return, even as I wobble a little.

The second they move, I turn back, grinning as my untouchable phase offers me a fuck-you shield.

“What the actual hell?” Jude asks, slinging broken pool sticks around as he angrily stalks out of the closet.

I turn to flash a grin at him over my shoulder. “It’s amazing how much

survival instincts aide a girl when she needs them most.”

His grin slowly forms when I feel the pressure of gravity again, and I curse, wobbling until I crash into a strong body. Two arms come around me, and warm breath fans against my ear.

“What was that?” Ezekiel asks in a taunting whisper as he rips my shirt open.

It takes a lot of effort, but I manage to shift again, and I pass through his hands, blowing out a relieved breath.

“Fucking savages,” I accuse, pointing at all of them as I start backing out of the room on my good legs instead of those stupid real legs.

“It’s cute the way you act like you don’t want it now that you can have it,” Gage tells me.

Four wicked grins stay fixed to their devilishly tempting faces. “No,” I say loudly. “Not happening. You don’t all get to kiss me stupid so that I forget I sort of hate your ungrateful asses.”

“We’re not going to kill you, Keyla,” Ezekiel says, moving closer. “We just want to make those fantasies of yours come true.”

“Ha! Worst pickup line ever,” I lie, hoping they don’t hear that pathetic little tremor of hesitation in my voice.

After all, I did spend a lot of time thinking of little else. I’m starting to realize there are far more important things in life.

I flicker back to flesh before I manage to strain and concentrate on staying untouchable. It’s getting harder to do now. It’s like my body demands a little time in its new form, and I’m denying it.

“She can’t hold it much longer,” Jude says with a deviant spark in his eye, just ready to pounce.

A very important thought occurs to me, and I feel like an idiot for not thinking of it sooner. I’m going to blame it on the fact I finally have

adrenaline, and it makes you super durable, but hella stupid.

If I've seen a place before, I can zap myself there. Well, maybe not all the way to hell, but definitely to Purgatory and anywhere in range within the states.

A grin curves my lips. And if I'm whole...I might not need their presence to exist. Which means I can go anywhere without them. Seems like the perfect time to test that theory.

"If you really want to touch me, you have to woo me." I say this with a straight face, but I almost cringe when I hear the words aloud in one fluent sentence.

They all give me an incredulous look.

"Woo you?" Jude finally asks, his eyebrows arched in utter confusion, as though it's the most preposterous thing he's ever heard.

"Yes. If I'm going to be sticking around until I know for certain the devil isn't going to strike you dead, then I might as well be getting some perks before I leave the four of you to continue on in your hellish ways. I'll get the four of you, and you'll get my protection. Then we'll part ways, and I'll go find my one true love, while the four of you move back on to your harem of women."

"Harem?" Gage asks, a sardonic curve to his lips.

I flicker between forms again, but manage to hold on a little longer. I need to get this all out.

"Harem is an interesting choice of word, considering you're the one getting four of us at once, while we only get you," Ezekiel points out with a devious twist of his lips.

"Yes, you'll be my harem. Deal with it. I'm the only one who gets access to you for the duration of however short our time left together may be. In return, I get the ultimate experience to start my new life out with a bang."

I flicker again, sucking in a breath as I strain harder.

“Start your new life out with a *bang*. Again, interesting choice of words,” Ezekiel states with that same infuriating expression.

“I get my fantasy,” I go on, not letting him deter me, since my time is very limited for how much longer I can hold the new form back.

“All the things you’ve done to coerce a woman—”

“*Seduce* a woman,” Gage interrupts, smirking. “Not *coerce*.”

“—into bed with you,” I continue, not acknowledging the interruption. “I get that. All of it. Everything I’ve had to watch over the past five years.”

“Five years? Before we even get sex? I can’t even count the number of women who’ve been in here in that span of time,” Kai growls, as though I’m ludicrous.

I open my mouth to speak, but Jude waves his hand. “No need to recite the number, *comoara trădătoare*,” he says, his accent subtly shifting to one I can’t pinpoint on the last two words.

“What did you just call me?” I ask, then shake my head when I remember I’m on a timer here. “Never mind. Not the important part,” I go on calmly.

“I want five-and-a-half years of seduction, and not just the touching kind. Roses. Jewelry. Fancy dinners. All of it. I want the same amount you did for them crammed into the limited amount of time we have.”

“High maintenance little piece of ass, aren’t you?” Kai asks with an eyebrow arch.

I point a finger at him. “You’ll be lucky if you get to do more than watch. I’m the one getting to be selfish in the bedroom, while selflessly risking my life for you and following around your ungrateful asses.”

Another flicker that I force back has me taking a deep breath, that fortunately helps to calm me. Bonus.

The other three guys just grin over at Kai.

“It’d almost be worth it just to see you suffer,” Jude states, his grin growing.

Kai snarls at him, and then turns his glare on me.

“You’ll change your mind.”

“Highly unlikely,” I dutifully point out. “If you want to touch me while I protect you, because I’ll be protecting you regardless, then you need to remember how very important it is to woo me. The sex will happen naturally and at my speed, while the wooing continues in between bouts of it. And I’ll let you do almost anything to me. As long as my fantasies get put out for me as well.”

“We’ve had a taste. What happens if you leave and we start losing our minds the way E did already?” Gage asks, a very scary look on his face that has me questioning my confidence. I’d say it had me questioning my sanity, but that went years ago.

“I thought we agreed we weren’t going to touch her for that very reason,” Jude points out as though he’s being reasonable and accusatory in the same breath.

“You felt it. You went after her too,” Gage tells him without looking away from me.

“You were just too slow,” Kai adds, smirking as he darts a taunting look toward Jude.

Jude’s jaw clenches, and he forces his eyes back to me. “I take it back. It wouldn’t be almost worth it. It’s definitely worth it. Sign me up. Tell me how many fucking roses or bracelets you want. Who gives a damn if we’re stuck with you for all eternity? As long as Kai suffers, I’ll sign eternity over.”

Kai flips him off, and I give Jude a dubious look, even as I flicker in and out of flesh, working even harder to force it back this time.

“If it is a long-lasting issue, which I highly doubt, we’ll find out how long

you can be without me, and I'll return at the end of that span. No touching during those times," I quickly add. "My body like this works just fine in reeling you in from that mad edge. We can go on without ever crossing a line again, and I can be loyal to my one true love."

"I'm sure he'd be just fine with you coming to see your real-girl-christening quad every so often so we can get our fix," Kai states flatly.

They truly are exasperating.

"I rescind the offer. You're making it too complicated."

I turn to leave, and Gage darts in front of me, passing through me, and causing me to lose my hold for a moment.

He immediately pins me against the wall, and for the first time, I feel trapped, unable to simply pass through him. His eyes drift over my face as he lifts a hand and fingers a lock of my hair.

His other hand fists against the wall like it's taking a concentrated amount of effort not to touch me in any other way. I finally manage to force the form back, and his hand slips through my body, ghosting those tingles throughout me that has me straining twice as hard.

I stay in my place, even as he continues to loom over me.

"Uncomplicate it," he says, even though it looks like he hates the words.

"I know nothing else about this world than the four of you. Outside of my fantasies, I don't even know what goals are to be had. I'm asking you to take care of me in all ways, and ease me out there. I can't tell you how many times I was tempted to give into the fade, to stop fighting so hard for so little. I didn't survive this long just to fall into the world with blinders on and get myself killed before I get to live. The tradeoff is me and my devout protection, though as I said, you're protected regardless."

"Sounds very meager as far as comparisons go. If you're protecting us regardless, despite the fact we've survived just fine for many, *many* years

without you, then all we really get is to sex you up and fulfill your fantasies,” Jude states dryly.

A hint of a grin forms on my lips.

“Gage was only with Ezekiel. They could have both taken me, if you know what I mean,” I state with dark humor in my eyes.

Kai’s smile falters, and Jude’s eyes narrow.

“I could have had her too, and there was no one in the room besides me,” Kai grinds out, cracking his neck to the side.

I hold Jude’s gaze as I remind him, “You can’t have any other girl without each other in the room. Except me. You can have me individually, and share when you want to share. *That’s* the tradeoff.”

His entire expression blanks, like he doesn’t want me to see anything in his eyes or his features to clue me in on where his mind goes. Kai shoves Gage away, taking his place as he gets in front of me.

“What’s my incentive if you’re icing me out?” he asks coldly.

“Work for it, and who knows, maybe I’ll let you have me too,” I say with a false bravado that wavers on the end.

Sheesh, he’s really gorgeous when that intense stare is on you because he wants what he can’t have. It has me questioning just how weak I might actually be once this thing gets started.

He pushes off. “I’m not in,” Jude finally says with a shrug. “Individually, we’ll get greedy, selfish, even combative. Look at what happened to E. I say we stick to how things have been, and you learn not to be in front of us in flesh. Otherwise, we’ll ask you to leave permanently. If you stay, that precious life of yours might just end before it truly begins.”

It’s always Jude who cuts the deepest. I’m not sure why I keep expecting anything else.

It’s like it sobers all of them, and I see the renewed determination in their

eyes.

“Then we go on as we have been. Stay out of my room,” I say tightly.

“Don’t tell us where you’ll be,” Kai groans, raking a hand over his face. “We don’t do well with temptation.”

“Fine.”

I zap myself to the basement where they never go, and finally stagger in my new physical form, collapsing to a couch. I had planned on leaving the estate to keep them away from me. I’m not quite as irresistible in reality as I was in fantasy.

I also had no idea this level of exhaustion could exist.

If I’m a gift from Lilith, that means I lose something each time I earn something new. What if I have to fight this form more and more to keep my untouchable one? Or what if I lose something else that has been instrumental to my survival?

The comfort that encompasses me when I snuggle up with a blanket has me smiling despite the ache they left in my stomach. My life has revolved around them for so long, that I’m truly quite worried I won’t know how to exist without them.

And they’re never going to do more than tolerate me.

This snuggly blanket really is a miracle cure for staving off stupid tears.

When my stomach suddenly growls, I’m very freaking distracted from all thoughts of guys. It growls again, and a pang accompanies it.

Then a slow grin spreads across my face as I glance to the basement kitchenette, staring at the fridge. Though they never actually come down here and stay down here, they do use that fridge for storing leftovers a lot.

In the next instant, I’m wobbling on unsteady legs all the way to the fridge. As I’m scrambling to pull out a box of pizza, a thought occurs to me.

It might have been a little harder for them to turn down the offer if I had

been wearing something sexier than the Pinocchio outfit.

My mind turns to mush when I bite into the pizza, feeling something so satisfying ignite in my mouth with a touch of surprise and savoring flavor. A little cold on the teeth, which I hadn't anticipated, since I've never felt cold before.

Yet I know what it is, so I can assume I've felt cold and forgotten it. Even the pizza seems familiar, in a unique, sensory sort of way.

It almost startles me when I realize that the moan in the room is coming from me. If pizza is making me moan, then I can only imagine what it would feel like to have an orgasm.

Pizza still in my mouth, I touch my stomach, feeling a grin light my features as a surge of excitement bursts through me.

I can touch myself.

I practically inhale the rest of the pizza, then grab a glass of water to choke it all down as fast as I can. It's not pretty, but it sure as hell works.

I try to make my clothes change, but it doesn't happen. So I just tear them off and toss them aside, still working on unsteady legs.

I drop back down to the couch, my hand trembling as I slide it down my body. Even my touch is almost too much. My memory from the first time Ezekiel was watered down by my mind to keep me from missing it so much.

My mind goes back to all the women they asked to do this so they could watch. It sounds creepier than it is.

It was actually really hot.

And informative.

Half of it is immediate instinct when my fingers brush over the very sensitive clit I completely underestimated. My eyes flutter shut, and those fantasies flash through my mind.

In my head, they said yes, and Ezekiel is already starting me out by

sucking my nipples.

I use my free hand to try and mimic how I think it might feel, and it's like a shot to my lower body. Biting down on my lip so as not to make too much noise, I start slow circles, imagining Gage's face between my thighs as he works that glorious mouth of his on me.

My imagination kicks it up a notch by letting Jude kiss me while Ezekiel continues on with his mouth. And I have Kai in the corner, watching me, his hand stroking slowly, matching a rhythm I've requested.

It's so much more intense when I can actually feel the physical touch and the overwhelming sensations crossing over me all at once.

I immediately know what an orgasm is when one crashes into me so forcefully that I'm forced to arch, my toes involuntarily curling as an unbidden, rasp cry is pulled from my throat.

When I open my eyes, they cross, and the sound of my panted breaths resonate in my ears as I try to breathe normally again. A stupid, uncontrollable smile spreads across my lips, and I stretch, feeling remarkably less stressed and addictively relaxed.

If that's an orgasm, I'm going to have as many as I possibly can until the day I die.

It's so much better than I imagined, even though there is a small, annoyingly hollow feeling stealing a little of my high.

That pizza sounds good right now, so I sit up, planning to eat another slice before round two.

But I freeze.

All four of them are perched up on the stairs or walls, staring. Jude's hands are gripping the banister so hard that there are indentions on the cracking wood.

Ezekiel has his hands clenched in fists, and it looks like he wants to

strangle me.

Kai is leveling me with a look that is equal parts murderous and captivating as his arms cross over his chest.

Gage is gripping the bar, and he's the first to turn and look away.

Now I know what it's like to have an audience you're unaware of. It's a little embarrassing. And terrifying, in my case.

"Hide better," Jude finally says through a sardonic, annoyed grin before he walks down the rest of the stairs and pushes out through the basement door that leads to the outside on this side of the house.

"Okay," I manage to say on a rasp whisper.

By some miracle, I manage to go ghost and zap myself to the woods. I pick a new outfit while in this form before zapping to the waterfall just beyond here. The new *whole* form takes over as soon as I end up on the smooth rocks.

That are slippery.

A laughing scream is jerked out of me when I slip off the rocks and land in the cool water that feels...amazing. My eyes open in wonder as I look around, taking it all in.

The white silk gown turns out to be a terrible choice. It's clingy as hell and very transparent in the water.

But I don't care.

It's just me out here, and I'm fairly shameless as I pick out a perfect boulder to lie down on for my next orgasm.

Chapter 23

Fun fact: orgasms don't get old. However, I'm already desperate to graduate to a two-person orgasm.

Yes, I think about more than sex. But imagine discovering sex for the very first time. I've read about teenagers, so I don't feel one bit ashamed about my current obsession.

However, the guys sure as hell haven't come around. In fact, they've made it easy to adjust to my new form this past week because they've avoided me more than I've avoided them.

I tried leaving the house. It was a terrible thing to attempt, since I sort of got lost fifteen times, and kept having to zap back and forth. Ezekiel finally asked me not to leave without them, since I have no idea how easy to kill I may or may not be.

Another fun fact: I heal as fast as they do. I cut open my finger with a kitchen knife, and the wound sealed almost immediately. I wasn't a fan of the pain, but it was a good learning exercise.

Don't worry, I know their weapons won't allow me to heal as fast.

I've seen them in action, so I go ghostly when they're strapped with weapons and off to reap some souls. They've done a lot of reaping this past week, staying gone longer and longer.

Me? I've just been hanging out in my flesh.

They've kept the fridge stocked with sandwich stuff, and they drop me off takeout when they bring home food. It's probably the most thoughtful thing they've done for me.

Ever.

I'm assuming at the rate I heal that I can't starve to death, but it's nice to

not be hungry. Downside? Not one bag of popcorn has shown up in either kitchen.

Anyway, as long as I'm in flesh, I don't ache for their presence. Another plus.

Everything evens out, I suppose.

I haven't seen one bouquet of roses show up at my door, so I'm assuming they aren't going to buy me any. And I have no money to go buy my own or decorate my room.

I've also learned to never drink that damn liquor they get from Harold. I choked half a jar of that shit down, and the next thing I knew, I woke up on the bathroom floor.

Not. Pleasant.

So far, I'm sucking my first week of being a real girl. But it's the best week of my life.

A knock at my door tells me they're delivering more food, which is odd, since they only dropped some off less than an hour ago.

I open the door not expecting to find the four of them loitering in the hallway. Ezekiel is the only one who looks directly at me.

"We're going to the club. Thought you might want to come," he says with a smirk.

The other three all give me a look of amusement I don't particularly understand.

Their words finally resonate, and a smile flits across my face. "Are you inviting me?"

He shrugs.

"You've done good not to leave the house without us, so we figured it only right to reward you with something you want to do," Kai tells me, a smug look on his face.

“How thoughtful,” I state, draining as much sarcasm into the two words as humanly possible.

Ha! *Humanly* possible. Fairly sure I’m not too human.

His lips twitch, and Jude turns away to smirk at the wall instead of in my face.

“We’ve been worked up this week, since you riled us up and left us hanging. It’s getting distracting, so we’ll be bringing you a show tonight, if you’re interested in watching, that is,” Gage drawls, his eyes cutting toward me.

I’ve experienced jealousy a multitude of times, but never so much of it that it left my stomach feeling lined with lead and dragging me down. I also have to swallow back a bit of bile, even as I force a smile.

Right.

I prepared for this. I knew this was coming. They’ve already gone much longer without a woman than I expected.

“Good. Then tonight I can hopefully do some shopping of my own and find out once and for all if I’m a virgin or not,” I chirp, trying to sound enthusiastic so they don’t see the unfounded way it hurts to know they’re choosing another.

They all give me an indescribably blank stare, almost eerie.

“Virgin?” Kai asks incredulously.

“Fairly certain I’m not, but I’m not entirely sure what I’m searching for or if my fingers are long enough—”

“I’ll see you guys at the club,” Jude grumbles, turning and siphoning away.

They all look freshly showered. I spent two hours in the incredible bathtub in my bathroom today, so I know I’m clean enough. Baths are my favorite thing about skin. The water feels amazing. And I don’t have to even

bother drying off if I don't feel like it.

One quick flick from real to ghostly and I'm dry and clothed.

Flicking out to my ghostly form, I opt for a sexy pair of leather pants, and a pink crop top that shows just a hint of my stomach.

My hair falls in loose curls around my shoulders, and I check the mirror, smiling at the fresh look.

A groan catches my attention as Kai vanishes, and Ezekiel runs a hand through his hair as he gives me a look of exhausted patience. His gaze flicks angrily to Gage before he's gone as well, and I shrug.

"Can I hitch a ride with you?" I ask him.

He gives me a curt grin and flips me off before he also leaves.

Guess I'm going to them.

Rolling my eyes, I lose my skin. I can't sense them in flesh—only in my untouchable state can I locate them anymore.

It takes me a minute, but I finally feel them, and I siphon myself inside the...men's bathroom.

Yeah, I can only go where I've been before, so this is...awkward.

Five guys lined up at the urinal look at me as I poke my head out of the stall door. One looks away, then his gaze darts back to me as his eyebrows rise.

Clearing my throat, I push all the way through the door, and flash them a grin. "Oops," I say, shrugging. "Wrong bathroom."

I walk like a boss, other than that wobble in my high heels...that will have to go. Heels are way harder to walk in when gravity is involved.

Just as I pass one very tattooed guy, I back up, my eyes dropping to the dick in his hands, seeing four piercings down the shaft of it. Jude has those.

"Can I ask if those are painful when you have sex?" I ask him, peering up to his very blue eyes.

His lips twist in a grin. “Not at all. And it’d probably be the best thing you’ve ever felt.”

My cheeks get hot for no apparent reason, and I’m almost tempted to fan myself. No wonder the girls Jude takes over the edge always act like their dying and going to heaven.

Interesting analogy there.

It’s never struck me as ironic until now.

I glance down, wondering if any of these other guys have piercings like the other guys. I see none, but I do get a couple of incredulous gawks.

Shaking my head clear from my inner ramblings, I pat Mr. Tattoo’s arm. “Good to know. Gives me more alone-time material.”

His grin only grows, and I walk on out the door, and into the chaotic club scene. The music is pumping as loudly as ever, but like never before, I feel those heavy beats in my chest, vibrating through my body as though the music is alive.

My smile practically takes up my whole face.

Before I take another step, I let my feet go phantom, and change my shoes into some cute flats that aren’t going to send me face-planting.

Then I walk out into the madness, feeling the heat from all the writhing bodies as they brush against me with varying types of fabric that range from abrasive to divine.

My sensory stimulation has me closing my eyes, absorbing all the contact I didn’t realize I could enjoy so much.

Just physical contact is enough to soothe the ache in my chest.

It’s so much more empowering and addicting than I realized it could be. I’m dancing before I even reach the crowded dance floor, grinding with anyone and everyone who wants to dance like we’re overly familiar.

Moving through the throngs of people, I start to feel eyes on me. I whirl

around, and my gaze collides with Jude.

He's standing on an overhead balcony, his gaze burning through me, as Ezekiel and Gage seem to be having an argument of some kind.

Kai is nowhere to be seen, and I break my gaze away, until I finally spot Three on the dancefloor, a pretty blonde curled against him. I thought he preferred brunettes.

His eyes flick to me, and he smirks as the girl presses into him. My heart is pounding in my ears as the sting of betrayal slithers into me.

They prefer a stranger.

Because I'll never be good enough.

Before I can look away, Jude moves in behind the woman, fitting his body against her as they press her between them. Her entire body flushes as she leans back on him, and Jude barely spares me a glance.

The only thing that keeps me from leaving and going home to find earplugs is the guy suddenly blocking my vision, and a drink being put in front of me.

"Hello again," I say to Mr. Tattoo Dick Piercings as he grins down at me.

"Usually by the time a girl sees my dick, I've bought her at least a few of these," he tells me, smirking. "And I can assure you it's far more impressive when I'm turned on," he adds.

"Are you saying this drink is drugged and you only get it up for incapacitated girls?" I deadpan, arching an eyebrow.

He bursts out laughing, shaking his head. He takes a generous sip of the drink, like he's taking a test, then passes it to me as his eyes sparkle with humor.

He's not as freakishly gorgeous as the four of them, but he's still attractive. He's also flirty and fun.

"Just how impressive are we talking?" I ask him, sipping my non-drugged

drink.

His smile spreads. “Never had a complaint in the past,” he says, making his voice carry over the music.

“And what’s the usual standard. It’s only right for me to have all the facts before handing you my virginity,” I go on.

He laughs again, quieter this time. “Funny girl. I’m Neal, by the way.”

When he sticks his hand out, I slide mine into his, letting him shake it as I savor the feel of someone touching me with skin. It’s not as consuming or drugging as when the guys touch me, but it’s...nice.

Like him.

“I’m...Keyla,” I tell him, though it’s a little hollow, since that’s not my true name but the one given to me by Ezekiel.

Those tattoos on this guy are misleading, because he looks like a hardened criminal, when really he’s a fluffy teddy bear.

My hand moves to his chest, and I take back the fluffy part. His body is pretty damn hard.

His smile falters, and something lights in his eyes as he steps closer. “Please tell me you’re not the kind of girl to tease and walk away.”

“I’m actually not sure what kind of girl I am, to be honest, but I’m not in a teasing mood,” I assure him.

He runs his thumb along my bottom lip, and though those sparks are absent, I still enjoy the comfort in his touch and the dreamy way he’s looking at me.

He’s totally in the pile of possible true loves.

“I like the way you talk,” he tells me.

Weird compliment, but sure. I’ll take it. “I like the way you talk too,” I decide to say, returning what must be a common courtesy, and his grin kicks back up.

He presses even closer, lining our bodies up as he starts to move to the music. The sexy song sets a rhythm for our bodies to move to, and his eyes stay locked on mine. He's so tall and broad-shouldered that I can't see around him to know if the guys have already taken the girl home, or if they're still luring her into their trap.

It's a welcome distraction.

My eyes flick to his lips, wondering what it would be like to kiss him. Would it be as powerful with him? No. I know that much, simply because I'm not on fire just from his touch.

But it's only because I've fantasized about the guys so long that I've built up everything too much in my head. It's a trick my brain is playing on me, telling me everything is better than it is to keep it from miserably failing to meet expectations.

His hand slides up and slowly pushes into my hair, tugging my head back, and I suck in a breath, because it looks like I'm already going to find out what that kiss feels like.

My eyes flutter shut reflexively, and as soon as they do, I'm stumbling forward as the loss of his body causes my eyes to fly open. Then they widen, because Neal is on the ground, looking dazed as he tries to get up.

Jude is glaring at me as he steps in front of me, and I feel Kai press against me from behind before I see him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I demand, looking up at Jude like he's lost his damned mind.

"We decided we don't want you touching anyone while you're staying with us," Kai supplies, still standing too close to my back.

"Oh? Well, does that mean you four will also refrain?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

Jude smirks. "No. But we'll let you watch, and you can touch yourself."

“Unbelievable,” I mutter, shoving by him.

Neal is just standing up when Gage and Ezekiel shoulder by him so hard it sends him to his ass again. Gage looks like he wants to kill me.

Ezekiel looks like he wants to kill Neal.

I give up. These guys are impossible.

And super selfish.

I change my direction, heading into the thick mass of people. I’ll go back to the bathroom and siphon myself to another club I’ve gone to with them before.

I shift directions again, staying low so they can’t see me, and finally come out to where Neal is. He gives me a surprised look when he almost runs into me.

“Boyfriend or brother?” he asks me, a nervous laugh following.

“Neither. Just a terrible roommate. Actually, four terrible roommates. I’ll ditch them if you want to meet me at the club down the street.”

His grin grows. “That sounds like a setup.”

I shrug. “Your choice, Neal. If not you, I’ll find someone else.”

He grabs my hand before I can turn away, and he tugs me back. “My place in an hour if you’re serious. We’ll skip the club and do Netflix and chill. You got your phone?”

I don’t have a phone, but I elect to be vague.

“Not on me.”

“It’s the Martine apartment complex on the corner of Lexington and Pike. 1501B. Just ring me and I’ll buzz you up.”

“I’ll be there,” I tell him with a smile, but my smile falters when I see Jude making his way toward us on one side, and Kai coming in from the other.

“Gotta go. I’ll see you there,” I tell him, then turn and dart away.

I'm looking behind me, checking for the two unpredictable psychos, when I slam into an unrelenting, hard body.

Cursing, I look up with dread, and find Gage as he snakes an arm around my waist and starts dragging me out. I'll let them think they've won.

For an hour.

Then I'll go see Neal and find out if he's my one true love so I can just dive in and start my life.

Gage basically drags me out of the club, even as I struggle a little, putting on a show. He knows I can't just disappear. I'm not supposed to draw attention to myself, and a girl disappearing will definitely raise a few eyebrows.

As soon as we're outside, I jerk out of his grip, and glare at him.

"I'm not really sure you guys ever hear the stupid that comes out of your mouths. I can watch you? But I can't touch anyone?" I ask, shaking my head.

"I didn't say that," he tells me as Ezekiel comes up and tosses me over his shoulder like a barbarian.

I'm going to smother them in their sleep tonight.

"If you don't think the same way, then put me down. I can promise you I have no intentions of watching you four paw all over another woman, all while you tell me how toxic I am for you. I'm certainly not going to let you dictate whether or not my vagina gets christened or not."

"Can't do that," Ezekiel growls, sounding much too angry. "I told you this would happen," he adds, glaring back at Gage.

"This was Kai's idea. We never considered she'd be this fucking annoying and shameless."

"I've told you I lost shame a long time ago. I have the four of you to thank for that," I remind them, groaning as Ezekiel continues to carry me.

As soon as we reach the park, he siphons us, and the next step we take is

inside his living room. He dumps me to the couch, dropping me like it burns too much to hold me another second, just as Kai and Jude appear in the room.

“Unless we lock her up, it’ll do no fucking good to leave her here,” Kai gripes, apparently carrying on a conversation I’ve already missed part of.

“Can’t lock her up, jackass. She can just pass through walls. Not even soul stone keeps her in,” Jude growls.

“I can assure you there’s no way you can confine me,” I decide to interject, earning a murderous glare from Kai before he directs his attention to Ezekiel and Gage.

“I told you it was pushing her too far, but you had to be a dick,” Ezekiel says as he starts making a sandwich.

“I find this all utterly ridiculous and a complete double standard. Why is it okay for the four of you to take home another girl but I can’t bring home a guy?” I ask seriously.

“Because we’re guys. It’s allowed,” Kai states just as seriously.

“I’m going to pretend you’re not referring to archaic social proprieties, considering you have none, and try not to stab you for that completely chauvinist remark.”

They don’t even glance my way, as they continue talking amongst themselves.

“No girl or her. Those are currently our options if we expect her to stay chaste while we wait things out,” Ezekiel tells them.

I nod in agreement.

“She doesn’t have to stay with us, then we don’t have to see her with other men,” Jude bites out, even though he seems to say it with strain.

Kai disappears from the room, and I hear him cursing above us as heavy footsteps stomp around the second floor.

“You want me gone now?” I ask, my voice a little quieter as I look at

Jude.

He gives me a look that has me flicking my flesh switch off so that I become untouchable.

“No. I unfortunately don’t want you gone. But for whatever reason, I can’t physically allow you to be with another man. At the same time, I can’t physically stand to be without the feel of a woman much longer, or I need to kill something to work off the steam. You’re driving us all crazy.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I blow out a frustrated breath. “I honestly don’t even know how to deal with you right now. Neal might have been my future true love, and I didn’t even get to tell him that I was looking forward to finding out. Instead, I ran off after you four morons barged in like cavemen.”

It grows quiet, and I look up to see the three of them just staring at me for a moment.

“You were going to tell him he might be your future true love?” Gage asks, studying me intently.

“Yes. In case you haven’t noticed, I like to be honest in my intentions from the start. If things change, I’ll inform him,” I state matter-of-factly.

Jude seems to fight a smile for no real reason. Their mood swings grew old months ago.

“Then I suppose we should let you do that,” Jude says, still fighting a smile. “You can go back to the club.”

“He actually gave me his apartment number,” I boast, feeling like I accomplished something, considering the very limited time frame I had to meet anyone tonight.

Ezekiel surprises me the most as he takes a seat. “Then I guess we shouldn’t stop you. True love is nothing to mess with,” he says seriously, though I swear I hear a hint of amusement.

In fact, they weirdly all look a little amused, when only moments ago it

seemed like they were ready to kill someone.

“You’ll seriously let me go?” I ask, glancing back at the time. It’s only been thirty minutes...

“Like E said, can’t mess with true love. Even we have boundaries, Key,” Jude tells me, his tone very close to mocking.

“Then I have thirty minutes to kill, because he said to be there in an hour.”

“You should go now,” Ezekiel urges. “Guys prefer for a girl to be much earlier than expected. The more eager you seem, the better.”

I don’t really trust them, so I siphon away quickly, making sure they don’t stow away and ruin my moment with Neal. I land in the cemetery they frequent, then start asking people for directions when I turn whole.

It takes a little while, but I finally find the building and buzz the appropriate apartment. I think.

But he doesn’t answer.

“Already here?” I hear him ask, causing me to whirl around to see him as he grins at me from the sidewalk.

I’m actually late, but I know for a fact men hate it when you correct them. I’ve learned a lot since trying to be a real girl.

“I ditched them faster than anticipated,” I tell him with a shrug. “There’s something I need to tell you before we go any farther.”

His grin only grows. “I can’t wait to hear it, as long as it’s no freaky secret,” he says, holding his hands up, though a teasing glint seems to be in his eyes.

Smiling back at him, I blurt it all out.

Chapter 24

I appear in the living room, where all four guys are lounging and eating pizza, and their attention turns to me as the TV plays on. Four matching, taunting grins mock me with just their existence.

“I hate all of you,” I say flatly, walking up the stairs without a backward glance.

“I guess he wasn’t quite ready for true love?” Jude calls to my back.

I flip him off over my shoulder, ignoring the riotous amounts of laughter that heckles me. I’ve never seen a guy run so fast in all my life, or make up so many excuses as to why he had to get away from me.

Sheesh.

You’d think I offered him a deadly virus. I’m assuming this is a guy thing, and three out of four of them manipulated me into making an irredeemable ass of myself.

Next time, I’ll take it a little slower.

People say “live and learn” for a reason.

I change to my ghost form and fashion me some silk pajamas that I know will be comfy, then turn back and collapse to the bed. I notice the rest helps me grow stronger, which helps me transition easier between both forms.

As I get the TV turned on and get situated on my bed, Ezekiel appears in the doorway, holding a massive bowl of popcorn. My mouth waters instantly as the buttery scent permeates the air, smelling so much better than the times I’ve caught a whiff of it in my phantom body.

“Thought I might could sleep a few hours with you,” he says with a smirk.

“In exchange for popcorn?” I muse.

“You’ve been asking for it. And I’ve had two good nights of sleep in my lifetime. Both those came with you. I’m willing to barter.”

“And the others won’t get upset by this arrangement? You know, since you’ll be sharing a bed with my evil vagina and all.”

He snorts then rolls his eyes, moving farther into the room. He always moves with the same predatory grace as the rest of them, but his movements are lazier, luring one into a false sense of security.

“As long as I don’t do anything sexual, I’m not breaking any rules.”

I pull back the other half of the cover and pat the bed. He smirks again before coming toward me, and I reach out for the popcorn.

I’m digging in, pointedly ignoring him as he strips down to his boxers. The salty, buttery explosion on my tongue has me closing my eyes and moaning.

Popcorn is totally going to be my favorite junk food.

When I open my eyes, Ezekiel is staring at me, and he clears his throat before he slides into the bed, taking up a lot of room. I scoot over to him, and he curls around me, getting comfortable.

“Neal really hated the idea of love, it seems,” I tell him candidly, and he smothers his laugh against my neck as his body vibrates with it.

I shove at his shoulder, rolling my eyes as he continues to grin against my neck. I also pretend that there aren’t a thousand little shocks reminding me how much my body loves one of theirs.

It’s hard to ignore, but I manage to fake it.

“Life lessons are never fun,” he says, though it feels like he’s mocking me again.

I open my mouth to speak when Jude stalks into my room, his glare pointed at Ezekiel. “What the hell?” he snaps.

“Not breaking any rules,” Ezekiel says with a shrug.

“You said being around her without touching her was driving you crazy, and you think this is a good idea?” Jude growls.

I slip my leg over Ezekiel, pretending it’s merely to get more comfortable. Jude’s hands fist, and he levels me with a cold glare.

I, being a little pissy about their manipulation, wink at him as I “scratch” my eyebrow with my bird finger.

“Kiss my ass, Jude. I’m getting some sleep and that’s it. Hell, I’m too tired for sex with all the extra reaping jobs we’ve taken just to work her out of our systems,” Ezekiel groans.

Jude turns and stalks out, but not before he punches my wall, leaving a crumbling hole in the sheetrock.

“I find that to be a violent overreaction,” I state dryly, causing Ezekiel to chuckle against me.

None of the others come in, and when Ezekiel’s hand slips down my body, pushing the thin shorts down, I don’t stop him. His breaths get shaky when he brushes the bare skin over my pubic bone, and I slowly put the popcorn down, pushing it away from me.

His lips press against my neck, and my eyes flutter shut as he slowly starts working my shorts down farther. Every touch seems ten times more erotic than it really is, and a thousand times more electric than Neal’s touch.

I turn my head and find his lips, and I go a little boneless when he cradles my head and kisses me deeper. His body moves over mine, and my legs spread for him to move into the cradle of my thighs.

We stay like that, so close yet so far away, the thin material of his boxers being the only thing that separates us, as his mouth explores mine in a way none of them have ever kissed me.

It’s languid and slow, almost as though he’s savoring every drop. His erection strains against his boxers, and I slip my hand down, almost reaching

him, before reminding myself this would tear them apart.

“We have to stop,” I groan against the kiss, which has him pressing against me harder, more desperate. “It’ll make the four of you fight.”

He breaks the kiss, breathing heavily as he drags his lips down my neck to my shoulder. He stays there for a second, like he’s catching his breath, before he finally rolls off me and scrubs his face with both hands.

“Shit,” he grumbles. “It’s like I can’t help myself.”

I pat his shoulder. “I’m not even going to tell you how miserable I am right now, but trust that you’re not alone.”

He laughs humorlessly. “That only makes me want you more, because I know how bad you want it.”

“Let’s talk about shark week or something. That should kill the arousal. As long as we don’t discuss sharks mating or anything. Not saying that turns me on, but it still makes me think of sex.”

He bursts out laughing, shaking his head as his fingers twine with mine. I’m not sure what’s going on right now, but it feels like Ezekiel and I just leveled-up together.

He reaches down and snags my abandoned shorts, dropping them to my lap. “Put those on before I forget how important that bond is to me.”

Chapter 25

The other side of the bed is empty when I get up the next morning, and my shorts are still on. I'm not sure why I smile when I smell his pillow, but I do.

I slide out of bed, moving through the hallway, and start down the stairs when I hear the doorbell ring. My stomach twists in knots, and I jog down quicker.

Why did I just get a bad feeling?

I quickly remember I don't want anyone from their world seeing me, so I shift to my phantom form just as Gage swings open the door to two guys in fancy suits.

He hands Gage an envelope, and Gage takes it before saying something in a language I don't understand. As he shuts the door, he flips the envelope over.

I can see a wax seal on the back before he turns and his eyes collide with mine.

"Just tell me if it's something bad," I say quietly.

His lips twitch as he holds it up, and I quickly hurry to him, turning whole just before I snatch it from his hand.

I tear the envelope open, and skim the contents quickly.

North Tower Quad,

Your attendance is requested for a royal celebration with the king and his heirs.

No weapons allowed.

"The devil invited you to a party?" I ask, my voice cracking a little. "Is that good or bad?"

“It’s hard to tell these days,” he says dangerously close to my ear as his fingers trail down my arm.

He presses against my back until his hand reaches mine, and he rips the invitation from my hand before leaving me bereft and a little light headed.

I’m getting a “gullible” tattoo.

I follow him into the room with the others, and Jude’s eyes rake over me as Ezekiel hands me a bagel. I take it, eating it anxiously as Gage passes over the note.

Jude’s eyes leave me as he and the others read it.

“No date or time, so does that mean they’re just going to show up and send us there?” Ezekiel asks absently as he takes my bagel away and smears it with cream cheese.

Kai answers as I get my bagel back. “It means they’re springing this on us for whatever reason. And I’ve got a bad feeling about it.”

I moan around the mouthful of bagel now that it’s been turned into something twice as heavenly as it was before.

I don’t realize I’ve closed my eyes until I open them and see them all giving me an annoyed look.

“We’re trying to have a serious conversation,” Gage says curtly.

“Sorry,” I say around my mouthful, then look over to Ezekiel and add, “That’s way better. Thank you.”

He smirks when the others all glare at him, and he shrugs as he lazily chews on his own bagel.

“Sleep good?” Jude asks bitterly.

“Real damn good,” Ezekiel tells him with an unrepentant grin.

“What are we missing?” Kai asks.

“Notice how she didn’t go from room to room telling everyone good night?” Jude drawls.

Shit. They're about to argue over this ridiculousness for no reason.

Looking around for something to distract them, my eyes land on the invitation, and my breath freezes in my lungs.

"What about it? I just figured she finally got tired of not hearing it in return."

"Invitation," I butt in, shoving it forward.

Two new lines literally start writing themselves like an invisible calligrapher is adding them.

Black tie. Be in the closest graveyard in thirty minutes.

"Shit," Ezekiel says, dropping the rest of his bagel.

They all abandon the table and dart upstairs. I ghost out and change my attire to my badass clothes with all my fake weapons. I also wear heels, because they look really good, and I don't actually have to walk in them, because I'm not going to be a real girl in hell.

No thank you.

The guys appear back in the room in no time, and I have to stare a little harder than necessary as they move around in their tuxes. They look like dangerous temptation in designer packages now.

That's really not fair.

Their tattoos are covered by the shirts, making them look devilishly classy and mysterious. Jude shoots me a knowing look and smirks in my direction.

I clear my throat and start looking around like I'm not impressed.

Then I sneak a few discreet peeks as they finish putting their wallets and phones in their pockets.

"Why do you have to go to the graveyard? Why not just siphon down there?" I ask. "We can sneak around and figure out what's going on."

Kai shakes his head. "We can't siphon to the underworld until we're given access. Besides, you only saw a small portion of it. It's endless, much

like the universe. We don't even know what section we're going to."

"Can I ask a stupid question?"

They all look at me expectantly as though I have their undivided attention.

"What happens if one of you dies?" I swallow a little more harshly after my voice breaks unexpectedly on that last word.

"We're not really sure," Gage says with a careless shrug.

"Ordinarily, we'd be sent up or down, if you know what I mean. But that was stolen from us when we inherited hell powers and soul responsibilities," Ezekiel states just as casually.

"The other competitors who die in the trials are sent back to hell's throat for a new transition. They may turn out the same, but that's a rare thing. We tend to get a little more vicious when the powers take root. Most end up the monsters you saw while you were in there," Kai goes on.

"Would you turn into monsters if you were sent for transition?" I ask quietly.

They all grin at me.

"We're already monsters," Jude tells me with a tone that has chills sliding up my spine.

They start walking past me, and I blow out a shaky breath as I turn and follow.

"You look ridiculous in that outfit," Kai tells me without turning around.

"Hot. The word you're looking for is *hot*. Or maybe *badass*. Not ridiculous."

To that, I get a round of laughter, but I still strut like a boss until we siphon to the graveyard.

The second our feet hit the cemetery ground, Ezekiel reaches over, his hand passing through me. Light flashes, and we're sucked into hell. I think.

It's hard to tell when we're in the glamorous section that hides all the

monsters, hellfire, and screams of agony.

The chandeliers are in abundance, crystal and ornate. The marble floors are a crisp white that contrasts elegantly with the gold accents.

It's a royal party.

"Another set of quads are here," Ezekiel says, leaning closer to Kai as they have a little stare down with the said second set of quads.

"And they're bonded like you?" I ask.

"Just like us. All the quads," Kai says quietly.

"So we didn't just make friends with the devil and get invited to the party. This has something to do with the trials coming up in a week," Jude states just as quietly, looking around.

"Definitely. Just spotted another set of quads and a few pairs as well," Gage says with the same nearly muted tone as he snags a glass of champagne off a passing tray.

"Stick close, little protector. You might come in handy tonight," Kai tells me warily.

My eyes are already searching the scene, but I pause my search when I see Lamar moving this way.

"Incoming," I tell them, moving closer to what I feel like is my friend, even though he doesn't really know me.

Lamar's eyes land on them, and he turns and looks over his shoulder before facing them again.

"I've come to tell you Manella was removed from creating these trials," he tells the quad in a hushed whisper. "Lucifer designed the upcoming course himself."

"Is that why he arranged this party? To announce that?" Gage asks, stepping closer.

"I'm not quite sure what this party is about. I only learned of it thirty

minutes ago.”

I exchange a look with the guys. Apparently those invitations all arrived at the same time.

“I offer this as a token of peace and gratitude. There will be riddles in this course that could cost you your life, and monsters that don’t even have names yet. Lucifer has created the hardest course in history, and I haven’t a clue as to why,” Lamar goes on.

The guys all bristle. “And I was starting to think he might like us,” Jude drawls.

“Lucifer only cares for his children. His opinion of anyone else can change on a whim. Trust me; I know this very personally.” He looks around again, then faces them one last time. “I do hope you brought your protective spirit.”

I pat his hand, and his eyes drop to the contact as a grin spreads over his face.

“Good,” he says, not looking back up immediately. “It may be your best hope of surviving, no matter what Lilith’s cost. I do appreciate you loaning it to me, though I’m not sure why you did it. Manella explained it belonged to you instead of me.”

Gage rolls his eyes. “We don’t really have any control over her, so don’t thank us.”

His head cocks. “Her?” Lamar asks, his tone going confused as all the guys stiffen. “The protective spirit is an actual being? And you can see her?”

He takes a wary step back as he studies them, and Jude’s lips tighten as Gage mutters a curse.

“I should return to Manella,” he says, a curious look in his eyes as the expression on his face worries me. “Beware of the riddles. Don’t treat them with no importance,” he reminds them, then turns and walks away.

He moves through the crowd, and I watch him as Gage runs a frustrated hand through his hair.

“Way to slip,” Ezekiel bites out.

“Fuck. I have no idea how I did that,” Gage says under his breath.

“What does it matter if I’m a girl instead of an *it*? Is hell sexist? Do they know it’s the twenty-first century topside?”

Lamar gets close to Manella’s ear, whispering something I can’t even hear. Manella’s eyes immediately cut toward us, and Kai curses as he looks away.

“And he just told Manella. Guess that gratitude only extends so far,” Kai growls.

“Not sure why you’re surprised,” Jude drawls.

Manella looks wary and surprised as he moves through the crowd like he’s searching for someone.

“I don’t get it. What’s wrong with me being a girl?” I ask absently.

The crowd parts enough for me to see who Manella is talking to, and my heart stumbles when I see Lucifer. He doesn’t look this way. He doesn’t even react other than to smile like he has a secret.

When his eyes do come up, it feels like he’s staring directly at me, though I see no recognition, and his eyes skip over me, searching around the four of them like he’s trying to pinpoint my location.

“The devil looks intrigued,” I grumble. “Someone please tell me what I’m missing and put me out of my misery.”

Jude blocks my vision, stepping in front of me. “Lamar has a lot more knowledge of the heirs and their powers. He figured out something we’ve been piecing together, but now we’re certain of it.”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“That Lilith couldn’t have created an actual being. I don’t even know if

Lucifer can create something like you,” Gage answers.

A chill slithers over me as I look back over to Lucifer, seeing him moving this way.

“Then what am I?” I ask so quietly that I’m not sure they hear me.

Regardless of whether or not they heard it, they can’t answer since the devil is now standing near us.

“I’m glad to see you boys in one piece. I trust there have been no further incidents?” he asks conversationally.

“No.”

The four of them bow at the waist, and I try to think of ways to calm down before I kick their asses for not addressing him as king or Your Royal Evilness or something, damn it. He’s so not the guy you want to offend.

He doesn’t seem to even acknowledge the misstep though.

“You can stand,” he says absently. His eyes land on Jude’s for a brief moment before flicking between all four.

“He’s really good at guessing about liars, and it’s not good if he suspects you of a lie,” I decide to remind them.

Jude’s lips twitch, but it happens so fast that I almost wonder if I’ve imagined it.

“Oddly enough, I couldn’t find any proof of power when I finally managed to find your very thin files. The only information I seem to have on you is your address and your soul count. I’m not even certain how you obtained your weapons.”

Gage doesn’t even bat an eye as he answers. “We were tested when we were summoned on the day our powers manifested. Damnedest thing happened, though. I think it must have been performance anxiety.”

“Why would you be a smartass to the fucking devil?” I groan, wishing I could slap the hell out of him.

Gage's lips tug at one corner, but like Jude, he wipes it away before I can be certain.

"I see," Lucifer, eerily amused. "During forty-seven summons all four of you had performance anxiety?" he adds, returning the smartassery with a touch of fuck-you-little-turds.

"It's a problem. We're working on it," Kai says in an assuring tone.

"Just so you know, I'm almost positive I can't protect you from the damn devil," I point out.

I'm going to kill all of them.

Still, Lucifer manages to maintain his humored expression.

"I only got a glimpse of two of you, and I'm not certain what you did. Care to try and explain it to me? Because I quite feel like you're being underutilized and pointlessly tested in these trials."

"There's not any real way to explain it, since we're not entirely certain what we're doing," Jude says with a shrug. "We just know how to kill. We like it topside, but we'd like to earn access to this plane as well."

"I'm sure you would," Lucifer says, stroking his jaw thoughtfully. "It's the best of both worlds to remain topside with all the perks of hell. Clearly if you had too much power, we'd have to bring you down below, since it'd be against our law to leave that much of the world unbalanced with dark influence."

"We never really died, so we have no dark influence, since our souls are still whole," Jude immediately points out.

Lucifer actually looks both surprised and intrigued by that confession. "Well, that certainly is another kind of imbalance, but not one that breaks any laws. And a very interesting turn of events," he goes on, his grin spreading.

The guys weirdly seem to be tenser now that the devil seems pleased.

"But I'm afraid I do need to learn what your powers are so we can

categorize you. If for any reason you're stronger than you should be on the surface, I'll take into account you have no dark influence. I'm sure we can come to some sort of agreement."

They all look wary now.

Lucifer gets closer to Jude, the amusement falling from his face so smoothly, as though it was an illusion all along despite how genuine it appeared. The ease of the transition chills me to the bone.

"The thing is, you somehow penetrated the notoriously impenetrable chest of a guard. Not that you'd know that. Surface guardians aren't privy to such knowledge, which is why you never once thought about exposing yourself."

Jude's jaw tics, but he remains a stone, keeping his eyes on Lucifer.

"Then you turned him to dust. They didn't regenerate," Lucifer goes on.

A prickling blanket of dread slips over me.

"That sort of power is very high level. It rivals Lamar's, and he's a very old immortal who has spent a large amount of time letting his power grow under the influence of this world."

Lucifer gestures around, as though reminding us we're surrounded by very powerful people who've been drinking the hell juice and getting stronger for a long time.

"And you don't even have access to here yet. Makes a person wonder just how strong you'll be if you succeed," he says, then steps back.

His smile returns like it never left, and his face is deceptively light and amused once again.

"I'll eventually learn just how you managed to do that." His eyes flick to Kai's. "And I'll learn what you did as well, since that's quite the mystery that intrigues me even more."

Kai's fists tighten beside him, and I press my hand against his back as though I'm trying to calm him down.

“You can’t punch the devil in hell. Get him topside. I heard he can die there,” I tell him, patting his back now.

The tingles make me want to turn whole, so I withdraw my hand. My job is done anyway, because Kai’s unclenched his fist, and a smirk toys with the edges of his lips.

“Good luck in the trials, in case I don’t see you before then. And enjoy the party,” he says, gesturing around, his smile growing as he starts backing up. “Hell is known for its parties.”

Two girls immediately join him, one for each arm, and he grins as he turns and walks away. Several really stunning women walk by in their lingerie or just completely naked.

I’m not really sure why I’m just now noticing this.

“So help me, after how you jerks treated me over Neal last night, if any of you try to have sex with some really hot hell girl, I will let you die,” I decide to point out. “I might even push you into a giant centipede’s mouth to see if you turn into one after transition.”

Kai shakes with silent laughter, but he ends up voicing a groan.

“Why did we use our powers?” he asks.

“It felt like I had to. I was just going to punch them,” Jude bites out.

“I was going to slam them into each other and knock them out. Instead, I killed them,” Kai tells him, clapping his shoulder.

“So we can thank you two uncontrollable hotheads for the unwanted exposure,” Ezekiel growls.

“How were we supposed to know the guards are that resilient? There was very little information on them available to us,” Kai points out.

“I’m assuming you don’t want them knowing about your power because it’s too strong to be topside? Like the devil hinted at?” I ask.

They give me a wary look.

“The devil already knows. I highly doubt I’m more of a threat to you than him even if I am out to get you,” I say on an exasperated breath.

“It’s not that,” Ezekiel says, looking around us, reminding me we’re not exactly draped in privacy.

They start smoothly moving through the party, and they make their way into a bathroom. Ezekiel checks it, and I hop up on the counter as he proceeds to investigate every stall.

He closes his eyes like he’s concentrating, and then his eyes open as Kai locks the door.

“Nothing in here to listen in,” Ezekiel says.

Gage turns his attention to me. “Partially. We sure as shit don’t want to live here full time. It’d get old. And though the parties are lavish and much more fun than the clubs, things are twice as lethal down here than up there. The ones strong enough to kill us are given limited amounts of time when they can be topside unless in mortal form.”

“Mortal form?” I ask.

“They can be born into the world as a mortal if they’re important enough or blessed by a royal, and they live until they die, then they bypass transition and return to their form that has been preserved in hell,” Kai explains.

“Awesome,” I state dryly.

“They’re not as powerful in mortal form, but it doesn’t really matter. They can’t legitimately die, so they live a fast-paced, rock star sort of existence until they get sent back to hell,” Ezekiel tells me.

“I think we’re telling her a little much now. Half of this stuff is among the things we learned from Harold just last year,” Jude growls.

They ignore him, much to my surprise.

“If we’re topside, we’re among the most powerful there on a full-time basis. Better to be a big fish in a small pond than a small fish in a big pond

when it's a game of life and death," Gage continues.

"But we're getting stronger, and we have no idea what we're doing some of the time," Kai says quieter.

"Now you're definitely telling her too much," Jude snaps, looking at them like they've all gone mad. "Just tell her the part she needs to know and stop sharing the details we never agreed to discuss."

"Why are you getting stronger?" I ask, even though I think I already know.

"It seems to happen every time you 'level up,'" Ezekiel says, his jaw tightening a little as I take a step away from him.

"That's why you didn't want me gone," I say more to myself than them, looking down at the sink. "That's why you closed the books when I tried to read them, and why you got jealous about Neal, and—"

"Neal had nothing to do with the equation. That was uncontrollable blind-rage jealousy," Ezekiel interrupts, shrugging unapologetically when I look over at him.

"You never really wanted me there. You just wanted the power boost."

They look at me like they expect me to cry, when all I really want to do is just walk out. Swallowing my pride, since I don't have a hell of a lot left, I just nod.

"Alright then. So how big of a boost did you get after I reached this last level?"

"Haven't tried it out yet," Kai tells me. "We've been recovering from our stint in Hell's throat and trying to conserve all our energy for the trials. It drains us to use too much, and the soul stones drained us in general."

Jude throws his hands up and walks out, slamming the bathroom door behind him.

"I'm not hearing anything so top secret right now. What's his problem?" I

ask. “I’m the one who should be walking out and slamming a door. The four of you know how much I care about you, no matter how hard you deny it, and you act like it’s no big deal you’ve been using me.”

Yeah, that last part comes out bitter.

“First rule of hell: Don’t trust anyone you don’t share a bond with,” Kai says with a sardonic smile. “Yet, as you already pointed out, the devil is already onto us. However, Jude still doesn’t want you equipped with the same knowledge we have or admitting our weakness about not knowing our true powers or reach.”

“I find it worth pointing out that Jude is the only one who hasn’t tasted her,” Gage states dryly. “And he’s the only one still keeping secrets.”

He cuts an accusatory gaze at me.

Ignoring him, I turn toward Ezekiel. “What do I have to do with any of this? What’s my connection to the four of you?”

His lips purse. “We don’t know,” he answers honestly. “It could be a cosmic perfect storm of some sort, and you could have used us an anchor to...fuck, I don’t even know at this point.”

“We need to get back out there before someone takes notice of our absence and gets too curious,” Gage says, exiting.

Kai turns and follows, and Ezekiel exits with me. I even suppress a taunting grin when he opens the door for me.

He mutters a curse under his breath when he realizes what he just did, and he walks off a little briskly.

Prickly they may be, but right now, they’re mine to protect. Nothing else matters when their lives are at risk.

Chapter 26

The party has been going for a while, and we're still waiting on the devil to lower the boom and tell us why we're all here.

Lucifer has been on his throne for the past hour, and occasionally his eyes land on the guys.

Lamar is standing behind Manella, who is sitting in a throne three down from Lucifer. I start to go to him, when a redhead steals my breath as she lands herself right in front of us.

The guys don't react, but I take an immediate step closer, watching her carefully. She smirks as she runs a finger up Kai's chest, and his fists ball at his sides.

"You four seem to owe me a favor after what I did for you, don't you think?" she asks in a voice so seductive that I expect them to shuck their clothes immediately.

Fortunately, they don't.

"Wait. Is she talking about me?" I ask, looking at them as she slides her finger over to Gage's chest.

He looks really tense right now, and his jaw clenches.

"How do you plan to work that off?" she asks, her finger now moving on to Ezekiel's chest.

"Considering you left me for dead," Kai says, drawing her attention, "I don't feel very indebted," he answers her.

Oh, that favor.

Her finger pauses on Jude's chest, and she strolls back through, dragging her finger over them again as she makes her way down the line to Kai.

I take another step closer.

Her hand slides down his chest, pausing just above his belt as she steps into him. “If I had wanted you dead, I would have let you fall all the way into the hellfire before I saved you,” she says with a little too much pep.

When her hand starts moving lower, I can’t help but stare at it like it’s the most offensive thing I’ve ever seen.

“So I’ll ask again; what do you plan to do for me?”

Just as her fingers start to dip behind his beltline, my anger might boil over a little overly so. In fact, I feel something leak out of me without permission—power, not anything gross. Just power.

She rips her hand back, shaking it out as it sizzles. An actual hiss leaves her mouth as she glares at Kai like he’s the one who did it.

He just smirks.

“I’ll remember that,” she growls, then stiffens as though something just occurred to her. “How did you even do that?” she asks more seriously, her sexy voice gone as a commanding echo chases her words.

“I actually did nothing. I think someone is toying with you, Lilith,” Kai tells her, gesturing toward where Lucifer is staring at us.

“Turning the devil’s daughter against the devil is so not a sound plan,” I grumble.

Her eyes turn to slits as she glares at Lucifer for a moment, then turns and stalks away. Now that I’ve noticed him staring, his hands steepled in front of his face like he just witnessed all that, I really don’t feel too smug.

I feel played.

I almost feel like this party was called to test me. Or maybe it’s to test them and I’m just being paranoid.

Cain distracts him when he leans down to say something in his ear. Lucifer nods, a new smile donning his lips as he stands.

Someone taps a glass over and over, and all eyes drift up to hell’s king as

he stands on his platform in front of his obnoxious throne.

“I’ve assembled you all here tonight for a very important reason. The trials lately have gotten a little complicated due to outside interference. Clearly we have to clean house, but before we can do all that, the trials must continue.”

He takes a step down, and the crowd parts for him as he starts walking.

I lose sight of him, but I can still hear his voice as it draws closer.

“So, in an effort to keep details from leaking out before I was ready for them to be leaked, we’ve decided to change the date of the trials.” The crowd parts in front of us, and Lucifer stops walking as he stares directly at us with a smirk on his lips.

“Tonight,” he goes on, still staring, “we have the final trial!”

There goes the *boom* we’ve been dreading.

Their jaws tense as they part, making room for the devil to pass between them. Lucifer grins like he’s delighted to have sprang this on them.

“And since I designed the final course this year, you can be sure it’s going to be a very epic event,” he says, walking away from us as the crowd continues to clear a path and start following behind him like really bad sheep.

We follow too, and my hand passes through Ezekiel’s shirt like I’m trying to draw some calm from him to keep from wolfing out. Or girling out. Or fleshing out?

Anyway, I’m losing a little control right now.

“This year, instead of one day in the course, it will be three,” Lucifer goes on as he steps onto a platform.

The crowd erupts into hushed whispers and surprised gasps. This sounds really bad.

“Three days?” Kai hisses.

“This is a test designed specifically for us,” Gage states quietly. “Look at

the other competitors.”

My eyes flit around as I start noticing the other competitors losing their suits, and attaching weapons onto their bodies.

“The invitation said black tie and no weapons. It didn’t say bring a change of clothes and a secret stash of killing devices,” I feel the need to point out.

“He wants to see what we can do,” Ezekiel says as his jaw grinds.

The devil steps high on the platform, and his grin only grows as the wall behind him starts to slide open. The thing about this mansion? I’ve never once seen a window.

I’m guessing the view must suck.

A glowing red light starts creeping in more and more as the wall continues to slide open.

“This year’s course will take place in the belly of the beast,” Lucifer goes on. “Hell’s stomach.”

More hushed whispers and some audible sounds of excitement comes from the restless crowd. I really don’t know if I want to do something that excites this bloodthirsty gathering.

“I’m guessing they’re not talking about giving hell indigestion with all of us in its stomach,” I state wryly.

Ezekiel steps closer to me, and I continue to try to draw a modicum of calm from him.

“Hell’s stomach is literally the place where the throat sends the most vile monsters that are too vicious for purgatory. It’s never been used as a location for the trials because it’s the hardest spot to survive. In fact, I haven’t ever heard of any survivors,” Ezekiel says quietly.

My eyes flick back to Lucifer as the wall opens the entire way.

“We were so busy accusing Manella that we never thought to suspect the devil,” I say quietly.

Gage bristles beside me, as does Ezekiel on my other side. Jude glances at me like he wants to agree, but has too much pride to take my side on anything.

“And we bought into everything he was saying,” Kai goes on.

“Number one rule in hell: Never trust anyone you’re not bonded to,” Jude states flatly.

All the competitors are allowed to pass through, and I follow the guys to the edge, looking over to see an endless wasteland of savage creatures racing around far below.

Lava runs far and wide, and now Lilith isn’t going to gift/curse us across it. Hellfire sprays up much like it did in hell’s throat, but it actually looks like acid reflux that would be in the actual stomach—I assume. You know, if the stomach had lava and monsters and stuff.

Some areas look like deserts. Some look like ashy forests. It all stretches and mingles together, making it impossible to miss any one thing.

“I’m afraid that other than the fact you have to survive all three days and cross the finish line, there are no rules,” Lucifer goes on. “It’s not like you can leave the boundaries unless you swim in the surrounding moat of hellfire and manage to survive,” he adds carelessly.

“No rules? What about other competitors killing and all that?” I immediately ask, panic pulsing through me.

Gage’s jaw grinds. “It’s another first,” he finally answers.

This course is designed to kill. Not to test.

He’s stripping the rules and making it a kill zone free-for-all amongst thieves, cheats, and murderers who have hellish powers and/or abilities.

I heave out a breath.

“Sounds like she just figured out how bad this is,” Jude drawls.

“I’m going to be exhausted when I finish saving you for three days

straight without an ounce of gratitude to show for it,” I deadpan.

Kai snorts, and the other three just grin as I mimic the motions of running a hand through my hair the way they’ve all been doing. Even as I joke, I cast another apprehensive look toward the devil, wondering why the hell he wants them dead so badly.

His eyes settle on their backs as they continue to stare out at the death course from hell’s belly.

Lucifer’s calculated grin stays fixed on his lips as he says, “Let the games begin.”

End of book 1

Note from the author:

Don't worry! Book 2 is finished, and this is only a four book series.

<3

I started this series as a fun side project. Weird fact about me: I have to write daily, but I rarely have any say in what I write. I can't force a book out. I just have to wait on it to flow.

I probably have over eighty or more books that I've started. I quite possibly have twenty or so that are fully/mostly written and might never be published, because I don't particularly love them. But since I had three out of four of these written, and happened to love them, I decided to start releasing.

I stole some names from some of my other C.M. Owens series. Essentially, I took some of my favorite characters, changed how they looked, and wrote an alternate universe where things are very much different.

As I said, I never intended to publish these, but the more I wrote, the more I fell in love. So now it's likely going to happen.

I picked a name to publish under, since it'd be confusing with all the recycled names from my regular pen. Not to mention, this is really different from my norm, and I didn't want anyone shell-shocked or scared to trust me again.

Anyway, I don't have any social media set up for this pen because that gets confusing and messy. Is that weird? Probably. But then again, so am I. However, I genuinely worry about upsetting readers who weren't prepared for me to do something quite so abrupt as writing a reverse harem, and the more you read, the more you'll understand why I don't unsuspecting people to accidentally download them.

But if you want updates, you can follow me on any of my C.M. Owens social media. <3 I'll keep updates there.

Where to find me:

[My Facebook](#)

[Private Book Club](#) (Very adult group. No drama. No judgment. And no one outside of the group can see what you like, post, or comment on.)

[My Teaser/Book Group](#) (Only I can post here, and it notifies you when I do as long as you have your settings set correctly.)

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