


LUST

INFERNO GAMES BOOK TWO

ELISE KNIGHT

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ELISE KNIGHT

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**BETWEEN SHARP LITTLE
LICKS**

Fury courses through my veins, a seething storm that shapes my features into a scowl. This was not how it was meant to be. I had every fucking detail meticulously planned out before everything got shot to shit last night in London. Anthura is going to pay for this. My gaze falls upon the message Remy sent me on my Hell Cell, the one that rudely interrupted my slumber.

I GOT THROUGH WITH CANDICE. DID YOU MAKE IT?

The words burn my eyes as I read them over and over. Candice, that treacherous bitch. I should have come through to Lust with her. My fingers tighten around the Hell Cell, tempting me to crush it to oblivion.

But Remy... He's a spineless moron, so how the fuck did he manage to get through the third trial with Candice? I know he's been fucking her. I actually found it amusing how he'd dress like me, and then fuck my sloppy seconds. I just wasn't planning on the two of them pairing up together in the Earthery. He was supposed to go through with Snowflake. I had it all planned out.

Maybe the dude finally came to his senses where that bitch is concerned. I'd rather stay in Purgatory forever than have to pair up with that monstrosity. Except I didn't choose Purgatory. I made the decision to come through to the next circle of Hell. The memory of last night comes back to me again, ending in another wave of blazing anger through my veins. This is fucking Anthura's fault. She could have stepped in, but the fucking bitch left me to fend for myself. What is the point of fucking a demon if they aren't going to do what I want when I want it?

I drag myself out of bed and storm out of my bedroom. As my hand grasps the door handle, I suddenly realize I'm back in my original room and no longer in the penthouse suite. Frustration makes me growl, and I forcefully swing open the door to the front balcony. A waft of perfume hits my senses as I take in the new view. It's pink. The walls, the carpet, the wood. Every part of the donut shaped balcony is a shade of pink. It's like being trapped inside a giant vagina. Holding back the scowl, I ascend the stairs two at a time trying to release some of my pent-up energy. Though I feel exhausted when I reach the top floor, my anger shows no sign of fading. I yank at the glass door without caring about the late hour. Anthura shouldn't have bothered stitching me up if she was concerned about her beauty sleep. Halfway through the door, I freeze upon hearing voices that make me hesitate. Swiftly, I retreat out of view, concealing myself behind the long red drapes. A woman's voice fills the air, captivating me with the sexiest French accent I've ever heard.

“Malheureusement, Anthura, Moloch, I won't be needing your services for any o' ze next trials, mon ami. I already 'ave zem all planned out, and eet was 'Ade's opinion zat trop de

cuisiniers gâtent le bouillon, or in zis case, trop de démons gâtent les épreuves.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Anthura snaps. I’ve known Anthura to have a bite, but I’ve never heard her lose her cool before. She sounds livid. I translate the French in my head and smile. Serves the bitch right. She can’t even manage the one fucking thing I needed her to do.

To my surprise, it’s Moloch who responds to her outburst. “I believe the saying goes, ‘too many cooks spoil the broth,’ but in this case, too many demons spoil the games.”

I lean in, positioning my eye near a small hole in the thick fabric, and peer through. Although the French woman is beyond my line of sight, Anthura’s anger at her is obvious. Her brow is furrowed, her jaws clenched, and she looks dangerous. If I wasn’t so livid with the way she fucked everything up, I’d almost be turned on. It’s about time someone stood up to her. Moloch doesn’t have the balls and despite the fact that I was one of the richest and most powerful men in America with people lining up to kiss my ass, that doesn’t mean shit down here. A fact, Anthura likes to hold over me at any given opportunity.

“No!” Anthura stands, her face almost as red as her pvc cat suit with rage. “I was promised I’d go through this with them. Why do you think I put up with their incessant whining for so long?”

“Anthura, mon cher.” The other woman’s voice is like warm honey. “You *weel* be goin’ through it with zem. Surely you didn’t zink I was plannin’ to send you back to Purgatory? Non, you and Moloch will partner up and become contestants in ze Inferno Games. Excitant, n’est-ce pas?”

Holy shit. Anthura is no longer in charge?

“She said that we are now contestants in the—”

“I fucking heard what she said, Moloch, and it’s fucking bullshit.”

“I assure you that eet’s not bullsheet. ‘Ade’s told me eemself.”

Anthura moves out of my eye line and I hear her heels tap on the floor as she undoubtedly faces up to this mystery woman. “I don’t give a flying fuck what Hades said to you. I run this show and I’m not prepared to let it go to some half-baked trollop like you. Now fuck off out of my apartment... Moloch, you can fuck off, too.”

As I move to leave through the glass door, I catch sight of Moloch turning away and exiting through the back. Waiting a couple of minutes after they’ve gone, I nonchalantly open the glass door, close it again, and step out from behind the curtains. Anthura glances up from where she’s standing at the kitchen counter. I shouldn’t take pleasure in her predicament, but considering the stunt she pulled last night, she deserves whatever is coming her way. It’s high time she gets a taste of the shit she’s been dishing out to me.

I take the seat next to her. “Everything alright? You look like shit? Have you been crying?” I mock.

She looks unruffled and an image of perfection as always. And if there’s one thing I know about Anthura, it’s that she never cries. I think the bitch actually had her tear ducts removed, or maybe demons aren’t born with tear ducts. Still, I’m not going to let up the chance to rub salt into the wounds.

“No. Everything is not fucking alright,” she snaps. “Some fucking bitch from the Second Circle thinks she can take my spot as head of the games. Apparently, Hades told her she

could. Two faced asshole. I swear to the almighty Satan himself, I'm going to break that bitch if it's the last thing I do.

I lean against the counter. Seeing Anthura as pissed as this is quite a sight to behold. "Hades or the Second Circle woman?"

She glares at me. "Both of them. Actually, there's not much I can do about Hades. These are his games, but Noémi, that bitch is going down. She wants me to be a contestant in the games. Can you fucking believe it?"

It's nothing less than she deserves. "You know what, Anthura? I don't give a shit." I slam my fist down on the counter, rattling a couple of bottles of Dragonfire Whiskey that are sitting on the counter. "Maybe you'll finally figure out what a shit show these games are now you're on our side of them. What the fuck happened last night? I was supposed to get through with Candice but fucking Bradford got to her first."

She reaches across me and grabs one of the bottles before unscrewing the top and taking a swig straight from it. "I was dealing with my own shit." She hands me the bottle. I pull over two glasses and pour liberal measures into both.

A murmur rumbles through her chest. "You got through, didn't you? What's your fucking problem?"

My hand closes tightly round one of the glasses. "The problem is, Anthura, that you were supposed to make it easy."

Anthura shrugs as though this isn't a big deal. "So? I've been telling you for weeks what a slut Candice is. I'm not even surprised she was hanging both of you losers from a string."

If I grip the glass any tighter, I'm going to shatter it. I down the whiskey neatly and slam the glass down on the

counter. “Damn it Anthura. You did this. I know you did. You were in charge of who got put where in London. Here’s what I think. I think you were jealous that I was fucking someone else as well as you, so you decided to put Remy and Candice together to teach me a lesson.”

She actually has the audacity to laugh but there’s a defiant fire in her eyes reminding me that above all things, she’s a demon. “Felix. My darling. You think far too much of yourself. You are a plaything for me. Nothing more.”

I pour another whiskey and stand up. “If I’m a plaything, you’re a child who doesn’t like others playing with her toys.”

She moves over to me. The sharp stench of perfume hits my nose followed by an undercurrent of sulfur. “Maybe you’re right,” she says, running her long talons softly down over my cheek. With the other hand, she takes my whiskey and sips at it. “I don’t like to share, but I had no hand in what happened in the Earthery last night. It was all Hades’ doing. I honestly thought Remy was going to go through with that stupid bitch.”

She could honestly be talking about anyone. The games are full of idiots who are beneath me. “Snowflake... er Quinn?”

“Hmmm.” Her eyes narrow with ill-concealed contempt. “If Remy dumped her sorry ass, I suppose she’s out. I haven’t checked my Hell Cell yet. Hades was going to message me this morning. Probably around the same time he’s going to let me know he’s royally screwed me. At least that’s one less problem to deal with. I hated that bitch. Did you know she actually chose to come down here to Hell?”

“Yeah. You’ve told me a million times.” Like I give a shit. I grab my whisky back and sit down on the couch. I hadn’t thought of that. Snowflake must be out of the games if Remy

didn't bother to go looking for her. Remy is the only one sappy enough to pick her unless she came through with Angelis. I almost choke on a laugh. As if that asshole got through. Even Snowflake hated him by the end and though I hate to admit it, even she had more sense to go anywhere with that murdering bastard. Instinctively, my hand rises to my face without conscious thought. The bruises he once left on my cheek have faded away, but the memories remain vivid.

I sit back on the sofa. My anger is abating slightly now that I probably won't have to see either of their faces ever again, but it's simmering under the surface.

Anthura slides a leg in between my legs, shifting them apart. She kneels down between them and begins to unbuckle my belt, a gleam in her eyes. Maybe Anthura does still have her uses after all. Despite everything, my cock begins to stir.

"I'll speak to Hades this morning before the first meeting," she purrs. "I'll sort all this out for us. You and I will be triumphant together."

I let my head fall back on the sofa as she unzips my pants and pulls out my cock. I feel my anger melting away as she swirls her sharp little tongue around the head.

"So," she says between sharp little licks. "If you didn't come through with Candice. Who did you come through with?"

In my hand, the glass shatters, sending whiskey and shards of glass raining down on Anthura's perfect hair.

UNHOLY SHIT

My Hell Cell beeps, waking me from a nightmare from the very pits of hell. Heart pounding, I bolt upright, consumed by panic. I was in London with Dade and then everything went black. I scramble to a seated position, my breathing ragged. The nightmare's grip feels so real. With frantic eyes, I scan my surroundings, only finding relief when I see that I'm alone in my bed.

I wipe the sleep from my eyes as a flash of memory from another dream hits me. After everything had faded to black in the Earthery, I imagined the two of us being consumed in flames. The Hell Cell beeps again with infuriating relentlessness.

When I pick it up, I find approximately forty texts from Remy.

I'M SORRY

Then

I WAITED FOR YOU. I THOUGHT YOU
WOULDN'T COME

and

I COULDN'T LEAVE CANDICE BEHIND

His words are like a dagger to the heart. I can't read any more. He couldn't leave Candice behind, but he was more than happy to leave me. He made his loyalties perfectly clear with his actions.

Instead of reading the rest of his messages, I scroll to the only one not sent by him. It's from Anthura.

WELCOME TO THE SECOND CIRCLE OF HELL—LUST. WE'LL BE MEETING AT THE USUAL SPOT AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STAIRS AT 10AM SHARP FOR ORIENTATION.

Holy shit!

Or Unholy shit in this case. I'm in the Second Circle of Hell already!

I scroll through the rest of my messages, hoping to find one from Rowena and Juliette. A sense of worry creeps in as I notice no messages from either of them.

Twila hasn't messaged me either.

It's the nature of Hell that we get moved from place to place whilst being unconscious and, although I hate it, I can deal with it. What I can't deal with is doing it without my friends.

I flick my eyes to the time and see that once again I'm going to have to rush to not incur Anthura's wrath. I sprint to the bathroom and hop into the shower. As I'm washing, I notice another tattoo has appeared on my wrist above the first one. It's another circle, equal in size to the first, but this one is blue and has what looks to be a snake coiled around a stick of some kind in the center of it. I rub at it, already knowing it

won't wash off. Nausea bites at me as I scrub the delicate skin, reddening it round the blue tattoo, but having no effect on the thing itself. I don't even know why I'm trying to rid myself of it. It's a mark of victory, and yet somehow someone managed to tattoo it on me while I was asleep. It feels... icky. My mind wanders to the beautiful tattoos gracing Dade's back and arms, covering the tats the demons marked him with.

"Stop thinking about Dade fucking Angelis... or fucking Dade Angelis" I admonish myself and swallow a mouth full of soapy water for the effort.

This isn't about Dade. It's about Jenny, but like it or not, I've made it this far because of him. After getting out of the shower, I head to my wardrobe. I'm pleasantly surprised to find my old shitty clothes I'd been graced with in Purgatory have all been taken away and a brand new wardrobe left for me. One that doesn't consist of my old work uniforms and threadbare t-shirts.

Maybe it won't be so bad in this circle.

Maybe.

I grab a pair of designer jeans and cashmere sweater from the wardrobe and put them on. My hand catches the door knob and I hesitate. Dade is going to be down there. The memory of him gripping my hand for dear life and then waking up with an empty feeling in the depths of my soul hasn't left me. He murdered people. He lied to me. He hurt me, and yet when he looked at me last night, there was more than anger in his eyes. I saw pain there too.

I don't want to think about it. I can't or I'll lose sight of the reason I'm here and in this competition. I have to think of Jenny.

I head out through the back door, hoping that everyone else will decide to head down the front way — the more visible way — and try to catch my breath. The view from my back door has changed. A vista of red dusty earth with hundreds, if not thousands of towers spanning out in all directions is the same as it was in Purgatory, but the large stained glass panels that before had shown images of people in pain, now shows images of naked bodies entwined and contorted in every position I can think of and many that I didn't know were possible. It's like the entire karma sutra is laid out in colored glass in front of me. Erotic, beautiful and utterly terrifying. The expressions on the faces range from ecstasy to agony. To my right is a depiction in glass of a woman with spirals of black and pink hair, her legs gaping open, a huge demon's forked tail entering her pussy and the lower end of his trident down her throat. I inhale sharply and try not to think of someone else with a forked tail. Despite me trying everything I can not to think of him, I can't help wondering how it would feel to have Dade do the exact same thing to me. Would I have the same look of rapture on my face or would it hurt?

Damn it!

I shake my head and walk over to the steps that will take me down to the lower ground. I could call the levitating platform, but a quick look at my Hell Cell shows me that I have a few minutes left before orientation and I want to gather my composure before I'm thrown back in at the deep end, probably literally knowing Anthura.

My heart begins to pound as I walk down past Dade's door. I finally let out my breath when the door remains shut and skip down the rest of the steps. My fear of heights hasn't

fully left me, but after the months I've spent in a tower identical to this, I'm getting used to it.

At the bottom, I take a deep breath and open the door to the place where I'll be spending the next few weeks... or months of my life. The Second Circle of Hell. Lust.

I was completely mistaken if I believed this tower would be nearly identical to the previous one we occupied. Although the general layout remains the same, the enormous circular room at the tower's base is remarkably different. The walls are adorned in a gentle shade of pink, and instead of the plain red sofas we had before, there are now pink love seats scattered throughout, accompanied by swings that mysteriously hang from nowhere, their ropes entwined with blooming vines. My eyes instinctively scan the people already assembled here. Dade isn't here. His huge wings and penchant for black clothing would make him stand out against the pink. Anxiety gnaws at the pit of my stomach as I take in the faces of the people I'm going to be up against in the Inferno Games. Some I recognize from Purgatory, but there are a number of new faces. My heart tightens as I move my eyes from one face to the next until I find the two people I know I can count on and in that moment, my entire being lightens.

Juliette looks stunning in a tight-fitting pink leather dress that looks like it was made for the place, but the expression on her face tells me she's not as thrilled to have come through to this Circle as I thought she would be. Her eyes are downcast and the muscles in her face are tense. If I thought there was any place Juliette would fit right in, Lust is probably the first place that would spring to mind, with the possible exception of the Third Circle — Gluttony. Rowena, on the other hand, is wearing a pink, flowery outfit that seems to be held together with safety pins. I'm not sure what to make of it other than she

probably made it herself. Just like Juliette, her face is downcast. The pair of them look like they've just come from a funeral. A wave of heaviness washes over me.

“Hey you two, you made it!” I greet them, then sit on the swing next to them when it's clear that neither of them wants a hug.

Juliette gives me a brief, thin-lipped smile before turning to Rowena. “You tell her. I can't even bear to think about it.”

My heart drops another notch as I wait to find out what could be worse than our current situation. I mean, we're already in hell. How much worse can it get?

Rowena takes a deep breath and speaks, her voice trembling slightly. “She came through with Orlin.”

“Orlin Moss?” Try as I might, I can't keep the tone of surprise out of my voice.

“Do you know any other Orlins?” Juliette snaps, her frustration evident. “Of course Orlin Moss. The dude is gross. He has a comb over for Christ's sake. I think I'm going to be sick.”

My mouth falls open as I wait for the punch line. “I thought you'd have come through together,” I say, gesturing the pair of them.

Juliette gives me a withering look, and it's clear there isn't going to be a punch line. She really did come through with Orlin. I can barely think of anything worse, not that any choice would be a good choice. When we all made the decision to enter into the games, I don't think any of us really thought it through. I pin an image of Jenny in my mind and swallow back the feeling of horror of what the next few weeks might bring.

“Oh my God,” she whimpers. “I’m going to have to see him naked! I’m going to have to have sex with him.” Her already gray-green face pales a shade and she does look like he’s about to vomit. I cast my eyes around the sofas, finding Orlin. He’s standing next to a sofa with a clapboard over his shirt that reads SIN=CONSEQUENSES. He looks completely lost. I shudder, then turn back to Juliette.

“No one said you have to sleep with him,” I say lamely. “You just have to do the first trial with him.” Even as I say it, my mouth turns dry. We’re in Lust. What else would they make us do? Whatever horror Juliette has in her head about what will be expected between her and Orlin, I’ll have to do the same with Dade. I swallow back the lump in my throat. In my messed up dream, I’d kissed him. It wasn’t real, but the desire to touch him was. The want, the need. They were very real.

“Look at this place.” Juliette gestures around us at the comfy love seats, the scantily clad people walking past us and the pink furnishings. Pink, everywhere. “It oozes sex. I’ll probably have to see his small maggoty dick.” She recoils in horror. “I just know that in the first trial, they’ll make us fuck like bunnies.”

“It could be worse,” I grumble, feeling my heart tighten as I say it. “I came through with Dade.”

I have to stare at Juliette’s face to not look at Rowena’s open mouthed expression in my peripheral vision.

Juliette gives me a withering expression. “Hmm. Yes, I can see how fucking a gorgeous man of mystery with a ripped bod, sexy tattoos and giant wings would be a massive turn off.” She sits back in her seat and folds her arms.

“He’s...” I can’t even finish the sentence, because I don’t know what he is. I only know that he might be a murderer and gave me the best orgasm I’ve had in my life. The only orgasm if I don’t count one’s given to me by myself.

“He’s a weirdo,” Juliette continues, unaware of the turmoil she’s ignited in my belly, “but if it makes you feel better, I’ll swap... you know, as a friend.”

Rowena rolls her eyes and I can no longer ignore her. However vocal Juliette will be on the subject of me and Dade, I’m expecting a lot worse from Rowena.

“What happened between you two, anyway?” she asks. “One minute you hated him, then you seemed to like him, then you didn’t. You’re worse than Ross and Rachel on Friends. On again. Off again.” Her blonde curls bounce as she speaks, though she’s marginally less animated than she usually is. Actual curls, not the usual frizz. She looks different and now I come to think of it, so does Juliette. Neither of them were ugly before, but now, despite the misery etched on their features, they are both glowing, as though they’ve just come from a beauty salon.

“I was never ‘on’ with Dade.” I lie, thinking of our time in the shower, the best orgasm I ever had and the interruption by Remy. Remy! I haven’t seen him yet. My heart falls like stone as I think about what he did — the two of us in The Shard in London, Candice holding his hand. “Remy chose Candice over me,” I whisper.

“I always said he was an asshole,” Rowena comments, her mouth turned downward as though she has a sour taste in her mouth.

“To be fair, you think everyone is an asshole,” I mutter, though she’s right. She did warn me on numerous occasions,

and I chose to ignore those warnings. I sigh. “Who did you end up coming through with?”

Her lips purse into a thin line as she glances around the room, avoiding my question. Before she can answer, a loud commotion from the other side of the lounge catches our attention. We all turn our heads in unison, curiosity getting the better of us. It’s hard to ignore the angry voice of Felix as he’s shouting, “I’m not fucking going to be with that... that...” I can’t quite make out the rest of his sentence, but his tone is enough to send chills down my spine.

Anthura, dressed in a striking red latex cat suit with a long red tail trailing behind her, stands next to him. Felix is yelling directly at her, his face twisted in anger. Despite Anthura’s attempts to calm him down, he’s getting more agitated by the second.

Rowena lets out a small gasp and bites down on her bottom lip. Worry is etched all over her face.

Trying to lighten the mood, I jokingly comment, “We need popcorn for this lover’s tiff. Count yourself fortunate for not being paired with him.”

Rowena’s gaze shifts towards me with an expression that hints at tears, and in that moment, realization dawns upon me...

“No.”

She nods, then wrinkles up her nose in disgust.

“You ended up with Felix Barclay?!” Suddenly being coupled up with Dade doesn’t seem so bad. Hell, even sleeping with gross Orlin would be better than being paired up with psycho Felix.

My heart lurches as he strides over to us. His face is almost as red as Anthura's cat suit and nearly as shiny. He jabs his finger toward Rowena in harsh anger. "If you think I'm going to come anywhere near you, you've got another thing coming, freak."

I hold my breath as Rowena stands to face him. It's like a mask has shuttered down over her face, hiding the worry that showed just seconds before. "Why don't you just cum in a tissue, then, little boy? It would be a shame to change the habit of a lifetime."

It's fucking glorious.

The whole group is watching, along with a number of bystanders who have stopped to see what the commotion is. I hold my breath along with a smirk, waiting to see what Felix will do. His face is dark as thunder and he looks like he'd like nothing more than to punch Rowena. Someone to my left laughs. He stands there for a moment, his mouth open as he stares at Rowena. The tension in the air is palpable as they engage in an angry staring contest. Neither moves for a few long seconds, then Felix twists on his heel and storms off back to Anthura. The tension dissipates and everyone goes back to their own conversations now that the show is over.

"I know he's a dick," muses Juliette as Rowena plunks back down beside her, "but he does look really fucking hot in that suit."

"Let's hope it's so hot it cremates the bastard," Rowena mutters under her breath, and in that second, I know that I'm going to get through this.

WANTING IT ALL

FELIX

Anger burns hot through my veins as I stride back over to where Anthura is sitting. Fat fucking lot of good she is letting that freak talk to me that way. I didn't even get my blow job earlier. Apparently showering someone with shards of glass is a fucking turn off. "Anthura. I don't know what the fuck's going on, but I'm not hooking up with that. I don't give a shit about the rules."

Anthura barely looks up from some bullshit rulebook she's reading before giving me a non-committal hmmm. Behind her, I spot Angelis walk out through the double doors. Damn. Both Angelis and Snowflake got through, after all. My muscles are tense with rage as I grab the rulebook from Anthura's hands. It's not like she'll stick to any of the rules, anyway. She does what the fuck she wants, when the fuck she wants, and is beholden to no one. I can't stand her, but up until now, she's been an asset, not to mention a great lay. If I could rid myself of her, I would, but I need every advantage to get out of this literal hell hole.

"Are you even listening to me?" I demand.

She flicks her black eyelashes up and deigns to look at me. "Darling," she purrs. "Play the game. Act the part. Do what you have to do." I can tell she's still pissy with me after what

happened in the apartment, but I wasn't the one who stopped a blow job before it really started. I'm more pent up than ever and now I have an aching dick and small cuts on my legs where the glass pierced my skin to add to my problems.

I glance over at the freak and cringe. He's in a weird outfit which I'm pretty sure is made from curtains. It gives me the finger, sending another wave of anger swelling through my system.

"I'm not doing that. Fucking do something. You're in charge, for Christ's sake."

Anthura winces at my choice of words, then levels her gaze at me, coolly. Even in this situation, she has a carnal look about her that I both desire and hate in equal measure. "May I remind you that I'm not in charge here anymore? Hades told me on the Hell Cell in no uncertain terms that I was no longer required for the position." She sniffs and pulls her mouth into an ugly sneer, which she quickly corrects. "There's nothing I can do about your little predicament, but if you want a real woman, come to me in my room and we can exorcise Rowena from your teeny brain for the night. I might even finish that blow job I started." She brings her hand down to the front of my pants and caresses my cock, which stiffens, pissing me off even more. I grab her wrist and pull it away angrily.

"Fuck you," I spit out, venom lacing my words, but we both know that despite my defiance, I'll inevitably find myself in her room. She's the closest thing to fun around here and though she's no longer the head honcho in this circle, she's still the only advantage I have.

"Éveryone, bienvenue. Welcome. Gat'er round."

I turn my head away from Anthura to finally see who it is who'll be leading us through this new nightmare. My pulse

thunders in my ears, not to mention my still half stiff cock as I take in the glorious vision before me. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life has taken her place at the front of the group. Beside her, standing like bodyguards with their arms crossed over their chests, are two demons, both so huge, they dwarf the beauty in between them. Suddenly, nights with Anthura fall far from my mind. This woman, whoever she is, will be getting the full Felix Barclay charm. Especially if she's in charge now. I'll no longer have use for Anthura. Two birds. One fucking huge stone that I might have to bludgeon Anthura with.

The woman possesses a lithe frame, her brown skin radiating a warm pink glow under the strange lights. Her body is a masterpiece, every curve and contour carved to perfection. I already know this is the woman I'm going to spend the next few weeks with until I can get out of this hellhole. I throw Anthura back her rule book and head over to the woman, slipping in between her and everyone else. I extend my hand. "Felix Barclay at your service."

When she looks at me, it's like there's no one else in the room. I can see in her eyes that it won't take much persuasion to get her into my bed. The woman is practically drooling. There's an unmistakable spark of attraction between us, and I can almost taste the anticipation in the air. It's clear that persuading her to join me in my bed will require minimal effort. The thought excites me, amplifying the pulse of adrenaline coursing through my veins. For the first time in my life, I've found someone that I might want to spend more than a few torrid nights with. She's that good looking and if the way she's licking her lips and staring at me is anything to go by, she'll be in my bed before the day is over. I don't even care

that both Snowflake and Angelis got through. Why should I care about anyone else when this vision is here?

“Noémi,” she drawls seductively. “Eet’s a pleasure to meet you, Felix.” Her French accent makes her even sexier. So this is the woman that Anthura lost out to. “I theenk we are all going to ‘ave some fun zese next few weeks, no?”

Fucking hell, this woman could make me come with just her voice, though I can think of other ways she can put that gorgeous mouth to use on me. My cock twitches as I imagine Noémi’s plump pink lips wrapped round it.

“Felix isn’t here to have fun,” Anthura cuts in, pushing the giant demons out of the way and giving me a hard stare. “We’re all here for the games and nothing more. Maybe we should start them, Noémi?”

Her smile barely conceals the anger bubbling beneath the surface, her sharpness cutting through the air like a knife. Without hesitation, she seizes my wrist, her grip firm, and pulls me away from Noémi. “Don’t even think about fucking her,” she hisses when we are out of earshot.

“Of course not,” I reply smoothly. Anthura must know I’m bullshitting her, but she doesn’t say another word as we sit together on one of the god-awful pink seats. Moloch hovers around behind us like he doesn’t quite know what to do with himself.

I glance back at Noémi, irritated that she’s now giving the same smile to Dade Angelis that she gave to me. I’m surprised he got through after Anthura practically blurted out that he murdered two people in the second trial. My eye tics slightly. I can’t stand the guy, but at least he doesn’t seem affected by Noémi’s stunning beauty. He’s barely looking at her. Now he’s simpering after Snowflake, he won’t be a problem. It’s

pathetic how his eyes are like magnets and she's due north. What's worse is that she keeps looking at him. Another rush of irritation rushes through my veins. He fucking murdered two people and she still can't keep her eyes away from him. Not that I care. She's a murdering bitch, too. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be in this godforsaken hell hole in the first place. They're welcome to each other. Remy is a fucking idiot to even think about dating the bitch, but then again, Remy got to Candice before I did in the final trial. That fucked my plans right up, but with Candice out of the equation, there's more space in my bed for Noémi. As if on cue, both Remy and Candice enter the room from the stairwell. It's clear to anyone with eyes that they slept together last night, or at least found each other this morning for a quickie, but the second he sees Snowflake, he gravitates over to her. I have really no idea what he sees in her. She's a skinny wretch who usually dresses like she's woken up in a dumpster. As he takes a seat to the side of her, Angelis looks like he wants to murder the pair of them. I hope he does. The fewer people in this fucked up game, the better. If he can murder that stupid bitch and, hopefully, take himself out with her, that would solve two of my most pressing problems.

“Everyone, take a seat,” Noémi says, her voice dripping with honey. “Bienvenue to ze seconde stage of ze Inferno Games. Many of you will know each ozer from ze first circle, but we've consolidated a number of towers, so zere will be people you don't know. Almost everyone here is from Purgatory, but we do 'ave a few people zat reside 'ere zat lost in zeir seconde round and will be trying again. By my count, we 'ave fifty-eight people competing to go into ze troisième circle. Each and every one of you will become amis, and maybe more zan amis. Zis is ze circle de amour after all.”

“Circle of sexual deviants, more like,” Anthura hisses under her breath. She gives me a shove. “You’ll fit right in!”

Ignoring her, I fixate on Noémi.

“Mon nom es Noémi Laurent and I’ll be your guide for zis Circle. You all know ‘ow ze games work. Zere will be trois trials wheech you’ll ‘ave to pass all of zem to proceed. My assistants Asmodée and Arch will also ‘elp you.” She gestures to the two walls of muscle behind her.

“Zis tower is set out très similar to ze tower you’ve just left. Your rooms coincide wiz ze rooms you just vacated. Ze main restaurant is juste behind you and ees open day and night. Below us is ze entertainment level. You’ll find some subtle and some not-so-subtle differences to ze level in Purgatory, but you’ll still find ze Earthery and many of ze same fun things to do, plus a petite extra zat is special to our circle. You may ‘ave noticed zat your clothes ‘ave been replaced. We like sexy ‘ere, so we’ve mixed zings up a leetle. Tomorrow will mark ze start of ze Second Circle’s Inferno Games, but for now...” Noémi’s voice trails off, her hands clapping together with a certain flair. She pivots gracefully, directing her gaze towards Juliette Perez, who happens to be positioned directly opposite me on the other end of the sofa. “Let’s play a game to get to know each ozer better. Tell me your name and your greatest desire. Your desires can be magical, mundane, wild... sexual.” Noémi’s voice dips into a range so sensual, I could eat the woman out right here in front of everyone and not feel the slightest bit of embarrassment.

“We ‘ave no secrets ‘ere.”

“Why?” Everyone’s eyes turn to Dade. He’s like a harbinger of death, so completely out of place in the pink room. This is the first time I’ve heard him speak aloud in front

of others. Trust him to question everything. Why the fuck does it matter why?

“Wizzout inteemate knowledge of each ozer, you will not get through zis circle and my games,” Noémi explains patiently.

I’m more than intimate enough with most of the people here. Way too much in some cases. My eyes flick to who I’m paired up with and revulsion fills my senses. Anthura must think I’m fucking insane if she expects me to get intimate with that. I think I’ll take my chances with Noémi and do what that other freak Twila did in the last round. Fuck the boss to gain passage.

“No.” Dade stands and strides over to the stairwell, kicking the door before slamming it behind him. Looks like the guy finally grew some balls.

Noémi takes it in her stride. “I’ll talk to ‘im later. So, let’s start. Juliette eesn’t it?”

Juliette leans forward, showing cleavage a mountaineer could get lost in. “Hi everyone. I’m Juliette. I’d like to be railed by multiple men at once. Preferably ones who actually know what they are doing.” She’s not even looking at Noémi, but at the colossal half dressed demons beside her. Asmodée and Arch, or whatever their names are. Disgusting fucking slut.

Noémi doesn’t bat an eyelid. “Parfait! And who ees your partner?”

Juliette’s nose shrivels up as she looks over to Orlin, who’s busy staring vacantly at his knees. “I came through with Orlin Moss, but I was wondering about that. Do I have to stay as his

partner? I mean, can we swap for someone else?” Her eyes drift back to the demons. It’s pathetic how obvious she is.

Noémi shakes her head. “Eet’s not up to me to say. ‘ades will be ‘ere tomorrow wiz details of ze trois trials, ze first of which weel start zen and weel be very sexy. I do know for ze first trial you will ‘ave to participate wiz your partner.”

I smirk at the look on Juliette’s face. She’s attractive, but she’s a bitch and surrounds herself with the worst scum. If she kept her mouth shut, I might have tried coming through with her.

“Oo wants to share next?”

Snowflake raises her hand, almost falling off her swing in the process. “I’m Quinn Valentine,” she says clearly. “My biggest desire is to get through this circle so I can get to my sister, who is in the Seventh Circle. That’s why I came to Hell and why I entered the competition.”

The woman sitting in a love seat beside her, gasps audibly. She’s good looking in a kind of cutesy way, with dark blonde hair that she’s currently wearing in pigtails. Next to her sits a guy who must be twice her size with muscles that could crack nuts. He’s got black hair and a beard and, despite his size, looks just as excited by the proceedings as his partner. And if the fact that they are holding hands isn’t enough to tell the world they are together, they are also wearing the most nauseating matching shirts I’ve ever had the displeasure to see. His says I COME IN PEACE and hers, in the same font, says I’M PEACE.

If they didn’t come to hell for the very reason of wearing those monstrosities, the whole fucking system is rigged.

“Belle! What about you, Peace?” Noémi asks. “What ees your favorite fantasy?”

It’s clear she’s been waiting for her chance for the spotlight. “It’s Maggie, actually. I just thought the shirts were cute. This is Colin and my biggest desire is to spend every minute of the rest of eternity with him.”

“Ditto,” adds Colin.

I stand corrected. This must be the reason they belong in Hell. Frankly, they are the most nauseating, revolting, repugnant couple I’ve ever had the displeasure to meet, and that’s saying something in this place.

Noémi puts her hands to her mouth and exclaims, “Beautiful.”

Beautiful? I hope she’s joking. While I can overlook many things to get my hands on a body as perfect as hers, if she genuinely finds that couple beautiful, she’s just as messed up as the other weirdos in here. I decide not to ditch Anthura after all. I’ll keep her hanging on my hook while I explore how things turn out with Noémi. “Now, what about you?”

My stomach turns as all eyes turn to Robert.

“I’m Rowena. My friends call me...”

“Freak,” I cough out.

Noémi turns to me. “Do you need a tissue?” she asks. It’s an unfortunate choice of words and I hate that it elicits a grin from Rowena... Robert. Next to him, Snowflake and Juliette glare at me.

The roar in my head has me on edge. No one dared to glare at me on Earth and if anyone tried, I destroyed them. I might not have the money that I had before, nor the power, but I still

remember how to destroy people. Juliette and Snowflake are the first on my list, right after I deal with their freak friend. “Not at all, Noémi. I think that we should all be aware of our real names. No secrets here, remember? Rowena is really called Robert.”

“Roro!” he inserts, licking his lips and staring ahead defiantly.

Noémi’s face drops slightly. Shit, I’ve overplayed my hand.

“Zat’s right, Felix. No secrets, but our names are what we call ourselves and eet’s each and everyone’s prerogative to change zem as zey see fit.” She actually turns to the freak and smiles. “Roro, I ‘ope you’ll come to consider me a friend. May I call you zat?”

Damn! I’m losing points with Noémi already. I need to win her over if I ever want to feel the sweet smell of winning, and if I just happen to feel those lips of hers on my cock in the process, all the better.

The freak nods his head and smiles. “I’d love that, Noémi, thank you. My biggest desire is that people stop dead naming me.” He shifts his eyes to me for a brief second, a challenge in them. I glare back, then smirk before turning my eyes back to Noémi. She’s looking at me expectantly.

Fuck, I’m going to have to attempt damage control.

I’ve never said sorry and meant it in my life, but there have been situations where looking like I’m remorseful has gotten me what I want, and in this case I want Noémi’s gorgeous lips giving me ecstasy. “I apologize for my earlier indiscretion... Rowena,” I say in a way that sounds anything but apologetic.

“It was my mistake and I won’t do it again.” Not when Noémi’s around, anyway.

“Beautiful!” Noémi claps her hands again. “Zat’s what I like to see. Zere’s no reason we can’t all be amis ‘ere.”

Robert makes to sit down, but Noémi stops him. “Wait, you’ve not told us your biggest desire yet!”

Robert looks around uncertainly. “I just did. I don’t like being dead named.”

Noémi steps over to him and rests a hand on his shoulder. “Roro. I understand zat being dead-named is upsetting to you, but I don’t believe zat’s your greatest fantasy. I know zere’s more.”

Robert bites down on his bottom lip before licking it slightly. “I just want to feel normal in my own skin. I want to find love and... get married and...”

I roll my eyes.

“And...” Noémi encourages.

Robert’s eyes flicker downward. “I want to have children... I want to be a mother. That is my greatest desire.”

I swallow back a snort. Unfortunately, it escapes slightly. Noémi turns her head to me. “And what is your biggest desire, Felix? What is eet you want?”

I square my eyes on hers. I’m expecting anger, but I see only desire. Her eyes reflect the pink of the room, giving her a gleam. I’m hard just looking at her. I want you. I want your lips wrapped around my cock and your naked body hot and waiting. I can’t say either of these things, so I say the next best thing. “I want it all, Noémi. I want every fucking thing you can give me.”

IT'S PROBABLY A TENTACLE

ROWENA

The second I step through the door to my room, I rip the dress from my body, sending safety pins flying and clattering to the ground. I pull off the matching panties and bra set and palm my hands to the smooth marble of my bathroom sink as I stare at myself in the mirror. My breasts no longer show the scars where they were augmented years ago, filled with silicone. My eyes slide down to the crevice between my legs, real as any other woman's in here, and yet despite being the woman I was always supposed to be, there are still hints of the man I once was. My hips, though more rounded than they ever have been, still are slightly too angular and though my Adam's apple is gone, my chin is slightly too square. Some of the changes I made with surgery in life and some were made after death when I entered Hell. Now there's been another change since entering Lust. Every single person in here is slightly more beautiful than they were in purgatory. I don't know if anyone else has noticed, but I have. I've lost the frizz from my blonde mane. Now my hair flows down my back like I'm in a shampoo commercial, no kinks. I huff out. The frizziness of my hair was the one thing that never bothered me.

Rage courses through my veins, and all of it is directed at Felix. When will I be seen as a woman enough, so people like him stop trying to expose me at every chance they get? Hell,

I'd be happy just being seen as human. It's as if he takes pleasure in revealing my dead name to others. I've spent my entire life defending my identity to people who didn't even know me. I always knew I was a woman; it wasn't a sudden revelation or a radical change later in life. Yet, to those around me, my gender transition seemed like a massive upheaval. They don't understand that I didn't change my gender; I only embraced my true self outwardly.

The difference between my appearance and who I am is lost on Felix, and it's infuriating. That's why I still can't fully feel at peace. People like Felix Barclay will never let me be, and their constant harassment keeps me from fully embracing who I really am.

I run my hand over my flat belly and cringe at what I told everyone earlier. I've never told anyone about wanting to be a mom. No one, not my friends in life and not Juliette and Quinn in death. It was my secret, but there's something so compelling about Noémi, it just all came out. So now I'll have to deal with more of Felix's shit.

Beside me, my Hell Cell beeps. I pick it up to find a text from Juliette. Despite everything, I smile when I read it.

HE'S A SLIMY TOAD. DON'T LET HIM GET TO YOU. QUINN AND I ARE HAVING LUNCH IN THE RESTAURANT. COME JOIN US.

I look back up at my reflection. Confidence stares back at me, hiding the mess I feel inside. Ignoring the clothes on the floor, I head to the wardrobe. I'd noticed new clothes in it when I checked it out earlier, but now I have time to find an outfit that says 'fuck off' to the world.

My wardrobe is a crafter's paradise with a sewing machine at the far end and swathes of fabulous fabrics. I can't wait to

get to work, making my own clothes again, but this time with everything I need to hand. Until then I find a dress that flairs out, giving me the appearance of hips, and sling it on over my head. I pull my hair into a high pony tail, smudge some pink lip gloss over my lips, pull on another set of panties, blow a kiss to my reflection and head out the door.

I find Juliette exactly where she said she'd be, hidden behind a stack of heart-shaped pancakes dripping with pink syrup.

“My thirteen-year-old self would have died for this place,” I remark as I take a seat opposite. She appears from behind the stack of pancakes with a banana, which is undeniably in the shape of a penis.

“Would your thirteen-year-old self have loved this?” she says before ramming it down her throat. A couple of men I've never met ogle at her from the next table over.

“Must you?” I grab a pancake and take a bite. It's way too sickly sweet.

“Please tell me you're eating something better than this,” I say to Quinn and push the pancakes to one side.

“Not exactly.”

I look down at what can only be described as a sex party on her plate. She's got tomato slices representing boobs with olive nipples, bacon crudely shaped as a woman's body, with a hole cut in the lower part of it for a sausage that's been pushed half through. The other end of the sausage is more bacon shaped like a man. Both the figures have half a boiled egg, each representing their heads. Finally, artfully placed basil makes their arms and legs.

I raise my upper lip and furrow my brows. “What the heck did you order? Breakfast Orgy?”

Quinn shrugs. “I ordered a cooked breakfast, and this is what they brought me. At least the demons here bring me real food. In Purgatory, all they served me was maggots, so I’m calling this a win.”

She spears the man’s head and eats it in one bite.

I shrivel my nose up. “I’m calling it an abomination.”

Thankfully, a waiter appears next to me. He’s dressed in a very dubious outfit that’s skin tight and shows off a rather large bulge. Juliette laughs as I divert my eyes away.

“How can I be of service, Ms. Bagshott?”

Juliette raises her eyebrows and gives me a disgusting grin.

“I’ll have eggs on toast, and for all that is holy, don’t make it in the shape of two people doing it. I want to be able to keep my food down, thanks.”

“She doesn’t like to swallow,” Juliette teases. I throw her a dark stare as the waiter disappears.

Seconds later, he’s back. Juliette and Quinn fade into fits of giggles as I’m handed over my breakfast that is unmistakably in the shape of a six and a nine.

“I should have asked for a sixty-nine from him,” Juliette sighs when he disappears once again. “Oh, did you see Noémi’s assistants?”

“See them? They took up half the room.” I pull at my breakfast, making it look more like actual breakfast than a still of a weird porn movie. “They were pretty hard to miss. I noticed they didn’t say a word. Men who look like that spend

all their time in a gym and probably don't have a collective brain cell between them."

"Oh pish." Juliette waves her hand in a dismissive way. "I have literally never seen anyone so utterly gorgeous in my life, and there are two of them. Oh, what if they are brothers? Twins! I've always wanted to do it with twins!"

I'm going to give my eyes a hernia with all the rolling they are going through. "Apart from the vacant looks on their faces and the muscles on muscles, they didn't look anything like each other."

"They're demons," Quinn points out. "I could feel their aura a mile away. Noémi's too."

"Who else thinks Noémi is a bit... weird?"

Juliette and Quinn look at me blankly so I elaborate. "She's as sickly sweet as that syrup you're eating, but I get the feeling she's not all she makes herself out to be. She gives me the ick."

Juliette squints "The ick? Pray tell, what is the ick?"

"I don't know. I can't explain it. I just don't want to get too close to her."

"I wouldn't get too close to any of them," Quinn adds. "It's probably against the rules."

Juliette sits back in her chair and chews on a pancake thoughtfully. "I don't see how. Twila did... and Felix!"

My mouth automatically curls into a sneer at the mere mention of his name. "Twila left the games and Felix gets away with everything. Seriously, must we talk about men? Surely there are better topics of conversation? I feel like I'm back in high school giggling over the jocks."

“Have you seen the staff here?” Juliette muses, obviously ignoring my suggestion. “It’s like being in porn, but everyone is amazing looking. Did you notice how hot our waiter was?” She picks up a pancake and adds it to her plate before covering it with more of the sticky pink syrup.

“Just remember, they are all demons who are glamored,” Quinn warns. “Just because they are gorgeous up here doesn’t mean they don’t have horns and scaly skin in real life.

Juliette shrugs. “I could go for that. I’m really not picky. As long as that bulge in his pants wasn’t glamored.”

“It’s probably a tentacle or something weird,” Quinn muses.

I pick at my breakfast. “As long as whatever it was didn’t touch my eggs,” I say flatly, poking them with a fork. This elicits another round of laughter from the girls and I can’t help the corners of my mouth elevating.

“I don’t think you’re equipped with any eggs, Rob, so don’t need to worry on that score.”

My hand tightens on my fork, but Juliette’s hand comes down on mine, stopping me from going on a murderous rampage.

“Ignore him,” she mouths, glaring at Felix’s retreating form.

“Easier said than done with what I’ll be expected to do to him tomorrow. You heard Noémi. We have to get intimate with each other. I’d literally rather get intimate with an angry scorpion up my pussy than have Felix Barclay’s crusty dick come anywhere near me.” I push the eggs aside, no longer hungry. “Can we please change the subject? Quinn, what is going on with you because one minute you and Dade are like

some commercial for sexy people everywhere and the next you're with Remy, who seems to be with Candice? It's like an episode of love Island but with less STDs."

"Have you ever even watched Love Island?" Juliette interjects.

I set my features in a way that I hope shows the deep disdain I feel for trite TV. "No. I have brains. Of course I've not watched it. It was a figure of speech."

Juliette sticks her tongue out at me. It's decidedly pink.

"Dade and I aren't together owing to the fact he murdered Michael and Lucia, among other things." Quinn says before Juliette can complain about my lack of love for Love Island. "Remy and I aren't together because he's probably fucking Candice as we speak."

Juliette raises the fork in her hand and points it at Quinn. "Dade didn't kill anyone and Remy isn't fucking Candice."

I elevate my eyebrows at Juliette's sudden observation skills as Quinn stares at her. I don't want to be the one to point out that Remy and Candice arrived at the meeting together with serious bed head.

Quinn looks at Juliette hopefully. "How do you know, and... How do you know?"

Juliette shrugs. "Why would Dade kill anyone? I know you know him better than I do, but when you came out of that pool in the second trial, he looked like he wanted nothing more than to get you to his room and fuck you senseless."

"So? What if he's a horny murderer?"

It's sad how desperate she looks. Like she wants him to be innocent.

Juliette shakes her head. “He’s dark and brooding and has that mysterious vibe, but he didn’t kill anyone. Why would he kill Michael and Lucia? If he was going to kill anyone, he’d go for Remy or even Felix.”

“True!” I say, pulling my plate back and breaking the yolk of one of my eggs. “There are four main motives for murder. The four L’s.”

Quinn’s eyebrows arch.

I hold my fingers up and count each motive off. “Lust, love, loathing and loot.” I bring my hand down. “He didn’t lust after Lucia or Michael as far as I’m aware, so there wasn’t a jealousy motive. He didn’t loathe either of them either, or at least no more than the rest of us. We all loathed Michael, he was a prick, but he was pathetic enough to ignore. Finally Loot. Dade had nothing to gain from killing them.”

“Except winning the trial,” Juliette says softly, dispelling my theory in four words.

Quinn throws her hands up into the air. “Remy saw him do it!”

I sigh “Oh sweet child. Remy doesn’t want anyone else in your pants. He’d say anything if it got you away from his love rival.”

“Now you do get love rivals on Love Island,” Juliette comments. Pink syrup runs down her chin, making her appear like an anemic vampire.

Ignoring her, I continue. “You should have seen the look on Remy’s face when you emerged from the pool with Dade in the second trial. He was green. A little like the color you’re turning now.”

Quinn looks like she's about to choke. "But other people saw him too!"

I sit back in my seat and put my fork down on the plate. "So Anthura says and since when does she tell the truth? She's a demon and a prize bitch. Plus, she can't stand you or what you represent. All her pitiful life, she's been safe in the knowledge that the people she surrounds herself with are bad people. Maybe not the worst sinners, but no saints either. Then you come along. You, who was meant to go to heaven? You disrupt everything she believes in.

"Oh my god!" The color drains from Quinn's face as she lowers her head into her hands.

Juliette helps herself to yet another pancake from the stack and liberally pours more of the sickly sweet syrup onto it. "Who cares anyway? I get that you aren't dating either of them any more, but are you sleeping with them? You've still not answered the most important question."

Quinn shakes her head on the table. Her voice is so low, I can barely hear her mumble. "Neither of them but..."

Juliette's eyes turn to mine as she mouths the word 'but.'

"But what, honey?" I try to sound sympathetic.

"But Dade gave me the best orgasm I've ever had in my life and I repaid him by calling him a murderer."

My teeth come together and my mouth widens in an eek, mirroring the expression on Juliette's face. When Quinn looks up, I rearrange my mouth into what I hope is a friendly smile.

"I'd say it's more customary to repay orgasms with orgasms, Babe," Juliette says soothingly, putting her hand on Quinn's back, "but as you said, some people have a murder kink. Maybe he likes being called that?"

I don't think I can roll my eyes far enough back in my head.

"What?" Juliette mouths at me and shrugs.

I shake my head before holding my hand out to Quinn. She doesn't take it. "You know. The guy really liked you. Maybe you can find a way through this. Talk to him tomorrow before we start the first trial."

She looks distraught as she lifts her head from the table. "The first trial where we are supposed to be fucking each other like bunnies, you mean?" She stands up and grabs her bag before marching away.

"Murder kink?" I say as Juliette grabs the uneaten sausage from Quinn's plate and takes a bite out of it.

Juliette lifts her eyebrows. "I don't know. He's a weirdo. He might be into stuff like that. Who cares anyway? She only has to fuck the guy... probably. She doesn't have to speak to him at all if she doesn't want."

I sit back in my seat. "Just remember that when you find yourself staring at Orlin's wrinkly ballsack and maggot peen tomorrow."

Juliette's face drops and she puts the sausage back on the plate. I think it's the first time I've seen her put food anywhere but her mouth.

She crosses her arms and glares at me. "You can really go off some people, you know that?"

I grin back at her, the thoughts of Felix Barclay now distant in the back of my mind.

THE POOL IN PURGATORY

What if he didn't do it? The question has been rolling around in my mind since the second Remy knocked on my door on the night of the second trial in Purgatory, but I've not dared to really think about it. I feel like I've been pulled in every direction. If he didn't murder Michael and Lucia and I left him for Remy... who, by Rowena's accounts, was probably lying...

I let out a long sigh as I try to think of ways I can get ready for the first round. I can't, for the life of me, imagine what a trial in Lust will look like. I'm hoping it's something similar to the labyrinths of purgatory but with fewer hellhounds, pain and death, but I get the feeling that Noémi isn't a hell hound type and the only pain she knows how to inflict is of the BDSM variety. Just as my brain is twisting itself into scenarios I really don't want to ponder, someone knocks on the door.

I open the door and find Remy behind it, a bunch of red roses in his hand and a contrite expression on his face.

It's almost laughable. A few months ago I'd have thought I'd died and gone to heaven if a guy as good looking as Remy showed up at my door with flowers for me, but now it takes a lot not to slam the door in his deceitful face. "I'm not

interested in anything you have to say, and some flowers aren't going to make me change my mind."

His ocean green eyes twinkle in a way that has my treacherous tummy fluttering. His expression drops into something more serious, allowing me to actually breathe. "The flowers aren't to convince you of anything. I just thought you might like them."

I might not be the most knowledgeable woman when it comes to love, but I do know insincere crap when I hear it. I give him my best withering look and nod down to the flowers. "I smell bullshit over the scent of the roses."

"Fine," he says, lowering the bunch of roses, "but please let me in. There's something I have to show you."

I grip the edge of the door tightly and take a long unsteady breath. "Whatever it is, I don't want to see it."

He leans slightly to the side, resting on my door frame. It doesn't help that he's impossibly beautiful with a face that wouldn't look out of place on a copy of teen heartthrob magazine. He goes to his signature move, pushing his hair back through his fingers. "Please let me inside, Quinn. I can't show you this out here." He turns and looks around him as though he expects anyone else would want to see whatever it is that he wants to show me. Last time I checked, there wasn't a line-up of women for his dick, which is what I expect it is that he wants to show me. Then I remember Candice and the flutters in my stomach turn sour.

"Seriously Remy. Go show Candice your sorry tiny dick. I've seen it, and it's not even worth the mention." I'm lying. His cock is perfect and certainly not small, but I want to hurt him, even if it is with stupid sharp digs at his manhood.

“Quinn. Let me inside,” he orders, though anxiety threads through his voice. “Stop messing around.”

I put my hands to my hips, frustration bubbling through me as I meet his gaze. “I won’t stop mes...”

I’m cut off by his Hell Cell thrust in my face. A video clearly taken in the underwater labyrinth of the second trial in the pool in Purgatory is playing. The video is slightly grainy, but it’s clear enough to see exactly what’s going on. My heart lurches when I see Michael enter the frame from the right-hand side, Lucia, a couple of steps behind him. The whole picture is slightly green thanks to the color of the water that can be clearly seen through a long window.

“What’s this?” I ask, even though I already know what it is. My stomach lurches and it feels like a dead weight has been dropped into my chest cavity. I don’t want to watch the next part, knowing how it ended for both the people on the screen, but macabre curiosity has me glued to it and I can’t look away.

Remy’s eyes narrow and his voice becomes stern. “Keep watching.”

If my heart lurched when Michael and Lucia entered the frame, it almost implodes as Dade enters not far behind them. It’s clearly Dade too. Not some guy in a costume with fake wings. Even in the murky green of the picture, I can clearly see his face. My stomach twists itself into a knot and I feel sick just for watching this. It’s like watching a car crash in slow motion, knowing someone is going to get hurt and being powerless to stop it. I desperately want to tear my eyes away, but I need to know what happened. I need the answer to the question that’s been haunting me for weeks. Did Dade kill Michael and Lucia? Lucia senses him first. She turns and says something. It’s silent so I can’t hear, but it looks like she’s

shouting out Michael's name. To warn him? She doesn't look scared. Annoyed maybe? It's a small mercy, knowing what's about to happen next. Her last moments weren't in fear. Sure enough, Michael twists around. Half a second later, Dade brings out a long sword and slices it through the air, lopping Lucia's head clear from her shoulders. Bile comes to my throat and cover the scream on my lips with my hand as her head lands somewhere off screen.

"Now can I come in?" Remy pushes past me into my room, but I don't care anymore. I grab the Hell Cell from him and continue watching as he slams the door behind him. Michael actually tries to fight Dade off, but he's no match. I've seen Dade's muscles and know how strong he is. Michael didn't stand a chance. Michael's head goes the same way as Lucia's, but this time it lands on screen, eyes and mouth open in an empty scream of despair.

I can't breathe. My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it roaring in my ears.

"Keep watching. You're on there too."

I flash my eyes to Remy. He's sitting on my bed, the flowers splayed out next to him.

"Where did you get this?" I croak.

His face is set and his jaw hardens. "Does it matter? Watch to the end."

It does matter. Of course it matters, but I need to know how I fit in to all this. I have no idea how I can be on this piece of footage. I wasn't there. I know I'd remember this. And then it all comes back in a powerful rush. I do recognize this room. Dade had practically pulled me through it after telling me that Felix had murdered someone. I remember how

he'd shielded me from the horror of seeing Lucia's body. Even though morbid curiosity has gotten me so far, I can't bear to see the rest. I don't know what Dade did with the heads or Michael's body and I don't want to know. No wonder Anthura was making it clear to everyone that Dade had murdered Michael and Lucia. It's because she's seen this. I briefly wonder why she didn't out and out tell everyone rather than give heavy hints. Anthura isn't one to hold back, but perhaps Hades told her not to. Knowing her, she wouldn't want to spoil the games by announcing who the murderer was. Instead, she's probably getting off on having us all terrified. It's not like this whole damn situation isn't terrifying enough. I collapse onto the bed, my feet dangling off the end to the floor. Sharp prickles on my back tell me I've fallen on the roses.

Remy leans over toward me, his floppy hair falling over his eyes. I feel trapped by his presence, unable to breathe and yet unable to push him away. I try to remain like stone, but my body is jittering under the skin.

"I told you he killed them, Quinn. I'm sorry I had to show you this, but I was worried you wouldn't believe me after... what happened in London."

My mind is too messed up to think about London right now. It's not like we were even there. We were in this god-forsaken hell hole, one circle above in the Earthery. Just like everything else in my life right now, it's just another lie.

"This doesn't change anything with us," I warn him, but as soon as the words exit my mouth, emotion wells up, and tears fall from my eyes. I wipe them away quickly with the back of my hand. I want to hate him, but I don't push him away when he wraps his arms around me and holds me tight. It's suffocating. Stifling. He brings his thumb up to my eyes and

wipes away the tears before kissing my forehead softly. It's soothing but also alien to me now. It's not what I want and I'm paralyzed with uncertainty. I let him push my hair back, but I've mentally checked out. It's only when his lips brush mine that I finally come to my senses. I sit up, pushing his arms from around me. "I can't do this, Remy."

Remy straightens, his posture changing to one of rigidity. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you." His tone is matter of fact and almost business like. "I just hate seeing you so upset. I knew this would hurt you, and I deliberated in showing you, but I was scared."

"Scared?" I don't see fear in his eyes, but as I'm beginning to learn, I shouldn't trust my own instincts about anything where men are concerned. A tense silence descends between us and I don't know how to break it.

He stands from the bed. When he talks he sounds like he's holding back anger, or maybe it's just resignation. "I thought you might go back to Dade and then what would happen? I wanted to protect you."

I shake my head sadly, an empty feeling in my chest. I rise from the crumpled flowers and hand Remy's Hell Cell back to him. "Thank you for showing me this, but I'd like you to leave."

Without uttering a word, he strides toward the door. Just before leaving, he speaks softly, "If you ever need me, you know where to find me."

"With Candice?" I mumble under my breath.

His expression turns cold. "Not with Candice. I don't want to be with Candice. I've told you that. One day, I hope you'll believe me. I'll be in my room... alone."

My heart hurts as he turns away and strides toward the door before opening it and stepping through.

When he finally shuts the door behind him, I race to the bathroom and retch over the toilet. I finally found the answer to the question I've been asking myself for weeks, but instead of satisfaction, I feel full of dread and a deep well of sadness. With horror, I remember what Noémi told us in orientation. Tomorrow is our first trial and, whatever it is, I have to do it with Dade.

SEDUCTION

“I do wish you would stop moaning about Rowena. It’s becoming wearing.” Anthura blows on her talons that she’s just painted cherry red, the same color as her outfit. She’s literally sat there for an hour complaining about Noémi and now she’s pissy that I’m complaining?

Anger rolls through me, threatening to spill out. “You said you’d figure something out, but the first trial is tomorrow and so far all you’ve done is paint your nails and bitch about Noémi.” I clench my fists. “Get me, the fuck out of this!”

She nonchalantly picks the pot of nail polish up from the side table and begins painting her toenails. “I don’t know what you want me to do. Hades is in charge and I’m just an unwitting pawn in these games now, like all you miscreants.”

Blazing anger is already fizzing through my veins and Anthura doesn’t seem to understand or give a shit how fucking important I am. I stand over her and when I speak, my voice is rough and low. “I don’t care what you do, Anthura. Go suck his cock and make him change his mind.”

She snorts. “Darling, if only it was that easy. You mortal men are easy to manipulate with such things, but Hades isn’t a mere man. He’s a demon. A demon that has other demons

lining up to suck his cock. Why don't you go suck his cock if you think you can make him change his mind?"

I bite back a retort. This is getting us nowhere. The first rule of business is to keep a clear head while your opponent loses theirs and so far, I'm not doing a good job of it. The only person I've seen make Anthura lose her cool is Noémi, and I can't get near her. Every time I try to leave Anthura's sight, she asks me where I'm going. It never used to bother her, but since Noémi arrived on the scene, she's been watching me like a hawk.

I stand up and head over to the back door.

Immediately, Anthura stops what she's doing and snaps her head up. Suspicion coats her features. "Where are you going?"

I point vaguely toward her feet. "Your nail polish is dripping all over your floor."

As soon as she looks down, I slip outside and slam the door behind me. She's becoming a liability. I should have ditched her when I could, but until I can seduce Noémi, I can't rid myself of Anthura. It's as irritating as it is unavoidable. The second rule of business is to know your opponent, and the third is always have a back up. So until Noémi is mine, I'm stuck with Anthura, whether I like it or not.

I don't think Anthura will follow me. By the time the paint on her nails dries, I'll be halfway down the tower. I step on the call button for the platform, and rather than waiting for it to make its way up the hundred flights of stairs, I begin to jog down, jumping the last five or six steps on each balcony until I meet the platform on the sixty-seventh floor. I hop on and press the down button. It's only when I reach the bottom that I realize I don't know where Noémi lives. I think back to the argument she had with Anthura on the first morning here. If

she lived in the penthouse opposite Anthura's, she would have left out of the front door and walked round the balcony to get to it, but she didn't.

I step out into the atrium and find her chatting to the two weirdoes with matching shirts on the sofas.

I squint to read them and when I can, I wish I'd decided to poke my eyes out instead. Hers says I like blowing bubbles. His says, I'm Bubbles. If they worked for me on Earth, I'd have the pair of them fired. Screw that, they need to be locked up in a secure cell. It's times like this I remember I truly am in Hell. Then I look at Noémi and I forget the weirdoes even exist.

It's like watching a ray of light. Her face is animated as she talks and she actually seems interested in whatever bullshit they have to say.

I watch her for a full minute before striding over to her. When she sees me, her face lights up.

“Ah Felix. Come join us. I was just telling Maggie and Colin ‘ow much I’m looking forward to ze start of ze games. I can ‘ardly wait until tomorrow. I zinc you weel love eet.”

She's a fucking goddess. Everything about her oozes sexuality from the way her lips move as she speaks to the way she's sitting on the sofa with her legs up to the side underneath her. She's so fucking glorious and even my intense anger towards Anthura is abating in her presence.

I stand tall as I gaze down at her. “I was hoping to have a word with you.”

She claps her hands together. “’ow exciting. Please come.” She pats the sofa beside her and moves her legs, allowing me to squeeze in next to her. When I'm sitting, she stretches her

legs over mine, leaving me nowhere to put my hands but on her bare skin. She's practically begging for it. Tonight it will be me stretching her legs - wide on my bed. Her skin is soft, and she doesn't complain as I inconspicuously run my fingers lightly over her legs upward towards her thigh.

“What ees eet you'd like to talk to me about, Felix?”

I'm irritated that the two weirdoes haven't taken the hint and left, but the pair of them are on the edge of their seat, both of them leaning toward Noémi and I.

I direct my attention to them. “Will you both back up a bit?” I snap. “This isn't an orgy.” I mean to sound forceful and irritated, but they both burst into laughter.

“We're in the right place, for one!” The woman whose name I've already forgotten giggles. “Don't mind us.”

Fuck. I've never been irritated and horny at the same time, but it seems there's a first for everything. I won't let these two spoil this for me. Normally, I wouldn't have to put in much effort at seducing a woman. When I was alive, they fell at my feet thanks to my charm, power and wealth, but I can already tell that Noémi won't fall for any bullshit.

The feel of her skin under my fingertips has me distracted, but I've never been turned down by a woman yet and I don't plan on starting now. I fix my eyes on her, pushing the boundaries by letting my fingers glide under the hem of her dress. We're in Lust, I remind myself. There are no boundaries here, no propriety. I can do what the fuck I want. As I coil my fingers round to her inner thigh, I delight in the hunger in her eyes and the way they flutter closed briefly. Her breathing deepens and I'm already hard, imagining what else I can do to her and what noises she makes when she comes

I lean in, getting a good look at her gorgeous tits in her low cut top as I do. “Noémi, let’s leave these losers behind and go up to my room.”

She flutters her eyelashes at me seductively. I’ve seen girls do this a million times, but somehow on Noémi, it’s so much hotter.

She leans so close to me that I wouldn’t be surprised if she tries fucking me here on the couch. She smells sweet, lickable like sugar and I already know that’s what she’ll taste like too. My hand is so close to her pussy that it’s fucking indecent. I’ve never been so horny in all my goddamned life.

“Felix,” she purrs, and I swear I might come with just her voice alone. “Colin and Maggie are my friends and eef you ever refer to them as losers again, I weel ‘ave to remove you from ze games.” She clamps her hand down on my wrist and licks her lips. “Fraternizing weeth the contestants is not allowed I’m afraid, but Felix?”

Fucking bitch! Behind me, I can hear the two freaks laughing. “What?” I snap.

She narrows her eyes and blows me a slow kiss. When she talks, her voice is almost a whisper. “Eef it wasn’t for ze games, I would definitely take you up on zat offer. I bet you are an amazing lover.”

Her hand squeezes my wrist and pulls it from her thigh. She kisses my wrist. A shock of electricity shoots up my arm then right through my body down to my cock, which it’s now taking everything I have not to come right there and then despite the roaring anger pulsing through me.

“She brushed you off, buddy. Might wanna leave before you make a fool of yourself.”

I turn to see the female weirdo nodding toward the very obvious tent-like bulge in my pants.

“I’ll suck you off if you don’t mind Colin watching,” she offers. “We both like that.” She winks at me and I feel my stomach curdling. Behind her, Juliette and the freak are watching, enjoying the show.

“Fuck off!” I stand, shielding the front of my pants, and slam through the pair of them. I can still hear the fuckers laughing as I slam the door to the stairwell behind me.

SUCCUBI AND INCUBI

Every time I close my eyes, the image of Michael's gaping dead eyes terrorizes me, and I'm forced to open my own. I wish Remy hadn't shown me the video. Having my worst nightmare confirmed is worse than the delusion that Dade might be innocent. At least believing in his innocence, I might have been able to get through the first round. The doubt that Dade murdered Michael and Lucia might have been enough to help me survive, but now... now I don't know how I'm going to be able to do it. I never thought I'd be praying for a trial in these games where we fight, but I'd rather that than any of the things that are going through my mind. Juliette's words about fucking like rabbits has my stomach heaving. Not that I'd win in a fight, but at least I'd be relieved of the misery.

Someone knocking on my door takes my mind away from my own self-pity and agonizing fear for a second, but then I think about who might be behind it and decide there's literally no one I want to see, so I ignore it.

Unfortunately, the knocker is persistent, and the noise feels like a drill hammering into my skull. It's like I've got an almighty hangover without the joy of getting drunk first.

It's bound to be Remy, coming back for another round of apologies for choosing Candice. Or maybe he's got more

bloodthirsty terror for me to watch. I pull open the door, ready to rip him a new one.

“What the fu...”

Twila grins at me shyly. When she sees my expression, her face falls.

“I was expecting more of a welcome.”

“Twila!” Tears sting the corner of my eyes as I take my beautiful friend in. I pull her into a hug and blink a few times.

“It’s been less than a day and they’ve already got to you, huh?”

I step back and keeping my hands on her shoulders, take her all in. She looks like a gothic fairytale. As beautiful as ever, with her long black hair coiled in ringlets over her shoulders. Her cheeks are slightly pinker than usual on her pale skin and her lips are a deep pink. Her black corset and flowing skirt is embroidered with accents of pink and in her hair she’s wearing a black crown with pink jewels encrusted in it.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I say, ushering her in and closing the door behind her. “You look...”

“Like a fucking Barbie goddess?”

I snort out a laugh. She looks nothing like any Barbie I’ve ever seen, but then again, I wasn’t the type to play with dolls as a kid. Maybe they do make goth Barbies nowadays.

“I was going to say slightly more colorful than usual, but we can go with Goddess.” I feel better already. “Did you just get here?” I ask as we sit on the bed.

She nods her head animatedly. “Yep. Isn’t this place weird? You know I’ve spent my whole life wondering what

the circles of Hell would look like, but nowhere I my imagination did I think any of them would be so pink!”

I grin at her exuberance. Literally no one loves Hell like Twila does. “Did you come down with Hades?”

“I did! He’s downstairs having a chat with some French chick with bubblegum pink hair.”

“Oh, that’s Noémi,” I explain. “She comes across as super friendly, but whenever I’m around her, I get this weird urge to... well, lick her.” I shake my head, bemused. “She gives off these strange, sort of seductive vibes. Her aura is screwed.”

Twila bursts into laughter. “I forgot you could sense auras. I’m so jealous.” she sighs. “Apparently, she’s the queen of the Succubi so I doubt you’re the only one reacting that way. What’s she like?”

I shrug. “She seems nice enough, but who knows? She gets excited over the most mundane things. What’s succubi?”

“A succubus is a female demon that seduces men. The male version is Incubus.” she crosses her arms on her knee as though this is important for me to know. “This place is teeming with them.”

A realization hits me. “That’s why I feel turned on all the effing time. It’s really distracting. I’ve had three cold showers since getting here and I’ve not been here a full day yet.”

“You should count yourself lucky.” Twila’s eyes widen as she breaks into a sly grin. “Can you imagine what it must be like for Juliette? She’s probably slept with half the staff already.”

I think back to breakfast and how she ogled the demon waiter. I snort. “Probably. You know she got through then?”

Twila nods. “I do. Hades told me. Rowena got through, too. I was so happy to find out you all got through. I’d hate being here all by myself.”

I huff good naturedly. “All by yourself with Hades and all the other demon swingers you two hook up with.”

Her cheeks color slightly adding to the pink. “You know, I couldn’t cope with this place without my girls. Being with Hades doesn’t change that.”

I sigh, then a thought comes to my mind. “How did you get down here? They brought us down unconscious so I have no idea.”

She swivels her eyes to the closed door, then back to me. “There’s an elevator that stops at all the basement levels,” she says in a whisper. “I’m not supposed to tell you.” Her eyes go wide. “You can’t tell anyone!”

My mind automatically goes back to Dade. He spent so much time in the lower level searching for a way out and he never found it.

I shrug. “I don’t know who I’d tell.”

“Rowena and Juliette? Remy?” She pauses. “Dade.”

Just hearing his name chills me to my core, but underlying that is the intense sadness. I can’t think about him. Not when Twila is here and is so happy. I swallow back the lump in my throat and think about what she just told me. “I won’t tell Dade, you have my word, but if there’s a way out, that means we don’t have to do these ridiculous games. I can figure out how to get to it and I’ll take Juliette and Ro with me.”

Twila’s pupils dilate as she tenses up. “No, you can’t. If you all escape, who do you think they’ll suspect told you?”

I place my hand reassuringly on hers. “I’ve spent enough time down in the lower level to figure it out myself. I did guess that’s the way out. I mean, what other way out could there be?”

Her eyes narrow as she scrutinizes me. “You went down one time and that was because I gave you the key. You can’t try to get out,” she insists.

“Yes, and Hades saw me down there,” I point out. “But it doesn’t matter, anyway. I’d been down there loads of times before you gave me the key. Anthura gave me one on the very first day in Purgatory so I could do her laundry. In fact, I’m expecting her to message me to go to her room and start again here.”

Twila gives me a hurt look that tugs at my conscience. “You never told me that.”

I recall how Twila always struggles with feeling inferior and remorse washes over me. “I didn’t tell anyone. I was embarrassed. Anthura was tormenting me under the pretense of assigning chores.”

“You should have told me!” Twila’s eyes widen in horror and concern.

I shrug. It’s hardly the worst thing that’s happened to me since coming here. “We’re in Hell. I expected a little torture.”

Twila’s expression tightens. “Yes, well, she can’t do that now. She’s no longer in charge. Please don’t go looking for the way out, Quinn.”

My heart falls. “What about Jenny? She’s being tortured as we speak and you’re asking me to put off finding her.”

She looks sad as she speaks. “You’ll get caught. The demons are not stupid. They’ll know if you try it and then

what do you think will happen? You'll be out of the games forever with no way to get to her."

Damn. My ticket out of here and I can't do it. "Fine," I concede. "I won't go looking unless I absolutely have to."

She nods in acceptance.

"You said Anthura isn't in charge anymore? I thought she was awfully quiet this morning. Noémi did all the talking."

"That's because both her and Moloch have been kicked off the game's leadership team apparently. They are both contestants now."

My astonishment must be palpable as my mouth hangs open in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding me. No wonder she looked so sour at the meeting. I bet she's fuming."

With a secretive grin, Twila leans in closer, her voice hushed with excitement. "Don't tell anyone this either, I'm glad Noémi's kicked her off the team. It's way past time she got a taste of her own medicine."

I chuckle softly. "Now that, my friend, is a promise I can keep."

She lays back on the bed and folds her hands together before letting out a long breath. She looks so serene and happy.

I lay down next to her and prop my head on my hand. "I don't suppose you're going to let me in on what the first round will entail, will you?"

She turns her head and smiles. "Nope."

Her Hell Cell beeps. She picks it up and reads the message. "It's Hades. Apparently I'm needed." She says it as though it's an irritation, but I see the pinkness in her cheeks and the way

her mouth quirked up at the edges as she read his messages. The girl's got it bad for that hot demon of hers! She sits up and slides off the bed.

“For a kinky threesome with an incubus?” I enquire, giving her a cheeky grin.

She gives me a withering look in response.

“Foursome?” I shrug my shoulders. “Full on incubi, succubi orgy?”

“Wouldn't that be telling?” she replies with a grin as she opens my door. I'm sure I detect a ghost of a wink as she steps through, closing the door behind her.

As I lay back, there is one thing I'm grateful for. If Twila's right about Anthura, I'll no longer be subjected to having to do her laundry and getting burns on my wrist every time she's displeased. It also means that I no longer will have access to the basement. And even though I now know for sure that's the way out of here, I'll still have to go through the Inferno Games to get to Jenny.

HEART SHAPED MEATBALLS

“I’m not going to get through this.” My announcement to the girls barely raises an eyebrow from any of them. “The first trial. I can’t do it.”

We’re sitting in the restaurant eating dinner, although I can’t eat. Quinn hasn’t touched her food either. Even Juliette isn’t stuffing her face as she usually does. Only Twila, who appeared a couple of hours ago, seems to have her appetite.

Juliette finally looks up from her plate of spaghetti where she’s been chasing a heart-shaped meatball round her plate for the last five minutes. “He won’t dare hurt you. You’re his partner in the trial.”

“I’m not worried about him hurting *me*. I’m worried I’m going to get disqualified when I murder him.”

Twila snorts. “I’d forgotten what an asshole Felix is. I’m so sorry you girls are going through this. I wish I could do something.”

“So,” Juliette turns to Twila. “You must have some intel? Please tell me I don’t have to go anywhere near Orlin Moss’s maggot.”

Twila raises her eyebrows.

“Just so we’re clear,” I say. “She’s talking about his dick.”

Twila stares down at her plate. “I can’t tell you. You know that.” She looks up again and casts her eyes at the three of us, one to the other. I see pity, and even though I love Twila, it irks me. She doesn’t have to worry about this. She just has to keep fucking her literal God and not worry about anything.

“But you know what our challenges are, right?” Juliette begs.

Twila shrugs. “I know a bit, but if anyone thought I was telling you, even hinting at what to expect, then you’ll lose your place in the games. Hades has made it very clear that I’m not to give you any assistance.”

Juliette groans. “I only want to know if I have to scoop my own eyes out with this fork, which I will if I have to, to fuck Orlin Moss. Can’t you flicker your eyelashes or something? Once for no, twice for yes?”

Twila brings her hand up to her face, hiding her black mascara coated eyelashes. “You’ll have me paranoid that I’m sending secret messages every time I blink.” She peeks out over her hand. “I can tell you that you should avoid certain people, and pleasure isn’t always what it might seem.”

Juliette stares at her. “Is that it? I’m already planning on avoiding certain people. Mainly Orlin.”

I narrow my eyes. “What do you mean about pleasure not being as it seems?”

I know I’m making Twila uncomfortable, but she’s not the same as us. Not anymore. She made herself different by giving up the games and taking the easy way out.

“I’ve already said too much. Just don’t trust anyone except yourselves.” She stands, leaving half the food still on her plate. Normally Juliette would be on it in a flash, but I don’t even

think she's noticed. "Look. I have to go. Sorry, I can't give you any more help." I watch as she darts between the pews and out to the atrium, where she bolts for the elevator.

"Now you've scared her off," Juliette says bleakly. "I was going to try to wheedle some information out of her."

Quinn puts down her fork and puts her hands on the table. "I think we need to leave Twila alone. She obviously can't tell us anything and you heard her. Anything she does say could get us thrown out of the games. Juliette. I know the thought of having sex with Orlin is off-putting and I can't say that the prospect of it is something that I'd enjoy, but you've had sex with, like, a billion different men. I'm sure, if that's what we have to do, you'll figure it out. Orlin's so dazed, he probably won't even know how to." She turns to me. "Felix is the biggest asshole on the planet, but he's probably hiding in his room crying like a little boy after what you two told me happened this afternoon with Noémi. If I know anything about men like Felix, it's that they don't like their egos hammered and from what you say, it sounds like Noémi annihilated his. He'll probably sulk in the corner for the entire trial."

Juliette stares at her. "Since when are you so calm? Have you spoken to Dade and figured out he didn't kill Michael and Lucia?"

I finally see the tell in Quinn's eyes. She's not as calm as she's making herself out to be. That's why she put down the fork before she drew attention to herself. She's been trembling since she joined us.

"Quite the opposite. I now know for sure that he did do it." She picks up her fork again and stabs at her food.

Juliette looks at me and nods toward Quinn, one eyebrow raised.

“And this is good because...?”

She doesn't even look at me as she answers. “It's good because whatever happens in the first round, this is a battle. I don't need to bring emotions into it on any level. Not anymore.”

Silence descends over our table as Quinn begins to eat her food. Juliette goes back to pushing her meatballs around her plate and I try to enjoy eating the sugary sweet crap that's been put in front of me. I can't stay in this circle, if only for the food. I swear my teeth are getting cavities just by looking at it. If Quinn can pretend to not be affected by what's going to happen tomorrow, then I can suck it up too. If worst comes to the worst, I'll knock Felix out with my right hook.

With the others consumed with their meals, I take a surreptitious glance around the restaurant. Dade is sitting alone at the very edge of the restaurant in the shadows, as he usually does. He's easy to spot with those giant wings of his. Orlin isn't here, but then again, I don't think I've ever seen Orlin eat. He appears at the meetings, shuffles around, rings his bell and then disappears until the next meeting. I personally think that having to do the first trial with Orlin would be the best choice all round, but if Juliette thinks that having to have sex with a boring old fart is the worst thing that could ever happen, then good for her. I always thought she'd do well in this circle. The woman oozes sex and has more experience on the subject than most. She'll be fine.

Felix isn't here, which is no surprise. A lot of people saw his rejection, so he's probably hiding in his room nursing his bruised ego. Maybe Quinn is right and that will work in my favor.

I'm just about to start eating when the view behind Quinn changes. Just like in Purgatory, the huge glass wall along the far side of the restaurant is really just one giant screen made up of many panels. In Purgatory, the view would change depending on what people asked for. There was an app on the Portal that let people suggest views, so sometimes we had unicorn filled meadows and sometimes it looked like we were in the ocean. I never really bothered with it because we all knew what really lay outside. Here we've been subjected to sexually suggestive videos that have barely stopped short of porn. I've had to learn to ignore the scantily clad people blowing kisses to the camera and writhing against each other for my own sanity and ability to keep my food down. Now, however, I doubt I'll ever be able to eat again. There, thirty feet high, is a moving image of me.

My mouth falls open and I hear my knife and fork clatter to the table as I take in a video that I don't remember making. It looks exactly like me, but it doesn't move like me. I'm wearing a pink leotard, the kind that young kids going to ballet class wear, but this one has holes in it, showing more of me than I ever want to show. If it's not bad enough that I look like that, I start to gyrate.

"Holy fuck!" Juliette exclaims next to me. Quinn spins in her chair to see what we are looking at.

"Holy fuck!" Quinn echoes, clearly taken aback.

"That's not me!" I stammer, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. I wish I could vanish under the table as the image on the screen delivers a suggestive wink and proceeds to stick out its tongue, wiggling it in a manner that I can only find repulsive. "I swear, I didn't do this!"

All eyes are on me at this point. My heart races as the attention shifts from the screen to the real me. Laughter ripples through the crowd, and I can feel the heat of humiliation intensify. Their smirks and eager expressions tell me that they're thoroughly enjoying the spectacle.

Bile comes to my throat as, on the screen, I begin to peel away the leotard, pulling it down over my shoulders. Next to my image, in five-foot letters, appears my full name.

There is no way I made this video. Not even high on drugs would I move that way, and yet I can't deny it's me up there. A rush of embarrassment washes over me, causing me to recoil in my seat. My whole skin itches with mortification. I don't want to look anymore, but I can't keep my eyes off the screen. I've spent my whole life living as modestly as I can while assholes think they are somehow entitled to my body because of who I am. Now, the choice has been taken away from me and beneath the layers of embarrassment, a surge of anger courses through me.

I'm forced to watch as the top of the leotard moves lower over my breasts. Just as the hint of the deeper pink of my nipple shows, the picture changes. Felix is now up there in my place.

My eyes widen as he performs moves similar to me. He's wearing a skin tight outfit, showing every bulge, and I do mean bulge.

"Is that real?" Juliette exclaims, her hand over her mouth. "Thank fuck this isn't in 3D. That'd have our eye out."

I pin my stare on Juliette. "Of course it's not real!" I snap. "Do you really think I'd do something like that?"

She shrugs. "I thought you looked hot actually, babe."

“I think you’d have noticed by now if Felix’s dick was that big,” I choke out. “It’s literally the first thing you look for when you meet any man.”

Juliette sticks her tongue out. “Well, I, for one, can’t wait to see my video!”

Quinn reaches out across the table and puts her hand on mine. “They are obviously not real. No one will think they are. I’m guessing they are going to do all the contestants in the games. It’s just another pile of bullshit designed to make us uneasy.”

Sure enough, her words are barely out of her mouth when her image materializes on the screen.. She handles it a lot better than I did, but I can tell by the way she’s stiffened up that she’s finding this as uncomfortable as I did.

“See?” she mumbles, her voice faltering. “It wasn’t that dreadful.”

“Your reassurance would hold more weight if you didn’t look like you’re on the verge of throwing up,” I point out. She practically turns to stone as Dade Angelis appears on the screen. My eyes scan the restaurant for the real Dade. He’s nowhere to be seen. He must have slipped out when he realized what was happening. He does look majestic on the big screen with his wings out fully and the black leather they’ve fashioned him in. Someone at the opposite end of the restaurant wolf whistles, and that’s followed by a cheer. It seems Dade is unwittingly an idol in here as he was in Purgatory.

The thought makes me feel a little better. I don’t know Dade as well as Quinn, but murderer or not, the guy does not like being the center of attention. This is a trial, just like Quinn said. It might not be an official trial. Those start in the

morning, but there will be a hundred small challenges like this and if I let them get to me, I'll lose and end up stuck here for eternity and there's no way I'm going to let that happen.

A NEW RAGE

I don't need to rely on my Hell Cell beeping to tell me it's time for the first trial. I've spent the night awake, hoping this moment never arrives. If it wasn't for Jenny, I wouldn't bother dragging my ass out of bed at all, but, just like everything else in here, I have no choice. My reflection stares back at me in the bathroom mirror. I look like I've been dragged through Hades' Labyrinth backwards by one of his hell hounds. My hair is sticking up and out in every direction and my skin is sallow, with dark circles under my eyes. So much for Lust making us all look beautiful. I pick up the brush and bring it to my hair, but as I do, I realize I don't want to make myself look presentable. I'm probably going to have to sleep with Dade. By this point, it's pretty much a given, but if I have to sleep with the murderous bastard, I don't have to look pretty while doing it. I throw on the first crappy outfit I can find, which is actually more difficult than I'd thought seeing as my entire wardrobe looks like it's been lifted from back-stage at Paris Fashion Week, and head outside.

Instead of taking the elevator, I opt to walk down the front, curving around each floor and taking the steps. Less chance of bumping into either Remy or Dade this way. I'll have to see both of them down there, but if I can put it off for as long as possible, I will.

Looking over the lowest balcony. I see both of them. Remy is sitting next to Felix, who has Anthura on his other side. I'm surprised to see Candice sitting apart from them, somewhere in the middle between the weird couple Peace and Carrots or whatever their names are. My eyes automatically move over to Dade. I can't help it. He's so obvious in the sea of pink. He's sitting directly opposite Anthura, basically as far away as he can get from her in the semicircle. Next to him is the only empty space. No one wants to sit with him. They all know he's the murderer. Just thinking about it is almost painful to breathe against. With horror, I realize that if there's only one empty spot left, I'm going to have to be the one to take it.

Right at the front, Noémi stands, looking as gorgeous as ever in a pink dress that hugs her flawless curves and flares out at the bottom. As I watch, Anthura stands, taking a place next to Noémi. She looks down at her Hell Cell, and even though I'm a floor above them, I can clearly hear her muttering about me being late. I take the last set of stairs two at a time. The atrium is full of people, all brought here, no doubt by curiosity. They surround the circle of love seats, keeping a small distance. It's clear that the games are just as much a spectacle here as they were in Purgatory. I swallow back my nerves as I take the last remaining seat next to Dade. The reality of my newfound celebrity status is a sensation I doubt I'll ever get used to.

Dade remains unaffected, his attention unswayed, and he doesn't extend even a nod of recognition as I sit down.

"Bonjour, good morning," Noémi says cheerfully as she walks round the back of the love seats and swings, touching each of us on the shoulder and forcing us to crane our heads round to see her. As she passes me and her hand brushes across my back, a shiver passes through my body. I've always

been highly attuned to the demons in this place, more so than most people, but Noémi's touch hits me harder than all of them. At least it doesn't burn my skin like the demons in purgatory used to. A hit of desire spirals away from that touch, but she doesn't linger and as soon as she lifts her fingers, the desire fades. I might not have known the term succubus before Twila told me it, but I don't need a name to know Noémi is a demon of potent strength - both magical and sexual.

At the front, the two guards, Asmodée and Arch, stand, arms folded, both looking forward.

“Glad you deigned to bother yourself with this meeting, Ms. Valentine,” Anthura says, taking a place in front of them. “It's good to see that you've not changed one iota since leaving Purgatory and that it's not only I that is beneath you, but Noémi as well. It's almost as though you don't give two shits about your sister.”

I remember what Twila told me about Anthura no longer being in charge and I wonder if anyone has actually told her. I open my mouth to defend myself, but in the corner of my eye, I see that Dade has finally turned round and is looking at me. I try to ignore his stare, but it's difficult because I feel it burning into me. Noémi's demon aura is strong, and hers along with sensations of Anthura, Moloch, Asmodée, and Arch, all mingle within me to create an unsettling sensation, but it's Dade's aura I'm most attuned to, and even in the melting pot of demon aura's, his comes through the strongest.

“I'm sure she just slept een,” Noémi says, giving me a wink and thankfully taking Dade's... and everyone else's attention away from me.

Anthura isn't to be stopped, even by Noémi. “It's quite apparent that she neglected to comb her hair this morning, Mr.

Angelis. I empathize with your predicament. If she's skipped hair brushing, I daresay she hasn't bothered with tooth brushing either."

My heart drops. I indeed didn't brush my teeth. I practically tumbled out of bed and made my way down here. While there might be some truth to her words, I'm not fond of the observation. I vow to make sure I'm immaculate as everyone else seems to be from now on, if only to keep Anthura's attention off of me.

"Quinn looks just darling," Noémi says. "I love what you've done to your 'air. Is zat the new rage up on Earth?"

Opposite me, Felix scowls. With everything else going on, I'd forgotten that I also have him to worry about. I've got so many people that hate me, it's hard to keep track of them all these days.

"No, Noémi," I say, turning my eyes to her and smiling. "I'm starting a new rage here."

Beside Felix, Remy smirks and for the first time today, the pressure in my chest lifts slightly. He gives me a wink and a slight nod of his head. It's as sexy as all hell, but it's also a comforting gesture.

"Well, I for one, love eet!" Noémi says to me with a warm smile. At least there's one person in here that doesn't hate me. Although I get the feeling, she's about as sincere as a kumquat. No one can like everyone as much as she seems to. She turns to everyone else, keeping the smile on her face. "You all know why we are 'ere today. I hope you've all 'ad a good breakfast because you are going to need your strength for ze first trial."

As if on cue, my stomach rumbles. I should have eaten. I should have slept.

“Before I let you all in to what we’ll be doing today, I do ‘ave a couple of announcements to make.” She steps up to the front, practically pushing Anthura out of the way. I ‘ave been talking to ‘Ades about ze trials ‘ere. I ‘ave poured my ‘eart and soul into zese trials and I ‘ope you enjoy zem. ‘Ades and I feel zat zere are too many people on ze leadersheep team, so, to add a leetle spice, Anthura and Moloch are now contestants in ze games. Zey are no longer in charge. I am.” She giggles.

Anthura looks like she’s about to punch Noémi in the nose. With a surge of frustration, she starts to storm away, halted only by Felix, stepping up and catching her arm. He whispers something in her ear, causing her to sit back down next to him, her arms folded across her chest. I search for Moloch.

I have seen him since coming to Lust, but he’s usually hiding in the background. I find him standing behind the back sofa. He’s not smiling as such, but he’s certainly not as angry as Anthura is at this piece of news. I get the feeling he’s hated being in Anthura’s shadow for so long. And now he has to complete the first trial with her. To give him his due, he’s an attractive guy. Sleeping with him wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

It’s clear that the news of Anthura and Moloch’s fall from Hades’ grace was the worst kept secret. Despite Anthura trying to take charge at the beginning of the meeting, it’s clear that the news has failed to elicit surprise amongst those of us here.

“Also, once ze second trial ees over, I weel be ‘olding a ball for all ze Inferno Games contestants, ze likes of weech ‘ave never been seen.” She claps her hands in apparent delight and some of the people watching cheer. “I weel theme it on my days at ze Moulin Rouge. Tres elegante and a leetle sexy, no?”

I feel the bubbling of excitement in the whispers of the surrounding people, but it's clouded by the cold aura emanating from Dade. I guess he's not the dancing type.

"Now zat all ze news is out of ze way," Noémi continues. "Let's start with ze first trial." There's a collective groan. So far, she's the only one that's shown the slightest bit of enthusiasm for the games. "I've tried to make eet as easy as possible while having a leettle bit of fun on the way." She holds her forefinger and thumb half an inch apart. I'm pretty sure, even that is an exaggeration of the amount of fun we're all going to experience in the next couple of hours. "You should all know who you're partnered up with for ze first trial."

I don't want to look at Dade, but his body curves slightly as she says that. A shiver of dread skits down my spine as his aura practically freezes.

"I am goin' to bring all of you up to ze front in your pairs and zen send you off into ze Earthery. For those of you who 'aven't been in ze Earthery 'ere, it's in ze same place it was in Purgatory. You'll go over to ze elevators, 'ead down to ze entertainment level where someone will meet you. I'll give each of you a 'int on what you'll be doin', but I won't go into too much detail. I don't want to spoil ze surprise for anyone. Anthura, Moloch, Seeing as zis is your first ever trial, why not be our first contestants? Come up 'ere to ze front, s'il vous plaît.

Moloch practically vaults over the sofa to get to Noémi, but Anthura takes her time, clearly aggravated by the whole situation. If I wasn't so on edge with everything, I'd enjoy watching her discomfort. She deserves everything that comes to her after what she put me through.

“Zat’s it, Zat’s’ it, “Noémi continues as they come up to the front. “I zink you’ll enjoy this first trial. I can’t say too much, but the Earthery has been specially activated to transform to somewhere you might recognize. Anthura, Moloch. I ‘ope you ‘ave fun down there. Everybody, let’s give a beeg ‘and to our first contestants.”

Moloch makes to leave, but Anthura doesn’t budge. “That’s it?”

Noémi furrows her eyebrows. “Oui? What more is zere?”

“Oh, I haven’t a clue,” Anthura huffs, her eyes rolling impatiently. “The rules?”

Noémi chuckles. “Oh, darling, zis is Lust... Zere are no rules. You’ll live out your beegest fantasy down zere, I promise. The Earthery weel mould itself to your ‘eart’s desire. At ze very end, only ten couples weel go through to ze second circle, so do your very best.”

Anthura looks close to snapping. I think her biggest fantasy right now is that Noémi spontaneously combusts. She never played by the rules herself, so I don’t know why she’s making such a big deal of this. She does have a fair point, though.

She crosses her arms and glares at Noémi. “So, how do you determine who advances to the second trial if there are no rules?”

“Well, you simply ‘ave to make it through alive and ‘ave some fun, zat’s all.” She laughs as though she’s joking, but she’s not the one who has to enter the Earthery and live out their fantasies with someone who murdered two people. Anthura looks pissed as she strides purposefully to the elevator and smacks her hand down on the call button.

“Let’s peeck someone from ze ozer side zis time,” she says as my stomach churns wildly at what she’s just let slip. Her gaze settles on Dade. “Mr. Angelis? Your partner is Ms. Valentine, right?” His aura radiates a darker, colder intensity than I’ve ever sensed before. I don’t need to feel his aura to understand that he’d prefer almost anything over this situation.

I swallow back the fear that’s gripping me. Will the Earthery contort to my fantasies or Dade’s? I’ve never been one for fantasies. Throughout my life, my greatest fantasy was to get Jenny and me out of poverty. I didn’t have time for anything else. The thought of what Dade’s greatest fantasy is terrifies me to the pit of my soul. Everything about him is dark and his fantasies no doubt follow the same theme, dark and perverse and utterly horrifying. I sit on my hands to stop them from giving me away by their trembling. I might be scared, but I won’t show it.

“Yes,” he replies, the syllable carrying an undertone that seems to express a desire to be anywhere but here with me. It’s oddly ironic—he’s managed to pack both loathing and despair into that single syllable.

The feeling’s mutual.

“Dade, Quinn, please come to ze front,” Noémi instructs.

With reluctance, I rise from the sofa and join Dade and Noémi at the front, to the apparent joy of the onlookers who give us a mix of cheers and screams. Peace and Carrots sport grins that suggest they’re heading to a leisurely day at the park, rather than being consigned to a confined space with both Anthura and Dade. While I won’t be able to see, hear, or feel Anthura down there, unfortunately, the same can’t be said for Dade.

“The same advice I gave Anthura and Moloch applies to you.” Noémi continues, her voice filled with exuberant joy I usually reserve for finding a fifty in my wallet or being given a bottle of wine as a tip from my cleaning job. “You can make what you want out of your time down zere, and if you’re lucky, you might actually enjoy eet.” She gives me a wink. “I know a few of ze people from zis circle we sent down to test eet out ‘ad a whale of a time. Enjoy, kids.”

Conflicting emotions churn within me at the thought of others having enjoyed whatever lies ahead. Everyone in this place seems to harbor deviant desires, and while Dade and I have only ventured so far, I’m not inclined to go any further—particularly when it risks a knife in my back.

I remember the way he wielded the long sword and lopped Michael and Lucia’s head off. My stomach churns as we walk toward the elevators. By the time we reach them, Anthura and Moloch have already departed. Entering the elevator alongside Dade, the tight space feels constricting. The tension between us is palpable, suffocating. The journey from one floor to another is brief, yet it’s laden with an overwhelming mix of fear and loathing.

As the doors open, I exhale a sigh of relief. We were only in there for a few seconds, yet my entire body trembled throughout.

THE FIRST TRIAL

Embarrassment courses through my body when the door to the Earthery closes behind us and the room takes shape. Like a piece of black putty, the Earthery contorts and molds itself, taking on color as it comes to its final form. My greatest fantasy is the most depressing thing I've ever seen, and I'm mortified. This is all my mind conjuring this, not Dade's. I should be happy I'm not in a weird Victorian sex dungeon filled with swords and instruments of torture, but this has somehow managed to be so much worse. I didn't think I had any fantasies, but the room is painfully familiar and is proving me wrong. It's the bathroom from my old room in Purgatory. I know it's the room I once shared with Dade because his blue toothbrush is sitting next to my yellow one. All my stuff is laid out next to the sink. My hairbrush with strands of red hair sits next to an open book that I'd accidentally allowed to become damp, leaving its edges moistened and crinkled.

The memories of the first time we almost had sex crash over me like waves of torture. Of all the things my brain could conjure up, this had to be the one thing the Earthery fixated on. It's quite frankly the most cringe-worthy thing that's ever happened to me, and knowing that I'm being graded on this intensifies my inner turmoil, leaving me with an overwhelming sense of mortification.

“You thought of our bathroom?” Dade says with a slight smirk.

“I like to keep my teeth clean,” I say, picking up my toothbrush and holding it up to him. I don’t see any cameras in the room, but just in case, I keep my face impassive. Dade might understand the significance of this room, but if there is an audience, they won’t and I want to keep it that way. He takes a step toward me and I think he’s going to touch me.

I recoil, practically backing into a wall. What exactly does Noémi want us to do? It seems obvious, but she didn’t actually state we had to do anything beyond survive and have fun. Nothing about this is fun, and my survival rests solely on Dade’s shoulders. I glance briefly around, but apart from the toothbrushes, hairbrush, and book, there’s nothing he can use as a weapon. Conversely, there’s nothing I can use to defend myself either

“Don’t worry, Quinn. I have no intention of touching you.”

My stomach churns as he takes a seat on the edge of the bath. The room is uncomfortably small. I take a look round, but it’s all me. I know it was my brain that conjured this up, even if I won’t admit it aloud. So where is Dade in all this? Where’s his big fantasy? There’s no way he thought of the same thing as I did. Before I came along, Dade had lived for hundreds of years. He’s been married, for fuck’s sake. His entire sexual fantasies wouldn’t boil down to one time in a shower with me. For me, it’s different. I had my first orgasm, not given to me by myself, in this room. My face flushes as I recall the way he ripped off my bikini and how it felt when he clamped his teeth down on my nipple. I have to turn away from him to pull myself together. This is beyond embarrassing.

I pull myself up onto the vanity and sit down, putting my head into my hands. If I'd dreamed of a sex swing in a swingers club, it would be less awkward than this. At least I could pretend it wasn't about Dade. I'm pretty sure I could come up with a hundred more exciting fantasies than this if I tried, but now, as I think back, this is the one recurring fantasy I've had since the day it happened. Every moment with Remy didn't come close to the excitement I felt with Dade in this room. I've dreamed about this so many times it's indecent.

I try to think of something that turns me on more than this bathroom, but nothing is springing to mind. I really am the most vanilla bitch on the planet. I'm surprised I didn't fantasize about being a virginal nun before realizing that even that in itself is probably way sexier and more taboo than a crappy old bathroom.

For the next ten minutes, neither of us speaks. If awkward silence was a turn on, we'd both be clawing each other's clothes off by now. Thankfully, it isn't. I hazard a look at Dade and he seems as bored as I am. He's now sitting in the dry bath, his wings partially wrapped around him. He looks deep in thought. My mind is whirling with the memories of our time together in here and the video I watched only yesterday. I can't quite put the two together.

The silence and lack of motion are excruciating. "This can't be exciting if they're watching us on the big screen upstairs," I say, trying to break the ice. It feels like I'm chipping away at the iceberg that sunk the Titanic with a spoon.

Dade doesn't even look up. "I'm sure everyone'll be entertained by your friends' exploits."

"Don't slut shame!" I say defensively.

He brings his dark eyes up to mine and immediately I know I've said something stupid. I'm way too wound up to think clearly, let alone converse in a way that will entertain the masses upstairs. "I never used that word," he says darkly, "and correct me if I'm wrong."

I think back to Juliette's confession yesterday about being railed by multiple men and have no argument. At least she'll be enjoying herself... or at least would be if she was allowed to. I imagine her with three hot men all wanting to take her body at once and her lapping it up. Orlin is probably on the side somewhere, not even realizing there are other people in the room. I envy Juliette. Even paired with Orlin, she's probably living it up.

I pick up the toothbrush and examine it for the want of something to do. I don't want to be here and I don't want to be talking about Juliette's sexual escapades, but anything beats talking about what happened between Dade and I.

Even though he's sitting at the other side of the room, it would literally take less than a second to gap the space between us and for him to rip my head off my shoulders the way he did so effortlessly with Michael. I don't look at him directly. I can't. My nerves are taut and yet being here with Dade has my body humming with...

Desire.

I'm turned on.

Fuck.

Despite everything, my body remembers what I don't want to. It's not helping that being in Lust exacerbates these kinds of feelings. I've been low key turned on since getting here. It's like my body and brain have disconnected somehow and being

in such close quarters with the man that turns me on like no one else ever has is not helping matters. I'm utterly terrified, but at the same time my body is turning that fear into some weird sexual energy.

Fucking great!

Somewhere, a lilting melody fills the air, giving me a few seconds to breathe. I knew being trapped in a room with Dade would be hard, but I wasn't expecting the conflicting emotions even though neither of us have said more than a few words beyond small talk.

I try to fixate on Remy. Anything to take my mind away from the thoughts going through my mind about Dade. Then I remember that he's here in the Earthery somewhere, living out his wildest fantasy with Candice, and I'm willing to bet it's a hell of a lot more exciting than sitting in a bathroom. The nausea within me threatens to erupt. Hopefully, the Earthery decided to conjure them perched on the edge of a crumbling cliff overlooking shark-infested waters.

"Juliette thinks your handwriting was forged on those notes," I blurt out. It's the last thing I want to talk about, but it feels a damn sight safer than where my mind is really going.

He doesn't look up, doesn't murmur a word, which irritates me even though this is all my fault.

"I saw a video of you, but then last night I saw fake videos of all of us projected onto the big screen and maybe I was wrong and it was all a fake. When I saw that video, I knew something was wrong with it, but I couldn't put my finger on it. It took me all night to remember that the color of the water was wrong. When Michael and Lucia were murdered, the water had changed from green, but in the video it still showed

that.” I pause and my heart feels like a stone in my chest. “Did you do it? Did you murder Michael and Lucia?”

This time, he finally turns his eyes to me. I see that I’m not the only one haunted by memories of being down under the water that day. “What is it you want, Quinn?”

I don’t know what I want. I want him to tell me he didn’t kill them, but he’s already done that. Multiple times.

The music begins to rise in tempo, confusing me. He stands up and bridges the space between us. My heart palpates quickly as he brings his face to mine. Anger emanates from his every pore. His face is hard, his eyes darker than usual. When he speaks, it’s a furious whisper, “You made the right decision not to trust me, Quinn.” A shudder runs like ice down my spine. His aura is all-encompassing, dark, frightening.

Now I wish I’d kept my mouth shut. It’s not helping that the music is invading my brain, annoying me more than music usually would. It’s like someone is playing a classical piece on a flute that’s directly inside my mind. I can’t hear it with my ears, but it’s definitely there. I want to ask Dade if he can hear it too, but I decide that I’d rather keep the fact I might be having auditory hallucinations to myself under the current circumstances.

Instead, I match his stare, holding it, even though I can’t breathe under the intensity of it. I’ve spent my entire life hiding my fear from Jenny. I’m well attuned to it. Neither of us blinks as the music gets louder. It’s practically deafening. His face is inches from mine. Darkly beautiful. I lean into a kiss, then recoil in horror.

What.

The.

Actual.

Fuck!

He doesn't seem to notice my inner turmoil. I nearly kissed him! He looks like he'd quite happily murder me on the spot and all I was thinking about was tasting his lips. With horror, I realize I still want to kiss him. It's utterly insane and yet I'm having to fight my body from leaning forward and planting my lips on his.

It's the music! The realization hits me like a brick. This is what Noémi meant by fun. She's controlling us all by music.

"Get the fuck out of my face," I whimper. Damn. This cannot be happening.

He wavers a second, then thankfully steps back and sits back on the edge of the bathtub. It's not enough. The urge to go over to him and touch him is no longer within my control. I'm having to fight my bodily urges. As I sit gripping onto the edge of the vanity and staring at Dade because I can't seem to find anywhere else to put my eyes, I notice how gorgeous he is and how much I want to run my finger over his bottom lip. Not just my finger. I want to bite it, kiss it, lick it. Heat floods through me and the music becomes louder and faster, as though it's urging me on. I try to close my eyes to stop whatever it is that's turning me on, but I can't help but peep at him through my eyelashes. He's staring at the floor, and I'm literally shaking with arousal. Wet heat is pouring out of me. My panties are soaked, as is my brow. I need to get into the shower and turn it on to the coldest setting. I've never felt more wretched in my entire life, and it's mortifying.

"You need to get out of here," I demand, already pulling my sweater off.

He doesn't move. If he doesn't leave soon, I'm going to jump on him and basically force him to touch me. Horror doesn't even come close to what I'm feeling right now.

"Get out!" I scream. Sweat is pouring down my body and my hair is soaked.

Finally, he turns to look at me. When he does, his eyes widen. "What's happening, Valentine?"

Finally, his face registers some emotion other than contempt, but I'm way too far gone to care. I want him. With every fiber of my being, I want to rip his clothes off and have him fuck me all over this bathroom, fulfilling the promise that his fingers and tongue made the last time we were in here together. At this point, I don't think I even care if he does rip my head off, at least that would bring me some modicum of relief.

But I can't. I can't have him do any of that because he hates me. I probably hate him and I still don't know if he's going to draw out a sword from thin air and lop my head off. "Please go outside," I huff out through clenched teeth. I'm so hot I feel like my skin is on fire and though my entire body is an inferno, most of the heat is concentrated between my legs.

"You need help. Shit, Valentine, You're a mess."

"Thanks for that astute observation," I manage to pant, my voice trembling with a mixture of fear and frustration. Why won't he just leave me alone?

"We need to stop this. I'll call for them to stop it." He takes a step toward me. I hold my hand out, palm facing him. "Stop." I try to calm myself down, which is a herculean effort, seeing as my body is becoming painful. I know what I need. I just can't get it from him. Literally, anyone but him would do.

I would even swap with Juliette and have Orlin attempt to give me an orgasm to get this feeling to subside.

I inhale sharply and try to compose myself. “I need you to leave me alone. Don’t call anyone. Don’t do anything. Just go.”

I can’t take it anymore. I hop in the bath and turn the shower head on as cold as it will go. My clothes soak through as the water washes some of the sweat from my body. It’s not enough. I need to find a release and I need to do it by myself.

Dade turns and puts his hand to the door knob. I know he’ll find our shared bedroom through that door.

I could follow him and we could have sex on the bed.

The thought has never been so exciting and yet so horrific. Why isn’t he affected by the music? He looks normal. Perturbed maybe. Shocked. Maybe even upset, but he’s not the one having to cross his legs to ease the pain. I will him to go through the door and leave me alone. Tears course down my cheeks as the desperate need for release strengthens with each passing second. When he turns around, my heart pounds. Why won’t he just go? I need to feel something on my clit, if only my own fingers. I can get rid of this situation by myself if only he’d just leave. I’ve never really been one for masturbating. Truly, the best orgasm I’ve ever had was given to me by Dade’s tongue.

Oh god, how I wish I could feel his tongue of me again, he could take my pain away in seconds. Although I feel like I’m about to literally burst, even I could finish myself off in seconds at this rate.

He strides over to me. Not getting in the shower, but leaning over enough that his hair is getting wet. He looks so

fucking sexy with his wet hair clinging to his face. I think fucking Dade in the shower has now become my number one fantasy and my number one nightmare all rolled into one.

Focus!

“Tell me what’s wrong, Valentine,” he demands. His voice is hard like marble and the way he’s looking at me, he might as well be hewn from it.

“I need...” I can’t bring myself to say the words. I think I might actually die from this pain, but rather than the alternative.

“What? What do you need?” He takes his hands and places them on each side of my head and gives me a dark, hard stare.

He’s absolutely glorious and as sexy as all hell, and I can’t take it anymore. It’s practically a compulsion at this point.

I can’t seem to get the words out so I grab one of his hands and pull it downward, slipping it under the waistband of my pants. His eyes widen and I feel the heat of shame mingling with the heat of whatever this nightmare is.

“I need...” I choke out. His eyes widen. “I need you to touch me...or I need to touch myself. I need relief from this... I need...”

“You want me to make you come? Here? Now?” Confusion fills his features, softening the edges that a moment ago were all hard angles and anger.

“I need you to,” I sob, practically falling on him. He shifts forward slightly, taking my weight by putting his spare arm under mine, holding me up.

“You’ve got a funny way of seducing people?” he says flatly. There’s nothing actually sexy about this, I realize. From

my point of view, which is currently one of a sex crazed idiot, I'm horny as hell and there's never been a more sexy moment in my life, but he can't have the same thought. I literally just asked him if he was a murderer. It's hardly a Hallmark moment.

"Please!" I cry out, trying to grind myself on his fingers.

"Valentine!"

"The music," I pant. "The music is doing this. I need..."

He turns his head from me and angles his ear upwards. It's clear he doesn't hear anything beyond the sound of water pounding on the bathtub and my cries for release.

"Please," I finally muster again. I grip onto him as his fingers begin to work against me...finally. His face is black as thunder and I know I'm going to pay for this later, but I don't care right now. I just need some blessed relief from whatever this is. I rest my head on his neck, unable to keep it upright as I slump against him. It has the added value of me not being able to see his face looking at me through those dark eyes of his. He steps over into the bathtub as I cling to him, my fingernails digging into his black t-shirt.

Then this insanity that's wracking my body isn't the only thing I feel. Pain wracks me as he slams me against the wall of the shower. His hand is on my throat, holding me to the wall and practically holding me up. I've never seen such darkness in his eyes before. Not even when I accidentally pushed him over the edge of the tower when we first met. For a brief second, I forget that my body is trying to kill me and wonder if Dade has taken over the trial to save my body from the trouble. I stare at him in a way that I hope tells him that I'd welcome it. Orgasm, pain, death. Whatever Dade wants to dish

out, I'll welcome it, because anything would be better than this.

His hand squeezes tighter, locking me in place but not cutting off my airway. Water pounds both of us. His clothes are soaked through and his long hair is sticking to his face, making him impossibly hot. What a way to die.

"Please!" I cry out, although I no longer know what I'm asking him to do.

His free hand rips down my trousers and, quite possibly, right through my panties, but I can't care as he inserts his fingers inside me, leaving his thumb free to work my clit. My neck might be pinned to the shower tiles, but my hips aren't. I push into him, begging him. His eyes don't leave mine the whole time he works me and the anger in them never leaves. I'm locked in the most intense staring contest and neither of us is backing down. Hate matches hate, but it's a contest I can't win.

He doesn't take long, as I predicted, to hit that sweet spot. The orgasm rips through me, leaving nothing but distaste in its wake as I cry out Dade's name. It's not even pleasant though it's certainly powerful. I let out a keening yowl as I break apart on his fingers. My eyes flutter closed because there's no way in the world I can go through something so intense with my eyes open. He releases his grip on my neck and I fall forward, no longer able to hold up my own weight. My fingers grip into his skin and think I actually chew a hole in his t-shirt as I bite down. The music begins to break up at about the same time I do until there's nothing but the sound of water pounding down on us. He brings his hands from between my legs and grips me tightly, pulling me to his chest. I hold on, knowing that if I let go, my jelly legs will give way beneath me. The room begins

to darken, and the Earthery starts to give way to the nothingness before we have to leave. In the darkness the bathroom disappears around us, the sound of the shower evaporates and Dade lets go. I fall to the floor, still soaked in water, sweat, and my own juices. Dade has gone, and it's completely dark. I let out a low sob as the lights begin to flash, telling me it's time to leave. My cheeks flame with embarrassment as I pull on my soaking pants and head to the exit alone, dripping wet and fresh from the most powerful, if not the best... and worst, orgasm I've ever had in my whole life.

HELL IN HEAVEN

ROWENA

Being locked in a room with Felix is worse than being with a caged animal in a zoo. It's not like either of us wants to be here, but all we have to do is get through a couple of hours or so. We don't even have to look at each other. As trials go, I've been through worse. Now I just have to hope that he keeps his mouth shut. I follow him with my eyes as he storms from one side of the room to another, before turning on his heel and storming right back again.

A nagging impulse tempts me to mutter something to get him to sit down or at least stay still for a second, but I keep my mouth shut. An hour long bickering match might be fun, but I've been in enough of those in my time and they invariably end up with a fist in my smart mouth, so I turn my attention to the room we're in instead. It's a cozy living room, centered around a well-worn sofa with a pair of matching, faded armchairs, all adorned in a modest floral fabric. Homemade curtains frame a window that offers a view of a serene grassy plain. A vase of fresh white flowers sits on the windowsill. Daisies. My mother's favorites. It reminds me a little of the house I grew up in, before my parents died and I had to sell it. Our house wasn't as beautiful as this, but it has the same homely feel. A pang of homesickness hits me. It's been a long time since I thought of the home I grew up in. It feels like I

left that life a million years ago. There are some subtle differences. Our house had a gap under the door so wide that wind would whip up in the living room, sending the curtains and the cats into a frenzy and the furniture wasn't as well made or as pretty. This room, despite the homely nature of it, reminds me of the homesteader magazines I used to buy and wish I was in. There's no doubt in my mind that this room has molded itself to me and my psyche somehow. It's my dream home. Not that I'm going to tell Felix that. It's clear that this is his personal idea of hell. Ironic really. He probably lived in a penthouse with all metal everything and no personality whatsoever. I vaguely remember Quinn telling me that she saw his house, and it was a mansion somewhere, but all I see when I look at Felix is black and chrome. All the finest things in life, with no life in them. The only thing this room is missing is a handful of children and, perhaps, a dog. And maybe a man whose face isn't as black as thunder, who is currently wearing a path on the hardwood floor.

"I'll bet a million dollars that there's food through that door," I say, pointing to the only door in the place.

"I doubt you have a million dollars," he snarls.

"Technically, neither do you anymore," I reply, rising from the chair and swinging open the door to reveal the kitchen of my dreams. Again, I'm not going to tell Felix that so he can mock me.

He doesn't follow me in which is more relief than anything. If this whole challenge is to see how he'll fare in my perfect world, then great. I get to have hours of home-making bliss and he can sit on the sofa like a wounded hound, all miserable and forlorn. What a result!

I turn and breathe in the fresh air that's coming in through the open window before opening a cupboard to find out what's inside. I'm not surprised in the least to find all my favorite foods in there. The huge fridge and the pantry are equally filled with foods ready to be made into something wonderful.

The food in Lust is utterly gross. It's all so sickly sweet and I've been craving something with actual vegetables in rather than just pure sugar and fat molded into various body parts and colored pink.

As I'm in my dream kitchen, I decide to make a meal I've wanted to try for a long time. It's one I learned in the cooking classes I took back when I was alive. Beef wellington. I decide to make a soup for starters and soufflé for dessert. If I have to be stuck in here with Felix for hours, I might as well find ways to enjoy it.

My heart brims with pure joy as I lay all the fresh vegetables out on the table and turn on the range oven to preheat.

Literally, every ingredient I need for every part of the meal is here for me. A huge slab of fresh beef is waiting in the fridge. The herbs and spices I want are in the cutest little hand labeled jars in the pantry.

I set to work, my mind set on making this perfect. I wish Juliette was here to taste what I'm about to make. It's almost a shame I'll have to share it with Felix, who is the most ungrateful asshole I've ever had the displeasure to meet. Still, the pleasure is in the preparing and cooking more than the eating. I'm in heaven as I prepare everything, chopping up the veggies, preparing the beef, making the pastry exactly how I was taught. From somewhere, the sound of a flute begins to play a delightful melody.

By the time the beef wellington goes into the oven, my hair has converted back into its usual frizzy mess and I've got sweat running rivulets down my face. I head to the window, cranking it wider and put my face to the cool glass.

When that doesn't help, I realize something is wrong. I've always enjoyed cooking, but I've never felt like this before. The room isn't overly hot, but I feel a flush rising to my face.

"Is it hot in here to you?" I shout through to the living room. It's the first words I've spoken to Felix in the hour I've been in the kitchen. When he doesn't answer, I head into the room to find him laid down on the sofa, his feet crossed at the ankles, a country life magazine in his hands.

"Who writes this shit?" he says before dropping the magazine onto his chest. His eyes crease up with a look of complete disdain when he sees me. "What the fuck happened to you?"

Sweat is pouring down my face and dripping down my chest between my breasts. "I was making a beef wellington and..."

"Decided to whip up a Robert Wellington and skip the beef, did you? You do realize you're not meant to hop into the oven alongside it, right?" His words drip with sarcasm.

My blood thickens at his words, but I'm too hot to care. My skin is on fire.

"I'm having a fever!" I choke out, pulling at the buttons at the front of my handmade dress. I guess I pull too hard, or I didn't sew it together well enough because the buttons ping off, peppering the floor. I should feel embarrassment, but the coolness of the breeze whipping through the opened window soothes my skin. Deciding I give more of a shit about my own

comfort than what Felix thinks about me, I pull the flowery dress off and throw it to the floor in a sweat soaked pile. The bliss of the cool air hits me and I let out a long sigh.

Felix is off the sofa in seconds, the magazine dropping onto the hardwood as he sprints across to the other side of the room, his eyes wide with horror.

“I’m wearing underwear. It’s nothing you’ve not seen at any beach,” I say defensively. Now that I think about it, perhaps I have been a bit rash.

He glares at me in abject horror.

“There’s something wrong with me,” I blurt. “I’m not trying to seduce you, you cretin.” Even as I say it, I feel my panties dampen at the thought.

“Might want to tell that to your fucking nipples,” he snaps, pointing in my direction. “Stay the fuck back.”

Holy fucking hell! I look down and see what I already know. My nipples are pointing right through the thin material of my bra. My skin is flushed and damp.

I’m turned on.

Kill me now!

It’s not a feeling I’m used to. I slept with a couple of girls when I was in my late teens, hating every second of it. Then I slept with guys I met in gay bars and hated that too. None of it was authentic because I wasn’t authentic. After my transition, I haven’t slept with anyone. In this body, I’m a virgin. I thought that I’d magically meet the right man and everything would come together naturally, but it never happened and I just don’t think of sex in the same way Juliette does. I’ve spent my life thinking my body is broken and now, of all times, it’s decided it very much does work. I’ve never been more

mortified in my life. I rush out of the room and douse my head under the kitchen tap. It's soothing, but not in the places that need soothing.

My pussy has decided at the worst time possible to come to life. I'm horny. I know it's nothing to do with Felix in the other room and everything to do with the stupid effed up games, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to go in there and rip his cock off to use it as a dildo. I can't contemplate any more than that. I can't actually have sex with him. I literally would rather grow dicks all over my body than ask for Felix for help, but with every second the pressure is mounting and I can't take it anymore.

The cold water isn't helping. I'd need Niagara falls to smother the flames of want and need consuming my body.

My hands skim over my breasts, sending shockwaves down to my core. I let out a strangled sound that I'm sure I've never made before and slide them down to my panties.

I pray with everything I have that Felix doesn't decide to walk in right now. I'm already completely mortified that he can hear this. If he were to see it... I don't even want to know what might happen. People like Felix Barclay can't deal with people like me in any situation that might turn sexual. And this is about as sexual as it gets. Having him near me in the state I'm in is putting myself at an incredible risk. Homophobic, transphobic assholes in positions of power are the fucking worst, especially when they are backed in to a corner. Best-case scenario, he'll stay in his corner, frightened of what I'm going through and will either never speak of this again, or tease me mercilessly for evermore. Worst case, and the one that's most likely to happen, he'll project all this on to him,

feel threatened and lash out, hurting me. I've seen it play out hundreds of times, in situations much less intense than this.

As the tension deepens, I change my mind and hope he will come in and kill me, if only so I don't have to put up with the unrelenting tension.

My hand snakes under the cotton panties, but I don't know what to do. I'm terrified. I've never done this to myself.

Felix appears at the door and immediately grabs for one of the big knives I left out on the kitchen table for chopping up the veggies. His face is full of unrelenting anger. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Madness clouds his eyes as he stares at me, the knife between us at arm's length. I know what I must look like to him. I'm a complete mess, red and wet and crying tears of frustration. One hand is in my panties, unable to move, the other is gripping the edge of the sink for support.

"Stop it!" he demands. His voice is full of loathing and venom, and probably no less than I deserve. I wouldn't particularly like it if this was happening to him in my presence. It's only a little gratifying that his hand holding the knife is shaking.

"I'm not doing this. I'm not doing anything," I cry out, all confidence and bravado out the window along with any dignity I might have had when I first stepped in here.

"Disgusting bitch. Stop!" His eyes are manic, his voice like ice.

"Don't you think I want to?" I scream. "I can't stop, because I can't start. I've never done this before."

If my cheeks were red to begin with, I'm pretty sure they've gone nuclear now.

He's as panicked as I am. "What the actual fuck!? I'm not doing anything!"

As if I'd ask him to. "Plainly!" Arousal is hitting me like a roller coaster, pulsing through my clit. The desire to touch it, to do anything to stop the relentless need, is overwhelming, but I can't. Not when he's here, watching me like I might literally explode. The way the fire is coursing through my veins, that might actually happen.

"Can't you do something? Turn it off?" Felix asks, clearly exasperated by my situation.

"I'm not a fucking stove, Felix," I grit out between clenched teeth. "This has never happened to me before and I don't know what to do." My knees finally give out and the only thing that's holding me up is my arm that is slowly beginning to slip from the sink edge.

Felix runs his hands through his hair, gripping it as though he's about to pull chunks of it out, "Jesus, fuck. Do whatever you guys do and stop it."

Hot frustrated tears pour down my face and now I can add anger into the mix. There's no way I'm going to get it through to him that I'm anatomically a woman without showing him. I pull my hand from my panties and grab one side of the soft fabric, pulling them down to my ankles. The movement is too much and my hand holding onto the sink finally slips off, sending me crashing to the floor, falling into a position that shows him way more than I expected.

The sour look in his eyes tells me he wasn't expecting quite a show, either. His mouth curls down at the edges as he takes me in. I'm only wearing my bra, and currently, wet with water from the tap, it's not doing much to cover anything.

I pull my legs into myself, but it's too late. I didn't think Felix Barclay could hate me more than he already does, but it's plain by his expression that his opinion of me has fallen to a new low. Not that I care about what he thinks of me. I've seen the same expression on men my whole life, but now I've given him the ammunition he needs to make my life a living hell for the rest of our time in actual Hell. He steps forward, the knife out in front of him gleaming. I know how sharp that knife is. I used it to chop the veggies. It sliced through the carrots like butter. My heart stops as he stands over me. Yet again, I'm in a position where a man of power is lording it over me as though someone appointed him the fucking king.

His expression is all disgust and aggression as he drops the knife where it clatters to the floor, sending a metallic echo round the room. "Why don't you do yourself a favor and fucking kill yourself?"

He turns and storms out of the room, slamming the door to the living room behind him so hard the window rattles. I let out a whimper as the feelings increase. I'm going to hate myself in the morning, because while Felix was standing over me, telling me to kill myself with a knife, I almost came. For the first time in my new body, I almost had an orgasm with only words of hatred and disdain spurring it on. My hand finds my clit. I no longer care if Felix walks back in, although I doubt he will. Nothing can be any worse than what just happened. It takes barely a brushing of my fingers to send me over the edge into orgasm. My first as a woman. My entire body shudders with the force of it, taking my breath and my sanity away.

And then it's over. The heat in the room dissipates and my body cools into a wet, wrung out mess. The music stops. A cool breeze washes over me, making me shiver again, but I

can't move to shut the kitchen window. My whole body is like lead, or sand, molding itself to the floor.

The oven beeps a warning that the beef wellington is ready. I'm pretty sure the veggies boiled over ages ago and the soufflé will never get finished. I haul myself into a sitting position and wipe my face with the back of my hands, snorting through the tears and snot. I may have gone through the most humiliating experience of my life, but I came. I had an orgasm. My body finally works. And all it took was the threat of death by my worst enemy.

BIRTHDAY CAKE AND DESPAIR

Knowing that my greatest desire is to have sex with Dade in a bathroom appalls me. Why couldn't my psyche come up with something else? Even if doing it against bathroom tiles is my deepest, darkest thrill, couldn't my brain have come up with something else to not make me look so utterly desperate?

My entire body tingles with an unsettling sensation as I step out of the elevator and into the bustling main atrium. The air resonates with cheers from the crowd. Amidst the throng, I can't spot any of my fellow contestants, but Noémi stands out, clapping with unbridled delight, her expression radiating pure joy.

A surge of humiliation unlike any I've experienced before propels me through the sea of jubilant onlookers. My sole focus is the platform that will transport me back to my room. I don't care whether Noémi wants to conduct an interview or about the fact we've become some sort of local celebrities down here. All I want is to distance myself from the world, to rid my body and mind of the lingering effects of the past few hours. I feel like crawling into a ball and dying, but my body feels lighter than air. It's like the trial was crafted to evoke these emotions on purpose, and I absolutely hate it. I can't stand any part of this experience.

As I open the door to the bottom of the stairs, I come to a stop when I find Felix and Anthura waiting for the platform. Their voices are hushed, but I can make out what they are saying given their voices are both raised in anger.

“I’m not going through that again. You’d better fucking do something!”

I step back against the door and hold my breath. I guess I’m not the only one that had a crappy time down in the Earthery.

“Me?” Anthura pounds her chest. “I’m a fucking competitor too now, remember? You do not want to know what I had to force Moloch to do to me.” She sniffs. “There’s nothing I can do, so I suggest you suck it up like the rest of us unless you’d prefer the alternative and stay in this cess-pit circle.”

I step out of the shadows. Both turn my way and become silent as I walk towards them. However much I don’t want to share the platform with them, I need to get to my room and so I’ll have to ride with them or wait. If Anthura is on the top floor of a hundred, it will be some wait.

I know what I look like. Even though there’s nothing real about the Earthery, I’m still dripping in sweat and though I can’t see my face, I can only imagine it’s as red as Anthura’s outfit. Of course, she looks perfect and unruffled. She gives me a glare as I step onto the platform. Felix merely looks angry and I wonder what it is I’ve just interrupted.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” Anthura snaps.

“I wasn’t looking at you,” I lie, willing the platform to speed up.

For some reason, Felix looks like he's about to throw up and my appearance, far from giving him ammunition against me, it seems to sicken him. Any closer to the edge of the platform and he'd fall off.

"You look like shit," Anthura remarks. "Fall in a pond?"

"Thanks for that delightful assessment of me, Anthura" I push past her and hop onto my landing right outside my door. "Only next time you degrade anyone, I suggest you look in a mirror before commenting on anyone else's appearance." She looks perfect, as she always does. Not one hair on her head is out of place, but if she spends the next seventy odd floors wondering if she looks crap, then I'll glean some satisfaction from all this. I open the door to my room and step inside. Just before the door closes, I hear her say, "What is she talking about? What's wrong with my appearance?"

"I don't know," Felix growls. "Nothing. She's just being a bitch. Wouldn't you be a bitch after going through that with fucking Dade Angelis?"

I close the door, not wanting to hear her answer. I feel for Rowena. Whatever happened in there must have been a nightmare.

I lay on my bed for hours until my stomach begins to rumble. I didn't have breakfast and I've not eaten all day.

I jump in the shower and set it to the coldest setting, yelping as freezing shards hit my skin. I refuse to spend any more time thinking of Dade. I've had so much embarrassment in front of Dade already that begging him to fuck me in the bathroom is barely worth my brain power. It doesn't matter what my body and, apparently, my brain want, Jenny is the reason I'm here. I'm only glad that the first test is already over and we've only been here a couple of days. With any luck,

we'll rush through all the trials and I'll be able to get away from here as quickly as possible.

I never thought I'd pray for the days when hell hounds and drowning were all I had to worry about, but here it is.

I step out of the shower and assess myself in the mirror. I no longer look the mess I did stepping into the shower, but the haunted expression in my eyes is new.

Dade warned me not to trust him. I asked him clearly if he'd murdered Michael and Lucia and he didn't deny it. I need to learn to let things go. Sadness fills me as I towel dry my hair and run a brush through it. It's the exact same brush that was in the bathroom down in the Earthery. I hurl it into the trashcan, then throw my toothbrush in after it for good measure. No longer will I have a bathroom that reminds me of Dade. I wrap the towel around myself and head to my closet to find something to wear. I'm not going to let the last trial define me, either. No matter how upsetting it was. I know I wasn't the only one who had it hard. If Felix was so morose, I can only imagine how hard Rowena had it. As I rifle through my clothes, I make the decision to head out and face everyone. I'm going to have to some time. May as well rip that bandage off sooner rather than later.

I never expected any of the trials to be easy. Anthura made it quite clear that things would get worse the lower we descended into Hell, but I expected things to be hard in other ways. I expected to feel physical pain, but not the emotional tangle currently squeezing my chest that won't seem to dissipate. I think I now have a finger on what the trials in this circle are about. They weren't designed to test endurance or to judge who's superior, kinder, or doesn't belong here. Each trial has been designed to make people forget the reasons they want

to leave in the first place. I know nothing of God or of religion, and I never put any thought to Heaven or Hell in anything but abstract terms, so I don't know if the Inferno Games are something that Satan has to provide. If there does have to be a Get out of Hell clause, this is the perfect way to implement it. The games are more than the trials, they are everything that makes up the minutes between trials, too.

As I take the elevator down to the lower floor, I make a note to ask Noémi or Anthura how many people have actually managed to get through this right to the end. My heart is pounding as I step out into the main foyer. I breathe out a sigh when I see the crowd from earlier has dissipated. I need to find Rowena and Juliette. They are the only people that I know I can trust in this place. I see them sitting at our usual table in the restaurant. A quick scan of the restaurant is enough to tell me that Dade isn't here. I'm not sure if it's relief or sadness I feel as I walk across the restaurant.

My need to tell them what I've been through melts away as I approach the girls' table. Rowena's face is ashen, and she's barely moving. Her eyes stare out at the image projected on the huge window. It's a still image of Noémi and the crowd in the atrium earlier. Juliette, on the other hand, is the exact opposite, pink cheeks almost glowing. Her hair is a mess as though she's slept for twenty hours straight on it and forgotten to brush it. Inexplicably, there's a massive birthday cake on the table between them.

As I approach the table, Juliette's eyes lock onto mine, and she exhales a relieved, "Thank fuck!"

I'm guessing that this isn't the celebration it's made out to be. "Whose birthday is it?"

“I can’t get Rowena to tell me what happened inside with Felix, so I did what always cheers me up and ordered cake. She’s not said a word in the last ten minutes.” She looks at me with pleading eyes. “Can you do something?”

I settle beside Rowena, my arm enveloping her shoulders. “Roro,” I address her gently, “Please tell us what’s wrong. Let us help you.”

Her face remains emotionless as though she’s died and been replaced by a statue. If she wasn’t breathing, I would have thought that she’d somehow managed to die in here.

My eyes shift to Juliette. Her eyes blaze with fury as she speaks. “I swear to God... and Satan and every unholy deity in this godforsaken place, if he’s touched one hair on her head, I’ll reach down his throat so far, I’ll grab his balls through his asshole and yank them up until he’s reverse swallowing them.”

“You do paint a delightful picture.” Rowena finally speaks, but her voice is flat and monotone and nothing like her usual self. “I can assure you he didn’t touch me and I certainly didn’t get anywhere near his balls.”

Suddenly I understand what happened. If the trial was the same for her as it was for me... It doesn’t bear thinking about. “You know you are so much better than Felix Barclay, right? He doesn’t deserve a second of anything you project or anything you did in that room.”

Juliette’s forehead creases, confusion etching her features. “What did she do in that room?”

“I can’t say for certain, but I doubt Noémi tailored unique experiences for each of us,” I explain. A pause follows before understanding dawns in Juliette’s eyes.

“Oh shit, Rowena,” she breathes, her eyes widening in comprehension.

She shrugs and holds her eyes steady. “It’s not that bad. I’ve spent my whole life being looked at with the same disgust Barclay did. I’d like to say it was surprising, but it wasn’t. He acted exactly like I expected him to. To be honest, I’d have been almost disappointed with the prick if he went against his own nature and actually helped me.”

My heart aches for her. What I went through with Dade was mortifying and he’s someone who I’ve been intimate with before. “If you expected him to behave like the asshole he is, why are you letting him get you down?”

She finally turns to me. Sadness laces her expression. “Because, yet again, he was in a position of power. I’d have liked it, if just once, I could come out on top over people like Barclay. He’s already embarrassed by Noémi turning him down. He’s going to use this to make my life a misery and make himself look like the big man. I’m never going to live this down.”

Juliette leans forward and levels a finger at Rowena. I’ve never seen Juliette cry, but it’s clear that she’s holding back angry tears. “Okay, stop it right there, lady. I’ve never known you to wallow in self pity like this before. Sure, it was humiliating. We all did things in there we are ashamed of. The whole point of it was to make us look like idiots. You’re not the only one. Felix is a dick and we all know it. You’re better than him!”

Rowena bites her lips together. “Did you fall to the floor and masturbate in front of your enemy while crying, Juliette? Did that really happen to you, too?”

Juliette looks hopelessly lost as she flicks her eyes to me for support.

“I did... kinda,” I admit.

Rowena grimaces. “Let me guess. You got all horny and the hot guy with the wings that I know you are crazy about even though you won’t admit it, literally swooped in and made you come and even though you tell yourself you didn’t want it to happen, you secretly enjoyed every second of it and now you are full of post orgasm hormones like princess penis possessor.”

I open my mouth to snap back, but every word she’s said is true. I’m a completely fucked up mess where it comes to Dade, but in no dimension can I pretend I didn’t enjoy what happened in that room on a physical level.

“Hey, that’s hardly fair,” Juliette protests, a pout tugging at her lips. “If there’s anyone deserving of that title, it’s me.”

Rowena releases a sigh, its drawn-out nature conveying her inner turmoil. “I’m sorry, Quinn. I know I’m being a bitch queen. I just...”

“Hey, no need to apologize,” I interject, offering a reassuring smile. “I’d probably feel the same in your shoes. And don’t worry, I haven’t spotted Felix around here. Maybe he’s still reeling from his encounter with Noémi. You know how much his reputation means to him. With a bit of luck, he’ll keep to his room until the next trial.”

I decide against telling her about my encounter with him in the stairwell. She doesn’t need to know that he’s told Anthura what happened between them. It will only hurt her more.

Rowena nudges me, then nods towards Juliette. “I think Juliette wants to have her turn to talk. She’s had to wait long

enough to tell us why she looks like she's been fucked a thousand different ways. Don't tell me that Orlin has turned out to be a complete stud muffin. I don't think I can handle it."

Juliette grins. "Sorry babe, nothing to report. It was a pretty boring trial, really."

Rowena looks at me then side eyes Juliette. "Didn't you get all uncontrollably horny?"

"Babes!" Juliette says, her hand hitting her chest. "When am I not uncontrollably horny? Look at this cake, eh? It's a fucking disgrace to leave it." With that, she picks up a fork and stabs it into the cake before taking a huge bite.

Rowena's brows knit together, mirroring an expression that I'm sure is showing on my face, too. It's evident that Juliette is hiding something from us, something to do with Orlin. Despite Rowena's jest about him being a covert "stud muffin," my imagination falls short on imagining any particular scenario that Orlin could be described as that. I can't imagine it at all.

PSYCHO NYMPHO BARBIE

QUINN

No one looks happy, apart from the possible exception of Juliette, as we gather around the meeting area the next morning. Noémi skips round us as she always does, brushing her hand over each of our shoulders as she walks round the back of us.

Dade isn't here. I know I should feel relieved, and I am, but mostly I'm curious, and a little grateful. What happened yesterday in the Earthery was horrific.

"Good morning, bonjour, Mes beaux amis!" Noémi says in her usual exuberant way. She looks beautiful as always, with the pink light highlighting her curls and matching her pink leather jumpsuit. Psycho Nympho Barbie. Behind her, Arch and Asmodée stand, arms crossed and staring ahead as usual. I've yet to hear either of them talk, though it's apparent that talking isn't in their job description. Noémi claps her hands together. "'Ow did you all get on yesterday? Did you all like my leettle trial?"

One of the people from another tower answers. I think his name is Jake. "As much as I like being shafted by a syphilitic baboon."

Next to him, Felix murmurs just loud enough for us all to hear. "I'd rather that than what I had to go through." His eyes

travel over to Rowena, who stiffens beside me. I take her hand and braid my fingers through hers. At her other side, I see Juliette do the same.

My gaze glides across the sofas, and I notice Candice seated beside Remy once more, though they maintain a slight distance—a few inches apart. Despite everything, a sense of relief washes over me. I try to picture how it would have been if it was Remy with me yesterday, but try as I might, my brain won't conjure it.

“Ze second part of ze first trial weel be set for ze same time tomorrow,” Noémi announces.

“Second part?” Rowena asks weakly. My heart sinks. I thought I was a third of the way through this circle already. I can tell I'm not the only one this is news for. I can hear the collective dismay in the form of sighs and whispers coming from the other contestants.

“I want to show you somezing first,” Noémi continues, seeming ambivalent to the anxiety she's causing. “Everyone please turn and look toward ze restaurant.”

I tilt my head to the right, and the windows that form the far wall of the restaurant have transformed, displaying a leader-board instead of the usual simulated view. With a start I see Juliette's name taking the top position. What the hell did she do in there?

INFERNO GAMES

JULIETTE PEREZ - 10

ORLIN MOSS - 10

MAGGIE HOLMES 9

COLIN HOLMES -9

I scan down the rest of the names until I find my own.

QUINN VALENTINE - 4

DADE ANGELIS - 4

My embarrassment grows to epic proportions as I realize that my little show yesterday was for nothing. I cringe as I remember what I went through and for only four points.

Below us, right down at the bottom of the board, there's Felix and Rowena with not a single point between them.

Jake raises a hand and Noémi nods at him. "What exactly are the scores for because I had to do things yesterday that not even hard core porn has readied me for and I'm pretty sure I deserve at least a nine."

I look for his name on the board. His partner is a quiet guy named Adam. They both got seven points each. I get the feeling that they wouldn't be partners unless they were forced together. I don't even know if either of them is gay. I'm reminded that the previous trial in Purgatory paid no heed to people's sexual orientations, a detail I doubt Noémi considers significant. I don't even think sexual orientations are a thing in this Circle. People just sleep with anyone.

Noémi smiles, and I feel a frisson of sexual energy ripple out. I don't have a thing for Noémi, but her aura is all-encompassing. I shake it off. "Ah, mesdames et messieurs, you see, Mademoiselle Perez and Monsieur Moss, zey truly immersed zemselves in ze trial, hence zheir impeccable score. While a few of you completed ze trial, ze lack of enthusiasm was quite palpable. Certain individuals, I must say, lost points due to, 'ow shall I put it, rather uninspiring efforts."

My stomach drops and I wonder if she's talking about me. I wasn't aware that I had to pull off an Oscar winning

performance in the throes of orgasm. Maybe next time I'll pull an Academy Award out of my ass at the same time as screaming out Dade's name.

“And lastly,” Noémi continues. “Some chose not to collaborate effectively with zheir partners, resulting in quite a dismal score.” She casts her gaze to Felix and delivers a disappointed look.

Felix stands up and storms away. I can understand why he received no points. From what I can tell, he didn't even try to help Rowena at all. Still, it's a crying shame Rowena had to get zero points, too. It's not her fault that Felix is an asshole.

“I don't understand why we lost a point,” Peace shouts out. “We were very enthusiastic.”

“Ah, oui, you were indeed remarkable. Maggie, and I applaud your efforts, zough I do believe zat as a married couple, you could 'ave tried something a leetle bit different. Alas, a point was deducted for your rather conventional approach, or should I say, lack of créativité.”

“The points are given out for arbitrary reasons, then?” Jake reclines in his chair, crossing his arms with an expression of irritation. One that I'm pretty sure we all share.

“No.” Noémi's mouth slightly downturns as though she wasn't expecting someone criticizing her trial. Even with a sad expression, she's still the sexiest person in the room. “Not arbitrary, but I guess you could say I applaud creativity and enthusiasm over anything else.” Her smile returns to her face. “I make ze games in 'ere and I'm ze one to judge them.”

“Wait a minute. You mean to tell me that you were watching us the whole time?” Anthura spits out. She looks over at Moloch, who looks miserable beside her. They both

got five points - more than Dade and I. My heart goes out to Moloch. He might be a demon, but having to go through this with Anthura is, quite frankly, a fate worse than death. I'm surprised she didn't eat him for breakfast.

"Naturellement! Of course I watched zem," Noémi says, as though watching people orgasm is the most normal thing in the world. I hadn't thought my embarrassment could plummet any further, yet Noémi appears to have a unique talent for drawing out that sensation within me.

"I'm going to throw up," Rowena mutters. "Kill me now."

"You're already dead," I whisper back. I notice Juliette doesn't share the same sentiment. She's still smiling. The only one of the contestants, that is.

Misery courses through me. The first trial was mortifying. I don't want to go through something like that again, and yet if I ever want to see Jenny again, I'll have to.

Noémi doesn't seem to notice the turmoil her words cause, because she keeps speaking. "You weel be paired up with ze same partner for ze second part of ze first trial, so I suggest you put your efforts into trying to get to know zem a leetle. I want to be entertained. See you all tomorrow." With that, she sweeps away toward the restaurant flanked by her two massive demons.

"I have to do another trial with Felix." Rowena's skin is gray and her eyes are wide and unblinking, as though she's in shock. I can't even muster up the enthusiasm to placate her because I know exactly how she feels.

I squeeze her hand. "Sorry. Maybe you should just throw yourself at him next time and get it over and done with?"

She responds with a wry smile, her voice tinged with sad humor. "I'd rather throw myself under a bus."

Juliette draws in a breath. "We'll do something. This is bullshit. Where's Hades in all this?" She swivels her head as though he's going to suddenly appear out of nowhere. "We know he's here. He must be able to do something. Let's go find him."

She stands, but is accosted almost immediately by a young guy wielding a note book and a pen which he thrusts at her. "Please, can I have your autograph? I'm your biggest fan."

Juliette's expression changes in that instant. Her mouth turns up at the edges and her eyes crinkle. She turns back to us. "Did you hear that? I have a biggest fan."

"Great!" Rowena huffs sarcastically, picking up her bag.

There's a whole row of people lining up to talk to Juliette and it's clear that in the moment, all thoughts of finding Hades have flown out of her head. Not that she would, anyway. He'll be down in the lowest level with all the other demons and without a marble key, we can't get down there. We'll have to wait for Twila to come up to plead our case, although I suspect she'll say the same things about being unable to help as she did the last time. "Wanna get out of here?" I say to Rowena. "We could go down to Infernos and drink ourselves into oblivion?"

Rowena shakes her head. "I think I'm going to go back up to my room and hang myself, but thanks for the offer. Have a dragon fire whiskey for me."

"Ro..."

"I'm joking," she placates me. "I'll be fine. I just want to be on my own for a while. I promise I'll not do anything

stupid, although I'm sure, being dead already, hanging myself would only end up with me dangling like a moron for hours, suspended by my finest ribbons. And, well, I can't let my prized ribbons go to waste. I had plans to craft a new dress with them."

I draw her into a hug and I can feel the weight of her despair. I know she's trying to use humor to mask her pain, but she's never been that good at masking her emotions. When Rowena is sad, I feel it and I don't think I've ever felt her as down as she is now.

"You sure?"

She nods her head. "You might want to make a quick get-away too before these sycophants decide they want your autograph too." She nods toward the line of people waiting for Juliette, which has now turned into a bustling mess.

"Yeah. I got four points. I don't think they'll bother with me. I'm more worried about being accosted by Dade's rabid fan base."

I watch Rowena walk through the atrium and through the doors to the platform. My eyes fall upon Orlin, who is as equally swamped with admirers as Rowena, but unlike her, he seems completely overwhelmed by the attention.

I pull out my Hell Cell and shoot Twila a quick message. She ran off in a hurry when we questioned her the other day, but I felt sure she'd turn up to cheer us on.

The message shows as unread. I wait for the small check mark to change color to show she's received it, but it remains steadfastly gray.

**HELL'S MOST ELIGIBLE
BACHELOR**

FELIX

Anger roars through my veins as I step up to the podium Noémi had erected in front of the Earthery. There's no fucking end to Noémi's realm of humiliation. Last time we just walked in to the Earthery, but in the last twenty four hours, the games have gotten so popular amongst the fuckers that live down in this flea pit that she's decided to turn it into a fucking circus and every man, woman, freak and demon is invited. Noémi's eyes sparkle as I take the last step for the ultimate humiliation. Going into the Earthery once with the freak fucking disgusted me. I still can't escape the fucked up mess he looked as he fell to the floor. So he has a pussy and so it looked real. His body might have been hot on a woman, but he's not a woman, despite what everyone keeps telling me. He was called Robert, for fuck's sake. I can see him now. At least he has the fucking decency to look scared. Good, because I'm not going to let anyone put me through that shit again, least of all him. He's wearing another one of his flowery monstrosities - a dress that skims the floor. I veer my eyes from him and Noémi as I take my place next to him.

“Felix Barclay!” Noémi calls out. I'm a little gratified that at least some people are cheering, but I don't want them to cheer. I just want to get this nightmare over and done with as soon as possible.

“How are you feeling about ze next round, Felix?” Noémi asks.

I need to play this cool. Show no fucking fear. “Confident, Noémi,” I reply, offering the audience a spirited grin. “In fact, I’m quite certain I’ll emerge victorious.”

The crowd cheer again. I know what the public want and I plan on giving it to them. I dressed in my best suit for this. In two hours, the idiots down here won’t remember Robert exists. My name will be the only name on their tongues.

“Zat’s the spirit, Felix.” She turns to the freak. “And what about you, Roro? How do you feel about being locked in a room weeth ‘ell’s most eligible bachelor?”

A sarcastic tone colors his response. “Just spiffy,” he deadpans.

It takes every ounce of stoicism I have to keep my face straight. Why the fuck are the crowds cheering? Surely they can’t actually like the guy? But as we turn towards the doors, it’s clear that Robert has fans. They are probably as crazy as he is. Irritation rattles through me as I still hear the freak’s name being shouted out over the noise.

I let Robert go into the Earthery first. To the crowd and to Noémi, it will look like I’m being gentlemanly. I actually don’t trust the freak, but they don’t need to know that.

The Earthery is black as it was the last time I entered, but as it clears, I’m happily surprised to see I’m not in some weird cabin like we were in the last trial. In fact, this place is familiar to me, almost intimately so—as intimate as one can be with a location they’ve solely seen in photographs. It’s the apartment of none other than Daniel Price, the wealthiest man in the United States. Our paths have crossed only once before, during

my final year at university when I attended a conference where he delivered the keynote speech. In that moment, I resolved to emulate him. Though our paths to wealth diverged, my journey has been closely attuned to his, tracking his every move, analyzing every decision he makes. I wanted to be him. Hell, I still do.

“Where are we?” Robert mutters. For a second, I’d almost forgotten the freak was still here with me.

Luckily, this is a big enough apartment to hide away from him for the next couple of hours in case he does what he did last time. If he even thinks about pulling a stunt like that again, I’m sure I could find a way to break the inch thick bullet-proof windows and unceremoniously evict him through the opening. We’re fifty floors up. He’d make a gorgeous, satisfying splatter on the sidewalk. The view of downtown Manhattan is spectacular. I know the address without having to look it up. Once upon a time, I harbored a fantasy of traveling to New York with the sole purpose of meeting Price. While the notion was utterly ridiculous, and I never followed through, the irony isn’t lost on me now that circumstances have brought me here.

“This is where I’m going to live one day,” I say to no one in particular as I stride over to the floor to ceiling windows and put my palms to them. The whole world is spread out beneath me, with Central Park directly in front. I already know this is the most exclusive apartment block in the whole of New York and this is the Penthouse. I also know that there’s a full garden and swimming pool above us on the roof as well as a helipad. I know this place like I know my own house, even though I’ve never set foot in here. The magazine spreads didn’t show everything, though. I make my way to the first door and push on it. It’s Daniel Price’s office. I heave in a contented sigh. “This is where the magic happens.”

“It doesn’t look very magical to me,” Robert says, peering over my shoulder.

I lift my chin. “That’s because you don’t appreciate fine architecture, not that I’d expect you to, you uncultured fucker.”

He gives me a hard stare and I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with someone who wouldn’t know culture if it bit them on their sorry ass.

“But there’s no life here,” he maintains. “No photos, nothing personal. It’s boring as eff.”

I curl my hand into a fist and turn to face him. “This happens to be where *the* Daniel Price lives. The richest man in America. I happen to know it has ten bedrooms. Why don’t you go find one and lock yourself in it for the next two hours so I can actually fucking enjoy this?”

Robert rolls his eyes, but he actually does as I say, or leaves me in peace, anyway. This apartment is big enough to get lost in and hopefully he’ll do just that. I hurry over to the desk and yank open the drawer. In the real world, this drawer would undoubtedly be locked, safeguarding Daniel Price’s confidential documents from the prying eyes of the staff. But I can see it now. I’ll soon know everything that Daniel Price knows and when I get out of Hell, I can use it against him and claim the title that should be mine, the richest man in America. I’ve been close a few times, but never quite hit the jackpot. Once upon a time, Daniel Price was my hero. If it wasn’t for him, I’d just be some hungry kid without direction, but in the years that have passed since he showed me the way forward, I’ve come to resent him. I have everything money can buy, but I don’t have that title and I really fucking want it. That’s not all I want. Somewhere in this room is the Cullinan Diamond,

the largest diamond in the world. He bought it years ago from some British Prince. It was all over the news and yet since the moment he procured it, it's never been seen since. I know Price well enough to know he's kept it close. I can practically smell the bloody thing.

I pull the documents out of the drawer and practically throw them onto the walnut table. The freak is wrong. There may be no furniture here with curves, but the simplicity is fucking breathtaking.

I spread them all out, my mouth practically watering as I take in this monumental occasion. I knew Anthura would come through. Keeping her sweet was the best Idea I've had since coming into this place and even though she's become more of a pain in the ass as usual and I've had to spend more than one night listening to her complain than fucking her sweet body, I knew she wouldn't let me down. She might only be a contestant like me now, but she knows how the games work and though that bitch Noémi is in control, Anthura clearly still has some sway with Hades.

Maybe this is what was meant to happen all along. I could stay here, be the king in my very own apartment overlooking Central Park. Even better, I could live in Daniel Price's apartment. The only thing that would make this any better is if I find something that shows Daniel Price living in poverty somewhere. As though the Earthery can hear my thoughts, a newspaper appears in the open desk drawer. On the front cover is Price, the headline reading 'Former Billionaire loses his fortune in a poker game against Felix Barclay.'

I sit back on the leather chair, a smirk on my face, and pull a Cuban cigar from a box on the desk before lighting it. I've

waited my whole life for this moment. So what if it isn't real? It feels real, and that's what matters.

Somewhere from another room comes the sound of music, some classical bullshit. I should have guessed the freak likes this kind of sappy music. He's probably playing it himself. I've seen him going to those lessons in Purgatory. He's marginally better at flute than dressmaking, but it's a fucking annoyance.

I stand to slam the door to tune the noise out, but before I get to it, the doorway is blocked by two of the most gorgeous women I've even seen in my life. They aren't Price's wife or daughter. I've seen the pictures.

Hookers?

Between them stands Price. His shirt is partially unbuttoned, and he's got a stain on it and five o'clock shadow daubs his chin. He looks like absolute shit. What a day to be alive... dead.

"You won fair and square, Barclay," he says miserably. "Here's the key to the safe."

He throws an old-fashioned key across the desk toward me.

Trust Price to lock his biggest, most beautiful asset in a safe with a key instead of a key code. He might have made his money through technology, but at heart he's an old-fashioned guy.

I already know what I'll find in the safe. The biggest diamond in the world is just a couple of meters away from me, but I find I can't move. The two women are more enticing than any rock, no matter how large and how flawless.

“Get the fuck out of my house, Price,” I bark at him, blowing a puff of smoke in his direction. “And leave your bitches behind. I have plans with them.”

Price casts a melancholic glance my way before pivoting and heading off. I watch him walk through the living area until I can't see him anymore, but don't make a move to get up until I hear the front door click.

“Shall we move to the living room, ladies?”

The music is louder out here, but there's no sign of Robert. The girls are both dressed exactly how I like my women to dress. Classy but slutty too. One wears a long dress that has a slit so far up her thigh I can see she's not wearing any underwear. The other has a short dress and though I can't tell right now, I'm sure she's equally naked under her dress.

I'm already hard as I sit on the generous sofa. I don't need to pay for sex, never have, but there's something about paying women. The transactional value of it means I don't need to bother with their enjoyment. So I've been known to partake in hookers from time to time. Another thing about paying for sex is that you know how much you're going to pay up front. Pick a girl from the office and it might seem like a cheapo fuck, but weeks later they are calling you, hitting you up for child support. I've never gotten a woman pregnant, to my knowledge, but it's happened enough to friends of mine. I never wanted kids. There's enough fun to be had without wasting my life on money-sucking rug rats and women who try to bleed you dry. I made that promise to myself the day I saw Price for the first time, too. Women are a dime a dozen. He actually married well and as far as I know, his ex-supermodel wife has never cheated on him, but I'm betting he spends a small fortune on her every day and he's tied to her

now. If he even thinks of sleeping with another person, she'll have the divorce lawyers on him like flies on shit. Stupid bastard. No, I like my life better. Casual fuck when I want them, the odd hooker if I can't be bothered with small talk and then sometimes I'll fuck women to get where I want. Case in point: Anthura.

I picture her face. She's in the Earthery too somewhere. I bet she's pining over me right now, as she sucks that idiot Moloch's tiny dick. I let out a small laugh as the two women sit next to me. One moves to unbutton my shirt while the other goes for my belt.

Threesomes are another thing I've had the pleasure of having more than once in my life. There's nothing on this earth better than being serviced by two gorgeous women. As though I've willed it, one of the women slides down from my lap to between my legs and eases my pants down to the floor. The other starts to bite at my skin, running her teeth over my nipple. Not painful, just playful. I'm already hard as nails as the one between my legs begins to suck me off.

"You, join her," I bark at the one kissing my chest. Having a blow job is amazing, but to have two women sucking, licking, kissing my cock is even better. If there was space, I'd have three or four women. Hell, I'd have every woman in the world worshiping my cock if I could.

"You're so big, baby," one of them hums.

"I can barely take it all in," the other agrees. I've never been harder. It's almost painful, but the two women are doing a good job. Not the best I've ever had, but better than anything I've gotten in Hell so far and I can just about put up with the fake porn star moans that accompany it. No one likes giving head that much.

I shift on the seat to try to find a more comfortable position. Maybe two of them was a mistake. It's beginning to hurt. "Hey, take it easy, girls. It's a cock, not a fucking banana." The music is getting louder now and more annoying. I dig my fingers into the sofa on each side of me. The pain is becoming unbearable and as I shift my gaze downward, I see why. Both the women have teeth like fucking vampires and are running them up and down my cock, causing red marks to appear.

I try to buck away from them, but that causes them to become even more enthusiastic. "What the fuck!" I push one off, kicking her away from me, but almost as soon as she's hit the floor, she rushes back with unnatural speed. Before my eyes, their glamors wear off and it's no longer two beautiful women sucking me off. These fuckers aren't women, they're demons and not the same kind of demon as Anthura.

"Get the fuck off me!"

I attempt to fend them off, but the escalating agony becomes overwhelming. Each nibble is like a searing fire coursing through my cock. It's not just their teeth that are causing it. The pressure in my cock is hitting a breaking point. I've never seen myself so engorged, so big and so red. The sight of the women licking and suckling me, their sharp teeth biting, is enough to instill terror in me. The horror of seeing the unnatural size of my dick is compounded by the terrifying demons using it as a fucking chew toy. Terror fills me. I've never been scared before in my life. Not during those first years when I completed hostile takeovers, not when I made my first million, billion. Not even when I was fucking shot and died, but now I feel what's left of the blood in my body rushing to my cock, causing my chest to feel like it's going to collapse in on itself.

I scream out, no longer able to fight them off. The music is cutting into my brain with a similar intensity to their assault on my cock. The pain is like nothing else I've ever felt in my life and I can't do a fucking thing about it. I can't move. My entire body feels heavy and languid. Conversely, my head is light and woozy. Hardly a fucking surprise as it's barely got any blood left in it.

I let my head loll back and wait for my cock to explode and not in the good way, but then there's an almighty crash and the pain lessens. I look up to see Robert standing there, a frying pan in his hand and his mouth gaping open. The two demon hookers, or whatever they are, lie unconscious on the floor.

He stares at me in horror, his mouth gaping open and his eyes wide. "I'm sorry! It looked like you were in pain."

"I'm still in fucking pain," I growl. "Turn that fucking music off."

He stares at me blankly. "I'm not playing music. I can't even hear any music." Then his face falls into one of comprehension. "Did you hear music when we were in the farmhouse kitchen?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I snap back. My dick is pointing right up in the air, at least twice the size it should be. It's bright red and hurts like holy hell. I want to pull my pants up so he doesn't see it, but it's clear by the way his eyes keep flicking down that he already has. It's not like it's hard to spot. It's currently the size of a fucking pepper grinder. Those ones they bring out with great fanfare in Italian restaurants, the ones bigger than a fucking baby. Forget a baby's arm. My cock could be delivered as a new born right now.

The freak starts wittering on. “When I was.... you know, I heard music. I think it’s some kind of weird magical aphrodisiac. The fact that you can hear it now and I can’t means I’m not affected this time.”

Anger courses through me. “Get the fuck out of here before I murder you on the spot.”

He flicks his eyes down to my dick again and disgust fills his features. “I don’t think you’re in any fit state to do that,” he says, kicking the bodies of the demons away with his heels. He gives a long sigh and nods toward my engorged cock. “I could help you if you like?”

“No fucking way!” I hiss out in disgust. I make to sit up, but my body is so heavy I can barely move an inch. I think all my blood is currently in the only part of me I can feel.

“Listen buster.” He folds his arms and looks like he might throw up. “I don’t like the thought of jerking off your meaty dick any more than you do, but we have to pass this test. We failed miserably in the first round.”

Fuck, he’s right. At least he didn’t say “thanks to you” at the end of the sentence, but if I want to get through these stupid games, I need to play the game, no matter how galling it is. Plus, there’s the matter of the unrelenting pain. I need relief from this agony.

I nod my head slightly and let my head fall to the side. It might have to be done, but there’s no way I’m going to watch the freak jerk me off. I slam my eyes closed and pretend I’m in any situation than this one.

My entire body cringes as I feel the touch of his hands on me, and it takes everything I have not to recoil.

It’s like being at a doctor. Nothing more.

His movements are slow and nowhere close to being enough. I love barking out orders most of the time, but during sex I like it when they have an iota of knowing what they are doing. For a guy who used to have a dick, he's fucking terrible.

I cringe as I bark out the words through gritted teeth. "Faster, freak. Harder."

"Stop it, you're turning me on," he retorts in a dead pan voice.

I curl my hands into fists. "Stop playing games, you fucking freak-show. I know what happens in a place like this. My fucking dick is going to literally explode and you're making fucking jokes."

I nearly jump a mile as I feel a pair of lips and a wet tongue around the head of my cock. Holy shit, he's sucking me off.

"Fucking stop it, Freak!" I heave out, but my words are lost in a sigh. I'm utterly mortified that I'm allowing this. It's humiliating and disgusting and I'm as angry as hell, but fuck, it feels so damn good.

He slides his mouth down the shaft right until his lips touch the root. My eyes snap open. I don't want to see this, but knowing the size I am right now, I have no idea how he's deep-throating me. I can barely catch a breath as I catch sight of her...him.

He's sucking me so hard it should be painful, but instead it feels exquisite. I let out a sigh. No woman has sucked me like this before. "No wonder you're good at this."

He stops momentarily. "Yes, I once had a cock of my own. I'm a freak. Now shut the fuck up and let's get this over with."

Lay back and let me suck you till you come.”

Hearing the words he uses is turning me on more than I've ever been. I know it's this place and the music, but I've never had a blow job like this. I hazard another glance down. He doesn't look like a man. At least I can console myself with that. He looks... Damn, she looks fucking beautiful. Blonde ringlets frame her face, bobbing slightly with the motion of her cherry red lips moving up and down my shaft. The memory of her on the floor of the farmhouse kitchen, legs splayed out, pussy on show as she fingers herself comes to my mind unbidden.

Suddenly, I'm fisting the cushions and thrusting into her mouth. Damn. I didn't even watch her back in the first part of the round, but apparently I must have seen her pussy because now it's the only thing I can think of. A sigh escapes my lips as I picture her playing with herself on the kitchen floor. I remember it with great clarity. I even remember how turned on I'd been, even though I know for a fact I left the room before any of that happened. My mind is playing tricks on me. What actually happened was that I shut the door... no, slammed the door and sat in the other room in disgust as she made herself come... kinda like she's going to make me come now. Oh, and how? “Oh fuck!” My fingers grasp the edges of the sofa as the familiar feeling of pre-orgasm hits me. I'm already dripping in pre-cum and feeling frantic as she sucks hard and fast, but with the precision of someone who knows what she's doing.

She grips the base of my cock and licks it up before flicking her eyes up to mine. For a second she holds my gaze. It's fucking erotic and terrible and almost as strong a sensation as the one she's giving me and then it's over. She closes her eyes and goes back to deep-throating me again. It's addictive

to watch I'm going to cum so hard, I can feel it. My balls pull in before I come with a roar, spilling hot cum into her mouth.

"Ro!" I hiss out through gritted teeth, my fingers straining tight against the couch pillows and my ass practically leaving the couch.

She swallows, licking up a bead of cum on her chin with an expression that's so deliciously wanton and sexual and dirty, that I give a final spurt, finally emptying myself of hot cum. It's only when it hits me in the eye that I know she's deliberately let go.

She gives me a look of pure malicious power before wiping the corners of her mouth with the bottom of her god awful flowery dress and giving me a fuck you smile.

As soon as I've come, the music stops, but the feeling of euphoria continues. I've just been sucked off by a dude. And it was the best fucking blow job of my life.

"I'm not gay!" I point out as my penis begins to soften. The pain is gone and instead there's only the wonderful feeling of ecstasy left behind.

"Neither am I, Asshole," she grumbles, before standing up. "I suggest you pull your pants up while you decide whether to beat me up for helping you."

I'm surprised by her accusation. I still fucking detest her, but I'm not going to beat her up. For a start, I couldn't move if I wanted to. I feel way too good. Not that she needs to know that.

"I wouldn't want to get my fist dirty with your blood." I bark back, but unlike usual, a hint of remorse hits me as I speak.

“Of course you wouldn’t,” she mutters under her breath before heading to the open-plan kitchen. I hear the sound of the fridge being opened and something being poured. Once again, she surprises me by handing me a glass of juice with ice. My eyes lock with hers as I take the glass from her hands. I see something I don’t like. The look of superiority, like she’s won a game or something. She doesn’t speak as she takes her juice to a seat facing the large windows. I put the glass on a nearby coffee table and pull my pants up, easing them over my sad and sorry dick. There are red marks down the sides of it, not made by her, but by the demons whose bodies are still littering the floor.

I fasten my belt and pick up the juice, downing it in one. My body feels back to normal now, if I count feeling like I’m floating on air as back to normal. I can see her profile from where I stand. She’s not actually unattractive. Her hair isn’t as bushy as it used to be and it’s actually kinda nice pushed back at it is by a thick headband made from the same ugly material as her dress. My eyes pass to the swell of her breasts and I wonder what she looks like beneath the dress. I saw her naked in the Earthery before, but I couldn’t bring myself to look objectively. The memories of me watching her playing with her pussy were false. A fantasy? Fucking Hell! I’m one really fucked up mess. It’s this place. I cast my glance back at her. She wears such floaty oversized dresses it’s hard to get a real feel for her body shape.

What the fuck am I thinking?

I don’t want to know what her body shape is. So what if she’s got gorgeous legs and a pussy?

Gorgeous?

Fuck.

I head back to the kitchen and scout out something stronger than juice, finding only a half a bottle of cheap whiskey. A man like Price wouldn't keep his good stuff in the kitchen. In fact, I vaguely remember a bar being set up on the roof top terrace and I'll bet if I looked hard enough I'll find something better than this cheap crap. I unscrew the top and take a swig, feeling it burn my throat. I'm just about to take a second when a claxon sounds out. Half a beat later, the apartment falls away, leaving us in darkness. I ignore Rowena completely as I make my way toward the light. Nothing happened. I doubt she'll tell anyone, but just in case... I run over to her and grab her wrist. A spark goes up my arm as I feel how soft her skin is. It's the remnants of the music, I'm sure of it, but I drop her hand like it's burning me.

"This stays between you and me," I hiss in her ear as we head through the doors out of the Earthery and into the light.

My mouth falls open when I witness the scene in front of me. There's a massive screen that wasn't there before and in glorious Technicolor is footage of Ro bringing down a frying pan on the heads of the two demons.

I feel her stiffen beside me. She leans into me and whispers in my ear. "You were saying?"

MANACLED

Keeping any emotion out of my face is almost impossible as Dade and I line up to enter the second challenge. It's not difficult to figure out what the next challenge will be. Last time it was me who was vulnerable. This time it's going to be him and I have to deal with it in a way that gives us enough points to go on to the next round. It should be easier this way round, but I know it won't be. Last time I was delirious with desire and barely registered anything over the thrum of want and need. This time I'm going in with a clear head and I'm not going to have the luxury of being half out of my mind when I do whatever I have to do to sate Dade's fantasies.

He won't even look at me, and his aura has been as thick and dark as night since we all gathered down in the atrium.

I sneak a look at him as Remy and Candice head into the Earthery in front of us. Remy is who I should be thinking about. My ex-boyfriend is going in there to have mind-blowing sex with a woman that looks like a model. I bet Candice knows BDSM; I think bitterly, as Noémi calls out our names.

There's equal amounts of boos and cheers as we step forward. Dade's fan club has turned up then. I wish they knew that I'd literally do anything to swap places with them,

watching this rather than having to participate. Then I could go back to my room and pretend none of this is happening, and they can swing from the chandelier upside down, hanging on with only their legs wrapped around Dade's neck and their mouths on his cock.

Or whatever!

I swallow back that particular image and step up to the door. I hold my head up high, and when the doors open, I step through them.

Nerves fill my stomach with dread, but nowhere in my imagination could I have pictured how awful Dade's deepest fantasy is. We're in a room that looks like... no, it is a torture chamber. I swallow back as I take in the objects of torture. Chains with manacles line the walls and there's something in the corner that could be a bed of some kind, but no one would sleep on it. It's hard and has leather straps on each corner. I guess I'll not need to worry about knowing about BDSM after today. I'm going to get a crash course. That's if I survive.

My mouth falls open as I take it all in.

“Do not worry, Valentine.”

That's easy for him to say.

I back up slightly, knowing that the doors we walked through will no longer be there. I'm trapped. My back hits a wall and a trickle of dampness seeps through my shirt, making me leap forward in shock. It's only the dampness of the walls. Wherever we are, we're underground. In a dungeon.

Dade strides forward to the opposite wall, which can't be more than ten feet away. It's a small room which makes it even more claustrophobic.

“What is this place? A Victorian sex torture club?”

Dade's eyes are dark and shadowed. "I did not think of this place."

Terror flickers at my soul as I hear the lie. He must have thought about it. "In the last part of the trial, it was my brain that conjured up the bathroom. You know you did this." I gesture around me. It's cold and damp and has a wet earthy smell that isn't exactly unpleasant, but hardly has the perfume of flowers either.

He doesn't even look at me when he answers. "Never the less, this is a place not known to me."

"So it's a fantasy, then?" I press, feeling queasier with each passing second.

"My only fantasy is to get out of Hell and find my daughter. You already know that. This is not me. Perhaps it is your fantasy?"

I snort. "Damp torture dungeons are hardly high on my sexual fantasy list." Then, with a horrifying realization, I remember I did think about a place like this. Briefly, in the first part of the trial, I felt relief we didn't end up in a sex dungeon and this is exactly where we've ended up. I may vomit.

He steps across the room and lifts one of the manacles from the wall. The sound of the chain echoes in the small space. "Then it just is."

I shake my head, but I can't shake off the terror I feel.

As he binds his hands to the wall, securing the metal cuffs around his wrists, I find myself fixated on his actions. I'm so out of my depth here, and yet I can't cower in a corner and pretend this isn't happening. We're so close to the bottom of the leader board that we're in danger of not getting through to

the next circle. I need to get control of my fear and pretend I'm enjoying this. Noémi is watching.

“Do I have to lock my arms up too?” I ask nonchalantly, as though being locked up in sex dungeons with a possible murderer is an everyday occurrence. I keep my eyes leveled at Dade. It's clear this isn't turning him on any more than it's turning me on. His appearance is a picture of misery, and against my better judgment, I feel for him. Unlike me, he doesn't have the luxury of ignorance about what lies ahead. He's fully aware of the impending ordeal, and his torment is palpable.

“Take a seat.” He nods to the bed in the corner. I gulp as I wonder how it's used to torture people. The leather straps are clear, but there's a wheel of some sort at one end.

I give him a curt nod. So he still wants to be in charge. That's fine by me. I have no clue what I'm doing. The bed is pretty obvious. I push myself up onto it and lay down, splaying my legs out to the corners. As I begin to tie one leg up, threading the leather strap over my ankle, Dade's voice stops me.

“Just sit, Valentine. Sit up and look at me.”

I can't look at him, because I can already feel a flush of blood rising to my cheeks. Now that the threat of being tortured and murdered by him has been taken away, it's allowing blistering embarrassment to take its place.

“I thought you'd want me strapped down for whatever you were going to do to me.”

I hear some chains rattle and when I look up, Dade's giving me a withering look. He opens his hands and holds

them out. “I’m chained to the wall. I’m not going to do anything to you.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “You’ve led me to a sex dungeon. How am I supposed to know what I’m supposed to do?” I worry that my confession of inexperience might cost us points, so I clamp my mouth shut.

“You don’t have to do anything.” His expression holds a genuine weight. There’s a sadness to his eyes and a vulnerability that pulls at my heart strings despite myself. “This isn’t a sex club, though it is a place of torture. It’s a prison.”

“Your greatest fantasy is a prison?” I shudder. I’m not sure what’s worse. At least he’s admitting it and it’s not another place the Earthery has pulled from my subconscious.

“No. I have already told you my greatest fantasy, and it hasn’t changed in the last five minutes, however it is now twined with the fantasy of not making my miserable existence worse than it already is.” His voice is harsh and leaves me in no doubt he’s enjoying the questioning about as much as I’m enjoying this experience.

I don’t understand what he means, so I sit still, waiting for something to happen. He slumps against the wall, his head down and his arms twisted out above him in what looks like a painful contortion. The chains are long enough so that he can sit on the floor. With him not looking at me, I allow myself the time to process the situation. I’m in a prison, no doubt one from Dade’s time, judging by the damp walls and lack of electric light. The only light in the place is coming from a barred window high up in the wall. There’s a wooden door to one side which is no doubt locked. My nerves are on edge, waiting for something to happen when Dade groans. My

attention jumps right back to him. I'm so skittish that even the sound from his mouth has me on edge. He's still slumped over, his head bowed low, but the movement of his legs and hips makes me realize he's in pain.

Not pain.

He's turned on. The music is playing in his head.

I bring my hand to my mouth as I realize what he's doing. This isn't his greatest fantasy at all. He was lying to me, but to protect me. He thought of a prison precisely because he knew he'd be able to lock himself up. He's saving me from having to do to him what he did to me. The chains are to save me.

"Dade?"

He doesn't look up.

"Dade?" I try again. When he doesn't answer, I jump down off the bed. My feet make a tapping sound on the floor, causing him to look up. He looks awful. His face is flushed and sweat has his long hair sticking to his face. I flash back to when he was in the shower with me, his fingers inside me and his hair slick and wet like it is now. Except it was me with that expression of pure need on my face. Me, who was in unimaginable pain with desire. Now that he's shifted position, I see the bulge in his pants straining to escape. It looks huge and painful.

"Don't!" His expression twists with manic intensity. "Don't come any closer, Valentine."

My heart races within my chest as uncertainty grips me. "Let me help you," I plead, my voice trembling.

"Step away and get back on the table," he orders, his tone commanding.

“I can’t,” I cry out. “Not when you’re like this.”

His desperation is visceral. His face is twisted and though I hate to admit it, the intense need in his eyes is turning me on in a strange and terrifying way. I don’t even have the music to blame. I can’t hear it. He licks his lips, dragging a bead of sweat from his top lip onto his tongue. It’s an incredibly sexual gesture, though I don’t even think he knows he’s doing it. He looks crazed.

“You helped me,” I say, taking another step toward him. “Let me help you. Please Dade.”

When he speaks, his voice is low and rough and I can tell it’s hard for him to keep calm. “I said sit back up on the table and stay there. Do not come near me.”

The fear of what he’ll do to me is long gone. Now I only feel helpless as he writhes around. He can’t even reach to give himself relief with his hands manacled above his head.

“Stand up!” I shout over. I’m not sure if he’s even listening to me anymore. The growls emanating from his throat are both terrifying and sexy as hell. “Stand up and you can reach... yourself.” I can’t bring myself to say the word cock, or dick, or anything else. I feel like just mentioning it will make it worse.

“I will not!” he roars. “Sit the fuck down. On. The. Table! Now!”

I shout back. “No!”

He locks his eyes with mine, capturing me in a manic stare. “Sit down or I will strangle myself with these chains and put both of us out of our misery.”

I do as he says, perching on the edge, ready to jump up. I can stop this. I can do something. With my hands, my mouth. I

can put an end to his suffering. I remember all too vividly how awful it felt. I wouldn't have been able to deny anyone helping me. I'd have let a viper go down on me to ease the pain, and here Dade is, putting himself through it without any help. Any relief.

Frustrated tears roll down my face at how awful this is. When I needed him, he did what he had to do and now he's denying me the chance to help him. I don't want him to suffer. Even with everything that has happened between us, I can't bear to see him like this.

It goes on for an unbearably long time. I grip the edge of the table, unable to look away as he thrashes around, growling.

And then finally it's over. The lights flash a couple of times and the prison disappears into darkness. When the lights come back on, he's no longer manacled, yet his position on the floor hasn't changed. He's no longer thrashing, but his erection is still pressing against his pants, creating a bulge of epic proportions.

Amazingly, he lets me pull him upright, but then I don't think he's got any energy left in him to fight me off.

"You should have let me help you," I whisper in his ear, aware that the doors are going to open any second and that everyone will be looking at us.

"You did help me," he growls into my ear. "You stayed away."

It's not what I want to hear. "But I didn't want to. I could have done something."

He finally looks up and levels his gaze at me. His dark eyes appear tired. "Did you want me to rape you, Valentine?"

A shudder runs down my spine as I grasp the magnitude of the hell he's just put himself through for me. "Because that's what would have happened if I didn't shackle myself to the wall."

I don't get a chance to answer as the Earthery doors open to the sound of excited cheering.

STILL TINGLING

FELIX

“Felix,” Noémi grins lasciviously, thrusting a microphone in my face. “Ow was eet for you?”

Suppressing a surge of revulsion, I glance across the sea of faces fixated on me, cheering. Deriving joy from my lowest moment. The entertainment value they are finding in what happened sickens me. Still, I have a façade to maintain.

“Great,” I muster, standing as tall as I can and trying to ignore the throbbing from the bite marks on my dick and the euphoria from the best blow job I’ve ever had. It’s not an experience I want to share with these degenerates.

“Excuse me, Noémi,” I mutter, disengaging from the crowd and making my way through the throng until I reach the platform. Once I reach my room, I slam the door shut behind me and swiftly lock it.

Later, when a knock echoes on the door, I don’t respond. But as expected, Anthura doesn’t take not answering a door as a hint. She opens my door, even though I know it was locked, and slams it shut behind her.

My frustration boils over. “What do you want?” I bark.

“You let Rowena blow you?”

A sarcastic smile tugs at the corner of my lips as I retort, “Ah, thank you for the gentle reminder. I was just starting to forget that delightful encounter. Your timely intervention truly warms my heart.”

She glares at me.

I haven’t forgotten. My god damn cock is still tingling. I sit up. “What the fuck do you want, Anthura?”

She must see how dangerously close I am to losing it, as her demeanor changes in an instant. “Felix,” she purrs, sitting down on my bed next to me. “I think I’ve figured out how to swap partners. We can get rid of Robert and Moloch and let them do what they want with each other. Then…” she runs a finger up my thigh, “then we can do the last two trials together.”

Anger flares and I roughly grab her wrist. It’s only when I see the look of shock in her eyes that I realize I’ve gone too far. Being with Anthura in the next trials will solve all my problems. I won’t have to do anything with Rowena and I’m pretty sure being with a demon will increase my chances, even if she is only a contestant. I loosen my grip and bring her wrist up to my mouth. This seems to appease her. She leans forward and licks her lips, her now free hand going for my zipper. I pull away without thinking. “What’s your plan?” I ask, hopping down off the bed.

She leans out, stretching her body like a feline. “I have my ways. Nothing for you to worry about. Come back to bed and let me show you how a real woman gives head.”

I run my hand through my hair as I contemplate her offer. I’ve never turned down a blow job, but now I don’t want her fangs near my junk. “I think we should cool it a bit until

you've put your plan into place. We don't want anyone suspecting anything."

A fine line appears between her eyebrows. "Who gives a fuck what anyone thinks?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Hades, Noémi?"

She sits up and scowls. "Don't tell me you've still got a thing for that bitch after what she did to you? Don't think I didn't hear about your little stunt, trying to get into her pants with everyone watching. You've been the laughingstock amongst the demons for days. Quite frankly, Felix, you're becoming an embarrassment. First asking the fucking Queen of the Succubi into your bed in front of half the people in here, then letting that freak suck your dick."

I bristle at her words, and yet it's better to let her think that than what's really going on in my head. She's right about one thing. I shouldn't have asked Noémi out. That was a mistake. "No," I counter, "but I don't want to give her more ammunition. She's still in charge here."

Now it's Anthura's turn to bristle. As she turns her mouth down into a scowl, I get a glimpse of how truly repulsive she is. I don't know why I let her suck my dick as much as I did. Okay, I do. I'd let any simpering bitch down there as long as they were hot and Anthura is certainly hot. For a weird reason, Snowflake's sister comes to mind. I don't even remember her, but then again, there were many women in the lead up to my death. Then Rowena takes back her position in my brain and I have to focus on Anthura.

"Only until we go down to the next circle," she sniffs. "Then I'll make sure I'm in charge again." She gets up from the bed and languidly moves around it until we're face to face. I try to remain impassive as she cups my balls in her hand over

my pants. “Then we can be together and none of this shit will matter.”

“Great!” I curve my lips up into the most charming smile I can muster under the circumstances. I can’t wait until the bitch leaves me alone. I can’t throw her out because she might be my key out of here, but I want her in here less than I want a rabid hell hound to use my balls as a chew toy.

“Leave it to me.” She gives me the ghost of a wink, then kisses me on the mouth, forcing her sharp tongue between my teeth. I’ve never noticed before now, but under that strong perfume she wears is the unmistakable stench of sulfur. I resist the urge to gag.

“Bye for now, Darling.”

I give her a short wave as she heads toward the door. It’s all the enthusiasm I can muster. I let out a long breath when the door closes behind her and I can be alone again.

Even though I’m really beginning to hate her, I can’t deny that I’m turned on. It’s something about this place that makes me constantly horny. I lay back on the bed and bring my already hard cock out. As I fist it in my hand, I can’t help the image of Rowena that pops into my head. The way she knew exactly the right places to lick and the right pressure and speed to suck. The image of her blonde head bobbing up and down and her eyelashes fluttering. The way her dress fell open just enough for me to see her bra covered breasts as she made me come.

“Fuck” I come hard, spurting my cum all over my pants. Mortification fills me that it’s Rowena on my mind and how much I really fucking like it.

I rip the pants off and throw them to the floor in disgust before heading into the shower and washing off any thoughts of her and of Anthura. The quicker I get out of this Circle and down to Gluttony, the better. It's going to be safer stuffing my face with food than walking around with a constant boner.

That's what this is. I'm only thinking of Rowena in this way because I'm horny all the fucking time. I'd probably let myself be blown by that syphilitic baboon someone mentioned a couple of days back. It's not Rowena that's making me horny. It's this god forsaken place.

I don't want Rowena. I can't want her.

So why the fuck can't I get her out of my mind?

SWEATPANTS

The image of Dade's face and his confession is frozen at the forefront of my mind and no matter how much I try to think of anything but him, his words keep coming back to me.

Did you want me to rape you?

I remember too how painful and how desperate I felt when the tables were turned, but if Dade hadn't helped me willingly, would I have forced myself on him? I honestly don't know the answer. I was out of my mind, almost delirious. Dade had seen that and purposely made the world around us into a place where I could be safe... from him.

It's not just the images of what did happen, but what would have happened that are tormenting me. How would I have helped him? Would I have fucked him? Would I have enjoyed it?

I'm saved from that particular rabbit hole by a knock on the door. I left the cheering crowd behind me for a reason. I couldn't face having to be interviewed in front of everyone and having to tell them what happened in there. I'm pretty sure we got low points again. No one in this place is going to be happy watching one person being chained up without some sexy action being involved.

I heave myself off the bed, preparing myself to turn whoever it is away. My breath catches in my throat as I open the door to find Remy standing there. He looks like... Well; he looks like he's just come from a marathon Candice fucking session, which, considering what we've just been through, he probably has. His normally neat hair is tousled and wet through sweat and his shirt is only half buttoned. Depressingly, it's a sexy look on him.

"Can I come in?" His voice carries a note of desperation.

"No." I begin to shut the door, but he stops it with his hand. "Please Quinn. I have nowhere else to go, and I need help."

I shrivel up my nose. "You need a bath and some sleep. Go back to your room."

He runs his hand through his hair. "I can't. Candice is outside waiting for me. I saw her sitting by my door and fled."

I feel my face harden. "She's probably waiting for another fuck session, although I don't remember you being up to much when we had sex, so I guess after the last hour or so, she's going to be out of luck."

It's mean and petty, and I don't even care. I just want him out of my face.

When his face falls, I realize how bitchy I'm being. It's not like he had any choice in the activity we all participated in, although by the looks of it, he didn't chain himself to a wall like Dade did. "Use the back door. She'll not even know you're inside." I relent.

"She's not really the problem." His voice lowers. "I didn't have sex with her and that is what's creating the problem." He gestures down, and that's when I notice the bulge in his pants.

“Oh no.” I step backwards and hold my hands out as my stomach contracts. “What you and Candice did or didn’t do is up to you. There’s no way I’m being your fuck buddy. You have a problem, you deal with it yourself, or let Candice deal with it.”

“That’s just it. All the time I was in the Earthery and turned on, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. Candice was trying to seduce me and the awful music was playing in my ears, but I knew that if I slept with her, if only for the sake of the games, I’d never be with you again. So I restrained myself.”

“Do you want a medal?” I retort with a touch of sarcasm. “A gleaming, brand-new medal to display proudly, showcasing how exceptionally great you are?”

“Quinn, please,” he implores. “I’m dying here. I thought you’d understand.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, feeling sick to my stomach. “This is all just too much.”

I don’t know what makes him think I’d understand. “How did you resist?” I finally ask, genuinely curious now. Dade had almost gone insane with lust, as had I. And that was without the added threat of someone trying to seduce us. Neither time had we been willing partners. I’m pretty sure if Dade had given the slightest hint of wanting me in the first round, I’d have jumped his bones so quickly he wouldn’t have seen it coming.

“I closed my eyes and pictured the nights we spent together. It was a bittersweet agony all of itself. And then it was over, but now I’m left with this to remember it by.” He gestures downwards.

I let out a sigh and open the door fully to let him in. “Go and have a cold shower in my bathroom. Sort yourself out. I’m not going to help you, nor am I going to be in there with you, but you are very welcome to cool off before you go back to your room.”

I’m half regretting it as I close the door behind him, but it’s too late now.

“Thank you, Quinn.” He kisses my cheek softly before running off into the shower. The sound of water cascading down reminds me once again of the first challenge and how Dade stepped up and helped me in this exact same position. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t turned on, except when I picture Remy naked in my shower, the image swiftly turns to that of Dade and I can’t help but wonder if he’s thinking of me.

Even though I didn’t hear the music in the last trial, the general ambiance of this place has me keyed up pretty much all the time and after watching Dade, then hearing that Remy wants me and is currently jerking off to me in the shower has my blood pumping and heat pooling between my legs. I pick up the Hell Cell and walk around the room in an attempt to keep myself from following Remy’s lead, or worse still, joining him in the shower. I have enough problems without adding Remy to them. I’m hoping for messages from my friends, but for a change, neither Juliette and Rowena are replying to my messages. As I’m looking at the screen the Hell Cell beeps. It’s a group message from Noémi.

WELL DONE EVERYONE. I HAVE DECIDED THAT AS YOU WERE ALL SO ENTERTAINING IN THE FIRST ROUNDS THAT YOU WILL STICK WITH THE SAME PARTNER FOR THE SECOND ROUND

I stare at the phone, my mind blank. I can't seem to grasp any emotion. I feel numb. I'm going to have to do this all again with Dade. It's a shock to my system and yet I feel absolutely nothing. After the day I've had, the less I feel the better. The emotions will come, but for now, I just need to get through today without losing it. I take a deep breath and type off another quick message to Twila. Just like the first, it remains unread. I try to fixate on what that might mean, but the shower has stopped. I can't find any position to sit or stand in that doesn't make me feel self-conscious, so I drop my Hell Cell on the bed and perch next to it. As the door opens, I plaster an uninterested look on my face in the hopes he'll see that I'm not bothered by his presence and just leave. My mouth falls open when he comes out of the bathroom with only a towel around his waist. I'd forgotten how utterly delectable he was under his clothes. Rivulets of water run down over his bare pecs and chiseled abs. I follow one droplet down until it comes to a rest, soaking in the white towel just where the top of his pubic hair is peeking out. I swallow, then bring my eyes back upward quickly. So much for not looking bothered. I can already feel the heat creeping up to my cheeks.

"No clothes," he explains. "Mine are all sweaty."

I clench my thighs together and try to clear my head. "You can borrow something of mine. I think I have some sweat pants in the closet behind all the designer dresses and ball gowns. They might be a bit small, but they'll get you up to your room."

He nods and heads to my closet. I let out a long breath as he closes the door behind him. I'm nervous as much as I'm turned on and I don't know why. The turned on part is obvious. The demons that run this place pump all kinds of magical aphrodisiac crap into the air conditioning system to

keep everyone in a permanent state of arousal for their own fun. I pick up the Hell Cell and idly begin to play a game on it.

“I couldn’t find any underwear that fit, so I’m going commando. I hope that’s okay?”

I glance up from my game and my composure drops in an instant. He’s picked a pair of leggings which look ridiculous on him, but shows off his thick muscular thighs to perfection. I fasten my lips together as I take in the bulge in the top of them. He’s no longer erect, which is a small mercy. The leggings leave nothing to the imagination at all. He may as well be naked in front of me. I avert my gaze from him, bringing it back down to the game, which I’m now losing. I know if I look up again, I’m going to lose it entirely.

“Maybe you’d have been better in one of the dresses after all,” I joke.

“You don’t think these suit me?”

I look up again to find him wiggling his hips in a comical manner.

I bite back a laugh. “At least go find a t-shirt. Preferably a very long one.”

If I thought covering him up with a t-shirt would help, I was wrong. He pulls one of the few t-shirts I own over his head. It’s so tight it looks like it might rip and it’s doing a woeful job of hiding his body.

“I think you should go out the back way or it won’t be just Candice you have to worry about,” I say, ushering him to the back door. As he walks past me, I’m treated to a view of his perfect ass. If only my clothes made me look as good as he does in them.

I think I can finally breathe when he turns at the door. “I never did apologize to you for bringing Candice in here with me.”

“Actually you did,” I admit. “Multiple times. I just didn’t want to hear it.”

He shakes his head, a look of contrition on his face. “Not properly. Listen. I fucked up. I know I did. I was scared, and it was like a minute to go and I panicked. I’m sorry.”

I shrug. It doesn’t matter now, anyway. “It’s fine.”

I try to brush him off, but he’s relentless. “It’s not fine. I have to see you go into these trials with that murderer, and every time, I pray that you’ll come out of it unscathed. Just tell me one thing. Did he hurt you in there?”

I don’t want to talk about Dade with Remy. I honestly don’t want to think about them both at the same time at all. They are both in my life but may as well travel in different stratospheres.

“He didn’t touch me,” I mumble.

Remy nods thoughtfully and I think I see relief in his eyes. “Look. Why don’t you let me make it up to you? There’s a restaurant in the very back part of the entertainment level that I’ve not tried before. I hear they flame grill the food right in front of you. It’s called Unholy. How about I meet you there at seven tomorrow night and we can chat?”

I look into his eyes and see only eagerness in them. “I don’t want to date you.” I pause. “I don’t want to date anyone. I just want to get through the games to find Jenny.”

He holds his hands up. “It’s not a date. Just dinner. I promise not to try anything on.”

I find myself relenting, if only to get him to leave my room. It might not be the worst thing in the world. If I can get through the last two trials without shattering, I can handle a dinner.

When I close the door behind him, I flop down on the bed. Once again, Dade has treated me to one of the most intense experiences of my life and I'm going out with Remy.

PERVERTED THINGS

“Holy shit, girl. You blew Felix?” I don’t think I’ve ever seen Juliette more animated as she grills Rowena over lunch the next day.

Rowena shrugs and I can’t believe how complacent she’s being. “It wasn’t my finest hour. I had to. His dick was like a fourth of July firework and I was scared it was going to go off and literally kill me.”

“Damn!” Juliette comments, a wry grin on her face. “So you decided to make it go off for him. You should have bitten it clean off after all the shit he’s put you through.”

“I did think about it,” she admits, “but I decided I didn’t like the idea of bits of his dick getting stuck in my teeth.”

I shrivel up my nose at the picture of Felix’s dismembered... member.

“Besides, I was worried Noémi would throw me out of the games if I murdered my partner, so I figured it was better to keep him alive than having him bleed out.”

“Did you swallow?”

Another gross image pops into my mind at Juliette’s question and I have to take a sip of the champagne someone left in front of me.

Rowena's cheeks turn pink. "I made him think I did."

A crevice appears between Juliette's eyes. "What do you mean?"

"He started to cum so pulled back after getting a bit in my mouth. He came so hard he hit his own face with it. Then I made him a juice and spit his own cum in it, hiding it with ice."

"You didn't," Juliette chokes out laughing.

Rowena's lips turn up at the edges. "Yeah, I did. He drank the whole lot down."

"But how could you?" I say, trying not to choke on the bubbles as Juliette wipes tears of laughter from her eyes. "Wasn't it gross?"

"Gross?" Maggie pipes up from the next table. I know she's not the only one who's been listening to our conversation. Since the second part of the first trial, Juliette seems to have become even more popular, and even Rowena has acquired some fans. I doubt all the people who've chosen to sit in our part of the restaurant are here for me.

"The dude is heavenly," Maggie gushes. "I'd suck him off even if my place in the games didn't depend on it." She mouths the words 'not really babe' at Colin, who's sitting a couple of tables away and rolling his eyes. She gives us all a thumbs up then walks back to her table.

"How does she even know?" I mutter.

"Babe! Everyone knows," Juliette responds with enthusiasm, a mischievous glint in her eyes. She gestures around at the bustling crowd of people seated near us, as if to emphasize her point. "Why do you think we are suddenly so popular?"

I get a faintly queasy sensation in my stomach. “I didn’t know until I came down for lunch.”

“She watched the video playback on the big screen after she came out of the Earthery.” Rowena sniffs.

My mouth falls open in astonishment, and I turn my gaze towards Juliette. “You actually stayed around to watch that?”

Juliette shrugs. “I wanted to scope out the competition, that’s all.”

My mouth goes dry as I try to imagine my best friend watching what transpired in the Earthery and I’ve never been so glad that Dade chose to manacle himself to the wall.

Rowena huffs. “Wanted to see what her own ass cheeks looked like on the big screen more like.”

Juliette lifts her nose in the air. “I wanted to make sure my cellulite didn’t show up. Is that a crime? It doesn’t matter because they didn’t show me, anyway. They didn’t show everyone. They didn’t show Remy and Candice either, but they did show what Dade did!” She gives me a wink that makes me cringe.

“What did Dade do?” Rowena’s eyes turn to me. “Was it vile? Kinky? Did he hurt you?”

I don’t want to talk about Dade and what happened in the second part of the trial any more than I want to tell the girls that I’m going for dinner with Remy this evening. I already know what they’ll say if I tell them. I’ll have to at some point, but I’ll do it when there’s not so many people around. I don’t like that half of Hell know what Dade did for me. I’m still not sure if he was being chivalrous or if he thought he was actually going to hurt me. What Rowena just said has put it into perspective for me, though. She could have hurt Felix, but

she chose not to because if Felix was out of the games there's a good chance she would be too. Maybe that's the only reason I'm still alive. Dade can't kill me while I'm still his partner. Not if he wants to get through to the next round. That means, as long as we are still together and in the second circle, I'll survive.

“He didn't do anything.”

“Nothing? Couldn't he get it up or something?” She nods upwards toward the leader board. “You got zero points.”

My eyes flick up to the screen and see mine and Dade's names right at the bottom of the Leader board. Rowena, thanks to what she did to Felix, has shot up, overtaking us, and of course Juliette is still at the top with a perfect score of twenty.

My heart falls. Zero points this half of the first round. Twenty-six other couples are above us. I try to work out the score. If Dade and I get ten points in the next two trials, whatever it might be, and literally everyone else gets zero, we'll still not make it to the Third Circle. Noémi's words come back to me. Only ten couples will go through to the next circle. We're out. Because of Dade's actions, or lack of action in this case, we're both doomed to stay here forever. With a sharp intake of breath, I realize that we're not only going to be stuck in hell, but in this Circle. There's no going back to Purgatory where, at least, my body was my own and not turned on and fizzing with desire by the slightest thing.

This is it.

Forever.

“I can't imagine Dade having a problem like that,” Maggie shouts over from her table. “So many men. So little time. I

guess if you stay behind and we do too, we could do a bit of partner swapping? What do you say?"

"Hmmm," I mumble, not really listening. "I'm going out tonight. I have to go get ready." I slip out of the booth and practically race back to my room. I pull up the score board on my Hell Cell and despair at our rank. Less than a minute after I've closed my door, there's a knock at it.

"Quinn. You okay?" someone shouts through.

I open the door to find Juliette and Rowena.

Rowena looks at me with pity. "I didn't think anyone else could possibly have it worse than me, but you look like you've swallowed a lemon. What's going on?"

"I'm out," I say, holding the Hell Cell up to show them. Juliette takes it from my hand as she shuts the door behind her.

"Look. I'm at the bottom. I worked it out. There's no way I can get into the top ten now. Not even if I do something amazing like bang all the guys in here."

"You'll put Juliette out of a job if you do that," Rowena teases, settling onto my bed.

Beside her, Juliette rolls her eyes. "It's not that bad. I bet there's a way around this. Maybe you could ask to switch partners? It's his fault you got a zero score, not yours."

"I don't even know if Dade's the problem. I can't stop thinking about him." I admit with a hint of frustration. "I'm going to dinner with Remy tonight and I can't get the image of Dade out of my head. It's driving me insane."

"If you really want him," Juliette says softly. "I don't see the problem."

I sit on the bed and let my head fall into my hands. “He’d rather manacle himself to a dungeon wall than touch me?” I let out a sigh. “We are at the bottom of the leader board and I have to do the next trial with him, which is going to be horrific. I didn’t know what to do during that last trial. Dade told me to sit and watch him suffer and I could have done something. I should have.” I sigh. “I couldn’t do it. I was glad that Dade told me not to come near him. It felt so wrong.”

“Oh honey.” Juliette takes my hand. “We’re in Hell. It’s a little too late for us to be thinking about what’s right and wrong. No one cares about morals here. You’ve got to forget that part of yourself.”

“I can’t.” I say, raising my voice. “When I’m near him, my body freezes in fear and I’m more turned on than I’ve ever been in my whole life.”

Rowena strokes my face. If anyone else did that, I’d be irritated at the intrusion, but with Rowena, it’s calming. “That’s this place. You think I’d have ever given Felix a blow job if the air wasn’t being pumped full of sex chemicals? It’s the only thing that helped me to do it. This isn’t about you or Dade. You’re in this for Jenny. Remember that.”

I bow my head and squeeze my eyes tightly, biting back a sob. “I didn’t even think of her when I was in that room with Dade. What does that make me?”

“It makes you human,” Rowena says. “Which is more than I can say for most of the people in here. But if you want to get to Jenny, you’ll have to stop this pity party. Think of Dade as a tool to get you what you want. We’ll go and speak to Noémi and find out if there’s anything you can do about the point situation. It might not matter in the next trial, anyway. Maybe our points reflect who goes first into the second trial?”

I wipe away the one tear that's escaped as Juliette types something into her Hell Cell before putting it on speaker. It rings a couple of times before Noémi answers.

“Bonjour, ma belle, Juliette. To what do I owe ze pleasure?”

Next to Juliette, Rowena mimes sticking her fingers down her throat. I see her opinion of Noémi hasn't changed in the last couple of days.

“I was just wondering about the points system for the games,” Juliette begins.

“You are doing wonderfully. I zink you and Orlin have been practicing, no?”

Juliette scrunches up her nose. “Not exactly. It was actually the final trial I was wondering about. Say, theoretically, I didn't have enough points to get me into the Third Circle. Does that mean there's no point bothering with the other trials at all?” She holds her fingers up and crosses them.

“Ma cherie, you weel not 'ave a problem.”

“No, I know, but theoretically.”

There's a pause. “I zink you are with your friend, Quinn, no? Tell ze beautiful girl not to worry. The final trial 'as fifty points at stake.”

I let out a breath and my muscles relax. I'm still in.

“She still 'as a chance of getting into ze top ten, but she really 'as to talk to zat 'andsome man of 'ers. Communication is key, no?”

Juliette gives me a thumbs up and a grin. “Thanks Noémi.”

“Anytime, Cherie.”

Juliette hangs up and puts the Hell Cell back in her pocket. “Told you not to worry, babe, but she’s right. Whatever perverted thing you’ve gotta do to Dade’s body in the second trial, you’d better psyche yourself up for it if you ever want to get out of this place.”

“Close your eyes and think of Jenny!” Rowena adds. “Now that we can all breathe again. What’s this about you going on a date with Remy?”

WASTED

FELIX

I need a damn drink. Staying holed up in this room any longer and I'll go batshit crazy. Besides, Anthura's like a leech, and I'm not keen on getting tangled up with her again. No matter how much I dread facing Rowena's humiliation, I sure as hell aren't jumping into Anthura's web. She's become a nuisance, sapping my damn energy. Tonight, I'm hitting a bar, getting wasted, so I don't have to think about either of them.

I'm pretty sure Anthura isn't going to be hanging around the entertainment level, but who knows about Rowena? Shit, I don't know a thing about her except that somewhere along the line, I've started using 'she' and 'woman' for her. It's the only way I can make sense of what went down yesterday. Slipping on a jacket, I make my way out, avoiding any chance encounters. Pushing through the main foyer, I feel the weight of everyone's stares on me like they've got nothing better to do. Fuck them. They haven't got a damn clue what those trials do to you. They'll never understand the pain I felt before Rowena...

I smack the elevator button, waiting impatiently for the doors to slide open. Downstairs, the entertainment level mirrors Purgatory's, except it's painted in goddamn red and

pink. Feels like I'm in some giant blood vessel, about as sexy as a soggy fish. The demons here are crazy for those colors. I steer toward the Brimstone Bistro, but the crowd pushes me away. I'm not in the mood for company tonight. This floor's like a whole damn city, but the dim light's a blessing, letting me slink through unnoticed. I pass sex club after sex club with half dressed men and women writhing in pink lit windows, attempting to entice passers by in. Eventually, I spot a bar, darker than the devil's soul. I find a stool, slap the bar, and order a Dragonfire Whisky.

“That'll mess you up quickly.”

I squint in the darkness to make out the person sitting next to me as the bartender drops my drink in front of me.

“You should drink water and repent.”

Orlin Moss. Of all the people to find sitting next to me. He's wearing a knitted green sweater vest, twinning it with an expression of miserable condescension.

“Why are you in a bar if drinking is only for sinners?” I query, not giving a fuck. I had enough of the miserable bastard when we were partnered up together in Purgatory.

I knock back the whisky and hold up my hand to get the bartender's attention.

“This is where sinners go,” the dull motherfucker explains. “I like to tell them the evil of their ways.”

“Sure thing,” I say, swiveling to the bartender. “Double up and toss one his way, too.”

“Water!” Orlin chimes in, raising his voice in almost a panic. “Get me a water, please. No ice.”

I smirk. “Yeah, let's not go too wild, eh?”

The bartender drops a drink each in front of us. Orlin picks his drink up but doesn't sip at it.

"Tell me," I say, turning to him. "How the hell are you doing so well in your trials? Everyone seems to know my business, but for someone who doesn't like to sin, you're doing awfully well."

I'm pretty sure the Juliette bitch is knocking him out while she goes to town on his body. There's no other explanation and nothing would surprise me about her.

"It's the devil's work, that's for sure."

I raise my eyebrows as I down my second whisky. "That's very insightful, Orlin. As usual, it's been a great pleasure talking to you." I clap his back and make to leave. I'll have a bottle of whisky brought up to my room and feign sleep if Anthura comes round.

"Take these two," Orlin says, putting one hand on my arm and directing my attention to a couple in a booth. I'm about to chew him out for touching my six thousand dollar suit when I recognize the pair. If it isn't Remy and Snowflake. I thought he'd ditched her after the last circle. Fucking idiot. He had it made with Candice. Sure, she's an empty-headed bimbo, but she's an okay lay. Still, Snowflake is looking hot these days too. She's changed since coming in here, but that could be the fucking bullshit ambience they pump through this place, or the dragonfire whisky talking.

"Nice chatting with you, Orlin," I say, pulling my arm out from under Orlin's hand. "Don't let me catch you doing any sinning, alright?"

As I approach Remy and Snowflake, my already black mood darkens. I'm spoiling for a fight, if only to get rid of

some of my pent up energy. Snowflake cringes when I squeeze into the seat next to her and rest my hand on her leg. “Slumming it again, Remy? I thought you’d seen the light, but I guess not?”

I’m more than a little mollified when I see a hint of anger in his eyes.

“We’re on a date,” he points out as Snowflake grips my hand in hers and rips it away from her bare leg.

Quinn stiffens and I don’t think it has anything to do with me touching her bare flesh.

“How lovely,” I grin at him. The whisky is stronger than usual, or maybe I’m feeling the effects because I’ve not eaten all day due to not wanting to leave my room. “I see you’ve chosen the one place where it’s pretty much guaranteed that no one will see you with Snowflake here.” I gesture to the surrounding space. “Dark isn’t it?”

His expression is ticking with anger, but I know Remy well enough to know that he won’t want to bring attention to himself by punching me. Dude doesn’t have the balls.

“Didn’t work so well, did it?” Snowflake grumbles, shooting me a venomous glare. “I mean, you’re here.”

“Happy accident. I’m not the only one.” I nod toward the bar. “Orlin had his eyes glued to you two. Maybe if you’re lucky, he’ll join you for a threesome. You both need the points.”

“You’re drunk,” Snowflake points out. She’s right. I am. Two fucking dragonfire whiskies and I’m wasted. It’s not enough to shun the fucking horrible thoughts of Rowena sucking me off, even if I am having trouble stringing sentences together.

“You are friends with Rowena,” I say before I can stop myself.

Snowflake levels her gaze at me. “I am and if you even think about hurting her, you won’t have to worry about Dade ripping your head off. I’ll do it myself.” She looks shocked at her own words and opposite, Remy looks like I’ve just pissed in his champagne glass.

“What the fuck has Dade got to do with anything?” I grumble.

Normally I’d get some satisfaction at the awkwardness that’s now festering between all three of us, but she’s hitting close to the mark and I don’t like it.

I do want to hurt Rowena. I want to hurt her more than I ever wanted to hurt anyone. Because before, it was just a bit of fun, but now I need to do something to get her out of my head. At least I’m not the only one fucked up.

This circle is like a disease, opening festering wounds all over the place.

“Nothing,” she says, casting her eyes downwards. “Just don’t hurt her.” She looks back at me with renewed anger. “She’s the only reason you’re doing so well in this fucked up game. You’d do well to remember what she’s putting herself through for this.”

We’re doing well?

Last time I checked the scoreboard after the first part of the first trial, we were right at the bottom. I want to pull my Hell Cell out and check, but I won’t give her the satisfaction.

“Yeah, she sucked my dick,” I snarl. “It’s not like I’ve not had plenty of women giving me head. Once you’ve finished with limp dick here, I might let you have a go.”

Remy stands as if to punch me, but he's too late. I've got no interest in fighting the guy. I'm leaving.

"I think she's got to you more than you think." Snowflake smirks as I pull myself up. "This is the first time I've heard you call her a woman. Maybe you like her more than you want to admit"

"Fuck you." I sway as I leave the restaurant. I had two drinks. Two! And I let Snowflake think I've changed my mind about Rowena. I haven't. She's a fucking nightmare that I can't wake up from.

The world is swaying as I pull out my Portal and bring up the score board. We're not at the top, but we've eked our way into the top ten. We got ten points for the second part. Only Fucking Orlin Moss and Juliette Perez equaled our score.

I stumble my way back to the platform. I don't know what makes me do it, but as the platform rises past the second floor, I hop off onto the balcony, letting the platform go up without me. The huge silver numbers mark the doors. I've never been to this floor before, but I know which is her room thanks to a quick search on the Portal. I need to tell her what I think of her before other people start getting any ideas like fucking Snowflake Valentine.

I knock at the door with one hand while grabbing the door frame with the other to stop from falling over.

When she opens the door, I'm ready for her.

She looks shocked to find me standing on her doorstep. She's wearing a white nightdress which is ever so slightly see through and hints of her curves show through.

"You are a fucking disgusting bitch," I slur, "and I hate you to the very depths of my soul."

DICK SIZE ISN'T REALLY THE PROBLEM

Felix sways slightly before falling over in a heap in my doorway.

“Charming.” As I stare down at the man who’s made my life a living hell, my first instinct is to kick his sorry ass out of the way of my door to shut it and if he happens to fall off the edge of the balcony so be it. If it wasn’t for the fact that he is the only thing between me getting out of here and being stuck here for all of eternity, I probably would have. Because eternity would have to be shared with him.

“Fuck me!” I grab his arm and drag him into my room before anyone sees. I’ve never been one to put myself in a dangerous position, but being who I am, danger follows me whether I want it or not. Being alone with a man whose last words to me were how much he hates me, makes this one of the worst positions I can be in. The stench of Dragonfire Whiskey is rolling off him in waves. Why is it these tiny-dicked men have to get raving drunk before they get up the courage to spew their vitriol? Not that he is small-dicked. His dick was actually on the large size.

“That’s not the point,” I murmur to myself as I shut the door behind him and ponder his unconscious body. He’s got tiny-dick energy, and that’s my point.

Either way, dick size isn't really the problem here. The problem is how to get him the fuck out of my apartment before he kills me.

I nudge him with my foot to make sure he really is unconscious, and then, when he doesn't rouse, I kick him hard enough to leave a bruise on his side. It brings me more satisfaction than I care to admit.

I've spent my life living in a world where people think they are better than me, purely because of who I am. In pretty much every circumstance, I've been the subject of, at best, other people's fun at my expense and, at worst, danger. A man killed me because he didn't like the fact he couldn't pigeonhole me into what he wanted me to be. Felix hasn't hurt me physically yet, but he's barely any better. He's done everything he can to bring me down. Once upon a time I would have let him, but now I'm the one in the position of power. From the second my lips touched his dick, he was at my mercy and not the other way around. And here we are again, where his safety and wellbeing is in my hands. Glorious.

I sit on the bed while I try to make a plan. Obviously, I can't let him wake up here, but at the same time, I don't want to be carrying him up to his room. Not where the likes of Anthura might catch us. If Anthura thinks for one minute Felix has been in my room, I wouldn't put it past her to get Felix disqualified. And if Felix gets disqualified, then I do too. Thanks to my magnificent blow job skills, we're now in the top ten. We only have to get through the next two trials, and I can move down to the next circle, no longer tethered to him. The next circle is Gluttony, so the only thing I'll need to be eating is food and not Felix's scrawny dick...

Okay, not so scrawny. I hate how I keep coming back to it.

I've never given a blow job that wasn't forced on me in my entire life. Men wanting the power over me, or viewing me as a novelty, made dragging me into club toilets or dark alleys a more commonplace event than I want to remember. The simple act of going to a bar was never simple. I've never known the touch of a man to be anything other than brutal. Yesterday was the first time I've given a blow job where there was no one gripping my hair, pulling me forward and backward until I gag on their cum and they could throw me to the ground like a piece of trash.

I stare at him for a good few minutes while I reflect on my miserable life, and so far, pretty crummy death. I thought once I had a real body, one that I felt comfortable in and wasn't a result of surgeries, I'd be happy, but it turns out a real vagina and breasts don't take away the bullshit.

Bullshit from the likes of Felix Barclay.

He looks like a fucking angel, even in the weird position I've dragged him into on the floor. Years ago, I might have dreamed about ending up with someone like him. Rich, great looking, powerful. Years ago, I was naïve. I head to the closet and grab a scarf.

If I can't throw him out, I can at least make myself safe. I haul him to a sitting position by the side of my bed. His head falls onto my shoulder as I wrap the scarf tightly around his wrists and bind him to the bed post. When I'm done, I step back and check out my work. I don't know if it's going to hold him. I can see at least three ways he can escape, then press a pillow to my face while I sleep. It's no consolation that it takes a lot to kill someone in Hell. I can feel pain and I'm partial to breathing. I pick up my Portal and, after throwing a robe over

my nightdress, I head out through the back door. I don't want to be around when he wakes up and discovers where he is. If he's still tied to the bed in the morning, I'll ask Juliette and Quinn to help me untie him. He can't fight all of us at once. As it is, I'm already going to impede on them. I head next door to Juliette's room first. There's a red ribbon tied around the door handle. From those nights when we shared a room, Juliette told me that she'd tie a ribbon on the door handle if she... in her words - was fucking someone's brains out. I guess old habits die hard. I call the platform and head up to Quinn's room, hoping like hell that she's not decided to invite Remy back with her. There's no answer. Her date must be going almost as well as Juliette's.

I cup my hands to my face and let out a string of quiet expletives. I have nowhere else to go. I could sleep on one of the love seats in the lounge or even lay along one of the benches in the restaurant, but there I'll be exposed to questions. Plus, eff it, why should I give Felix more power over me? It's time I pull up my big girl panties and deal with him once and for all.

When I get back to my room, I find he's slumped over so his head is now on the floor. His arms are still tied to the bedpost behind him, though they are crossed in what looks like a painful position.

“Damn!”

I untie his hands and pull them in front of him before putting him in the recovery position. I'll be damned if let him into my bed with me, but at the same time I don't want to wake up to him choking on his own vomit. I use the scarf to bind his legs instead of his hands. It won't stop him from

being able to strangle me, but if he tries to run after me, he'll fall on his face.

The bottom of my nightdress drapes over his face as I step over him and get into bed. I lay there, listening to him breathing, full of nerves in case the deep breaths stop and I'll somehow be held accountable for him dying on my bedroom floor. When I'm sure he's both breathing and still unconscious, I let myself relax. He's going to be like a bear with his balls in a trap in the morning, but I can't deal with it tonight. After the day I've had, sleep is the only thing that's going to prepare me for the onslaught I know I'll face when I wake up.

“Rowena.”

At first I think I'm dreaming, but when I hear my name being called again, my eyes shoot open. I move to the edge of the bed and peek over. Felix is pretty much where I've left him, but the hand under his head has moved slightly.

“Rowena.”

Shit! “What?” I hiss back. When he doesn't answer, I dare to look more closely. He's still asleep. He's calling for me in his sleep? My nerves begin to pick up as I wonder if he's dreaming of punching my lights out when he speaks again.

“That's good. Just there. Hmmm.”

I clamp my hand to my mouth to stop any noise from escaping. He's sleep-talking about me giving him a blowjob!

Holy shit!

He lets out a low groan at the same time I let out a long breath between my fingers. Felix Barclay is having a sex dream about me and judging by the low grunts emanating from him, he's enjoying it.

This would be hilarious if it wasn't so bad. If he wakes up and remembers his dream while he's still here and I'm watching him, I might as well stick a knife right into my heart now. I know men like Felix. Terrified of anything impacting their own image. Terrified of their own feelings. I want to kick him again, but I know this is not the time. The best thing I can do is close my eyes and pretend I can't hear any of it.

I watch him, barely seeing him in the darkness. He looks happy. I've seen many expressions on his face, mostly ones of disgust or condescension, but I think this is the first sincere smile I've seen cross his face. I want to reach out and touch his face. Horror fills me at the thought. He'd probably chew my hand off if he knew what I'm thinking. What I'm about to do. It's like putting a honey coated hand in a bear's cage and prodding its ass, but I can't help myself. I want to touch someone without them looking at me like I'm an alien. I want to touch Felix and not have him recoil in disgust.

I want to touch Felix.

Oh my god, I want to touch Felix.

It's like some perverse urge, but I can't keep my hand from reaching out. I stroke the back of my finger down his cheek. My heart is thumping in my chest the whole time, afraid that he'll wake up. He stirs slightly but doesn't wake. His skin is softer than it looks and the illicitness of what I'm doing, or the danger in what I'm doing, is more exciting than when I sucked his cock earlier. Because then he couldn't do anything. Then he had to take what I gave, but here in my room, I have no safety net. Maybe that's why touching him is thrilling me in ways it shouldn't.

I run my finger down until I reach stubble. Felix is usually clean shaven, but he's not shaved today. Feeling braver than I

should and fueled by a desire I've not felt before, I run my thumb over his lips.

“Rowena?”

I pull back sharply and turn over in bed, holding my breath. My chest is bursting before I breathe out. Low snores tell me he was still talking in his sleep.

I check my portal. It's five thirty am. I don't usually get up until seven, but I know there's no way I'm going to get any more sleep tonight. I've gotten way too close to the fire and somehow managed to not get burned. I was lucky. I quietly get out of bed and tiptoe to the closet where I dress as quietly as I can. After brushing my teeth and running a brush through my hair. I turn back to look at Felix. He's still sleeping. I fill a glass of water and leave it next to him and then, as an afterthought, find two painkillers in my bag which I leave beside the water. Then I untie him. It will solve the problem of how to get him out of my room. Once he wakes up and sees where he is, he'll get himself out. I don't need to be here when he does it.

YOU'VE BEEN A NAUGHTY BOY

My bed feels awfully empty as I wake up alone. Last night was an antidote to what happened in the Earthery with Dade. A palate cleanser between courses of torture and stress, but not even that was enough to persuade me to invite Remy into my room. I close my eyes and try to remember the night, but the image of Dade's agonized face is at the forefront of my mind and I know that no matter how many dinners I have with Remy, it won't erase what happened yesterday. I open my eyes in a desperate attempt to rid my thoughts of Dade, and when that doesn't help; I hop into the shower. Remy's clothes are still on the floor, folded neatly. After I'm showered, I pick up his t-shirt and inhale, hoping that will do something to sway my persistent brain away from the one topic I really want to extinguish from it. When that doesn't work, I fold it back up, brush my long hair and braid it, before getting dressed. From the bathroom I hear my Hell Cell signal a message.

A quick check lets me know that there's another briefing in the lounge in an hour. I know I still have a chance to be in the top ten and therefore get to the next circle. As I make to put the Hell Cell down, another message comes through. It's from Remy.

I HAD A GREAT TIME LAST NIGHT,
BEAUTIFUL

I allow myself an indulgent smile. Last night was lovely, except for the brief interlude where Felix turned up and spent ten minutes trying to paw my leg whilst talking crap about Rowena. I don't want to think about Felix Barclay, so I shift my mind back to Remy. He groveled last night and I think he was sincere. It wasn't enough for me to want to invite him back into my bed. Not when Dade was still taking up way too much of my head space, but it was a start.

My heart skips a beat as it always does as I step out onto the platform, but I'm not going to let my fear of heights get in my way today. Whatever Noémi has in store for me, I can take it.

Even if it does mean doing it with Dade.

I ignore the little voice in the back of my head. I'll have to talk to him at some point about what happened in the Earthery, but it can wait.

As the platform passes the second floor, Felix opens a door and steps out, faltering when he sees me. My eyes lock with his as I try to process what I'm seeing. Felix's room is on the eighth floor somewhere, I'm sure of it. My eyes follow him as the platform goes lower, and it's only when I reach the bottom floor that I realize who's room he was leaving.

Rowena's!

Felix. In Rowena's room! The venom that dripped from his words as he discussed her lingers vividly from last night. Without stepping off the platform, I stamp down on the button that will take me back up. An icy shiver dances down my spine as I absorb the sight of Felix's shifty expression and his

disheveled appearance. His eyes are tinged red, no doubt from the alcohol he was drinking last night. His shirt is untucked and his top button is open. He's in the same clothes he was wearing last night.

An eruption of anger surges within me, drowning out any hesitation. "What the fuck have you done to her?" I scream as I step off the platform on to the second floor where Felix is still standing.

Felix remains planted to the floor, his arm using Rowena's door frame to steady himself. Despite the fact he looks like shit, he's still managing to look down at me as though I'm a cockroach. "I don't know what the fuck is going through that tiny brain of yours, Snowflake, but I'm just going for a morning stroll."

"Bullshit!" I inhale deeply. "I just saw you stumble out through the door." Closing the distance between us, a gust of whisky-laden breath assaults my senses, triggering an involuntary recoil. My veins course with a fiery surge of anger as I hold my finger up to his face. It takes everything I have to keep my tone even. "If I find her hurt in there, I will fucking kill you!"

He grabs my arm and glares at me, his anger matching my own. "Keep your fucking voice down..." he hisses, squeezing my wrist. "or you'll be going down to the ground floor without the platform. She's not even in there, you stupid bitch."

I wrench my hand from his grip and push past him. Of course, the door is locked.

"Where is she?"

A frozen hardness stills his face. "How the fuck should I know? I just told you. She's not in there!"

“So you broke in?” I hammer on the door, willing Rowena to come out. The thought of her in there, broken, somehow fills me with dread. I know what Felix is capable of when he’s sober. Drunk and as angry as he was last night, makes him downright dangerous.

He folds his arms and leans back on the doorframe, clearly irritated. “No.”

My heart is beating in double time and his vague answers are making this worse. He’s deriving some perverse pleasure from this situation. It’s as if this is just another twisted game to him, and history has proven that Felix is a master at playing and winning these games.

With a growing sense of frustration, it becomes clear he’s not going to tell me what’s going on, so I pull the Hell Cell from my pocket and call Rowena. I let out a relieved breath when she picks up on the first ring.

“I’m having breakfast before the briefing,” she says, sounding remarkably chirpy. “Come join me if you like. We can both endure the porn pancakes and sexy syrup together.”

“Fuck!” I heave out in a rush. “I thought you were... I thought...” I glance up at Felix, who’s watching me with a mix of triumph and curiosity. I keep my eyes fixed on his as I speak. “Felix was in your room.”

“Was?” There’s a pause. “He’s gone?”

“You know?” I ask incredulously. I narrow my eyes in confusion as Felix pushes past me and steps onto the platform that’s still waiting. I jump on with him, much to his disgust.

“He was drunk,” Rowena explains. “He came to my room to talk dirt to me, then dramatically swooned onto my floor. You should have seen it. If I’d have known in advance, I

would have brought popcorn and set up a mini concession stand. Maybe even sold tickets to the show—Felix’s Fantastic Floor Fumble: A-One-Night-Only Theatrical Extravaganza!”

I gape at Felix with my mouth open. He clearly looks uncomfortable now that Rowena is telling her side of the story.

“I left him to it,” she continues. “Why do you think I’m having breakfast so early?”

“I’ll see you down there,” I manage, my mouth caught in a half smile. “Order for me?” I don’t hang up, though I pretend to. I want Rowena to hear what’s going to come next.

I can’t help my grin widening as I take in the look of unease on Felix. “You’ve been a naughty boy!” I wiggle my forefinger at him as though I’m chastising an insolent puppy.

His mouth pulls into a leer. “Shut it, bitch. Nothing happened and if you tell anyone that it did...”

He sounds like a high school kid who’s just been caught sneaking a quick joint at the back of the school. It’s way too good to resist. “Defensive much? You clearly don’t know if something happened.” I lean in to him and whisper just loudly enough for Rowena to hear. “What do you think happened between you and Rowena, Felix?”

I can practically hear Rowena holding her breath on the other end of the phone. I’m pretty sure that whatever comes out of his mouth is going to be complete bullshit.

He runs his hands through his hair manically, then straightens. I’ve seen him like this before. Once, when I confronted him about Jenny. This is the part where he comes over all superior. He’d pull it off too if he didn’t look like shit. Without his body guard and his rich bitch friends to bolster

him, he's actually beginning to look scared. Big bad Felix isn't as cocky as he makes out when there's no audience.

"I know nothing happened between me and your freak of a friend," he blusters. "I wouldn't go near her with a fucking bargepole."

"I think you're overestimating the size of your dick just a tad here, Felix, but whatever." I lick my lips. "Here's what I think. I think you liked Rowena sucking your dick and you can't admit it to yourself because you've been a disgusting, slimy asshole to her for months. Maybe you need to take a good long look at yourself and think about who is the freak in this relationship."

Felix's face becomes taut and I can practically see the steam coming out of his ears. "There is no fucking relationship between me and Rowena."

"That's right," I say, jumping off the platform as it comes to a halt on the bottom floor. "Because Rowena is so much better than you'll ever be. At least she knows who she is. Maybe one day you'll figure out who you really are and own up to your shit."

Without looking back, I head through the door to the lounge, purposely not leaving it open for Felix. That felt good. I can't do anything to him about what he did to Jenny, but I hope holding a mirror up to his conceited, self-centered face will make him atone for his actions. I doubt it, but it's the best I can hope for.

**I MIGHT HAVE KICKED HIM A
LITTLE**

“**O**h my god, I love you!” Rowena squeals as she jumps out of her seat and envelops me into a hug. “I only wish I could have seen his face as you stuck it to him.”

Juliette pushes a plate toward me. It’s full of heart-shaped pancakes covered in some kind of red syrup. “I kinda want to see his dick now. You know, just to see if it is the size of a bargepole.” She turns to Rowena, who’s beaming. “Your hair was in the way when they showed it on the big screen. They got the angle all wrong.”

Rowena holds her hands up facing each other and pulls them apart the length of her dinner plate. “Honestly, it’s not far off. I almost choked on the bloody thing.”

Juliette sputters and nearly spits a mouthful of pancakes out as I laugh.

“He’s an idiot.” I smirk. “Just for the record, though, what exactly was he doing in your room? Did he really come to your room just to degrade you? That’s a new low, even for him.”

Rowena waves her hands at me. “God, it’s going to sound so boring compared to what you’ve both got going on in your imaginations. Especially you.” She points to Juliette. “He

really did come to tell me that I was disgusting, then passed out on my floor. I left him with a glass of water and a couple of painkillers.”

“Boring!” Juliette rolls her eyes.

“I told you.” Rowena’s face lights up. “I might have kicked him a little. Anyway, enough about me. What about you, Quinn? How did the date with Remy go? You two hooking up again?”

Juliette rests her head on her hands and opens her eyes wide. “I forgot about that in all the excitement. I knew you shouldn’t have let that dreamboat go.”

“Dreamboat?” Rowena scoffs. “What is this? The fifties? He’s an asshole. He’s just marginally better at hiding it than Felix.”

“He is an asshole,” I agree, “But we had a good night and no...” I turn to Juliette. “I didn’t sleep with him. He does seem genuinely sorry for leaving me at the Shard.”

“I bet he is.” Juliette says digging into another pile of pancakes. “I mean Candice is superficially pretty, but she’s a complete bitch and everything about her is fake. I bet he hated doing the first trial with her.”

I grab one of the pancakes before Juliette eats the lot and pick a piece off. “He said he didn’t have sex with her in the second part of the trial.”

Rowena grabs an apple and takes a bite. “And yet, he’s so high up on the leader board.”

I sigh. I want to believe Remy, but Rowena’s right. I’ll never know the truth because his trial was one of the few that wasn’t broadcast. What can he really tell me that’s worse than my imagination? He said he didn’t touch her in the second part

of the trial. If he said he didn't help her in the first trial, I would probably judge him, anyway. I remember how awful it was before Dade helped me. The guy can't win whatever he tells me. Plus, it's hardly as though I pushed Dade away when he helped me. Hell, I'd have let pretty much anyone go to town on me to get some relief, Even Orlin. Especially Orlin going by the perfect scores he and Juliette are getting.

I look toward Juliette and raise my eyebrows. "Are you going to let us know what's going on with you and Orlin yet?" I ask, changing the subject away from me and Remy. Before Juliette can answer, Noémi appears at our table. "Good morning, my leetle darlings. Eet's time to announce ze second trial. No delay!"

Juliette grabs a handful of pancakes and gives me a wink as we all pile out after Noémi.

My heart lunges when I catch sight of Dade sitting at the far end of the couches. He looks sullen as always. Next to him, Orlin sits, staring ahead as though he's lost his way. He's wearing a shirt that he's written "You're all sinners" on in red ink.

Both of them look out of place, but it's only Dade who looks miserable. I shouldn't feel ashamed about going out with Remy, but somehow it feels like I've cheated on Dade. I shake my head. I can't think that way. Dade and I were a mistake. It never could have worked between us. As the thought runs through my mind, Dade glances over and catches my eye. Heat rises to my cheeks as I remember the look of agony on his face during the trial yesterday when I stood by and did nothing. Shame fills me as recall how I sat back and let him suffer in a way that I know he would never do to me. He hadn't done it to me. Even though I'd accused him of

murder, he still helped me when I was my most raw and vulnerable.

I can't look away, but then a flash of orange passes between us. My eyes refocus on Candice pushing her way between Dade and Orlin on the sofa. As I watch, she leans into Dade and whispers something in his ear. He doesn't smile, but he doesn't push her away either.

"Looks like she's getting her claws into your other boyfriend now," Juliette says, nodding toward them.

"He's not my boyfriend," I mutter a little too quickly. I have no right to be upset about who does and doesn't sit next to Dade. "He can sit with whoever he likes... even if it is a skanky bitch."

"Quinn!" Rowena admonishes. "What happened to solidarity amongst sisters?"

"She tried to kill me," I remind her. "And she's not my sister."

I'm saved from having to say anything else by Noémi talking. "Bonjour. Welcome back to ze contestants and welcome to everyone else." She gestures to the people who have gathered to watch us. We're really getting quite the fan base since our wet parts were broadcast in high definition for all to see.

"Ze second trial weel take place one week from today. After zat, we weel 'old ze magnificent ball for all of you. I'm très excité."

"You're the only one," Rowena mutters under her breath.

"Zat ees all." Noémi announces. "You may go and enjoy your week."

“Didn’t Noémi say the ball was to be themed on the Moulin Rouge?” Rowena whispers. She sounds a lot more excited than I feel.

“I guess so,” I reply.

She looks between Juliette and me, excitement bringing color to her cheeks. “Let me make your dresses I’ll coordinate them!”

“Make mine pink,” Juliette says, flicking her eyes towards Noémi’s retreating form. “I’m sick of Noémi monopolizing the color.”

I shrug. “I’ll take green, I guess. It will go with my hair.”

Once again, as soon as we all start to disburse, Juliette is swamped by rabid autograph hunters.

“Have you noticed how Hades hasn’t made an appearance yet?” Rowena says as she pulls me to one side away from the masses of excited people and demons.

I hadn’t really thought about it until she’d pointed it out. “He must be here. Twila’s here and she said he came with her.”

“Is she here, though?” Rowena looks over the tops of everyone’s heads, then back to me. “She *was* here, but we’ve not seen her since... since the first day. You’d think she’d want to come and hang out with us a bit more than she has.”

I shrug my shoulders. “It does seem strange, but her and Hades have some weird kinky sex life. The pair of them are probably too busy having threesomes and foursomes with demons down in the lower level to think of us losers up here.” As I say it, I remember the unread messages I sent to Twila and a pang of uneasiness settles in my stomach, like a heavy weight that I hadn’t fully acknowledged until now.

“I guess you could be right.” She flicks her eyes over to Juliette, who looks like the queen of everything surrounded by her adoring fans. “You know. I always thought Hades was more Juliette’s speed than Twila’s.”

“You’re forgetting that Twila was smitten with Satan before she even came down here,” I point out. “It’s not really surprising she ended up with a demon, even if it isn’t the main man himself.”

As I talk, my eyes catch the tip of Dade’s wings across the room. Just like Juliette, he’s surrounded by people, and as far as I can tell, they are all women. Unlike Juliette, he seems annoyed and is doing everything he can to push through them.

“Why is it that Dade is the bottom of the leader board and still has women fawning all over him?” I murmur aloud. “I mean, I’m his partner. Where are my fans?”

Rowena smirks. “Oh honey. He’s a man. They can do anything they please and still women love them. It doesn’t hurt that he looks the way he does.”

I pout. “Are you saying I’m not good looking enough to get fans?”

“I don’t have any fans either.” Rowena grins and touches my hair. “You’re gorgeous. Don’t let these idiots make you think otherwise. Look.” She nods toward Dade who’s finally broken free of his fan base. Anger and irritation line his features as he slams through the door that leads to the platform. “Having crazy fans isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Wanna get out of here and hang out in my room for a bit? I think Juliette might be down here for a while.”

I shake my head. “It looks like I’m going to be stuck doing the second trial with Dade, whether I like it or not. I think I

need to go and clear the air with him.”

Rowena nods. “A word of advice. Don’t accuse him of murder again, and for all that is holy, don’t sleep with the guy. It caused enough mess last time.”

“I didn’t sleep with him... and I have no intention of sleeping with him.” My cheeks flame as I turn away from Rowena and follow Dade through to the Platform.

NOT A FUCKING CHANCE

FELIX

I 'm itching to hit the bottle again, drown my thoughts in the burn of liquor. Though that move backfired spectacularly last night. Right now, I'm pulsing with a primal force, coursing with an electrifying surge that could power this entire circle for a month. I know it's magic, but it's fucking annoying to be turned on all the time. I could call Anthura and put her to work on my cock, but I can't stand the sight of her right now. I pull on my running shoes and head out. If I can't fuck this pent up energy out of my system, I'll run it out. There's a running track down on the entertainment level somewhere, but I'm way too keyed up to be bothered to find it. I don't need it when I've got a hundred sets of stairs to climb, not to mention balconies to run round.

I take the first set of stairs, pounding each one hard before running to the opposite side of the balcony and racing up the next set. I manage to get to floor seventy eight before realizing that I'm in danger of being seen by Anthura if she happens to come out of her apartment and look over the balcony railing. I turn around and race back down, pushing myself as fast and as hard as I can go. I'm running faster than an athlete and I'm barely catching my breath. The running is amplifying my pent up energy rather than expelling it. By the time I get back to my

apartment, I'm desperate for some other kind of release, one I won't find in running shoes.

I head in to my room, slamming the door behind me. Anger is blazing a trail through my body, and my mind is clouding over.

"Not a fucking chance!" I shout out to the empty room, answering a question that no one asked me, then pull my running shoes from my feet and fling each one across the room so hard they leave a dent in the wall.

Barefoot, I storm over to my back door and heave it open. The glass demons fucking each other in every possible way push my anger up another notch.

Without thinking, I storm down six flights of stairs barefoot until I'm standing outside Rowena's apartment. I slam my fist to the door frame, slowing it down to an almost stop before it connects.

I have no idea what I'm doing here. I want to scream at the bitch for locking me up in her room. Yeah, I shouldn't have been there, but I was fucking drunk. I'm sober now. I raise my hand to knock, but this time think better of it. What the fuck am I doing?

I'm about to turn when the door opens. Rowena's mouth drops open in surprise before her mouth curls down into a sneer. "Well, look what the cat dragged in."

Anger pulses through my veins at her face, her hair and at the fucking awful dress she's wearing. "You're a fucking bitch!"

She rolls her eyes, which exacerbates me even more. "Am I having déjà vu? Haven't we already done this? Is this some kind of freaky time loop?"

Damn, she's maddening. Why the fuck doesn't she look scared? I'm this close to putting a fist through her face and she's actually grinning. Someone took me to her room before. They must have. There's no way I would have voluntarily come to her. There's not enough Dragonfire Whisky in Hell.

I stare at her, my eyes burning with hatred and fury. "I don't know who brought me to your room before, but I didn't choose to come."

She pokes her head out of the room and looks both ways before turning her eyes back to me. "So, who's forced you to come here today?"

Damn her fucking logic.

"I thought so. You don't remember coming to abuse me last night, so you thought you'd come back here and repeat what you said so you can write it down. It was a real dear diary moment." She folds her arms. "Well, eff off back to your flying DeLorean, Marty McFly. I'm not interested in your hatemongering."

She moves back to slam the door in my face, but I wedge my foot between the door and the frame.

"You will listen to what I have to say," I seethe. "You are the most repugnant bitch I've ever laid my eyes on, but you give the best head I've ever had in my life."

What. The. Fuck. Did. I. Just. Say?

Rowena's eyes brows shoot up and her mouth falls open. Her shock doesn't silence her for more than a few seconds. Not that it ever does. "You are an effing vile dickwad with more money than you have brain cells. Go die in a ditch."

My anger increases with each word out of her mouth. "And you're a filthy mouthed whore who sucks men off for

fun.”

“I didn’t see you complaining when I made you come so hard, you screamed my name out, fuckwad.”

I don’t know what makes me do it, but I lurch forward and slam my lips into hers with all the intensity and anger I feel. Caught off guard, the impact sends her flying backwards into the door frame. I’ve literally never been so turned on in my life, nor have I felt so disgusted with myself. I think I feel her tongue on mine before a sharp sting across my cheek has me pulling back.

“What the actual eff?” She’s looking at me in almost comical horror, but it’s a drop in the ocean to the horror building up inside me.

I stare at her as she nurses her hand, which is clearly beginning to bruise. “You punched me!”

“Yes, I effing did,” she snaps, shock and anger coating her face. “Jesus effing Christ, Barclay.”

The pain in my cheek reverberates around my brain and the cloudiness of the past hour clears. “Holy shit.” I hold my hands up. “I... shit.”

Rowena just stares at me.

I’ve fucking lost it. Damn this fucking hell hole. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”

Her face is pulled into an expression that mirrors how I feel. Disgust and revulsion are written all over her features. “Well, there’s something I never thought would come out of your mouth,” she says. “It’s just a shame your tongue had to precede it.”

Oh my god. I really kissed her. And she kissed back? I spin around from the door.

“Forget this happened, bitch.”

I slam my fist into her door frame then step back onto the platform. I swear, even the stained glass fuckers are mocking me. At least there’s no one else around here to witness this devastating fuck up.

I feel her eyes on me as the platform rises mortifyingly slowly. When I get to my room, I stumble through the door, slamming it so hard it rattles in the frame.

My lips burn and I can taste strawberry lip balm on them. I rush to the bathroom and wash my face, then brush my lips vigorously with my toothbrush. I’ve clearly lost it, but I’m not the only one. I did not scream her name out when I came.

Fuck me. *Did I?*

She’s a dumb, worthless bitch. Hell, she isn’t even a bitch. Even if she was, she’s so far from my type with her flowery this and floaty that.

Fucking hell.

I pull out a bottle of dragonfire whiskey and unscrew the top. After last night, I didn’t think I could be trusted with this stuff, but it turns out I can’t be fucking trusted sober either. I swallow back a couple of gulps and pull out my Portal, pressing my thumb down in the only contact in my favorites list.

Anthura answers after five rings. “If you are calling me to complain, don’t bother. I have a plan.”

“Fuck your plan,” I counter. “Get down here now and suck my cock.”

“Charming seduction technique you’ve got going on there, Felix. I’m not at your fucking beck and call.” She hangs up without another word.

I lie back on the bed and take another swig of the whisky. With any luck, I won’t remember tonight either.

DAMN YOU VALENTINE

QUINN

My heart thumps as I catch my breath outside Dade's room. Tentatively, I raise my hand and knock on his door. As is his way, he doesn't answer.

"Dade. It's me." I'm surprised when the door opens a crack.

His eyes darken as he takes me in. "What do you want?"

Damn, this is going to be harder than I expected. "Can I come in?"

I wait for the expected refusal, but aching slowly, he opens his door just wide enough for me to slip through. His eyes follow me, making me feel self-conscious as I step past him. His aura is calm and surprisingly a comfort as I head into the dimly lit room. He can say what he likes to me, but I can always trust his aura.

His room is once again covered in hand-drawn sketches of the people that inhabit this tower. "These are beautiful," I say pointlessly. I take my time looking from one to the other to put off the real reason I'm here. There are pictures of Juliette smiling, Anthura sneering, and he's caught Rowena perfectly. She looks so sad, as though she's just been told she has to partner up with Felix. He's captured Felix's haughty

expression, too. In fact, he's drawn every contestant with one notable exception. I don't want to ask him why I'm not up there too, because I already know the answer. I didn't trust him and I hurt him. I know he didn't kill Michael and Lucia. I've always known. Evidence kept being thrown in my face and I chose to believe it, but deep down I was making that choice because I was scared.

"Why are you here, Quinn?" His voice is deep and gravelly.

I'm forced to turn and look at him. He holds beauty like no one else I've ever met, and dark though it may be, I can see right into his soul.

I lower my eyes to cut off my gaze from him. My eyes fall on a small blue marble that I recognize as a key to the lower level of the tower. I run my finger over it. "I came to apologize to you."

Dade sighs. "I do not require an apology from you."

"No." I say. The word comes out in a whisper. "I know you don't, but I want to give it to you."

"We have done this before and it has not changed anything." His voice is hard and scary, but I won't let him throw me out. I don't want to go. Even though I'm nervous and making a mess of everything again, I can't leave this room before I've said what I came to say. I lick my lips and walk over to him. My heart feels like it's being squeezed as I keep my gaze locked with his. I'm transfixed with those black eyes of his. No one has ever held me the way he's doing now, and he's not even touching me.

I take in a deep breath. "If you won't accept my apology, then please accept my thanks."

He looks confused. “You have no need to thank me either, Valentine.”

I throw my hands up in the air. “You manacled yourself to a wall for me. You put yourself through a living hell to stop yourself from hurting me.”

“I did that for me,” he says. I know he’s lying.

I shake my head softly. “You didn’t want to hurt me, so you made the decision to hurt yourself instead.”

His adam’s apple bobs as he swallows and behind him his wings ruffle slightly.

The tension between us is palpable and I realize I’ve once again stepped too close to the all-consuming flame that is Dade Angelis. I should have remembered how impossible it was to stand so close to him and not kiss him. As though he can read my mind, his eyes flick down to my lips for the briefest of seconds before returning to my eyes. He wants to kiss me, too. I know it. I see his rising desire in his expression and I can feel it in his aura.

“I’m part demon, Valentine. I’m not a human anymore. You can’t pretend away these wings, this tail. You can’t pretend my humanity has not been stripped away from me piece by piece, just as my skin was.” He looks so sad, I forget my desire for a moment and want to kiss him just to change the awful haunted expression on his face.

I lick my lips. “And yet, despite everything, you were the only one who willingly sacrificed points rather than violate their partner in the last trial. I can’t believe that any of those so-called ‘humans’ demonstrated such compassion for their partners. You aren’t the demon you think you are. The tail and

wings are part of your body, but they aren't a part of who you are." My voice is hoarse, wrecked by emotion.

"Damn you, Valentine. Why do you continue to do this?" He steps back and the spell is broken. I feel his aura darkening around us. "Didn't it occur to you that maybe I just didn't want to fuck you and I'd rather chain myself to a wall to avoid that?"

A sharp inhale catches in my throat as my heart clenches with pain. "Wow." I turn to leave. "I don't know what I was thinking. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come. I'm dating Remy and you're obviously doing just fine." My words tumble out in a hurried, almost inaudible rush. Tears well up in my eyes, blurring my vision as I race toward the door. Why does this hurt so damn much? I thought I was past caring about Dade.

Fuck, that's not true. Not even remotely.

"Valentine," Dade's voice pierces the air as I grasp the door handle and yank open the door, my back turned to him. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of seeing how deeply he's wounded me. Stillness overtakes me, my hand resting on the door frame. In front of me, the stained glass woman being fucked by a demon's tail is still moaning silently in ecstasy. I close my eyes as Dade's hand touches my shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." His words come, laced with genuine remorse, which makes it all seem worse somehow. "I didn't mean it."

I edge my shoulder away from his touch, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside. "Yes, but you did, and it's fine. I don't want to fuck you either."

I race up the stairs and slam the door to my room.

I let out a scream once the door is firmly shut. When will I ever learn? I pull out my Hell Cell. There's already a message on it from Juliette. I ignore it and message Remy.

SECOND DATE?

I'm going to fuck Dade out of my system once and for all.

While I wait for his response, I check Juliette's message.

911. MY ROOM. BRING ALCOHOL.

I clap my hand to my head. What's going on now? Juliette wouldn't send me a message like that if it wasn't urgent. I rush to the bathroom and wash my face to rid myself of the tears Dade has caused and race out the door and down the steps to the second floor.

HE DIDN'T JUST TRY

ROWENA

Quinn bursts through the door of my room without knocking, a bottle of champagne in her hand and a worried expression on her face.

“Damn!” she says when she catches my tear-streamed face, which, no doubt, is red and blotchy too. “I wasn’t sure if this was a celebration or a commiseration. Juliette’s message was a bit vague. I got it wrong, sorry. I picked up champagne from a demon down in the restaurant.”

“It’ll do.” Juliette steps up from the bed and takes the bottle from Quinn’s hands. She pops the cork, takes a swig, then hands the bottle to me. “Drink, babe.”

I take a small sip and rest the bottle on my knees. I don’t particularly want to get drunk.

Quinn looks amusingly flustered. “Is anyone going to tell me what’s going on? Should I have brought a shotgun instead? Was it Felix again?”

The mention of Felix’s name sends a jolt through me, and my stomach twists with a mix of emotions. “You could say that,” I reply with a hint of bitterness.

“You really fucking could,” Juliette seethes. “The bastard mouth-raped Ro.”

When Quinn's eyebrows knit together, I explain. "He came to my room and decided to shower me in vitriol."

"Oh Rowena. Again?" she responds, her tone laced with sympathy. She moves to sit on my other side, sandwiching me between her and Juliette, and her arm gently wraps around my shoulder in a comforting gesture.

I nod. "Yup, only this time he kissed me after calling me a fucking bitch."

Quinn's reaction is a mix of shock and disbelief, her expression opening into gaping astonishment. "He kissed you? Felix Barclay kissed you?"

I hold my hand to my head and groan. "Please stop saying it."

Juliette pulls the bottle of champagne from my knee and begins to drink. "The asshole is all horny for her." She's so matter of fact about it while my insides feel like they've been churned to boiling point. I wish I felt that blasé.

"No." I turn to her. "Don't do that. I hate it when people say to their daughters that a boy must like them if they pull on their pigtails. It sets girls up to view abuse as love. Felix didn't kiss me because he likes me. It was an assault on my lips. The guy hates me. You know he does."

"Wow." Quinn shakes her head. "And I thought I was having a shit day. Please tell me you punched his lights out."

I give her a wistful smile. "Actually, I did. Punched the sucker right in the eye."

Beside me Juliette whoops, flinging her hands up and sending a stream of champagne up into the air. "Oops. Sorry. You didn't tell me that part. Way to go, Ro." She wipes her hand over my bedspread, that is now wet with champagne.

I let out a long sigh. “I probably shouldn’t have. I don’t know. I was taken by surprise.”

Quinn pulls me in close. “He deserved it. Jeez. He kissed you? Urgh.”

I rub my temples, feeling a headache starting to throb. “Seriously, please stop saying it. It’s giving me a migraine.”

“So what happened then?” Quinn asks. “After you punched him?” The look of curious excitement and shock on both their faces is almost worth going through this.

Almost.

I offer a nonchalant shrug. “He apologized.”

Quinn stares at me in disbelief. “Felix Barclay apologized? That’s more unbelievable than him trying to kiss you.”

I shake my head. I can’t believe I’m reliving this. “He didn’t just try. His tongue was in my mouth.”

“Holy shit, babe.” Juliette falls back onto the bed, this time keeping the bottle upright.

I purse my lips. “You know what? I appreciate you both coming to see me, but I’m exhausted. My hand hurts and I just want to go to sleep and pretend this day never happened.”

Quinn pulls her arm from around my shoulder and holds my hand. “Are you sure you want us to go?”

“Not a chance!” Juliette interjects, sitting right back up. “We’re not leaving you alone tonight. I know for a fact these beds easily fit three full sized people. We’re staying with you. Right Quinn?”

Quinn gives a firm nod in agreement. “Right.”

I don't think I've ever been more grateful for my friends. A warm smile graces my lips. "I'll grab you both some pajamas."

"Atta girl!" Juliette heads to the bathroom while Quinn and I go to the massive closet.

"She knows for a fact that *at least* three people can fit in these beds," Quinn whispers with a grin.

"There's something that girl isn't telling us," I admit, pulling two sets of pajamas out of a drawer and handing one to Quinn. "No point asking her. She'll only give vague answers. What was so bad about your day?"

"What?" her eyes startle as though I've prodded her.

"You said earlier that you were having a bad day, too. Has something happened?"

She turns away from me evasively. "Nothing much."

I guess Juliette isn't the only one with a secret.

After Juliette's done in the bathroom, I go in and look at my face in the mirror. There's a slight hint of my lips darkening in a bruise, where Felix slammed his lips against mine. I can practically still feel his lips on mine, his tongue probing my mouth.

I close my eyes and breathe against the quickening of my heart.

I liked it.

I actually liked it.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but I know for a fact I hesitated for half a second before punching Felix. Shame washes over me as I remember the moment my tongue touched his. I

should have punched him sooner. I should have thrown the asshole off the edge way before his lips came into contact with mine. Why did I let it happen? I pull in a deep breath and wash my face. I'm victim-shaming myself. I wipe my face with a towel and take one last look at my reflection. I couldn't have stopped it. He was way too quick, and I wasn't lying when I told Juliette and Quinn he'd caught me off guard. How on Earth could I have predicted Felix kissing me? It's as unimaginable as a snowstorm in the very fiery pits of Hell.

I give myself a determined nod and head back out in to the bedroom. "Shift over," I say to Juliette, who seems to have taken up residence in the very centre of the bed. "You can sleep on the wet patch. I'm sure that's something you're used to by now." I smirk as she shuffles over.

"Touché, bitch," she says, grinning back. "but I've still got the champagne and now I'm not going to share."

"It's all yours." I offer back.

Next to me, the bed lowers as Quinn crawls in the other side. We lay in silence, but I'm pretty sure neither is sleeping and as I close my eyes, all I can see is Felix Barclay's shocked expression as he realizes what he did.

**I SHOULD HAVE ORDERED
POPCORN**

QUINN

I wake the next morning before Juliette and Rowena. Light snores tell me they are both still asleep. I check the time on my Hell Cell and am surprised to find a message from Remy.

SURE THING. TOMORROW NIGHT. 8pm?

I scratch my head, trying to make it make sense, and it takes a few moments for me to realize he's answering the message I sent him last night. The one I sent after Dade ripped my heart out and stomped on it. Deservedly so too. I sigh and switch my Hell Cell off. Do I really want to go out on a real date with Remy? The last one was nice enough, but I felt more in the two minutes I spent in Dade's room yesterday than I did on my whole night with Remy.

The two minutes where Dade told me he'd rather use ancient torture equipment than have sex with me.

I turn the Hell Cell back on and hit reply.

LOVE TO. MEET U IN THE ATRIUM

I slip out of bed as softly as possible so not to wake Rowena and Juliette. Neither stirs as I grab my clothes and leave out of the back door. Back in my room, I take a shower and ponder the clothes in my wardrobe. It's full of clothes I

never would be able to afford when I was alive and yet since coming down to the second circle, I've worn nothing but jeans, t-shirts and sweaters. I need to feel pretty. I hate how much Dade's words have gotten to me, but they have. I run my hand over the rack of dresses and pick out a sexy leather black number. It's the shortest dress in the closet and reminds me of something Juliette would wear. It's perfect. I need a little of Juliette's confidence, and if it doesn't give me that, well, at least it's dark like my mood. I pull it down from the rack and place it on my bed before going back to the closet and picking out a pair of faded jeans and an old t-shirt to wear. I can hardly wear the leather dress all day. I'm determined not to let Dade get to me any more than he already has and that means going out and having breakfast as I normally would.

Neither Juliette nor Rowena have made it down yet, so I message Twila for the third time this week. Not that she'll answer. Our little goth friend has been MIA since the very first day here. I wait for a few minutes and, when she hasn't answered, slip the Hell Cell into my pocket. A demon appears and asks what I want for breakfast. After ordering something I know will be so sickly sweet it will make my stomach curdle. I glance around the restaurant.

Hoping to see a pair of black wings?

I must be a masochist, because that's exactly what I want to see. The restaurant is almost empty due to the early hour, and it's clear he's not here. Dade is a creature of habit and always sits at the very edge of the restaurant in the shadows. As I search the rest of the restaurant, my eyes fall on Felix, who's sitting alone with his head down, clearly not wanting to be spotted. One cheek is black and his eye is puffed up and almost swollen closed. He catches me looking at him and turns his face away. My instinct is to get up there and tell him what I

think about him, but I think Rowena has done a good enough job to dissuade him from hurting her again. He's a mess.

A flash of red diverts my attention. I look to my side to see Anthura striding past. Felix ducks in his seat, but it's too late. She's spotted him.

"What the fuck happened to you?" Her voice is loud enough that I can hear clearly what she's saying.

"None of your business," Felix snaps.

The waiter appears at my side with my breakfast. I thank him and will him to leave. If anything will take my mind off Dade, it's watching a show like this.

I should have ordered popcorn.

"It is my business," corrects Anthura and sits opposite him in the booth. "I don't fuck ugly people, Felix, and at this moment, I don't think I've ever seen anything so putrid."

Felix grimaces. "Will you shut the fuck up?" he hisses. I have to lip read what he says next, though it's pretty obvious. "People are watching."

He nods to me and I know I've been rumbled. Anthura turns her head and gives me one of her patented sneers. I give them both a grin and a wave and pick up my plate. I take it back up to my room and eat it there and when lunch time comes round, I order room service using my Hell Cell.

It takes an age for eight pm to roll around and by six, I've already started getting ready.

I take longer than I usually do, curling my hair into submission and applying make-up. When I force my body in to the skintight dress and check out my reflection, I gasp. I've gone darker than I usually do, with black eyeliner and a deep

plum lipstick. I'm channeling Twila for sure. The dress accentuates my curves, making me look less skinny than I usually look and more womanly. Due to the tightness of the dress, my breasts are pushed up, almost spilling out of the top of it.

I give myself a wolf whistle.

An overwhelming sense of self-consciousness engulfs me as I descend into the atrium. Remy has yet to arrive. I hesitate to sit on the chairs, anxious about my dress riding up, so I position myself in the center and patiently await his arrival. Each time someone walks by, their gaze fixates on me, their expressions full of surprise and desire. I'm not used to being looked at the way people are staring at me. I'm well known down here because of my place in the Inferno Games, but until now, it was always Juliette that captured all the attention. When she was around, I faded into the background.

"Can I have your autograph, please?"

I turn to find a couple of young men staring at me, both looking nervous. One hands me a note book and a pen. The page isn't blank. I read through, recognizing the names already written down. Juliette's signature takes up most of the page with her big looping J and a heart instead of a dot over the I. Other signatures are squeezed around the edges. It looks like he's nearly got the whole set, although there aren't any of the male contestants' signatures. He's only missed Maggie, Rowena and me.

"I wasn't going to get yours," he admits as I hand him back the book after I sign it. "But you are super hot tonight."

"Yeah!" agrees the other one. "Like smokin!"

"Er, thanks."

I feel Dade before I see him. My gaze shifts and there he is, standing near the doorway to the platform. Our eyes meet, and for a moment, the world seems to narrow down to just the two of us. I can't look away as the two men dawdle in front of me. My body heats as I take Dade in, staring behind them. I feel like I'm caught in his flame.

"Er, do you wanna come with us? We're going to Infernos."

Yeah, it is hot," I murmur absentmindedly, lost in thought.

"No, we were asking you on a date?" The first guy clarifies.

My attention snaps back to them. "Sorry, what?" I ask, slightly caught off guard. The two look at each other in confusion. "A date. you know a few drinks, maybe some dancing?" He shrugs. "A threesome afterwards?"

I swallow as Dade steps toward us. His aura is overwhelming. I can feel the anger emanating from him, even at this distance.

"I'm sorry. I already have a date tonight." As soon as the words leave my mouth, Remy appears through the door. I swallow back the lump in my throat and point him out.

"I should have guessed you'd be fucking one of the pretty boys," the first guy grumbles before they both walk away.

"What was that?" Remy asks, kissing my cheek.

"They just wanted my autograph... and a date."

"I can't say I blame them," he responds, his gaze sweeping over me appreciatively. "You are looking beautiful tonight. I hope you said no."

I laugh and nod my head. My eyes gravitate to the spot over Remy's shoulder where Dade was standing in the shadows. He's no longer there and now that I think of it, I can't feel his aura anymore.

"Where do you want to go?" Remy asks, taking my hand.

I shrug and give him a smile. "Anywhere but Infernos."

I don't particularly want to go to Unholy either. I doubt Felix will want to show his face today, but after what he did, he might decide to drown his sorrows, so I steer Remy toward the Brimstone Bistro.

It looks just like its counterpart in Purgatory, but I know that I won't be served water and maggots here like I was there.

"This is the first time I've been in here and can order my own meal," I point out as the demon maitre d shows us to our table.

"I remember. You pissed the demons off." He pulls out my chair and waits until I sit before taking his own seat. "I have to admit, I was surprised to get your message this morning. I thought you'd changed your mind about us."

I shake my head as doubt and regret run through my mind. Now that I'm sitting with Remy, it forces me into another uncomfortable position. If Dade didn't kill Michael and Lucia, who did? And more importantly, why are they trying to frame Dade? However much I hate to admit it, Remy has the most reason to. He's not the only one by any means. Anthura despises me. Felix hates Dade and me.

"Are you okay?" Remy asks, looking concerned. "You have changed your mind about us? I told you that I didn't do anything with Candice in the second part of the trial."

"Did you do anything in the first part?" I finally ask.

He looks down at his empty plate and my heart sinks. “I had sex with Candice.” He looks up. “I’m sorry. I should have told you. She begged me. I didn’t know what to do. I thought she was going to die or something. I should have told you.”

Unease creeps into my stomach as the waiter appears to take our order. Dade did the same thing for me. Okay, we didn’t sleep together, but I would have welcomed it.

“No.” I say firmly. “None of us are innocent in all this and all of us are being manipulated. My mind wasn’t my own in the first part of the trial, and Dade helped me.” I don’t elaborate on what that help was and thankfully, Remy doesn’t ask. “We weren’t together when the first trial happened. What we did or didn’t do wasn’t wrong.”

“I’ll come back in a minute,” the waiter says and turns to help another table.

Remy looks at me hopefully and his ocean colored eyes twinkle. “Does that mean we’re together now?”

It’s a question I wasn’t expecting. The sting of Dade’s words yesterday is still painful, tugging at my heart and I know any answer I give Remy will be tainted by that. I can’t play these two men. “Will you answer a question for me?”

He shrugs. “As long as you answer mine.”

I swallow back my fear. “Did you actually see Dade killing Michael and Lucia? Not on the screen. In real life?”

Remy suddenly looks uncomfortable.

“Did you?” I repeat. “Please, just tell me the truth. This isn’t about Dade, it’s about our relationship. I need to know I can trust you.”

He holds out his hands and gives me a charming smile that almost disarms me. *Almost*. “I literally just told you I had sex with Candice.”

I hold his gaze, refusing to be swayed. “Did you see Dade kill Michael and Lucia?”

He inhales sharply, pausing for a moment before exhaling. The spark fades from his eyes as he shakes his head slowly.

“Felix told me he saw him do it. I know your thoughts on Felix, so I thought you wouldn’t believe it. I lied to you that one time. I’m sorry. I was terrified he was going to hurt you, and I didn’t know how to save you. I loved you.” He raises his eyes to me. “I still do, Quinn.”

My heart aches at his confession, his admission of deceit mingling with the admission of love. No one has ever told me they love me before, and the rawness of the moment leaves me feeling vulnerable and conflicted, not to mention angry. Dade never said it. I can barely get out the next words. “Who sent you that video of Dade killing Michael and Lucia?”

“I don’t know,” he stammers. “Honestly. It came through on my portal. Anyone could have sent it. You believe Dade didn’t do it, don’t you?”

I keep my voice steady as I meet his gaze. “I know he didn’t do it. It’s a cover up to hide the real murderer.”

Remy’s uncertainty lingers as he licks his lips. “Do you know for sure? You have proof?”

I shake my head, not daring to utter a lie after accusing everyone else of lying. I don’t have proof and I can hardly offer the fact I feel it in my soul as proof. I keep my voice steady. “He didn’t do it.”

Remy's expression shifts. "I believe you," he says softly, but it's difficult to tell if he's being sincere or trying to keep me sweet. "I'm sorry. I'll go and apologize to Dade right now if that will make you believe me?" He stands up as though he's actually going to leave.

I gesture for him to sit back down. My heart feels like a dead weight in my chest. "Dade has made it perfectly clear that he doesn't want to speak to me, see me or otherwise have anything to do with me."

Remy nods and brightens up a little as the waiter pours wine into our glasses. "Are you ready to order now?" The waiter asks.

Remy's eyes stay on me when he answers. "I don't know. What do you think?"

Remy has made mistakes, but I have, too. Hell was never meant to be a playground and although I expected the torture to be more physical, we've all been affected by the mental and emotional torture. I nod my head. Remy smiles as I give the waiter my order.

"I really am sorry, Quinn," he says after the waiter has left. "I never meant to hurt you."

"I never meant to hurt you, either. Since being down in Hell, I don't know what I'm doing. It's just so..."

"Hellish?" Remy offers.

"Hellish," I agree.

"You still haven't answered my first question. Are we together?"

My first instinct is to leave, but clearly I'm not right in the head. Dade has affected me, plunging metaphorical daggers

into my soul, and Remy is like the antithesis of that. Dade would never lie to me, but Remy doesn't have the capacity to rip my soul to shreds with his words. Remy is easy where Dade is hard. He's light when Dade is dark. I don't want to give my whole being to him, but he won't take my whole being, chew it up and spit it out either. "I can't answer that right now. I need time to process. We've both hurt each other." I sigh. "How about we have this dinner and see how it goes?"

He leans forward. "How about we just date casually to start? See how that goes. We can take it slowly. I don't want anyone else. I can wait."

I mull it over. I can't rush into Remy's bed, but I see no harm going on a few dates with him.

Dade's words cut into my heart and sear through my brain. *Didn't it occur to you that maybe I just didn't want to fuck you and I'd rather chain myself to a wall to avoid that?*

I pick up my glass and hold it out. "Okay. Let's do it. Let's see where this goes."

UNICORN CUM

FELIX

“**Y**ou’ve become a really boring fuck!” Anthura complains as she lounges on my bed. “You’ve barely left this room in days. Don’t tell me you’re fucking Candice again.”

I run my hands through my hair, irritation pulling at me. “For fuck’s sake. I’ve barely seen Candice since I came down here. You’ll accuse me of fucking that bitch Rowena next.”

She narrows her eyes which makes me cringe. “Nothing would surprise me about you these days. You did let her blow you.”

My muscles tighten, but she carries on talking. “Candice is following that idiot Dade around like a lost puppy, anyway. Did you see her simpering after him at the meeting the other day?” She sits up and slips her feet into her red heels, before standing up next to me and pinching my cheek. “I think you’ve lost out there,” she hums.

“Damn it. No, I didn’t see because I wasn’t looking. I’m not interested in what Candice or Dade or any other fucker is doing. What I am interested in is how you are planning to get me... us out of this because so far you’ve done jack shit.

“You’re in the top ten.” She pouts. “What more do you want?”

I gnash my teeth against a wave of anger. “I’m in the top ten because, as you so delicately put it, I let Rowena blow me. I don’t want to have to go through a repeat performance. Do you know what the second trial is going to be or not?”

Her face turns sour. “That bitch Noémi won’t tell me anything and I can’t get hold of Hades. He’s ghosting me like I’m a clingy bitch who asked him to give me babies on our first date. Asshole.”

“Well then, you’re no fucking use to me.” I stride to the front door, and even though I’m still naked and stinking of sulfur and Anthura’s perfume, fling it wide.

She stares at me in disbelief. “Wait. I have a plan. Close the door.”

Against my better judgment, I close the door and wait.

“This ball Noémi has been going on about. I’m pretty sure it’s the last trial. I overheard her and Hades talking about it on the first day. It’s a surprise for the contestants.”

“So?”

“So, we know something no one else does. Everyone thinks the ball is happening before the third trial.”

I sit on my bed and rub my chin. “So what’s the plan?”

“That bruise is fading. Why don’t you come down and grab something to eat at the restaurant? You must be sick to death of room service. I’ll tell you my plan down there. It’s not much yet, but it might work.”

Goddamn it. Yet again, she’s turned out to be as useless as a fishnet condom, but she’s right about one thing. I need to get out of these four walls. Being stuck in here is fucking with my mind. I’ve not left the room in days because I don’t want to set

my eyes on Rowena, but not doing that is even worse. I'm thinking about her and it's driving me to distraction.

"Fine! Whatever." I pull on some clothes and storm out, letting Anthura trail out behind me.

When I see Rowena with her friends in the restaurant, I automatically find a spot well away from them where they can't see me. I've already had to deal with that nosy bitch Snowflake listening in to our conversation this week, no doubt ready to swan right back to Rowena for a good gossip. I'm not going to give her any more ammunition.

As I watch, Remy walks over to them and gives her a kiss on the cheek before sitting in the booth with them. So they are hooking up. My eyes involuntarily trail over to Rowena. She's smiling as she eats. Something about the way she's looking so care free has my stomach in knots. My jaw clenches as a waiter appears next to us. "I'll have a burger and fries. And lay off that pink sauce. It tastes like unicorn cum."

Anthura orders, then turns to me. "What are you looking at?" She twists her head and follows my line of sight. When she spots where my attention is, she grunts. "Remy is an idiot."

I grimace and turn my eyes to her. "Agreed. So what are we going to do that's going to give us the edge in the final trial?"

"Well, we still have to get through the second trial tomorrow first, but I've been thinking..."

The dual beep of both our portals cuts us off. It's a message to all of us from Noémi.

SECOND TRIAL STARTS THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW AND THE THIRD TRIAL WILL COMMENCE ONE WEEK AFTER THAT. I HAVE DECIDED THAT THE BALL WILL BE THE THIRD TRIAL SO DUST OFF YOUR DANCING SHOES. IT WILL BE THRILLING.

Anthura's face pulls in tight like she's just swallowed a lemon. "Fucking bitch!"

"What was that you were saying?" I snap as I slide my portal back in my pocket. Scraping my chair back, I rise to my feet just as the waiter arrives with our food. "I'll take that to go."

Anthura doesn't call after me as I stride away with the plate of food in my hand. I don't know what makes me do it, but I turn and walk purposefully toward Rowena and her gaggle of loser friends. I pass Candice in one of the booths with Angelis, but she doesn't even notice me as I stride past her.

"I don't know how to do much, but I know how to dance." Snowflake's voice reaches my ears as I almost reach Rowena's table. My anger and frustration is palpable and for a moment, I'm driven by the impulse to take it out on someone, but as Rowena's eyes catch mine and her expression turns to one of defiance, I know I can't do it. I storm right past them and head back up to my room.

AWKWARD AS FUCK

“N ight.” I kiss Remy’s cheek as we come to a stop at the entrance to the platform. I can see he’s desperate for me to invite him up, but I’m still not ready. A few dates this week aren’t enough to invite him back into my bed. I only just feel comfortable enough to invite him to dinner with the girls. Rowena barely spoke throughout it, only showing emotion when Felix stormed past our table, puffing his chest out in a show of toxic masculinity or whatever. Juliette, on the other hand, pretended to be happy for me.

“See you tomorrow?” Remy asks earnestly.

“It’s the second trial in a couple of days, so I might be getting ready for that.”

I hate myself for fobbing him off, but the pressure to push our relationship further is mounting, and I’m still not convinced it’s the right thing to do. I still can’t get Dade out of my mind, despite the fact I’ve barely seen him since he verbally destroyed me. I turn and head to the platform, which I take alone.

I take a step back, almost falling from the platform, when I see someone sitting at my door. Not just any someone. It’s Dade. My heart begins to pound wildly at the sight of him. I thought I was over this. Apart from two pretty intense

moments, which, okay, were highly sexual and deeply disturbing, plus the last time in his room where he made it clear that I was nothing to him, I've barely spoken to him since we came into this circle.

I step off the platform and try to look like his mere presence doesn't bother me. I want to ask him what he wants, but that sounds too rough after what he did for me in the Earthery. I have to ignore the raging heat that pounds through my blood when I catch a glimpse of his huge black wings, which are currently furled up behind him. He looks up from where he's sitting when I approach.

My voice is like sandpaper as I acknowledge him. "Dade."

"Can I come inside?" His breathing is ragged, his eyes manic, and his aura is off the charts. It's difficult to catch a breath with him so close.

"What for?" I know it sounds rude, but I don't care. He stands up and though I don't think he means to, he steps so close to me, invading my personal space that I have to hold my breath. I already know he smells like parchment and ink and something that's so distinctively him that I don't want to inhale and remember other times he was as close to me as this.

"I need your help... Please Valentine."

My head is screaming at me to say no, but as I open the door, I move aside to let him in. He's like a flame and I'm a moth. My body aches to feel his touch, but my body is an idiot and shouldn't be paid heed to. I close the door behind us and back up to it. This feels dangerous. "What is it you want from me, Dade? You want what you missed in the Earthery?"

Damn, that came out wrong. I don't even know why I'm thinking about what happened between us in the Earthery. I've

tried scrubbing the whole damn thing from my brain. How much he looked at me with desperation, a little how he's looking at me now, but at least this time his cock isn't straining against his pants.

"I don't get why..." he starts then thinks better of it. "Never mind. I shouldn't be here. Sorry." He makes to move past me, but as I'm standing with my back to the door, I'll have to move so he can leave. His hand brushes my side as he reaches for the door handle. My mouth goes dry as he stares down at me. One more inch and our bodies would be touching. My back feels hot against the door.

"You have to move if you want me to leave," he bites out.

I should move, but I can't. There's only one way for me to go, and that's right into him. I could try to sidle out sideways, but it will be as awkward as fuck.

The tension between us is palpable. There's enough electricity between us to power a small town, but I still don't know how much of that is nervous energy on my part. His demon aura is burning brighter than usual and it's making it hard for me to think straight.

"Wait!"

His demon aura relaxes slightly over that one word and I wonder what it is that's brought him to me. After our last fight, I thought I'd be the last person he'd want to see. "Just tell me what you want."

"I can't dance." He says it so quickly and quietly that I have to think for a few seconds to process what he just said to me.

I shake my head a little. "I don't see what that's got to do with me."

A muscle tics in his jaw. “You said you could dance. I heard you talking to your friends.” He pauses. “I need you to teach me.”

I let my mouth fall open and don’t even bother to hide the shock on my face.

“Dade. I can barely stand to be in the same room as you.” He flinches at the words, but I know he feels the same way about me. “You look at me as though you want to eat me.” As soon as I say it, I remember the time in the bathroom and heat crawls up my neck. I didn’t mean it that way, but his eyes flash and now it’s all I can think about.

“I need to get to Emily, Valentine.” he growls. “Like it or not, you are my partner and I can’t do this without you.”

Damn it.

He’s talking about his daughter. I remember Noémi’s words. The last trial is worth fifty points. I need to win this as much as he does. He’s not the only one who is fighting to get out of here.

“Fine,” I concede, gritting my teeth. “But on one condition.”

His eyes flicker up to mine and I hate how relieved he looks.

“I’m dating Remy.” The words almost catch in my throat. “I’m not having a recurrence of when we were in Purgatory where he kept catching us alone together, however innocent those times might have been.” They were far from innocent if my thoughts were taken into account, but I can’t bring all that up again. “I tell him what we are doing. He comes with us and he watches everything.”

His aura and his eyes flash dark. “No!”

This time, it's my turn to stare at him. I hold my hands to my hips and try to keep my treacherous heart under control. "Those are my terms. Take them or leave them."

He doesn't look up, but he nods his head all the same. "Thank you." He stands up from the bed and heads back to the door. This time I move away so he's not pinning me against it.

"Dade?"

He turns back to me.

"Dancing is about as intimate as two people can get without taking their clothes off." I croak, my lips pulled down. "It doesn't mean there will be anything between us."

His dark stare turns hard and the blackness in his energy returns. "Got it."

I swallow back a gulp. "I'll book the Earthery for tomorrow afternoon and send you a message on your Portal.

He gives me a slight nod, then leaves. As soon as the door closes, I resume my position at the back of it and let out a long breath. Just being in the same room as him has my heart pounding. I move over to the bed and flop down on it. After booking a time slot in the Earthery, I let the Hell Cell fall onto the bed. I know I have to tell Remy about this, but I have no idea how to broach it. I need to not repeat the same mistakes. I write the message out ten times before giving up and deciding to go to see him in person.

He answers his door after my first knock. His smile as he sees me put me in a better mood. He's like the anti-Dade. They even look like polar opposites. With his sandy hair and easy going manner, being with him is easy. There's no demon energy, no darkness.

“I knew you’d change your mind,” he says, holding the door open for me to head inside.

“Actually, have a favor to ask.” I ask, as I step past him.

“Ut oh!” His face contorts into a lazy grin which, matched with his tousled hair, gives him the look of a cute little puppy.

“I kinda promised someone I’d help them learn to dance for the ball, and I thought you could come along.” I try to make it sound casual, but inside I’m cringing.

“Sure. Sounds like a good idea. I could probably do with a few lessons myself.” He does a little dance on the spot and brings his eyebrows up.

There’s no way to say this delicately, so I blurt it out. “It’s with Dade. That’s why I want you there. I want you to chaperone.”

God, I sound like I’m a main character in a regency romance novel.

His face visibly pales and I steel myself for a backlash.

His body stiffens, his expression hardening into a mask of tension. His discomfort is evident as he takes a step back, distancing himself from me. “Okay.”

“Okay? You’re sure? I mean, I don’t have to.” My words stumble out.

He closes the gap again, his hand finding its way to my arm as he steps forward. “I can’t begin to know why you would want to help him, and if I’m going to be honest, I don’t want to know,” he admits, “but you came to me, and you want me to be there.”

My head nods in response to his words. “I do.”

“So I’ll come with you,” he asserts. “I trust you, Quinn. I don’t trust him.”

“I know you don’t,” I reply softly. “I said I’d text him. I’ve booked the Earthery tomorrow afternoon. I just wanted to make sure you are okay with it.”

He brings his hands up, capturing my face. “I’m not okay with it. I will never be okay with watching him putting his hands on you, but I know you must have your reasons.”

I shrug. “He’s my partner,” I remind him. “If he gets through this circle, so do I.”

“Yeah, and maybe then we can finally rid ourselves of him,” he says dismissively. “I’m going to go have a shower. I’ll meet you at the Earthery tomorrow after lunch. What time did you book it for?”

I get the feeling I’m being dismissed. “Two.”

“See you at two.” He opens the door and gives me a kiss on the cheek. It suddenly feels cold as he closes the door behind him.

THE DANCE

My nerves are in shreds as I wait at the entrance to the Earthery. I'm early by two minutes, but so far neither Remy nor Dade have shown up. I almost want them both to forget, so I don't have to do this. Before I've finished the thought, I catch sight of Dade. He's easy to spot in a crowd with his black clothes and dark wings that are folded, but not quite concealed behind him. I heave out a breath of relief when I see Remy step out of the elevator behind him. This is going to be a disaster. I already know it. I turn to the demon at the desk by the Earthery door and let him know we've arrived. Anything to not have to look at the expressions on both men's faces.

"The Earthery will adapt to whatever your mind tells it to," the demon says. "None of it is real, though it will seem real to you."

"Yeah, I know I've been in here before, remember?" I grumble. "I'm one of the Inferno Games contestants."

He shrugs as though he couldn't care less. "Your time slot ends at ten pm."

"Thanks." I can feel Dade come up behind me. I can't help it. I'm so much more attuned to his demon aura than I am to the other demons. Remy clears his throat. I turn and give the pair of them a wide smile, which neither reciprocates.

“Let’s get this over with,” Remy says, clutching my hand and pulling me to the doors.

I pull back, bringing him to a halt. “Wait. We need a plan of action before we go in. With three of us going in there, who knows what the Earthery will conjure.”

“What do you suggest?”

I shrug my shoulders, wishing I’d thought about this a bit more. “We know there’s going to be a ballroom, so I’m thinking that we might need to learn waltzes. But knowing Noémi, she’ll probably mix it up. She was a can-can girl at the Moulin Rouge. There are so many different kinds of music and so many types of dancing. This isn’t going to be easy.”

“Just pick one.” Remy says gruffly.

I’m flustered already and we aren’t even in there yet. “Let’s go with a ballroom. I don’t actually know any waltzes because, funnily enough, there wasn’t a lot of opportunity to go to waltzes when I was growing up owing to the fact I was dirt poor and, you know, born in the wrong freaking century. I’ve seen them in movies though and I think we can figure it out if we make the Earthery conjure up the steps marked on the floor.”

“Let’s do it,” Remy says, clearly irritated.

As we step through the doors into the darkness, I picture a grand ballroom. I’ve never stepped foot in one in real life, so I only have TV and movie sets to go on, but when I open my eyes I find myself in a room so grand and beautiful it’s perfect. There’s no orchestra, but the strains of classical music are playing somewhere. I hold my breath for a moment hoping that it’s not only me hearing the music in my head and it’s more trickery by the demons that run this place, but seeing as

I'm not super horny and neither are the other two judging by dark looks on both their faces, I think we're good.

I can't breathe properly and for a second, a thrill of fear grips me until I look down and see I'm wearing a tightly laced corset under my dress. Why is it I end up in these devices of torture every time I come in here?

I look up to see both men staring at me, anticipation coating their features. I've never particularly been into period TV shows, but I think I have a new found love of them as I take in the pair of them. Both are dressed in white high colored shirts and dark pants and both have long dark jackets on. Beneath Dade's is a black waistcoat. I swallow at the sight of them. Their hair is styled in the style of the era, but where Remy doesn't look much different with his floppy hair, Dade now has sideburns and his hair is swept back from his face.

He looks gorgeous.

I take a few deep breaths and point to the foot markings in the parquet flooring. "You stand here and take my waist."

Dade barely has time to move before Remy jumps into the position. "How about you dance with me and Dade watches? He can learn that way. I'm guessing Dade knows more about grand balls than we do, anyway." He shoots him a warning look. "Isn't that right, Angelis?"

"This is my first," Dade admits, even though they must have had them in the time he was alive. He nods to me and takes a step back to the side of the room, which is partially in shadows. He seamlessly disappears into the darkness that the Earthery hasn't quite managed to fill as the ballroom is so large.

A shocking pang of disappointment floods through me as I take my position in front of Remy, though this is the best possible outcome. Dade learns the steps, thus fulfilling my promise to him and I don't even have to touch him. Plus, there's the added bonus that I'm learning new steps myself. It will make us all better dancers too.

My mind is all over the place as Remy takes my hand in his and puts the other on my ass. I hitch in a sharp breath as he pulls me in closer. Dade's aura deepens perceptively, distracting me.

I pull back slightly. "I can't breathe as it is in this corset. Let up a little."

He leans forward and growls in my ear, "Just making sure he knows who you belong to."

I cringe but reposition myself and direct his hand to my waist, giving us a couple of inches of space between us.

I can barely concentrate as I position my feet on the colored steps beneath my feet. "I don't know the waltz or whatever dance this is, but I figure we look at the steps on the floor and follow them to the rhythm of the music." I look up. "You're supposed to lead, but I think we just have to go with the flow."

It takes a few minutes of us stepping over each other's feet, and it's not helping that we are having to look at the floor to follow the steps, but we soon get into a rhythm. I can't see Dade, but I can feel his eyes watching us from the shadows. It's unnerving and unsettling. As Remy spins me around, I finally catch sight of Dade. He's watching me with laser focus. Not Remy and I, just me. It's disconcerting, but it's also unnerving how aroused I am, being the sole focus of attention. I lick my lips without thinking, then, when I realize what I'm

doing, I pull my tongue back into my mouth. Desire curls through me. It's being watched from the shadows that's igniting my arousal. It's knowing Dade is watching me, but barely being able to see him. I feel exposed and nervous and what I'm doing feels forbidden.

I'm no longer dancing *with* Remy.

I'm dancing *for* Dade.

This isn't supposed to happen. I direct my attention to Remy to take my mind off the way my core is heating. This dance is simple. A couple of steps here, a couple of steps there, but Remy can't seem to do it without looking down at the steps painted on the floor. "You should be looking at your partner," I point out, desperate to get this over with as quickly as possible.

Remy looks up and pulls me to him in the same position we were in when we started. I'm way too close to him and the shifting of position has me tripping and losing my footing.

"Stop. We've lost the rhythm," I grimace as he crushes my body to his.

"You said I should lead," he grumbles, "so let me lead."

As he pulls me around the dance floor, I have no chance but to follow him, but I can sense our feet aren't where they are supposed to be. I feel claustrophobic in the dress and now I can add dizzy to everything else that I feel.

"I've got it!" Dade says loudly.

It's such a shock to hear his voice after how quiet he's been hiding in the shadows. Remy lets go of me immediately, clearly irritated by the interruption.

The atmosphere is charged and I'm just waiting for these two to punch each other.

"Would you permit me to try to see if I understood?"

My eyes flick over to Remy, who clearly doesn't want to allow him to do anything of the sort.

"Fine." He pulls him to the side and whispers something in his ear. As Dade returns to me, he positions himself exactly as I had demonstrated to Remy earlier with the exception of the sheer amount of space between us. His hand rests on my waist, but there's a deliberate five-inch gap between us. It's both respectable and ridiculous, but it tells me everything I need to know about what Remy said to him.

"Music!" I say out loud. I expect the same song to play again, but the marks on the floor have changed, and the music has changed tempo. Once again, I'm forced to look at the ground to follow the steps, but it's easier than last time and within a few minutes Dade and I are dancing. I don't look up at Dade the whole time I'm dancing with him. I know that if I do, Remy will be able to sense something between us. Instead, I keep my eyes on a point just above his collar. His energy is muted. The dance is some kind of box step and the way we are dancing, so far apart from each other with barely a touch between us, we may as well both be dancing with our grandmothers. From the outside it must look as sexy as a brother and sister dancing at a family wedding, but what Remy won't be able to see are the lighting pulses shooting up my hand and down my arm from the brief touches of Dade's hand in mine and the way my blood is pulsing with arousal.

My body must look rigid as we follow the steps. Dade is breathing in a steady Cadence and there's a low guttural hum emanating from his throat that's sexy as hell. Remy is

watching us through narrowed eyes. I feel like I'm being critiqued for a test and I know that one wrong move and I'll fail.

Dade's fingers are barely touching mine. He's gone so far to hold his hand a couple of millimeters above mine, and yet with the movements we are making, it's impossible for them not to keep touching, and each touch is like an electric shock to my system. His hand is hovering next to my waist, not even on it. I can't look up to see if he's watching me because I'm scared of what will happen if our eyes lock. My body is responding more to Dade's non-touch than it did to Remy, crushing our groins together. It's not even a sexy dance. It's ridiculous.

"I think that's enough," I say, breathlessly, stepping back and twisting so I'm not facing either of them. I'm scared that both men will be able to read the arousal on my face. I take a deep breath, or at least as deep a breath as I can, in the corset and plaster a fake smile on my face before turning back to face them.

"I think we've had enough ballroom dancing. Let's expend some real energy and get me out of this bloody awful corset." I try to ignore the look on Dade's face that tells me that I'm not the only one who wants to get me out of the corset.

"Both of you let your minds go blank," I instruct them. "I'm choosing something much more fun!"

I close my eyes before either of them can complain and picture a nightclub I used to go to in the days before my parents died and I became a single parent to my five-year-old sister.

Below my feet, the floor pulses with the beat of music and a song I used to love booms through hidden speakers.

Before my eyes are even open, I feel someone slam right into me. I already know it's Dade by the feel of his body and his sheer size. I let out a sharp cry as he lifts me from my feet and practically carries me to the edge of the club.

Remy charges after us, pushing other dancers aside. "Get your fucking hands off her!" With a swift motion, he seizes Dade and lands a punch square on his jaw. Dade staggers backward, crashing into the nightclub wall with a thud.

"Stop!" I yell out, barely making a sound over the loud music. People are watching us and even though I know they aren't real, just generated by the Earthery, I still feel self-conscious.

Dade holds his hand to his cheek where a red bruise is already beginning to form. There's a manic look in his eyes. All around us, lights flash and lasers cut through the darkness. Hundreds of sweaty bodies press against each other on the crowded dance floor. He rushes toward me again, but Remy barrels him back into the wall. "We need to get her out of this place," he shouts above the noise.

Suddenly I understand. Dade has never seen anything like this before. Fuck. I should have thought. "Remy, let me handle this," I insist as I grasp Remy's shoulder and coax him to step back. He gives me a look indicating that he's far from comfortable with the situation.

Without thinking, I take both of Dade's hands in mine. "This is a nightclub. It's a place to dance. Like Infernos." My plan was to sound comforting like a mother would to a child, but it's not motherly thoughts I'm having as I rub my thumbs over the back of his hands to calm him. His crazed look tells me he doesn't understand at all. This is nothing like the bar back in Purgatory and I'm not sure he's ever stepped foot in

there anyway, but it's the closest thing I can think of to what he'll understand.

"This isn't music!" he bellows over the boom of the bass. "It is war."

My mouth curls up at the edges. It's loud, and the bass is pumping loud enough for me to feel the vibrations. I guess it might feel like a war zone to someone who's never experienced something like this before.

"It's okay." I reply calmly. "It's just a modern ballroom. Look at the people dancing." I nod my head toward the dance floor. There are so many people pushed together that it's hard to tell where one person stops and the other begins.

"That is dancing?" he asks incredulously. "Why do they look like they are having a collective seizure?"

I can't help the laugh that escapes my mouth. "It's fun. Come on. I'll show you."

Here, I'm in my element. There are no steps to adhere to. No marks on the floor. I can just feel the beat and move to it. I decide it might be safer to not go out onto the dance floor, so I start jumping to the beat, letting my body move instinctively. Without the corset restricting my movements, I can breathe much easier, although the stench of smoke and stale alcohol fills my nostrils.

Remy jumps up to join me, pulling me close to him again. This time, it feels more natural. I feel so alive and carefree. This is what I've missed. I wave Dade over, but he looks reluctant to join us. As is his way, he stands at the wall, blending into the darkness, watching us. I spin on the spot, pulling myself from Remy's grip and close my eyes. I don't need to see other people dancing to feel the music. I let myself

get lost in the bass, moving to the rhythm until I'm part of it. I might not know the steps of a waltz, but this is natural. It's exhausting but at the same time it's effortless and thrilling and I've not let loose like this in a long time. I'm aware that Dade is watching me again. It seems to be a theme, but this time I keep the focus on myself. Remy dances up close to me, but we're both jumping around too madly to stay close. It's just the release I need and I'm sad when the song comes to an end. The sudden silence is a shock. The scene around us changes again, and I find myself in what looks like a dance studio. It's bright and airy and a far cry from the nightclub. On the floor are the same foot shapes that marked out the waltz. On one wall is a long mirror and a barre in front of it.

"Ballet?" Remy huffs out as he bends to put his hands onto his knees. Sweat drenches his face, dripping down to the hardwood floor beneath him. "That was great, but I'm not performing pirouettes. What made you think of this place?"

"I didn't." I look around, equally confused. "I guess the Earthery is teaching us all the dances."

"If you want to do ballet, then go ahead, but this isn't my scene," Remy wheezes. "You have fun teaching Angelis over there how to balance on his toes."

I glance over to where Dade is sulking in a corner. He looks traumatized.

"You're leaving?" I ask, suddenly nervous.

Remy takes my arm and pulls me away from Dade. When he speaks, his voice is low and quiet. "I admit when you told me you were going to be dancing with Dade I was jealous. I thought... I thought it would be..." he shakes his head and more sweat comes flying off. "Actually, I didn't think I'd be able to cope with you two dancing together, but I can see that

this really is just a lesson and not one I want to keep going with. Why don't you find me when you're done and we can grab dinner or something?"

"Okay." I nod, trying to keep my expression neutral. The thought of staying alone in here with Dade is unbearable. Dancing with him is both torturous and blissful.

The room goes black suddenly, then the two doors at the entrance pour in light as Remy steps through them. When they close, we're once again thrust into darkness. Then the dance studio reappears around us.

"I cannot do this either." Dade begins to head toward where Remy left, but I reach out to grab his arm instinctively. He's walking much quicker than I expected and I end up grabbing his hand. It's meant to be an innocent gesture, but as our skin touches, a shock runs up my arm. I have no idea what it is with this guy. I can't even try to stop him from leaving without my body making it out to be something it's not. I pull back my hand quickly as he turns around. There's no anger on his face at all. His eyebrow is raised slightly, as though he's asking me a question. I just don't know what the answer is. Hell, I don't even know what the question is.

"You wanted to learn to dance." I pant, wiping my own sweat from my brow. "I know doing this in front of Remy made you uncomfortable. He's gone. It's just you and me." My words are not making this situation any better. I need him to go just so I can breathe, but I know that if he does go, I might never feel the way I do right now. The feeling is addictive and intoxicating and stressful and I'm not ready for it to end. Not even close to ready.

He takes a deliberate step toward me. My breath catches in my throat as he comes to a stop just inches from me. "My

comfort isn't relevant, Valentine. I'll stay if you can tell me truthfully that being alone with me won't make *you* uncomfortable."

He's staring right into my soul and I know that he'll pick up on the slightest hint of a lie.

"Your daughter needs you," I whisper. I turn away from him so he can't see the flush rising to my cheeks. "Besides, there's no point leaving just yet. We still have hours left in the Earthery."

It was my chance to get out of this and I've blown it. I look up to find him staring at me in the mirror. Goddamn it. I'd forgotten that was there. It's then that I realize that our clothes have changed yet again. He's wearing a vest that clings to his body, showing off every chiseled angle of his chest. I'm wearing a dress that's so short that the tassels on the hem barely cover my thighs. I think the Earthery has a fucked up sense of humor, but at least I'm wearing underwear. I turn around and plaster a smile on my face. "Let's get this over with, eh?"

"Earthery," I shout out into the ether. "We don't need to learn ballet. Give us something we can dance to together."

I was hoping for something formal, I could try to do an easy foxtrot to, but the music that follows is sultry and sexy, making it clear what the Earthery thinks to my demands.

"This is wrong," I say quickly, ready to ask the Earthery to change it to something that won't have our bodies slammed together and dripping in heat, but before I can speak, Dade catches my waist. I hitch in my breath as the sultry melody fills the room, its rhythm pulsating through me. The air thickens with anticipation, and a rush of nervous energy courses through my veins as Dade pulls me close. The

intensity of his gaze sends a shiver down my spine, and time seems to slow as I press my body to his and place my arms around his neck.

“We have to sway to the rhythm,” I whisper. It’s too close, too sensual and too terrifying. I close my eyes and try to picture Remy in Dade’s place, but it’s impossible. Dade has five inches on Remy and he’s thicker round the chest, too. The feathers on his wings flutter lightly against my arms as we move. Dade is still stiff, but he’s beginning to loosen up, which is making it worse. Our bodies are practically fused together and I can feel his bulge up against me. I need to let this go, to try to remain composed, but the fact we are practically vertically fucking with barely two scraps of thin fabric between us is making it hard to let anything go. Our bodies finally begin to sway in synchronicity, mirroring each other’s movements. Electricity courses through me with every movement and though I want to deny it, I’m completely turned on. Dancing like this is something I’ve wanted to do since I was eleven years old and watched Dirty Dancing for the first time, except back then I imagined my partner to be Patrick Swayze and not an almost demon with an eight-foot wing span and a cock that is pressing against me. An almost demon who I’ve barely said two words to in weeks and that, until now, has gone out of his way to avoid me. I catch my breath as his hand glides along the curve of my waist, pulling me closer. No longer am I leading him. He’s completely in control now. His domineering energy is molding me to him like putty. It’s overwhelming. I know I should stop it. This has gone way past a dance lesson, but I can’t stop. I don’t want this to stop. Arousal is blazing through my veins and the fact that this is illicit and dangerous only makes me more turned on. An electric current runs through our entangled bodies and my

panties are drenched through. Time loses meaning as we lose ourselves. The world around us fades away, leaving only a pulsating energy between us. This isn't a dance anymore. Not in the sense I know dancing. Our bodies have taken over our senses so much that I'm not even thinking, but feeling. It's impossible to ignore the hardness of Dade's cock between us. He's as turned on as I am, but he's not putting a stop to this madness any more than I am. The sexual energy between us is overwhelming and intoxicating.

Finally the music begins to reach a climax and as the final notes fade into the ether, we come to a rest, breathless and exhilarated, our bodies still entwined. In the unnerving silence, his breathing is almost as loud as the pounding of my heart in my ribcage. He's close enough to kiss. His lips are slightly parted. I just need to reach up on my tip toes and... The lights suddenly go up and with them, the absurdity of what we just let ourselves do becomes terrifyingly apparent. We're both breathless and drenched with sweat.

Dade's face hardens as he steps away from me. A mask shuts down over his features as he tries to hide the desire I saw in them moments before. "I think I've got it. Thanks."

He turns to walk away and this time I don't stop him with reminders of how much time we have left in the Earthery. The dance studio disappears until I'm alone in a massive white room, the only way out, a door that is still swinging with Dade's abrupt exit.

THE LETTER

ROWENA

Being surrounded by swathes of rich fabrics makes me more happy than I can say. Creativity runs through my veins as much as my blood does. I'm going to make Juliette, Quinn and me into the most gorgeous, most spectacular people at the ball. I know people think I have no fashion sense, but what they don't know is that I dress exactly how I want to. I don't need to wear designer clothes to feel amazing. I love my floaty flowered dresses made from cut off bits of material more than any dress I could buy. They remind me of my mother and my grandmother before her. Neither had much money and neither would win any style competitions, but both exuded happiness. They wore that happiness like rays of sunshine. The flowery dresses were always part of that. Part of a life before it became difficult. My mother's dresses were the first feminine clothes I ever wore. When I was a child, she'd let me rummage around in her closet and try on her shoes that were sizes too big for me. Right from the very start, she was the only person that never questioned it and when I came out, she told me she was waiting for a long time to finally meet her daughter formally. My father took a bit of warming up to the idea of losing his only son, but he loved me fiercely, and it didn't take long before he showed me off with pride. My life could have been so much easier than it was, but both my parents died before I

became an adult. At fifteen, I was orphaned and the family farm was sold. I was a child. I could have kept it going, but people weren't as accepting as my parents and no one wanted to gamble working with a child, let alone a child that looked like a girl but had the name Robert on all the invoices

There have been so many changes to myself and my body in my life. The first time when I started wearing girls' clothes, the second time when I started taking hormones and later when I had surgery and then the last time when I died and transitioned into what I am now. The woman I was always supposed to be. Now it's time for me to transition again, and I don't think I've ever been more nervous. I'm not becoming what I am inside. This time, I'm transforming into something else entirely. I'm no longer going to be the girl in the flowing frocks. I'm going to be a sexy ass bitch and I'm going to bring my two best friends along for the ride. No one at that ball is going to look hotter than us.

I set out separating the fabrics into three piles. The pink fabric is Juliette's. Quinn went with green and I'm going to be blue. Excitement fills me as I start making preliminary sketches.

Once I'm ready to start, I pull off my clothes and grab some blue lace, draping it over myself. I look into the full-length mirror and try to be objective. I can see my body clearly through the holes in the fabric. I look like a woman. If I do this right, I'll look like a beautiful woman.

Felix will be forced to see me as I am when he sees me in this.

I shake my head. *Eff Felix Barclay.*

I don't even know why the thought popped into my head. Felix sees me through bigoted eyes. He'll only ever see what

he wants to see when he looks at me.

“Damn it!” I hate that he’s even a thought. I’m going to look amazing because I want to, not to please anyone else. There’s no one here in the whole of Hell that I’m interested in and if I was, it would be literally anyone other than Felix Barclay.

It takes me hours to cut all the pieces of fabric so when I see the letter that someone has put under my door, I have no idea when it was slipped under. It could have been minutes or hours ago.

I open the door, not expecting to see anyone there, and I’m not surprised when I see the sweeping donut shaped balcony empty. I pick the letter up and shut the door behind me. My chest tightens as I see that there’s no name on the envelope. Quinn received letters like this. I try to reason away the dread. Anyone could have sent me this letter. It could be a note from Juliette. But as I rip it open and see the red ink, I already know it isn’t before I even read it. Not that it takes me long to read. It’s only five words long.

*FELIX WILL NEVER LOVE
YOU*

I stare at the words that are obviously meant to hurt me, but the more I read it, the more bizarre it seems. I don’t care what Felix’s opinion of me is. It must be a joke, but it’s not remotely funny. Whoever wrote this doesn’t know me at all. Quinn’s letters were much more macabre. Still, just receiving one is making me feel uneasy. I pop the letter back into the envelope and grab my portal that I’d piled a load of fabric on top of.

I type out a quick message.

QUINN, YOU FREE? CAN WE MEET IN THE RESTAURANT? I HAVE A QUESTION

Then, because I know Juliette would hate missing out on a possible mystery, I message her too.

When they both message back, I tuck the letter into my pocket, get dressed, and head downstairs.

It's a little early for dinner, so the restaurant is mercifully quiet. I find a spot in a far corner and wait. A waiter appears almost out of thin air as they do and asks for my order.

“Just a coffee. Actually, make it three, all with cream, one with enough sugar to sink a ship and a plate of donuts too.”

I'm not hungry, but I've never known Juliette to have coffee without consuming some kind of confectionery and I don't want a waiter interrupting us. Quinn and Juliette both appear as the waiter is leaving our order. I push the sugary coffee and the plate of donuts toward Juliette.

She gives me a wide grin in thanks.

I pull out the envelope and set it on the table between us. Quinn's reaction to it tells me everything I need to know. “This is like the letters you got in Purgatory, right?”

She visibly pales as she reaches for it. “Can I read it?”

I nod in acceptance.

Her fingers tremble as she pulls the letter through the ragged rip I'd made earlier. “Where did you get this?”

“It was slipped under my door earlier. Dade didn't write this.”

Juliette takes it from Quinn's fingers and scrunches up her nose. "This is hardly news. Felix is a moron. He only loves himself. I agree that Dade didn't write it though. She actually stops eating and raises her eyebrows, giving me a glance before turning her eyes to Quinn. "Quinn honey, is there something you want to tell us?"

Quinn leans forward and rests her head in her hands. Juliette put the half eaten donut back on the plate and rubs Quinn's back, leaving white sugary marks on her cardigan.

When she finally looks up, her eyes are dark and almost haunted. "I'm supposed to be dating Remy. I had a plan. I mean, he's hot, right?"

"He's an asshole, but he's hot," I agree.

Juliette nods her head. "He's Brad Pitt hot. Actually, he has a bit of a Brad Pitt look to him. How have I never realized that before?"

I roll my eyes as Quinn speaks again. "Exactly. He's probably the hottest man in this whole place."

Juliette grabs a donut and licks it. "So you're dating Remy and we can all agree he's like the hottest of hot. A Vesuvius of men, if you will. I'm really not seeing a problem here."

"I don't even like Dade," Quinn moans. "He's fucked up and scary and terrifying."

I furrow my eyebrows at the disgusting way Juliette is eating her donut. "I'm pretty sure scary and terrifying are synonyms, but I sense that you are telling us that despite Remy's perfection, it's Dade's pecker you're thirsting for?"

Juliette's mouth falls open in ill-concealed glee. "You like the mighty, murderous, mesmerizing, mysterious mister."

“The guy would rather chain himself to a wall than have sex with me.” Quinn cries, throwing her hands up in the air. “He’s so far from perfect. The exact antithesis of Remy and yet my panties are like Niagara Falls whenever I’m near him. When I danced with him at the Earthery earlier, it was the sexiest moment of my life and we were both fully clothed... well, half clothed. We were wearing dance outfits.”

“Woah! Back it up, sister,” Juliette exclaims, dropping what’s left of her donut on the table in her exuberance. “You were dancing with Dade in the Earthery?”

“Voluntarily?” I add.

Quinn looks completely miserable. I thought her pallor was due to my letter, but now that I think about it, she was white as a ghost when she sat down. “It was supposed to be an innocent dance lesson. Remy was there.”

Juliette claps her hands together. “Oh please tell me they sandwiched you between them and you did some dirty dancing.”

I shoot Juliette a warning stare as Quinn lowers her head so quickly she bangs her forehead on the table. “I was thinking it was like Dirty Dancing at the time!” she sobs. Her voice is barely audible.

“I don’t really see a problem with this,” Juliette says, picking up her half eaten donut and cramming what’s left of it into her mouth.

I push Quinn back up into a sitting position as best I can from opposite her. She’s not crying, but her eyes are wet.

“Did Remy get upset? Was there a fight? What happened?” I pick up my coffee and take a sip.

“Remy left. He thought we were going to do some basic ballet steps and I guess he figured it was safe to leave us to it. But then this sexy Latin American music started up and me and Dade were dancing like our crotches were fused together with super glue.”

I almost spit out my coffee but manage to swallow it.

“And?” Juliette leans forward, her eyes wide with curiosity. “Did you like it?”

“Of course I liked it,” Quinn whimpers. “I almost came in the middle of the dance floor.”

“Holy crap, this is juicier than Love Island.” Juliette practically bounces in her seat. “What happened after?”

Quinn rests her head in her hand. “Dade gave me a look of pure horror and stormed off. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now.”

“Nothing.” I reply. “Dade is weird. Forget it happened. When we’re at the ball, ditch Dade and dance with Remy, or better still, come as our date.” I gesture to Juliette.

Juliette leans back with a sly grin. “Actually,” she chimes in, a mischievous glint in her eyes, “I already have a date.”

Quinn’s gaze darts over to Juliette, curiosity and surprise written across her features. “Who?”

Juliette responds with a grin, her lips slightly dusted with powdered sugar. With a fluid motion, she rises from her seat. “Quinn, babe. I’m so sorry that you had an orgasmic dance with a mega hot guy. Rowena, I’m sorry you got a letter. It’s fucked up. I have to go. There’s somewhere I need to be.”

She slides past Quinn and walks away toward the elevators.

“What’s up with her?” Quinn asks, her brows furrowed in bewilderment.

I shrug. “I don’t know, but I noticed she didn’t answer your question. She’s been acting strange recently. I hardly see her anymore.”

“Maybe she’s with Orlin?” Quinn offers as though she can’t believe she’s saying it.

“You know, I thought that insane notion for a while too, but she can’t be. I mean it’s Orlin. She looks like she’s going to puke every time his name is mentioned. Unless it’s all a big ruse to throw us off the scent. He’s probably jacked under all those nasty sweater vests he wears.”

Quinn snorts and her features finally brighten up. “I’m sorry I hijacked your meeting about the letter with all my Dade crap. Who do you think is writing these?”

“I don’t know.” I lean forward and grab one of the donuts that Juliette left. “I was hoping you and Juliette might have a theory?”

Quinn ponders for a moment before suggesting, “Felix? He can’t stand either of us.”

Just hearing his name creates a reaction in my body. I tense up, but not before a frisson of something I don’t understand jolts me. “I don’t know.” I say, trying to keep my voice calm. “Theoretically, I can see where you’re coming from. You got the guy shot, then received letters like this in Purgatory. I gave him a blow job that everyone knows about, then I punched him in the face, and now I’ve started getting them.” I take a bite out of the donut and put the rest down. It’s way too sickly. “I believe he’s petty enough to do it, but I honestly don’t see his endgame. This isn’t the way Felix speaks.”

I look down at the wording on the letter again and purse my lips. “If he’d written it, it would be full of homophobic slurs and disgusting name calling. He really doesn’t need to send me a letter telling me he’ll never love me when he’s made it clear with every interaction we’ve ever had that he hates my guts. I think it’s kind of a given by this point.”

I lean back, slipping the letter carefully back into its envelope before tucking it into my pocket. “You know what the worst part is?” I sigh heavily.

Quinn looks at me, her expression expectant. “What?”

“I wanted someone like Felix to love me. Okay, not a transphobic, bigoted asshole, but someone who people respect and look up to. I guess maybe I thought if I could be with someone like that, people would look up to and respect me.”

Quinn rests her hand on my wrist. “Rowena Bagshot. You had more fans in Purgatory than everyone else put together. I know you’re not stupid, but you can be blind at times. Sure, Felix has his groupies, but even Dade has those now. And here in Lust you have people really rooting for you, not because of fame or power or...”

“Sexy wings and a gorgeous body?” I offer.

“Urgh,” Quinn groans. “I guess we’re both fucked. Maybe we should forget about our man troubles and do some sneaking around to see what Juliette is up to.”

My heart lightens, and I give her a conspiring grin. “You’re insane if you don’t think Juliette is knee deep in man... or men who are trouble, but I guess it will take our minds off Felix and Dade. Let’s do it.”

Forgetting the misery of the last hour, Quinn and I sneak up to the second floor and to Juliette’s room. There’s a red

ribbon tied to the door knob. I put my finger to it. “She’s definitely shagging!”

Quinn giggles. It’s good to see after how miserable she was earlier.

“You know what? I think I’m going to head back upstairs.” Quinn says. “I don’t have the stamina to wait around whilst Juliette practices fifteen hour tantric sex sessions with her mystery man or men. Let me know if you find out who’s in there with her?”

I nod, then head next door to my room. Spending time with Quinn and Juliette always cheers me up, but I played down how much the note hurt me. I shouldn’t care, but I do. It’s like a deep ache inside me that’s beginning to grow with each passing day. When I entered Hell, I’d never been happier. All my dreams were handed to me on a plate, but that one niggle that I would never really be a woman, despite my body being as female as any other woman’s in here, has grown and it’s eating away at me in a way that I can’t seem to push down. The fact that this asshole who is sending these letters knows me better than I know myself has only compounded it. I really have no idea who it could be. The only people who know me well in here are Juliette and Quinn, and there’s no way either of them would have written the letter. Neither have the motive and if I’m honest with myself, neither really knows the depth of my feelings. Whoever this is, is either lucky with what would hurt me the most or they know things about me that no one else knows.

A shudder runs through me as I gaze around my room. Fabric is still strewn around just as I left it and nothing has moved, but the only time I’ve said anything positive about

Felix was in the room to myself. So if that's the case, how is it someone knows about it?

TROIS MEN

The second trial isn't until tomorrow, so I'm surprised when I get a message from Noémi on the Hell Cell just before bed.

COME TO THE CLASSROOM IN THE ENTERTAINMENT LEVEL. DO NOT TELL ANYONE ELSE. SEE YOU THERE IN TEN MINUTES.

A flick of nerves crawls up my spine. Why the secrecy? For a second I wonder if it's just one of my teammates luring me down there to get me out of the games, but then I remember how busy the entertainment level is and until I step inside the classroom, I'm relatively safe. Or as safe as anyone can be in Hell. I pull my pajamas off and step into some jeans and a t-shirt. The nerves don't abate as I head downstairs and cross through the atrium to the elevator that will take me to the entertainment level. Luckily, it's a busy evening with people heading toward Infernos and some people still doing their shopping. My heart is racing in full gear as I walk past the entrance to the Earthery and down the corridor that will take me to the classrooms. I haven't been down this corridor on this level, but I remember it well from the classes in Purgatory. The corridor looks very similar apart from the pink walls and plush pink carpet beneath my feet. The door to classroom one

is closed, and the corridor is empty, although I can still see people lining up for Infernos right at the very end. When I push open the door, I'm relieved to find other people from the games all sitting down at desks. Rowena offers a swift wave, prompting me to release a drawn-out sigh of relief as I settle into a chair beside her. Positioned on her other side is Juliette. Just as I take my seat, Noémi enters through the door.

“Bienvenue. Good evening everybody. Glad to see you all ‘ere.” Her brown and pink curls bounce as she takes us all in and I can see her doing a quick count, pointing at everyone and mouthing the numbers in French. Finally, when she’s happy we’re all here, she heads to the front.

Rowena’s eyebrows furrow as she raises her hand. “This is only half of us. Where are the rest?”

She’s right. The group of people is predominantly women except for Jake and another guy I can’t remember the name of.

Noémi puts her hand down on Rowena’s table. “Zese ees everyone I invited down ‘ere, Ro. Ze twenty seex of you ‘ave been peeked specially by me. You are going to ‘ave special insight into ze second trial.”

“That’s not fair,” Rowena points out but is swiftly cut off from saying anything further by Juliette nudging her in her ribs.

Noémi smiles. “Do not worry. You are not getting special treatment. I ‘ave invited ‘alf of each couple down here. As you can see, no one down ‘ere ‘as their partner. Your partners do not know you ’ave been invited and I ‘ope that none of you told zem that you were coming down.”

“No fucking chance,” Juliette mutters under her breath. I guess I’m not the only one having a difficult time with whom

I've been paired with. I am surprised though. Despite her disdain for Orlin, she's so far managed to secure full marks with him, so he must be doing something right.

“Eef any of your partners find out about Zis meeting, both you and your partner will be disqualified from ze games.”

I hear a few people grumbling behind me.

“But I tell Colin everything,” Maggie complains. “He’ll be wondering where I am.”

Noémi gives her a hard stare. “Zen you must tell him anything. ‘E cannot know about thees. Tell him you ‘ave gone shopping.”

“But I never go shopping without him,” Maggie complains. We do everything together.”

Noémi walks over to Maggie. “Eet ees commendable zat you and Colin share your lives in such a way, but if you want to move further in ze games you ‘ave to keep zis meeting secret. You will ‘ave to lie to ‘im. Tell ‘im anything you need to tell ‘im just as long as you don’t tell ‘im that you have met up with me or any of ze rest of zis group. Do you understand?”

Her usual softness has retreated slightly and I see a peek of the real Noémi underneath the pink bubbly exterior.

Maggie must see it too, because she nods her head and sits back in her seat.

“Bien. Zen we can begin. Tomorrow we will be starting ze second trial. I know a lot of you struggled in ze first trials and ze second trial is not going to be any easier for you. ‘Owever I ‘ope you will find it fun. I came up with zis trial myself and eet’s a leettle different from what you are used to.”

I'm not sure how she can quantify different. Everything I've done since coming to Hell has been different from any experience I've had on Earth. All of this is new to me. I sit forward and listen eagerly, although I'm not quite sure I want to know what will happen after what happened last time. I'm pretty sure that whatever the second trial will be, it won't be fun. Noémi's idea of fun and mine are very different.

"Tomorrow," she begins, "each of you will be put in a room in ze Earthery. Ze room will not be like ze room you were in last time.

"Thank goodness," Rowena says, paling slightly. "I really can't go through that again."

Noémi quietens her with a stare. "Ze room itself doesn't really matter. I have to tell you also that there weel be no music played that will have you feeling, 'ow you say, 'orny. You weel go to zis room by yourself and in turn, trois men will come and spend ten minutes weeth you. One of these men weel be your partner in zis round. The same partner you had in ze first trials."

"Are we supposed to sleep with these men?" Rowena asks and I can hear the fear and also resignation in her voice.

"What you do with zees men is up to you, but no, as I said, there weel be no 'ormones, no magic present in this room."

"It sounds boring," Juliette complains. She sounds almost excited by the presence of three men in her room. As if on cue, she adds, "Will these three men come in together?"

Even though I'm not looking at her, I can almost hear Rowena's eyes rolling in her head.

"No," Noémi clarifies. "Zese trois men will each spend ten minutes weeth you separately."

Rowena raises her hand again. This time, Noémi doesn't look so serene. Irritation fills her features as she points at Rowena. "What ees it?"

"What's the point of all this? And for that matter, where is Hades? If this is the second trial and you've designed it like you designed the first, what's he doing?"

For a moment, Noémi's eyes flash pink before returning to their usual warm brown, sending a shiver down my spine and reminding me of the demon she truly is.

"Good fucking question, Rowena," Anthura chimes in, leaning back in her seat, arms folded, and a smug smile gracing her face. "Where is Hades, Noémi? I keep receiving messages about his presence here, yet I've yet to lay eyes on him."

"He is here," Juliette interjects, turning to address Anthura. "He must be. Twila told us."

Anthura furrows her brow. "You've seen Twila? She's here?"

"Was here," I interject. "However, we haven't seen her in weeks. She's also stopped responding to messages and calls on her Portal."

I brace myself for the usual sneer that Anthura directs my way, but to my surprise, her expression carries a note of curiosity. "Why do you suppose she's doing that?"

"Ladies!" Noémi's voice cuts over all of ours. "'Ades ees 'ere in Lust. What 'e is doing is nobody's business and I don't know zees Twila. Can we get back to Ze matter in 'and? Ro 'ad a good question, and I weesh to answer eet."

I catch Rowena's eye. Noémi is lying to us. She must know Twila. I think back to the conversation I had with Twila

on the first day in here. Twila definitely mentioned Noémi. She called her a pink chick or something like it.

“Ze trois men will entair ze room, believing zey are seeing you,” she begins animatedly. “In fact, tomorrow morning, I am going to switch you all around. Thanks to ze magic of ze Earthery, you will appear to be someone else. Only you will know ze truth of ze person you’re talking to. Zey will not know ‘oo you are. Zey will believe you to be someone else in zis room, so take a good look around, because tomorrow you will no longair be you. You’ll be one of zese ozzer people in zis classroom.”

“I still don’t get it,” Rowena pouts. She’s not the only one. It’s the lamest trial yet, but knowing Noémi, there’ll be a catch. There always is in this place.

Noémi looks like she is talking to an insolent child as she addresses Rowena. “Your job eez to make zese trois people believe you are ze person you look like. If zey guess it eet’s ze real you, you weel lose points. If zey believe zat you are not ze person you look like, you weel lose points. Ze only way to get full points eez eef all trois men leave your room believing you are ze person you look like. If zey zink you are someone else but get ze wrong person, you weel lose points.”

I’m not the only one looking around the room. There’s a lot of confusion and worry etched on the faces of the surrounding people. Behind me, Jake raises his hand. “I still don’t understand why we are doing this. I don’t understand the point of this trial at all.”

Noémi sighs. “Y’ave all been intee-mate weeth your partnairs. Even zose of you who do not like ze people you ‘ave been paired weeth. You’ve all done zings on ze physical level zat maybe some of you enjoyed.”

Her eyes swiftly turn to Rowena. “And some of you didn’t, but now we want to see...” She pauses. “I want to see just ‘ow much you got into zeir minds. Your partners weel ‘ave ze easy job. Zey zink zey’re just going to chat weeth you, or should I say, chat weeth ozzerr people. I ‘ave personally picked ze trois people who you weel be paired weeth and no,” she holds her hand up, “before any of you ask, you weel not ‘ave any pree- or warning of which people I ‘ave picked for you to go weeth. All I can say eez zat one of zese men weel be ze parrtner you were weeth in ze first trials. I ‘ave picked men zat I zink weel be entertaining, based on your first trials and ‘ow you’ve interacted weeth ozzerr people. So remember, do not tell anybody outside of zis room what weel ‘appen tomorrow. If I find out zat you ‘ave told anybody, you and your parrtner weel automatically be disqualified. Do not give any ‘int to your parrtner or ze ozzerr deux men. Tomorrow I weel be listening to every conversation, and if I zink you ‘ave told zem in any way or ozzerrwise ‘inted at who you are, you weel be out and your parrtner weel be out.”

I raise my hand as a question pops into my mind. “Do we know in advance who we’ll look like?”

Noémi shakes her head “No, so now we’re going to spend ze next ‘our chatting to everybody ‘ere. Remember zeir mannerisms. Ask zem questions. I don’t want to make zis too easy for you, but zose of you zat pay attention, ze better you will do.”

My stomach falls as I take in the people I’m surrounded by. Anthura sneers as my eyes fall on her and Candice gives me a hard look that clearly shows she’d rather be anywhere else but here. “How are we supposed to pretend to be someone? If we end up in a room with their partner, they will

know them intimately. What if they ask questions I don't know the answer to?"

"Zen Quinn, you should pay attention tonight and if zere are any questions zat you do not know the answer to, you better 'ope that you're a good actor. Remember all these interactions weel be shown on ze big screen so you want to make sure you do zis right because nothing you say in that room tomorrow weel be private. Do you all understand?"

A few people nod, but most look sick to their stomachs. Noémi claps her hands. "Right now let's pull zese chairs away. I'll let you spend ze next 'our chatting to each ozzer. Go around the room. Talk to everybody because you never know which person you're going to end up in ze body of."

"I have a question," Juliette says. "Will it hurt when we swap bodies? I mean, what exactly is the procedure?"

"Zair weel be no pain," Noémi replies. "You weel not literally be swapping bodies. Eet weel be like you're wearin' a magical costume. You weel look like zem and you weel talk like zem, but you weel still be yourself. Eet's your job to learn 'ow to act like zem." She looks down at the watch on her wrist. "You should start now because we only 'ave fifty minutes left. After zat, I weel dismiss you. You should go straight to your room and stay zair alone until tomorrow morning when we meet down in ze atrium at nine a.m."

The sound of tables and chairs scraping to one side resonates as we clear a space in the center of the room. My initial inclination is to approach Rowena and Juliette and vent my frustration about the task ahead, but with fifty minutes remaining, they're the last two people I should be talking to. I already know their mannerisms. If I look like either of those tomorrow, I would probably be able to pull it off. I will never

in a million years have the sexy swagger of Juliette, nor the scathing hilarious tongue of Rowena, but I know more about them than anyone else in this place does. As I talk to the people in the group, some of which I've never spoken to before, I try hard to remember the way they speak, their accents and their mannerisms, but with twenty-six people, it's hard to remember who's who.

By the time the hour is up, I've barely committed anybody's name to memory, let alone their partners and all their likes and dislikes. I just don't have the energy to care, so after saying a swift good night to everyone, Rowena and Juliette and I head back to my room in silence. As soon as I shut the door, Juliette throws herself on my bed and exclaims, "What the fuck was all that about? We're pretending to be someone else now? Does anyone else think that's creepy?"

Rowena pulls her skirt out flat and sits beside her. "This is Hell. Noémi isn't as obvious as Anthura, but she's a demon. We can't lose sight of that and think about it. She's giving the people what they want. She doesn't care about the contestants, but she does care about the people in her tower. She's got to spend eternity with them. It wouldn't surprise me if she had this all planned out from the start. She's a manipulator."

"What do you think she meant about Twila?" I ask. "She met her. I know she did, and it's hardly as though Twila is hard to forget."

"I thought that maybe she was having so much fun with Hades that she'd kinda forgotten us, but now I'm not so sure," Rowena muses.

"There's no way Twila forgot about us, but we do know for sure that she was here. If only we could get to the lower level

to go and look for her.” Juliette’s eyes turn to me. “Didn’t you say that you had a key?”

“I did in Purgatory, but it disappeared when I was brought down here. Twila is the only other person I know who isn’t a demon that has one.”

Shit. That’s not true.

Rowena searches my face. “What is it? You’re hiding something.”

“Not really.” I sigh and flop onto the bed next to them. “I just remembered someone else who has a key, but there’s no way he’s going to give it to me.”

“Dade Angelis,” they chorus.

I let out a groan.

Juliette sits up. “Go get it!”

Ha! “He hates me. Like hates me to the depths of his soul. There’s no way he’ll give me his most treasured possession.”

Both of them stare at me and my stomach sinks.

“What?”

“Didn’t you tell us earlier that you two did the horizontal rhumba... er vertical? You know what I mean.” Juliette smirks. “You’re gonna have to seduce that demon, babe. Take one for the team”

I look at Rowena for support. I don’t get it.

“I hate to say it,” she says, “but if we want to find out what happened to Twila, you might have to go speak to him at least.” She gives Juliette a warning look. “But don’t do what Juliette says eh? Just talk to the guy.”

PRETTY DAMN DELISH

My heart pounds as I once again find myself heading to Dade's apartment. The last time I was there, I left in tears and the sharp pain still stings sharply despite what happened between us in the Earthery. There's no imagining it as he opens his door and it hits me with full force. Anger. Sadness. Pain.

"I need your help," I pant.

He's naked from the waist up, which is disconcerting. The memory of the electricity between us as I danced with him, then him leaving me abruptly, is still raw. The contours of his skin catch the red and pink of the stained glass windows behind me, outlining the sinewy muscles and tattoos and making them appear as though they are on fire. It's a breathtaking sight, and one I don't want to contend with right now. I concentrate on his messy hair, glad that at least part of him doesn't look so fucking perfect. Then I realize it's probably mussed up the way it is because I've just dragged him out of bed.

He glances at his Hell Cell, then shifts his gaze back to me. "It's eleven o'clock at night."

"I'm painfully aware." I heave out. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't need you."

I catch myself and how that sounds. “Er, your help.”

He pauses, studying my disheveled state. I know that I look a mess. I chose to sprint up the staircase rather than wait for the platform. If I’d waited and thought about what I was about to do, I wouldn’t have come. My cheeks are flushed, and I’m struggling for breath.

“How can I help you?”

I fixate on him, expecting a confrontation. I thought he’d, at the very least, make me plead my case. Instead, he stands waiting for me to catch my breath. His expression is benign, but I can feel the turmoil beneath it.

“I want to borrow your elevator key. I need to get down to the lower level.”

As he steps back from the door, my heart tightens in anticipation of the slam of it in my face. It never comes.

“Dade?” I call, peering into the empty doorway, though I haven’t been given an invitation to enter. His room is dark and I can’t see him and yet the doorway remains open. I don’t know whether to step inside or leave. While I’m still pondering, he appears back at the door, the blue marble in his hand. I reach out for it, a sense of relief washing over me that it’s been surprisingly straightforward, and he hasn’t forced me to beg. He pulls his hand back.

I gaze up at him and see that he’s no longer half naked, but has pulled a shirt on.

“What’s going on?” I ask, confused. My heart is pounding and I don’t know why. It just does that when Dade is around.

His expression is solemn, but his voice leaves no room for argument. “I know you wouldn’t come to me if you weren’t in trouble. I shall not permit you to go to the lower level alone.”

What? No!

My head shakes vehemently, a surge of anger rising from the depths of shock provoked by his words. “You don’t permit me? You don’t own me. You don’t get to dictate what I can or cannot do.”

He responds with an infuriating calmness to my outrage. “And yet, it is I who possesses the key.”

He can’t. He just can’t. I can’t concentrate when he’s around. It’s like the entire world is filled with him, and I don’t need that right now. Of course, I can hardly tell him that, so I settle with, “I’m not the one in trouble,” I admit. “Twila is. I need to find her.”

The way he looks at me has my stomach turning to mush. He’s utterly impossible to argue with. He steps past me. “All the more reason, you’ll need help, Valentine,” he says, closing the door behind him.

I stare at his retreating back as he calls the platform. His black wings look larger and more magnificent silhouetted against the stained glass, which gives him a kind of red glow. He’s never looked more a demon than he does now. Its awe-inspiring and has my heart pounding in a way it shouldn’t, because it’s not just the demon in him I’m reminded of, but the times those wings were wrapped around me and I felt like nothing could hurt me.

I let out a sigh. I’m tired of all the push and pull between us. I’m exhausted by the venomous barbs we throw at each other, and most of all, I’m tired of the fact that I always seem to end up with him, but not really *with* him.

“You’d better not just be having so much sex with Hades that you’ve forgotten to call us,” I mutter under my breath to

Twila as though she's right next to me. I step into the small platform beside Dade, purposefully positioning myself to the side to ensure that there's no physical contact between us. If I have to do this with him, I don't need to complicate it.

I don't look at him as we descend the six floors to the bottom, but I feel his eyes boring into me. I can finally breathe as the platform comes to a rest and I step off. If Dade wants to come with me to find Twila, then fine, but I'm taking the lead in this. I won't be waylaid by any of Dade's crap. Thankfully, the atrium is pretty quiet and though a few people look our way, they don't bother us. I hear our names in their whispers and I curse my new found fame. Everything was so much easier when I was anonymous. Dade places the marble into the small hole that serves as a keyhole in the elevator and it takes us down past the entertainment level to the most dangerous part of the tower. The lower level where the demons are no longer glamored and don't have to pretend to like the humans that live here. Upstairs, they have to cater to our every whim, but down here, this is their territory and they can do whatever they want.

As the doors slide open, I draw in a deep breath. In stark contrast to the opulent pink extravagance of the upper floors, the lower level retains the same appearance as it did back in Purgatory. The gray service corridors bring back a rush of memories, none of them good. This is where I saw Dade having his skin peeled from his back by sharp toothed imps. I can still see his blood dripping onto the floor every time I close my eyes. I feel a change in Dade's aura as we step out into the bland corridor.

“That way is where the demons hang out.” I say, pointing in the direction of the lounge.

“I’m aware.”

Of course he is. He knows this place better than I do. “I think if Twila is anywhere, she’ll be in there. Hades too.”

Dade nods. “Stay here and I will go and see.”

“No. I’m not letting you go without me.” I stand my ground.

He gives me an unreadable look, cocking his head slightly. “You don’t permit me? You don’t own me. You don’t get to dictate what I can or cannot do.”

He’s so fucking arrogant, using my own words against me. “I’m coming with you!” I take a step forward, but he blocks my path with astonishing speed, a blur of motion.

“It is not like the bowels of Purgatory down here, Valentine.” His stare is dark and haunted, matching his aura, which seems to have thickened around us since the elevator doors opened. “Down here. The demons are vicious.”

I pin my hands to my hips and add steel to my voice. “I’m coming with you.”

Irritation flecks his eyes. “Why do you have to be so insufferable all the time, Valentine?”

“Why do you have to be an asshole all the time, Angelis” I counter. I step around him, but he catches my wrist, spinning me around.

Anger swirls in both his expression and his aura, but it’s exhilarating and consuming and I daren’t breathe. My blood seems to heat, caught up as I am in him.

“I won’t be able to protect you,” he growls, his voice dripping with a dark intensity. “If they decide that either of us is trespassing where humans should not be and take offence at

our presence, there will be nothing I can do to stop it. They will kill us without mercy.”

A shiver, as cold as death, courses down my spine and the heat that was surrounding us falls away.

“I don’t care,” I say, standing up to him. “I need to find her.”

His expression softens into something sad and vulnerable. It’s like an ache in his soul that radiates out from him. “But I care, Valentine.”

Neither of us speak after his confession. He lets go of my wrist and turns toward the direction of the demon’s lounge. He doesn’t stop me from following, but I notice he’s outstretched his wings slightly. Readying himself for attack?

I might have stood up against his words, but it doesn’t mean I don’t feel them intensely. On this level in purgatory, I was degraded, attacked, burned. I saw things that humans aren’t supposed to see. Dade literally had his skin peeled from his body, which caused him so much agony he screamed. I can’t imagine anything worse and truthfully, I don’t want to.

If he’s right. I won’t have to imagine anything.

I’m trembling as we turn into the corridor where the demons’ lounge is. With any luck, they’ll all be in bed except for Twila.

He stops outside the door and casts a dark glance my way. Despite the tremble, I stand straight and nod my head. My throat closes and my heart seems to stop as he raises his hand to knock.

I almost hope no one answers the door, but my hopes are dashed as a demon wrenches it open. The massive demon

towers above Dade and as he takes him in, his face contorts into an expression of rage and primal fury. “Humans?”

I’m terrified by this monstrous angry beast, but Dade doesn’t lose his cool as he addresses him. “We are here to speak to the almighty Hades. We are...” He glances my way... “Friends of his partner, Twila.”

I nod and he turns back to the beast. The demon opens his mouth and roars. “How did you get down here, Human? Humans aren’t permitted.”

“Hades invited us,” I shout out. Dade has done enough for me tonight. I’m not having the fact that he has an elevator key revealed to this monster.

The demon’s eyes turn to me and narrow. “That is not possible.” His voice is hard and rough. “Humans!”

This time it’s not a question, but a rally to attack. He lunges forward and grabs Dade by the throat, as what seems like hundreds of demons appear behind him, each more hideous and angry than the next. My heart seems to liquefy as I see the next few minutes play out with crystal clarity. We’ll be swamped and Dade’s prediction will come true. I pull every ounce of strength I possess and hurl myself at the huge demon. I bite down on the thick scaly skin of the arm that holds Dade up in the air. His skin tastes disgusting in my mouth and a pool of acidic demon blood fills my mouth. I let go, dropping to the floor as I try not to retch against the putrid goo dripping from my mouth. Without thinking, I punch hard, aiming below the demon’s belt. A guttural howl pierces the air, and the demon finally relinquishes its hold on Dade, who clatters to the floor beside me.

Dade elongates his wings, and grabbing me around the middle, takes flight. I’m sick with both stress and the rotten

taste coating my taste buds, but I breathe a sigh of relief as Dade's wings flap and we begin to fly down the corridor... For about three seconds.

Terror takes hold as I look back and catch sight of the hoard of demons screaming down the corridor behind us. "Faster!" I cry out as one of the demons leaps forward and clamps Dade's right leg in his hands. Our motion comes to a stop and I almost fall out of Dade's grip.

His body shudders as he lets out a bloodcurdling scream and the air fills with the sound of shattering bones. My heart pounds as I look down and see the demon has twisted Dade's leg a hundred and eighty degrees, so his foot is pointing in the opposite direction to the other. I swivel in Dade's arms, spit the remnants of the other demon's blood into the demon's face. Its grip on Dade's leg slackens, fingers clawing at its face in a desperate attempt to clear its eyes.

"Go!" I scream out as another demon catches up and leaps towards us. It misses us by inches. The blood drains from my face as we hurl down the corridor, putting distance between us and the angry demons. By the time we get back to the elevator, their battle cries are distant, but it's clear we only have a few minutes to get out of here. Dade has always been pale, but it looks like all the blood has been siphoned from his body as I slam down my fist on the call button. My knees almost give way as he slumps against me. When the doors open, I practically have to carry him in. I press frantically on the up button and finally breathe when the doors close and we begin to rise.

"Hold me, Valentine."

I think he's asking for emotional support as I'm already propping him up, but then he becomes heavier in my arms. He

reaches down and wrenches his leg, twisting the back into the correct position. The stench of sulfur, the acidic taste and the sickening crunch of bones has me hurling my dinner onto the elevator floor.

“I’m sorry.” I cry out, breathlessly. “I should have listened to you. They’ll kill us.”

Sweat pours from Dade’s brow as he lifts his head up to look at me. “They will not dare come for us up here. Their code prevents it.”

I wipe my face with the back of my hand and find tears. I wasn’t even aware I was crying. “They do what they want. They hated me so much in Purgatory that they served me maggots for every meal.”

Dade grits his teeth in pain and he grips onto me as the elevator doors open. The atrium is empty and strangely quiet. It’s also darker than usual, lit only by the faint glow of Hell streaming down from the glass ceiling a hundred floors above us.

“They are forbidden from causing harm up here,” he insists. “Maggot meals not withstanding.” His breathing is becoming shallow and I have to bear almost all his weight as we slowly make our way, inch by painful inch, through the atrium. “I need to get you to a hospital.” I don’t even know if there is a hospital in this circle.

“I do not need it. Just help me to my room.”

“I heard your bones breaking. Twice!”

He pulls in a deep breath as we step through the door to the platform. Well, I step, he hops. “We aren’t alive. We heal much quicker in here and I am part demon, which means the process accelerates even further. I will be fine.”

Guilt eats me up as the platform comes to a stop outside his door. He pulls out his Hell Cell and holds it up to the sensor, unlocking the door, then he pushes the door open.

“Let me do something,” I insist, feeling distraught. “I can’t let you go in there on your own.”

“You don’t permit me?” Despite everything, he cracks a strained smile.

Fucking hell. He almost had his leg ripped from his body and he’s doing the least Dade-like thing possible - cracking jokes.

“That’s right,” I croak, tasting the salt of my tears over the demon’s blood. “I don’t permit you.”

He places his hands on my shoulders and puts his injured leg to the ground. I gasp as he puts weight on it.

“As you can see, I’m already healing.”

“I don’t want to leave you. I can’t leave you like this.” My voice is coarse and full of despair and I’m clinging to something, but I don’t know what. I only know that I don’t want him to close that door and have us on different sides of it.

His hands glide from my shoulders to cup my face, the touch electrifying and safe at the same time. “You saved me tonight, Valentine.”

“I nearly got you killed,” I choke out.

He brushes a strand of hair away from my face in a gesture that’s so incredibly intimate and then when I don’t think I can take anymore, he brushes his thumb down my cheek and over my lips that part slightly at the touch.

“Let’s stop this. Whatever distraction and menace we’ve created between us. No more tears for me, Valentine. I will be

fine and so will you. We should put the past behind us and be friends.”

Friends seems such a bland word for the energy and adrenaline pulsating through my body right now. Then, in a gesture that most definitely isn't friendly, he brings his lips to mine. Soft. I close my eyes and lean into him, but then he's gone and when I open my eyes, the door is shut and I'm on the outside. Alone.

“Jesus Fuck!”

I look up to see Rowena and Juliette peering down at me from the level above.

They both begin to run down the stairs toward me. Juliette's heels echoing on each step. “What happened to you?”

I don't know what they mean until I look down. My clothes are ripped and coated in the demon's blood. “It's not my blood,” I huff out. “How long have you been standing up there?”

I shouldn't care if they caught the interaction between Dade and me, but I want to keep it to myself. Especially the kiss.

“We just came out now.” Rowena glances up at the closed door behind me. “Is Dade okay?”

He's not okay, but he's way too much of a maddening asshole to admit it. “It's not his blood either,” I concede. “I bit into a demon. Turns out they taste disgusting.”

“I don't know,” Juliette shrugs. “They taste pretty damn delish when I...”

She's cut off by Rowena's dark stare. "Let's get you upstairs. You need a bath. You stink."

"It's the demon." My whole body hurts as we traipse up the stairs to the seventh level, but it's my heart that stings the most.

"I'm guessing you didn't find Twila?" Juliette asks as we stop at my door.

I shake my head. "The demon I bit told me it wasn't possible that Hades invited us down. She's not there. Hades either. I don't know where they are, but at some point after we spoke to her, they left the Second Circle."

THE SECOND CHALLENGE

Every time I close my eyes, I hear Dade's scream, feel the flash of pain in his aura, and see his face. The second trial is tomorrow and I should be concentrating on that, but my mind has other ideas. Tomorrow I'll have to go into a room with Dade and lie to him. After agreeing to be friends, I'm going to be forced into deceit and if I try to warn him, we'll lose even more points. I turn my mind to Remy. I'm going to have to lie to him too, but somehow I think that will be easier. He's not my partner in the games. What I do tomorrow in the Earthery won't affect him one bit. He could guess my identity the second he walks through the door and it won't be him losing points, it will be me... and Dade. As my partner, Dade's points are linked to mine. So, just like everything else in this God-forsaken hell hole, I'll just have to take tomorrow as it comes and hope that I don't manage to fuck it up somehow.

By the time the next morning arrives, I've twisted my mind into every conceivable scenario, and I'm exhausted from lack of sleep.

I check my Hell Cell every two minutes, awaiting Noémi's message, and finally, it arrives:

MEET DOWN AT THE EARTHERY IN TEN MINUTES. DO NOT ARRIVE WITH YOUR PARTNER. THEY WILL BE ARRIVING LATER.

I'm already dressed to go, but my insides are in turmoil. My heart skips as the platform lowers me down past Dade's room. The urge to go to jump off the platform and knock at his door to see if he is ok is overwhelming, but I know if I do that, we'll either lose points or be thrown out of the games. It's a miracle we didn't get caught together last night by Noémi as it is. I have to go down to the Earthery without him.

Stepping into the atrium, a sudden eruption of screams catches me off guard, momentarily freezing me in place. Memories from the previous night come rushing back, echoing in my mind—the encounter with the demons. A surge of fear courses through me, mingling with adrenaline as I wonder if Dade was wrong and the Demons are coming to attack. But when I look closely, it's not just demons screaming, but people, too. They are screaming at me, but smiling. I swallow my fear as I try to understand what's going on. Stretching out before me, two golden barriers run in parallel, framing a long red carpet that extends from the entryway at the base of the platform to the elevator doors. A multitude of people stand amidst the crowd, enthusiastically waving flags and brandishing posters. I catch sight of one nearby, bearing the words "Juliette, get in my bed."

A sense of awe washes over me as I survey my surroundings. Suddenly, my own image appears on the immense screen positioned at the far end of the restaurant. The projected image of me waves and playfully licks her lips. This isn't an onslaught. Everyone is out to cheer for the Inferno Games competitors.

I spot two of the competitors I spoke to last night waiting for the elevator, so I walk quickly, stopping only to sign a couple of autographs.

“Hi, Hannah. Hi, Oliver,” I say, hoping I remembered their names correctly. Both nod and smile, saying, “Hi, Quinn.” I suppose last night wasn’t a complete waste of time; at least we now know each other’s names, and as no one corrects me, I’m assuming I got this right.

Oliver is good looking in a bland way with neatly brushed hair, brown eyes and glasses. Hannah is much more striking, with long poker-straight blonde hair, deep brown eyes and plump red lips. Her gorgeous yellow dress seems almost wasted seeing as she’ll look like someone else in someone else’s clothing for most of the day.

“I’m not looking forward to this,” Oliver whispers. “Just because I’m a gay man doesn’t mean I belong in this group. Almost everyone else is a woman, and there’s a good chance I’m going to end up being... well, I don’t know how to be a woman. I’ve never wanted to be one.”

“Oh, honey,” Hannah says, putting her arm around his shoulder, “None of us know how to be other people. I wouldn’t worry too much about it. I think we’ll all be doing the same. We’re all worried.”

Oliver shakes his head. “I don’t want to do this. I’ve never been one for acting or pretending to be something I’m not. I wish they’d picked my partner; he would have been fantastic. He was actually an actor in real life.”

“Honey, at least you’re down here with someone you knew in real life. I’m partnered up with someone I barely know, and the things we had to do in the last trial would make your toes curl. I suppose that makes this trial easier for me, because my

partner barely knows me at all. He sure knows what I look like naked, but I doubt he could pick me out of a lineup.”

I can barely hear them over the sound of the crowd, and I’m glad when the elevator doors open and we get in.

Hannah turns to me. “What about you? Did you know Dade before you came to Hell?”

I shake my head. “I met him in Purgatory.”

“Yeah.” Hannah sighs. “I guess the last trial was difficult for you, too?”

The memories of the two parts of the first trial leave a worse taste in my mouth than the demon blood I almost swallowed last night. “Put it this way, there’s a good reason we got low points in the first trial.”

She gives me a curious look. “You mean you two didn’t...” she follows it up with an obscene gesture.

“Nope,” I reply, with a tinge of regret.

Hannah looks at me with astonishment and shakes her head. “Honey, if Dade was my partner, you couldn’t keep me away. Hell, I wouldn’t need Hell Magic for me to jump his bones. You’d need to keep me away; have you seen the guy?”

Yes, I have, and that’s half the problem

I’m grateful when the doors open, and I can escape Hannah and Oliver.

It’s eerily quiet down here compared to upstairs in the atrium, and it’s clear that it’s been cleared out for us. Noémi greets us with her usual exuberance. Today she’s wearing a pink dress that skims her thighs and leaves very little to the imagination. Her make-up is much more pronounced than usual, with glittery pink eye shadow and bright crimson lips.

“Bonjour, Quinn. Good morning.” She gives me a hug which sends a shiver of desire rushing through me, which dissipates when she moves on to Oliver and Hannah.

“Bien. Now we weel proceed to ze Earthery. Remember, as soon as you pass through ze doors, you weel transform into someone else. You’ll know ‘oo you are, but your voices will mimic zem, and your appearance will match. Ze Earthery weel shape itself accordingly as soon as you step through ze doors, and you’re in charge of acting like zem, imitating their accents. So, please, don’t use your own accent eef you want to survive zis round.”

“Where’s everyone else?” I was hoping to see Juliette and Rowena before we started the trial.

“I ‘ave staggered you, trois at a time to ‘elp the Earthery acclimatize. Eet ees a very powerful theeng, changing ze appearance of so many people. Ready to go inside?”

I’m a bundle of nerves as we march in single file toward the Earthery doors. Pain and longing twist horribly in my stomach at the memories of the last time I was in here with Dade. It was less than twenty-four hours ago and yet, it feels so surreal that I could have dreamed it. I close my eyes, taking a deep breath as Noémi guides me through the doors. Hannah steps out in front of me, swallowed by the darkness. Then it’s my turn.

The world fades into obscurity as the darkness swallows me whole. It only takes a few seconds for another world to form around me. A room appears as bland and boring as it can be. I guess to give no hints to who I really am. It’s barely more than four gray walls, a plain carpet, and a couple of sofas. The only thing of interest in the room is a tall mirror. Looking down, I see that I’m a woman. I’m not Juliette or Rowena. The

dress is wrong. I also cross off Hannah and Anthura. Anxiety takes hold as I approach the mirror. I don't know how long I have before the trial starts and I need to get into character.

My breath hitches in my throat and I cringe as I see who I am. Long blonde hair in waves cascades down over my shoulders, and the face that should be beautiful, but seems to be in a permanent sneer, marking it as ugly, stares back at me in an expression that is all mine.

Candice.

Out of all the individuals Noémi could have selected, she opted for the one person I despise the most. I guess that's why she's done it. This was never meant to be fun or fair. It's a trial, not a party.

Where are the rabid hell hounds when you need them?

Truthfully, this is preferable to having the hellish beasts chasing me, but only slightly. It feels very strange to be looking at my biggest enemy, and yet somehow, even with all her features perfectly the same, I'm still managing to look like myself. I squint my eyes a bit and practice a grimace to get the correct level of contempt on my face before I'm happy with the results.

If I'm Candice, does that mean Candice is me?

It's only now I realize just how manipulative this round is. Sure, as Candice, I can say anything I like, but there's no doubt in my mind that Remy will be coming in here at some point and I'm guessing that swings both ways. Candice can and will put words into my mouth.

The thought of how to handle this is still going through my mind as the door opens. I was expecting Remy or Dade, but I'm not surprised when Felix Barkley saunters through the

door. Of course Felix is here. I don't know why I didn't think of him as soon as I saw I was Candice.

“Do you know what the fuck this is about?” he says lazily, sitting down on the sofa, spreading his arms and legs wide.

I'm not ready yet. I need a moment to compose myself, but if I don't answer him soon, he's going to know something's up. I keep the scathing look on my face as I glance up and down.

“How the fuck should I know?” I reply, my tone laced with defiance. “Since when has anything made any sense in this place?”

A thought crosses my mind as I speak, so I add, “I thought Anthura would have told you?”

He shrugs, looking completely unbothered. “If she didn't tell you, I don't see why she would tell me.”

He can't be serious. Every time I've seen him in the last few weeks, he's been attached to Anthura's side like a lost puppy. “Er, because you're sleeping with her?”

He stares at me. Damn, I should have kept my mouth shut. Even though it's been clear he's sleeping with Anthura from the start, I can't be sure. And even if I did know, would Candice know?

“Yeah, well, I'm not doing that anymore. I'm sick of the bitch. She's no help at all.”

This is interesting. Maybe this trial won't be so bad. If he's not sleeping with Anthura anymore, why not? I doubt very much he's sleeping with Noémi, not after the way he embarrassed himself with her. So, who else is he sleeping with? Because men like Felix Barkley don't spend their nights alone.

I don't know how to ask him this without being obvious, so I sit down and start looking at my nails—a mannerism that I think Candice did in the past...

“What’s going on with you and Rowena, anyway?” I don’t know why I asked, but I feel loyalty to my friend, and this might be my only chance to get him to treat her better.

He rakes his hands through his hair, and for the first time, I see some shaking in his fingers. “I don’t want to talk about her.” He stands and begins to pace the room. “Seriously. What’s this about?” He gestures around the room. Must be fucking boring to watch.”

I follow his movements as he paces like a caged lion in a zoo enclosure.

He rubs his cleanly shaven chin. “I didn’t want to do it. She forced me.”

It takes me a few moments to realize he’s talking about Rowena still. I doubt he’d tell Candice about the kiss, so I can only assume he’s talking about the last trial. “Didn’t look like it from where I was sitting,” I say in my own words before I can help myself. He doesn’t seem to notice that I’m not talking like Candice; he’s lost in his own world.

When he looks at me, his eyes are manic. “You must have felt it, too. I doubt very much you just sat there and took it. Remy might be a pussy, but even he wouldn’t let you go through that much pain without putting you out of your misery.”

“That’s not what happened,” I say defensively.

Damn!

He scoffs. “I know the two of you are fucking, so don’t try to tell me otherwise.” Pain pierces my chest, even though I

know he doesn't know that for sure. He's just postulating, so he doesn't have to look at himself.

I try to sit like Candice, crossing my legs. "You don't know shit about me and Remy, but if you must know, he was a perfect gentleman in the first trial. He helped me, but when it came to me helping him, he kept himself to himself despite my offer."

It's not just my legs that I've crossed; my fingers are both crossed behind my back. Felix turns, and for a second, I wonder if he's going to cross the room and hit me. He's certainly capable of it, and the madness in his eyes tells me that he's losing the plot.

"Whatever," he finally says, "but you don't know what it's like for a man."

I roll my eyes. "So tell me," I say. "What was it like, Felix Barkley?"

"It was fucking awful!" he snaps. He shoots me a glare through eyes brimming with anger.

I cross my arms and pose in the most Candice-like way I can manage. "You looked like you were enjoying what Rowena did to you." I smirk. I know I'm prodding the bear and putting myself in danger, but if it means helping Rowena, then this might be the only chance I get.

He storms over to me and when he looks right into my eyes, I feel his anger. "Fine, Candice. It was better than you. Is that what you want to hear? Rowena gave me the best head I've ever had in my life. Put you to fucking shame."

My mouth falls open in shock. I was hoping to get him to tell me that it wasn't bad, but I wasn't expecting this. "I don't see your problem then. Why are you so mad?"

“Because,” he starts, turning away from me. “She...he’s a guy and I’m not gay. And this whole thing is bullshit.”

My heart is hammering in my chest and I want to ask a hundred questions, but I have to be careful. If Felix questions who I am, then we’ll both be out.

I say a mental sorry to Ro before uttering the next words. “Yeah, well, Rowena might be a prize bitch, but you heard what Noémi said. She is a woman even if she is a dog. Maybe you should cut her some slack. It’s not her fault you’re a homophobic asshole.”

Damn, I’ve said too much. He’s going to know. He turns and looks right at me, and I know he senses something is wrong. I pull my face into a sneer, but it might be too late.

“Since when do you give a shit?”

I try to act nonchalant. “I don’t, I just... it’s not a good look on you. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with being gay. Didn’t your company celebrate Pride week? I’m sure I saw it in one of the magazines.”

This much is true. I did see a whole article about Felix Barkley in one of the pride magazines, saying how his company was full of diversity.

He turns his stare away from me and I let out a small breath.

“Yeah, well, I’ll say anything if it gets profits up. Besides, I never said there was anything wrong with being gay. It’s...” He falls back onto one of the sofas. “Just that I’m not.”

I shake my head. I’ve never heard such denial in my life. He kissed her, for fuck’s sake. “You know what, Felix? I think you need to take a long, hard look at yourself in the mirror. Liking Rowena doesn’t make you gay. She’s a woman, and

she's been a woman all the time you've known her. And even if she wasn't, you don't have to deny that you enjoyed yourself with her."

He grimaces. "I'm sick of this shit—these fucking stupid games and the shit we have to put up with." He holds his head in his hands, and I think for the first time, I see vulnerability in Felix Barkley.

"You like Rowena more than you admit to."

"Maybe. Fuck." He's still staring at the floor. I wonder what Candice would do in this situation. Would she go over to him and give him a hug? I can't see it somehow, but I have to admit that there are parts to Felix that I wouldn't have known either.

I'm grateful when the buzzer sounds, signaling his time to leave. "Time's up," I say. He looks around the room as it brightens. "I don't fucking get this. What is the point of this trial? I honestly thought I was going to have to fuck three people."

I understand the point of the trial now, not that I'm going to let Felix know. He'll figure it out soon enough when that little confession is broadcast on the big screen upstairs.

HELLQUAKE

QUINN

I inhale a breath and try to recompose myself as he leaves the room. I barely have a moment before Remy walks in. I knew he'd be coming and thought I'd be ready for him, but after my chat with Felix, I'm not so sure.

He flops on the sofa, very close to where Felix had. He closes his eyes and lays his head back without saying a word.

“Are you okay?” I ask. He looks up and rubs his head before running his hands through his hair—his signature move. “Do you have any idea what the point of this is? I've just spent the last fifteen minutes with Quinn, and she was acting bat-shit insane. Are you going to flip out on me, too?”

Panic sets in. I have no idea who he's actually spent the last fifteen minutes with. If it was Juliette or Rowena, they would have remained calm, and I wonder if it wasn't actually Candice he spent the last fifteen minutes with. I wouldn't put it past her to say anything to ruin my relationship with Remy.

“What did she say?” I asked, trying to keep my tone light. He huffs out of breath. “Nothing really, she just kept trying to kiss me.”

What the fuck.

“Why does that make her crazy?” I question. “I thought you two were hooking up again.” When he doesn’t reply, I remember who I’m supposed to be. “Although you should have been hooking up with me.”

“We’ve been through this, Candice,” he says with a sigh, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond me. “Things between us are over. What happens in the Earthery stays in the Earthery. Everything outside of the Earthery is nothing to do with you.”

I let out a long sigh, then realizing Remy is still looking at me, turn it into a yawn. “You didn’t answer my question,” I say, trying to figure out what happened with fake Quinn. “Why was kissing her such a bad thing? Everyone knows you are together, and there is nothing in the rules against kissing other people.”

“Yeah, kissing her is one thing in private, but doing it for the sake of a trial is pointless. You know whatever happens in here will be shown to everyone. The last thing I need is to turn my relationship with Quinn into a spectacle. But that’s exactly what she seemed like she wanted to do.” He leans forward. “I don’t understand her anymore. Things were fine until she started up with fucking Angelis.”

“She hasn’t fucked him,” I say a little too quickly. He gives me an odd look, so I quickly carry on. “I mean, I doubt it. He’s such a weirdo. Why would she want him when she has you?”

“Right,” Remy says with a heavy dose of sarcasm. “Because you don’t want to fuck his brains out? I thought that was your plan for this circle. I sleep with Quinn, you sleep with Dade, and get the bastard off my back.”

I’m surprised, but I don’t know why. Dade has groupies everywhere he goes these days. Why wouldn’t Candice be one

of them? “Yes, well, I’m not sleeping with him,” I mutter. At least I know this part is true. Dade can’t stand Candice. He thinks she’s an empty-headed bimbo. And if there is one thing I know about Dade, it’s that he wouldn’t mess up his chance to get through the games by sleeping with Candice.

“Why not?” Remy asks. “I thought we had this all planned out? We’re already on the second trial, and even though we’re in the top ten, it doesn’t mean we’ll stay this way. We need to have a backup plan in case we fall off the leader board.”

Damn it all. My heart falls. He’s making a plan with Candice, and it seems that this has always been the case. Maybe I don’t know Remy as much as I think I do. “What’s the plan again?” I ask. It can’t be just sleeping with Dade for the sake of it. Candice might be okay with that, but why would Remy care? And how would Candice sleeping with Dade help him? I sit down next to him.

Remy sighs as he turns to me. “For fuck’s sake Candice, we’ve been through this ten times already. I wish you would pay attention. Dade knows stuff that we don’t. You need to get into his head so he tells you his secrets.”

Now I’m confused. Why does Remy think Dade has secrets? “If you think Dade is hiding something important, why don’t you just ask your girlfriend?”

“You know why,” he bites back. “Because I don’t think Quinn would tell me, even if she did know something. Quinn isn’t like you. She’s trustworthy. She’s probably keeping all that asshole’s secrets.”

I don’t know how Candice would take such an accusation of untrustworthiness, but knowing her, she wouldn’t give a shit.

“So, what exactly do you want me to do?”

“Damn it, Candice, please just pay attention. This is important.” He runs his hands down his face. His tone is exasperated. “Sleep with the moody bastard, find out what he knows, and then we’ll figure out a way to get him out of the games.”

My heart squeezes in my chest. “You do know that if Dade’s out, then so is Quinn.”

Remy shrugs his shoulders. “Yeah, I know, but there’s nothing I can do about that. You win some, you lose some.”

It’s like a knife piercing my chest to hear him talk about me like that. I feel tears prick the corners of my eyes, but there is no way I’m going to let him see them fall.

The buzzer sounds, leaving me bereft. Strike two. Once again, Noémi has got her entertainment. Felix secretly likes Rowena and Remy secretly doesn’t give a shit about me. The fans of the games must be going wild up there, learning all this juicy gossip, but down here, it feels like the hell this place is.

Remy runs his hand through his hair one last time and exits the room. I’m not surprised when, a few seconds later, Dade limps through the door. Of all the people to come in to talk to me, Dade, as my partner, was the only one I knew for certain would be here. He barely looks at me as he takes a place on the sofa. Unlike Remy and Felix, he doesn’t say a word, and it’s left to me to break the ice.

His aura is dark but cool in a way I’ve never felt it before and yet it’s definitely him. He wouldn’t have been able to trick me in this trial. I would have known him the second he came through the door.

I want to warn him about Candice, but I know if I do that, he'll figure out who I am. Dade isn't like Remy and Felix. He's not so easy to fool.

I sit down next to him and lean into him the way I saw Candice do last week. He shifts his entire body away from mine.

I swallow back a lump in my throat as I say the words I expect Candice will say. It feels like I'm testing him when it's the last thing I want to do. "Why don't we forget our partners and do the last trial together?"

His voice is rough. "That's not going to happen."

There's a silence and I wonder if it would be easier to wait for the buzzer without speaking. I'm desperate to ask how his leg is, but if I do that, I'd have to ask why he's limping in the first place. I might know, but Candice doesn't, and I don't want anyone else to know either. Not that I think Dade would tell me the truth.

"If you don't want to be my partner, I'll find ways to get you out of the games." As far as threats from Candice go, it's pretty tame, but I hope it's enough to make him wary of her. I stand up and step away from him.

He doesn't even look up as he speaks. "You won't be the first, and you certainly won't be the last." When he shifts his eyes up to me, his aura changes to something stifling. A shiver runs down my spine as he stares at me. "Instead of concerning yourself with me, why not direct your attention towards the company you keep? I think you need to concentrate on your own safety rather than worrying about mine."

My voice chokes in my throat and I have to stand up and step away from him. "Is that a threat?"

He stands up and paces towards me. I keep forgetting how tall he is. Even with me in Candice's body, which is a couple of inches taller than mine, he still towers above me. "I have no need to threaten you, Candice, because you're managing to put yourself in danger without my help."

My mouth falls open. "What's that supposed to mean?" What does he know about Remy and Felix that he's not told me? They are the only people I've ever seen Candice with.

I wait for him to say more, but then the floor shudders beneath us, undulating like an earthquake. "What's happening?" Panic surges through me as the ceiling directly above us begins to crumble, disintegrating into a cascade of debris. Within seconds, I find myself engulfed in darkness, and it takes a few heartbeats to realize that Dade has extended his immense wings, cocooning me from the collapsing ceiling. His head remains exposed as he bows down, using his wings to shield me. He pulls me close, tucking my head against his chest as chunks of ceiling crash to the floor around us.

Panic filled screams begin to mingle with the sound of raining debris, heightening my anxiety.

"I don't know. Just stay still. This is the safest spot; I'll keep you safe," he reassures. I'm aware I'm still in Candice's body because her long nails are currently digging into my palms as I squish myself against Dade's chest.

The noise is deafening, and Dade's body lurches with every impact. Fear and anxiety shudder through me as the Earthy shakes around us and it's only Dade's warmth that keeps me from a full-blown panic attack. The guy already has a damaged leg and now he's making himself vulnerable for me... No, he's protecting Candice.

“Why are you protecting me?” I ask, my voice trembling, as debris thunders down around us. “You hate me.”

His words cut through the cacophony of falling plaster and metal. “I don’t have to like you, but I won’t stand by and let you die because of the bastards that run this place,” he proclaims. I raise my gaze, locking eyes with him, only for his gaze to shift past my shoulder. My grip on him tightens as the world trembles beneath us. His disdain for Candice is crystal clear, yet here he stands, presented with an opportunity to let her die without consequence. Suddenly, the chaos falls silent.

“If I die, that’s one less person in the games for you to be up against,” I whisper. Dade’s voice drops as he responds, “And if I let you die when I could save you, then I’m not worthy of leaving this place, and I deserve to stay in Hell.” He partially unfurls his wings, causing dust to cascade around us, making me cough. A sliver of light reveals his dust-covered face, with blood seeping through his hair. I long to reach out and check that he’s alright, but Candice wouldn’t, and this might still be part of the games.

He opens his wings fully and ruffles them. I gaze around, but all I see is dust settling like thick fog. “Just promise me one thing in exchange for saving your life.”

I turn around to find him gazing at me with a chillingly intense expression. “What?”

His tongue flicks over his lips, leaving a stain in the dust. “Leave Quinn Valentine be. I know you poisoned her in the last Circle.”

My heart pounds as I take in his words

“I thought you didn’t care... give a shit about her anymore.”

“My feelings for Quinn are absolutely none of your business,” he retorts, his tone dark. There’s so much anger swirling in his eyes and now, his aura. “Do what you will to me, but keep Quinn out of this.”

The lights suddenly flash, then fully illuminate the scene, revealing the stark reality of the surrounding destruction.

“We need to get out of...”He pauses. “Valentine?”

I turn my eyes to meet Dade’s gaze, only to find him staring at me in shock and betrayal. I nod my head. “It was the trial. I had to pretend to be Candice.”

His expression almost breaks my heart with the pain I see in his eyes.

“Don’t panic.” Noémi’s voice echoes around the cavernous room, taking my attention away from Dade. As my gaze sweeps the area, I’m met with a sea of disoriented figures amidst the rubble and debris.

“If you can stand, get out of ‘ere now, ‘ead towards ze door. Go and wait outside,” Noémi instructs. “If you’re injured, I’ll ‘ave someone come to take you to ze ‘ospital weeng.”

A rush of electricity runs up my arm as Dade grabs my hand and begins pulling me towards the door. “Your leg!” I call out in horror, pulling him to a standstill.

“It’s all right,” he insists, his voice low and intense.

“No, it’s not all right,” I retort, my voice tense with worry. “It’s obvious you can barely stand. And your head is bleeding too.”

He turns to me, his eyes filled with despair. “My leg is painful, but it’s fine,” he says between gritted teeth. “I need to

get you out of here now.”

“Wait!” The words escape my lips as my gaze fixates on a pair of legs jutting out from beneath a fallen concrete pillar. Rowena and Juliette must be in here, somewhere, buried in the chaos. “Dade, there’s someone trapped.” I point to the legs.

“He’s already dead. Look.” He points to the other end of the concrete and I can just make out the top of someone’s head, crushed flat.

The reality of the devastation crashes over me, and I let out a sob. Dade puts his arm around me, pulling me into him. I breathe him in as I cling to him. My whole body is shaking.

“It’s not Remy, Quinn,” Dade says, mistaking my terror for fear of losing my boyfriend. Honestly, I hadn’t even thought about Remy since the quake started.

I pull back and look at Dade through tear-filled eyes. “I’m not dating Remy.” I shake my head. “We need to help get people out of here. You can’t walk, but you can fly.”

Dade gives me a grim look. “I’ll stay behind, but you have to get out of here. You need to get to safety.”

I shake my head. “I’m not leaving you behind.”

He grabs me by the waist and pulls me into him again, but this time, my feet leave the ground.

UNDER THE RUBBLE

QUINN

I'm deposited by the door to the Earthery next to Noémi, who's wearing an expression of grim determination.

"Quinn, Dade. You're safe. Thank goodness," she exclaims.

Dade takes off once more, leaving me slightly breathless.

"He's going to help get the people out," I explain. "Do you know what happened?"

"Eet wasn't a, 'ellquake. Zis was done purposefully. I do not know by 'oo."

As the dust begins to settle, the sheer magnitude of the Earthery becomes apparent. I've been inside here many times, but I've never actually seen it before without its magic. Concrete and rubble cover the floor almost as far as the eye can see.

"I sent Asmodée and Arch in zere," she says, pointing vaguely. "Zey weel get people out. I cannot bear eet eef someone ees 'urt."

"The dust is suffocating in here. We need to get outside. You can still coordinate the injured from there."

She shakes her head, refusing to move. “I can’t abandon my post!”

Dade whooshes past us, guiding Juliette with him. He settles Juliette down beside us, and I embrace her in a tight hug. She startles for a moment, her hair tangled and dust-covered, her dress torn. Despite the disarray, she seems mostly unharmed.

“Juliette, are you alright?” I ask, concerned.

She nods, offering a small smile. “I’m okay, for the most part, thanks to Dade. Do you know what happened?”

Noémi chimes in, “I do not know, but I weel find out oo deed zis and I weel destroy zem.”

Juliette coughs. “Who would try to hurt us all, and how?” Her breathing is labored and her voice is rough as she talks. “A contestant in the games?”

“Everyone in ze games was in this room, and as far as I can tell, the Earthery ‘as fallen down around us in all places.” Noémi’s expression shifts from determination to a mixture of anger and resolve. “Anyone doing zis on purpose would put zemselves at risk.”

My heart pounds as Remy appears in the distance, being helped by Candice. I watch as they struggle over the debris. It’s clear he’s hurt by the blood on his face and arms. My impulse is to run to help him, but then I remember what he said about me earlier. I step back into the shadows as they pass.

“Remy, Candice, are you both alright?” Noémi’s concerned voice breaks the tension.

Remy lets out a pained groan and clutches his arm, while Candice responds, her tone brisk. “We’re okay, just a few

scratches.”

“Ead outside,” Noémi commands. “I’ll ‘ave someone examine you both.” She pulls out her Hell Cell, fingers dancing across the screen in a flurry of urgent taps as Candice and Remy make their way out.

“Where’s Rowena?” Juliette asks suddenly, her voice tinged with panic. I look around, scanning the line of people heading towards the door. I notice blood pouring down some of their faces, but Rowena isn’t in the line.

“Noémi, do you know where Rowena is?” I ask anxiously. Noémi looks at me in a panic. “I don’t know. I zink she was over zere.” She points to a huge pile of rubble. My heart races as I see a hand sticking out from underneath the debris, a foot peeking out as well. I’d recognize those expensive shoes anywhere. They are the only brand Felix wears. “It’s Felix,” I exclaim.

With a determined surge of adrenaline, I throw myself onto the debris, tugging at the massive pile of rocks alongside Noémi and Juliette. “Over here!” My voice cracks as I scream out, the panic in my chest intensifying. Dade swiftly responds, dropping to my side with a thud. He unleashes his strength, muscles flexing as he heaves colossal chunks of concrete, hurling them aside with controlled energy.

Time stretches and warps, each second feeling like an eternity of heart-wrenching struggle. Finally, the rubble shifts, and we uncover Felix. His face is a horrifying mess. One half of it has been crushed by part of the falling ceiling. He’s still and unmoving, but his chest is rising and falling. “He’s alive!” I choke out. I hate the guy, but no one deserves this.

Dade flaps his wings, sending plumes of dust into the air as he fights to pull Felix from the wreckage, but as he pulls,

Felix's arm snags on something. A terrifying sight freezes me in place. Felix's fingers are intertwined with someone else's.

"Rowena!" I choke out. Juliette jumps over the rubble to my side and the pair of us frantically shift the rubble off Rowena.

Tears stream down Juliette's face as she screams out Rowena's name. "Please don't die!"

A surge of emotions twists my heart as we finally manage to extract Rowena from the rubble. Her face is ashen, and covered with the dust as she is, she almost looks like she's made of stone. She's not breathing.

"We need to get these two to the hospital right now!" I shout out, my voice cracking with every word.

"Bring 'er out 'ere!" Noémi calls out.

I look on in horror as Juliette pounds on Rowena's chest. "Breath, babe! Breathe. Goddamnit!"

My heart hammers against my ribs as I lean over Rowena's motionless form. Instinct takes over as I pinch her nose and press my lips to hers, trying to force life back into her. The memory of CPR scenes from movies flashes through my mind, guiding my actions. With each breath, I will her to wake up. On my fifth breath, she coughs.

"She's alive!" My voice trembles as I sit back, my tears leaving damp trails on Rowena's dusty face. She's not alive. None of us are, but she's breathing. Juliette lays down next to her and drapes her arm protectively over her chest.

Noémi cuts through to us, along with a couple of demons. "We'll take 'er to ze 'ospital wing... Juliette! Let zem through."

I help Juliette up as the demons strap Rowena onto a stretcher and transport her out of the Earthery. Dade is waiting with Felix draped in his arms, still unconscious. We hurry out, chasing the demons while Dade flies behind us, carrying Felix.

“Follow me!” Noémi races ahead to the elevator and holds open the doors while we try to force eight people into the tiny elevator. The stretcher holding Rowena is almost vertical to allow us all to fit, and Dade’s wings are scrunched up tightly, crushed into the back wall of the elevator.

The hospital wing is already bustling with people by the time we arrive. I see Colin laid out at the far end. A couple of people are so covered in dirt and dust that it’s impossible to know who they are. A couple of demons direct us to two spare beds next to each other. The two demons place Rowena on one bed as Dade gently lowers Felix onto his. A demon doctor tries ushering us away. “Unless you’re injured, I need you out of here.”

Juliette hesitates, tears in her eyes. “No, Rowena is my family. I won’t leave her.”

“I said get out of here and let me do my job,” he barks.

She squares up to the doctor, determination filling her eyes, but it’s a gentle pat on her shoulder from Dade that finally makes her crumble. “She’s in good hands,” he reassures her in a gentle voice.

Juliette wavers for a second, then falls into his arms. He wraps her protectively like he’s done so many times to me and like he did when he mistook me for Candice, as the Earthery crumbled around us. She clings to him, tears streaming down her face onto his chest. Despite the pain he must be in due to his injured leg, he continues to comfort her as we make our way out of the hospital wing.

His face is set and I see a faint grimace each time he steps on his injured leg.

“Use your wings!” I whisper urgently, nodding towards his injured leg. “I’ll meet you at Juliette’s room.” He gives me a somber nod, then unfurls his wings and launches into the air, soaring above the now deserted atrium and ascending through the center of the donut-shaped structure. I dash after him, bounding up the stairs three at a time in an effort to keep up.

When I get there, I peek through the open door to find them both sitting on the end of Juliette’s bed. She’s leaning against him and his arm is draped over her shoulder. When she sees me, she pulls away from him. “I need a shower,” she announces, standing up. “I’m filthy. I’ll message you later, and we’ll go and see Rowena when those fuckwads let us in.” She strides over to the bathroom, disappearing behind the door and leaving Dade and me alone in the bedroom.

I want him to walk me to my room, to hug me like he held Juliette down in the hospital wing, but I know I can’t ask that of him.

“Do you want to come back to my room?” I can’t believe I’m asking. He stands and walks right past me, not even stopping to look my way as he passes me in the doorway.

The frustration within me rises to the surface. “I thought we were friends.”

“So did I until today. You tricked me,” his words sting, cutting deep into my already wounded heart. When will we stop hurting one another?

“It wasn’t a lie,” I defend myself, desperation creeping into my tone. “It was a trial. Noémi told me that if you guessed

who I was, we'd both lose points. I was doing it for both of us."

His voice sparks in anger, but his aura and his voice is more sad than angry. "You tested our friendship when you asked me not to be your partner anymore. Did you really expect me to willingly partner up with Candice?"

"No, I..." I begin, struggling to find the right words, but he cuts me off with a sigh.

"Goodbye, Valentine. I hope your friend gets better." His gaze is distant as he turns away and starts limping away, leaving me feeling a mix of emotions and an overwhelming sense of loss that hurts me to my very core.

THE AFTERMATH

I hear my Hell Cell beeping from the shower. In a panicked rush, I drip water all over my floor as I sprint naked to retrieve it from my bedroom. It's a message from Noémi.

CAN ALL CONTESTANTS RETURN TO THE ENTERTAINMENT LEVEL IMMEDIATELY. MEET IN CLASSROOM ONE.

“Shit!” I run back to the bathroom, turn off the shower and try to towel dry my hair whilst simultaneously getting dressed. Debris is still sticking to my hair as I hadn't had time to shampoo it out and I don't have a brush. I comb my hands through the messy tangles as I step out and call the platform to take me down to the Atrium. The atrium is strangely dark for the middle of the day, but then I realize the large screen at the far side of the restaurant is blank and the only light source is the swirling skies of hell a hundred floors above. It's hard to keep the panic out as I race across to the elevators. I've never seen the tower so quiet or so dark during the daytime. It's usually so vibrant and busy.

Classroom one is already full as I enter. Some of the contestants are still gray with dust and some, like me, have managed a shower. I scan the room for a seat. My stomach twists as my eyes catch Remy. Ignoring him, I sit next to

Juliette. She's managed a better job of showering than I have, though her eyes are swollen and bloodshot from crying.

"We are just waiting for one more... ah. 'ere 'e ees."

I don't need to turn to know it's Dade who's just walked through the door. I'm feeling him more and more intensely with each passing day and at this moment, he's full of intensity. Noémi gives him a smile and gestures to a seat somewhere behind me.

"I 'ad to call you all 'ere to make sure we 'ave accounted for everybody and to let you know what we know. What 'appened down in ze Earthery wasn't an 'ellquake, and it wasn't part of ze games. I'm afraid to say eet, but we're being attacked."

An audible gasp followed by a cry makes me turn my head. It's not just Felix and Rowena that are missing; a few others are too. In the corner, Maggie is sitting sobbing, her eyes fixed on Noémi. A thick layer of dust covers her skin everywhere except her hands, which she's wringing together. Her body is trembling, and she looks utterly miserable. I pat Juliette's hand, then slip back to join Maggie.

"I saw Colin in the hospital as we were dropping off Rowena and Felix," I whisper to her.

"Thank you," she says, smiling weakly at me and gripping my hand tighter. "I know. I was just with him. He's smashed most of the bones in his body."

"We are under attack," Noémi states. "We don't know why or 'oo by. Zis 'as never 'appened before in the deux cent..." she pauses. "Two 'undred years I've been 'ere. We zink it was an attack on ze games zemselves because no one else in zis Tower was affected."

“I heard someone was unable to get out,” Moloch says somberly.

I peer over at him. I forgot he was in there with us. Next to him, Anthura sits glumly, her arms folded. Unlike everyone else in the room, she looks immaculate. There’s not a speck of dust on her.

“Most people got out okay, but we did ‘ave some casualties. I’m afraid to say zat Adam and ‘annah deed not make eet. Zeir bodies were beyond repair, even in death.”

I didn’t know Adam well, but I know he was loved. I scan the room for Jake. He’s not here, which means he’s one of the people still in the hospital wing. I don’t even know who Hannah’s partner is. I do know that neither deserved this.

“We ‘ad a number of people weeth broken bones and small injuries and Colin, Felix and Ro are in serious condition een the ‘ospital. ‘Owever, as their bodies are intact, they weel get through zis. It weel be painful while zey get better, but zey weel survive. Whoever did zis weel not defeat us.”

I feel numb, as though this isn’t real. Isn’t it bad enough that we are being forced to put ourselves in incredibly hard situations for the apparent entertainment of the people of Hell just so we have a chance to get out, but we are now being attacked too? I feel sickened, and yet this is just another day in Hell. Another test to get through. I raise my hand. “Do you have any idea who would do something like this?” It wasn’t long ago that I was receiving threatening letters, and now I know that Dade didn’t send them. It means we all have an enemy. “Could it have been the same person that killed Michael and Lucia in Purgatory?”

Beside me, Maggie gasps. “There’s a murderer among us?”

Noémi holds her hands up. “Please, let’s not turn zis into a panic. As I said, I do not know ‘oo would want to ‘urt anyone in ‘ere. I weel not let zis go. I weel find ze perpetrator and bring eem or ‘er to justice. I weel not stop ze games. When everyone ees out of ze ‘ospital, ze games weel resume. In ze mean time, I weel ask Asmodée and Arch to keep an eye on all of you. Eef any of you see anything suspicious, let me know as soon as possible. Ze ‘ospital ees now accepting visitors for zose of you weeth loved ones zere and eef anyone would like to elp clean up ze debris in ze Earthery, eet would be very much appreciated. Zank you all for coming.”

Juliette grabs my hand and pulls me to one side as we all leave. “I didn’t think about the murders until you mentioned it. Do you think they are connected?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, but we never did find out who killed Michael and Lucia.”

She gives me a long, hard stare. “Are you definitely sure it wasn’t Dade? I know I said it probably wasn’t him, but then this happened.”

“It wasn’t him!” I say defiantly. A swish of black catches my eye and Juliette’s cheeks redden as Dade strides off behind us.

“Shit. Do you think he heard me?”

“I’m not sure it matters if he did.” I say sourly. I link my arm in hers. “Come on. Let’s go and see Rowena.”

Rowena is still unconscious when we get to the hospital wing. “Hey Babe,” Juliette says, perching herself on Rowena’s bed.

She looks awful. Her blonde hair is matted with blood and she has scratches all up her arms. And that’s just the part of

her that I can see.

“I barely had any of me left when I went to the hospital wing in Purgatory,” I reassure Juliette. “It’s not the same as when we were alive. Our bodies are much more robust.”

A doctor that had been looking over Felix turns to us. “That’s correct! If she wakes up in the next twenty-four hours, I expect her to make a full recovery.”

“And if she doesn’t?” Juliette asks.

The doctor offers us a small smile. “Let’s not worry about that right now. Her pulse is strong. Her body will recover. It is only her mind we have to worry about.

“Oh, is that all?” I cast my eyes over to Felix, who looks much worse than Rowena. Now that the dust and blood have been cleaned away, the massiveness of his injuries is apparent and they are truly gruesome. I nod toward him. “What about him?”

“Who gives a fuck about that asshole?” Juliette mutters.

The doctor ignores her. “Same. They both need to wake up. Only then can we see the extent of the damage.”

Suddenly, I feel sick and constricted. There are people everywhere in the small hospital wing that obviously wasn’t designed to hold so many people.

I’m utterly exhausted. It feels like I’ve been awake for a million hours, but the clock on the wall shows me it’s still only early afternoon, so I know I won’t sleep.

I pat Juliette on the shoulder. “You look after our Ro, I’m going to help Noémi with the clean up.”

Downstairs, I find Asmodée and Arch lugging great chunks of concrete with their bare hands into a pile outside the

Earthery doors.

The entertainment level is devoid of people, and all the shops and restaurants are closed. I find Noémi just inside the Earthery. “What can I do to help?”

She sighs. “We can fix ze Earthery weeth magic, but first we ‘ave to clean eet, and zere is no magic for zat. Eef you are feeling strong, you can join zose ‘oo are taking away ze big stuff, ozzewise, eet’s just a case of sweeping ze rubble into bags.”

I catch Remy hauling big chunks of ceiling at the far end of the Earthery, so I grab a bag and a brush and head to the opposite side.

It’s so much more than just sweeping up dust. I end up loading masses of small bits of concrete into bag after bag. Beads of sweat trickle down my back and my muscles scream in protest, but I don’t stop. I know that as soon as I let myself rest, I’ll start thinking, and I don’t want to think. There are too many painful thoughts waiting to pounce: Remy ignoring me, the letters that were sent to me, the murders.

Dade’s complete disregard for me in Juliette’s room earlier.

My stomach hits the floor when I see him working alongside Remy. The pair of them are working in tandem with Asmodée and Arch. They are hauling away the bigger stuff. Remy pulls it up and passes it to Dade, who flies it out of the Earthery.

This morning, one was my boyfriend and the other my friend. Now I don’t know what either of them are. I cast my eyes down away from them both as the familiar tendrils of pain start clutching at my heart.

The hours go by slowly, but I don't stop. I won't stop until my brain decides it's way too tired to think and at that point I'll head to bed.

Finally, after hours of work and bags and bags of rubble, Noémi taps me on the shoulder. "You 'ave done a marvelous job. I theenk you 'ave done enough."

"Just one more bag," I insist, although my back feels it's breaking and every part of my body is screaming in pain.

"Quinn. You 'ave done enough," she repeats. "Go and eat and sleep."

I glance up and realize that everyone else has gone. Neither Remy nor Dade came over to speak to me. Relief washes over me, mixed with a sense of sadness that is almost insurmountable. After what happened today, I thought I was worth checking to see if I was alright. I thought I was worth something.

My stomach growls as I drag myself up to the main level. I'm too tired to eat, but I haven't eaten all day. Reluctantly, I plod over to the restaurant and flop into a seat.

I've never seen it so empty; not even the demons appear to offer me food, which is a first.

"Quinn." I pull my head up from where I've rested it on my hands as Remy takes the seat next to me. I'm so angry at him, but I don't have the energy to argue. When he starts massaging my shoulders, pushing out the kinks caused more by tension than falling debris, I let him. The bastard owes me after what he said to me earlier.

"Which one were you?" he asks as he digs his thumbs into my shoulders.

"Who do you think I was?" I respond in a quiet mutter.

“I don’t know. The whole thing has me rattled, to be honest. What do you think is happening?”

I shrug my shoulders away from him and give him a tight look. “I guess we’ll find out tomorrow. Noémi is dealing with it. You know what? I just want to go back to my room. I’m tired.”

I stand and make to leave, but Remy stops me. “I can’t let you go alone. Come with me to my bedroom, and I will spend the night looking after you.”

The fucking audacity. I stare at him in disbelief. “Are you sure you don’t want to go and spend the night with Candice?” I retort, a trace of annoyance and spite creeping into my tone.

He waggles a finger at me. “I knew that was you. I should have guessed. It was a stupid idea for a trial, anyway. It would have been much better to get us going through an obstacle course. You know I didn’t mean what I said. Candice is a pain in the ass and I honestly thought you’d turned into some sex-starved monster. I wonder who was playing you?”

Anger bites at me. “Fucking hell, Remy. You told Candice that you didn’t care if I came through the games or not.”

His expression softens with remorse. “I know. I’m sorry. I was confused. You were being weird. Candice was being weird. I was flustered. She’s still my partner in the games, whether I like it or not. She really hates your guts, and I needed to placate her. She’d fuck it up for both of us out of spite if I didn’t at least try to be on her side a little.”

He has a point.

“And you know now that I’m not sleeping with her. Hell, I had a weird make-out session with you just before going in with Candice... er you. I’m still confused about who was who,

to be honest. You know, you girls were in a position of power in that trial. It wasn't really fair."

I glare at him, feeling sick to my stomach. "I'm way too tired to pick apart any more of your bullshit, Remy."

He holds his hand out to me. "I know. I'm sorry. At least let me walk you to your room."

"I don't need your help," I snap, but when I walk into the darkness of the atrium, I hear him following close behind me.

After opening my door, I turn to Remy. He's a mess, covered in dust and debris, but not even that dulls his bright eyes and charming smile. He leans against the door frame, looking as gorgeous as ever. It's clear he's expecting an invitation inside, an invitation he's not going to get. "I can't keep doing this," I blow out in frustration, my shoulders sagging. "I can't keep trusting you, only for you to screw me over. Leave me alone."

He doesn't reply as I close the door in his face.

I take my second shower of the day, not just to clean myself of the dirt and sweat, but to hide in the white noise of the water falling on me. After finally being able to brush my hair, I pull on some pajamas and pick up my Hell Cell from my night stand. I'm half an inch from the comfort of my bed when there's a knock at my door.

I'm tired. So fucking tired, and I have no strength left for an argument with Remy.

Frustration pulls within me as I haul the door open.

My breath hitches as I find myself face to face with Dade. A thousand thoughts run through my mind, but I'm too momentarily stunned to say anything. Dade doesn't give me the chance to speak as he grabs my wrist, pulling me from the

room, picks me up, and flings me over his shoulder. My heart bottoms out as he spreads his wings and flings the pair of us over the balustrade.

HOSPITAL IN HELL

ROWENA

My head feels like it's been bulldozed by a ten ton truck as words I can't hear very well drift around me. I hear Juliette's voice drifting through the darkness, but I can't quite grip on to it.

There's darkness again and the sounds of other people talking. I hear Juliette again and I think, Quinn, but I can't be sure. There's darkness again, but this time some color in it. I'm dreaming, but just like Juliette's voice I can't quite latch onto it and pretty soon it's gone, surrendered to the blackness.

“What the fuck?”

The voice is followed by a low groan. The sound of beeping and quiet machinery fills the air. I open my eyes and blink a few times. It's still dark, but this is a different kind of darkness. There's a low blue light illuminating everything. It takes a few moments to focus. I'm in a hospital ward of some kind.

I try to remember why I'm here, but my memory is foggy and the swirls of consciousness meld with reality. I pull in a deep breath and close my eyes again as I try to think back to the last thing I remember. The second trial. I remember walking into the Earthery and... Oh crap. I was Anthura.

I snap my eyes open as the memory of my reflection in the mirror in the Earthery comes back to me with a jolt. I focus on the bed opposite to stop myself from thinking any further. Colin is in there, wired up to contraptions I'm sure I've never seen in any hospital before. I guess that accounts for the machinery sounds and beeping.

“Fucking Hell. My head.”

I turn my head to my left slowly to see who's complaining, but I already know it's Felix, by his voice. My heart lurches, and I heave in a gasp as I take him in.

He's drenched in blood, and the left side of his face is a gruesome cavity where his eye used to be. I can't suppress the surge of horror that grips me, and my heart races with every breath. The hospital's dim blue night lights cast an eerie glow over his injuries, magnifying their horrifying nature. I swallow back my fear, but my throat is dry and scratchy.

Against the backdrop of his mangled face, his right eye opens and fixes on me. I'm sure my own expression mirrors my shock at his appearance. I can only imagine the excruciating pain he must be in.

“Are you hurting?” My voice is croaky and alien.

He closes his eye and shakes his head slightly before opening it again and staring at me.

Despite the terror crushing me, I grab a glass of water that someone has left on the table between us and lean over to pass it to him. His groans fill the air as he struggles to prop himself into a semi-upright position. His hand brushes mine as he takes the glass and drinks the water down.

When he's finished, he places the glass back down and turns back to me.

“You look like shit.” His voice is uneven and croaky, but yet still holds a tone of superiority.

I laugh. I can't help it. We're both bashed up in hospital, neither of us knowing how we came to be here and he still has to get in a dig.

“Nice to see that the half the brain you lost isn't the side with the snarky remarks stored away. I was beginning to worry that you might humble up a bit.”

He squints at me in confusion. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

He reaches up to his head. It's as though the world suddenly becomes slow motion. All my muscles clench as his hand skims the bloody mess that used to be his face.

His roar reverberates throughout the room, jolting the other occupants awake and causing a wave of fear to wash over me. A doctor runs over and injects something into his side, and Felix gradually subsides into an ominous silence.

Struggling to get out of my bed, I manage to muster enough energy to demand, “What did you just inject him with?”

The doctor retrieves a stethoscope, placing it against Felix's chest while I watch in growing horror. “Sedative. We weren't expecting him to wake up tonight. You either, as a matter of fact. How are you feeling?” He pulls the stethoscope away from Felix and places it on my own chest. It's just then that I see I'm in a hospital gown and not the dress I put on earlier.

After he finishes using the stethoscope, the doctor gently takes hold of my wrist, his gaze fixed on his watch. “There was an incident in the Earthery.”

I try to remember, but all I recall is a mess of darkness and noise. “An incident? How did it happen?”

The doctor rests my hand back down. “They don’t tell us much in here. You’ll have to talk to Noémi if you want the specifics. All I know is that the ceiling collapsed while all the Inferno Games contestants were inside. Some got out with minor scrapes, a few had some broken bones, and some of you came out a lot worse for wear. I’m sorry to say there were two fatalities.”

My heart starts racing. “Fatalities? Who?”

“Sorry,” he says, giving me a resigned look. “I don’t know their names.”

The memory of Juliette’s voice and Quinn’s voice comes back to me and I relax a little. They were both here next to me. I know it. Juliette was here for a long time, but I’m sure I remember hearing Quinn say something about being in hospital in Purgatory.

I glance back at Felix. He looks peaceful. “Is he going to be alright?” I nod in his direction.

“He’ll survive. You and he were buried next to each other under a pile of rubble. They had to dig you both out.” He pauses. “Don’t you want to know if you’ll be alright?”

My mouth falls open. “It didn’t even occur to me to ask if I was okay,” I say sheepishly.

“You’ll survive too,” he assures me, patting me on the shoulder. “Now rest.”

I settle back down into the bed and stare at Felix. The doctor might think he’ll be okay, but I know enough about Felix to know that this will destroy him. He’s used to having

everything be perfect. Perfect hair, perfect face, perfect bank balance.

I close my eyes and try to make sense of what the doctor told me. My memories of the second trial are hazy. I spent some time with Orlin first. He sat and stared off into space and muttered something about sinning. Then...

Then it was Felix. I open my eyes again. Felix came in next. I gaze at him as I try to remember what he said to me, but the memory won't come. It's there, but I can't quite access it. I remember him bitching about Quinn. He'd been in the room with her first. Then... Was that when the ceiling collapsed? It must have been. I don't remember anything after that. I close my eyes and try to sleep, but as my brain starts to dissolve into dreams, a memory comes back. Felix wasn't the last one I spoke to. Moloch came in too. I distinctly remember him telling me that he thought he and Anthura would get through the games if she lightened up once in a while.

It makes no sense. How could I have seen Moloch if the ceiling had collapsed first? Maybe I'm getting it wrong and Moloch came in before Felix. But no. That's wrong too. I told Moloch I'd just been speaking to Felix.

I shake my head, sending a sharp pain resonating through my skull. Maybe I'm over thinking it, or maybe the Doctor was wrong. There's no way Felix and I could have been buried under the rubble together.

I heave in a breath and try to calm my racing heart. Suddenly, it all comes crashing back. Panic floods my veins as my memory begins playing in my head with absurd clarity. I was with Moloch when the ceiling came crashing down. Moloch ran away in the darkness, leaving me alone and terrified. The noise was deafening. The lights flickered a few

times, showing the extent of the devastation. I was rooted to the floor in fear, and then Felix showed up. My heart rate notches up as I remember what happened next. He took my hand and tried to pull me out, but I was too scared to move. That's when the ceiling came down and... Holy Hell. I let out a strangled gasp. Felix shielded me as a concrete block shattered above us. He's in here because he was trying to save me. Felix Barclay saved my life. A sickening realization hits me. He's disfigured because of me.

GOING DOWN

“**W**hat the fuck are you doing?” I scream out as my stomach bottoms out. The dread I feel at falling through the air at speed is only matched by the confusion I feel at Dade’s reasons why he’s currently subjecting me to my worst nightmare.

“I’m getting you out of here,” he growls, offering no other explanation.

I know in my heart that he’ll still his giant wings, and the way he’s holding me tightly against him as we rapidly fall is some comfort, but that doesn’t stop the queasiness in my stomach. I’m furious, but beneath that, I’m curious.

“Put me down,” I demand, my voice almost getting lost in the wind that whips my hair up into his face.

“We don’t have time for me to chase after you if you decide to run,” he says.

“Dade, put me the fuck down. I’m not going to run.” It’s then that I realize I mean it; wherever Dade is going, I want to go.

“I’m afraid that’s not going to happen,” he says.

I bite back a retort as he spreads out his wings and brings us to a halt. As we reach the floor, he gently drops me down in

the center of the atrium.

I hold my knees to quell the queasiness, but as he lets go, all I can think is that after the day I've had, I need him. "What are we doing?" I breathe out.

"I'm not going without you," he says simply, as though this was always some kind of plan. When I furrow my brows, he holds out his hand to me. "It's not safe here."

"Not going where without me?" I throw my arms up and gesture at the dark atrium. "Here is all there is." I realize then that he's not holding me at all. It would be very easy for me to run back up the stairs or hop onto the platform. I eye his outstretched hand curiously. "Why are you giving me the choice?"

His eyes burn into mine. "I'm not," he retorts. "You are coming with me. I'm hoping that you will choose to make it easier on me, though."

Great! The illusion of choice. I fold my arms. "And if I don't hold your hand and come with you?"

"Then I will pick you up again and drag you."

Damn, he's infuriating. He's always been infuriating. I don't know why I'm surprised. Hell, I'm not surprised he's kidnapped me. I am surprised by how much I like it. I'm intrigued. I'm also tired and irritable. It's been a really long fucking day.

"And what if I scream?"

He shrugs, as if to dare me to do just that. "A hundred people will be down here in a flash."

"Then you are endangering the pair of us," I say wearily. He's got a hint of mirth in his stare, but I can tell he's deadly

serious. If this was anyone else, I would have thought they were insane, but it isn't anyone else. It's Dade.

He's still holding his hand out to me. I don't even know why I'm pretending to think about it. Maybe to give him the illusion that I'm putting up a fight.

We both know I'm going wherever he is. I just don't want to make it too easy.

It takes me less than five seconds to take his hand. His fingers entwine around mine as he pulls me towards the elevators, his injured leg causing him to limp slightly. Inside the elevator, he pulls out the marble and inserts it into the hole.

I pull my brows together as my heart rate increases. "We're going down to the demon level? After what happened last time?"

It's either admirable or insane at the lack of fear he shows when my insides are turning to mush at the very thought of where we're going.

"It's the only way out of here," Dade says, his eyes meeting mine.

I stare at him in disbelief. "Out of here? You mean out, out?"

He nods. It's almost a challenge. One that I don't have a hope in hell of winning.

"You know how to get out?" I ask incredulously.

"No," he grumbles, "but I'm not hanging around here any longer to watch you get killed, Valentine."

He's taking me into the very bowels of Hell and he can't even call me by my first name. If my legs weren't about to give out beneath me and my heart rate wasn't dangerously

close to light speed, I'd have laughed. "We almost got killed last night when we were down here, or have you forgotten the fucking huge demon that practically pulled your leg off?" I point down at his damaged leg. It looks perfectly normal, covered as it is by his trouser leg, but I know how bad it is. I can practically still hear the crunching of his bones as he twisted them back into position. "You're still limping, for fuck's sake."

He keeps his face ahead. Stoic. Infuriatingly gorgeous and inscrutable and darkly kissable. "I haven't forgotten," he says softly. "That's part of why we are getting out of here. You're in danger. They are after you."

Me?

The elevator comes to a stop and dread takes hold. The last time we were here, we had crazed demons with sharp teeth racing to kill us. Talk about jumping out of the frying pan into the fat.

"Who's after me? How do you know?"

"I know because I listen."

Why does he get to be so calm and exasperating when my heart is threatening escape from my ribcage? It's not fair. None of this is fair, but this is just galling.

"I have access to places that others don't, thanks to this." He pulls the marble from the hole and pockets it as the elevator doors open.

I freeze as we step out of the elevator. Inside it, we only had to press a button to go back up to safety. Here, I may as well borrow Orlin's bell and announce myself as demon dinner.

Dade puts his arm around my waist and gently guides me forward. "This way."

I heave out a breath as we take the corridor that runs in the opposite direction to where the demons hang out. Beside me, Dade is limping and I hear his breath catch on every other step. This is utter madness.

"You still haven't told me who's after me," I complain as we turn into another corridor.

Nor why you came to save me after making it clear how much you hate me. I leave the last part unsaid.

"Who do you think?"

We turn again. It seems to be the exact same layout as the demon floor in purgatory, so I have a vague idea of where we are going. "If I knew that, I wouldn't be asking." I come to a stop, forcing him to stop too.

He turns to me. "You are in danger. We're all in danger, but you especially."

I remember his words in the Earthery when he thought I was Candice. He warned her about the company she kept. "Is this something to do with Felix and Remy?"

"I don't know."

I'd damn him to Hell if we weren't already here.

He turns to walk, but I hold steadfast. "What do you mean you don't know? You can't just bring me down here in the dead of night and then tell me you don't know."

He lets out an impatient sigh. "Last night wasn't the first time I've been down here, Valentine." The way he uses my surname infuriates me. "I hear things," he adds. "The demons talk."

“You mean when they are not trying to eat you?” I scoff. I’m beyond mad. I’m livid at his lack of explanation and vague answers.

“They don’t always attack,” he says quietly. He sounds sure, but I catch him giving a brief check over my shoulder just in case there’s one behind me. He leans in and I finally see it. The fear he’s hiding is there. He’s just good at masking it. I suppress a shudder.

“I’ve heard that someone wants you dead, but I don’t know who. I only know it’s one of the Inferno Games contestants. Probably one that came through with us from Purgatory, seeing as they were sending you those letters back there.”

That narrows it down to like thirty people. “It could be anyone.”

“I don’t trust Bradford or Barclay as far as I can throw them.” So that’s what this is. Jealousy. Dade Angelis is jealous that I’m with Remy... was with Remy. If I wasn’t so damned scared, I’d feel smug.

“So you don’t know it’s them?” I question. “Felix was badly hurt when the Earthery fell. You saw his face. I doubt he’d do anything to mess up that pretty face of his.”

“I don’t know, no,” he admits. “It doesn’t matter who it is if we get out of here. Hold this.” He thrusts a pen into my hands.

“What’s this for?” I ask, confused.

“You’ll see. Just keep hold of it.”

He begins limping up the corridor and this time I follow him. We walk for what feels like hours, twisting and turning from one corridor to the next. Every time we turn a corner, my stomach twists in fear, but, despite the limp, Dade walks on

assuredly as though he's going for a Sunday stroll in the park and not sneaking down tunnels in a demon infested circle of Hell.

Finally, he comes to a stop. "This is as far as I've been before," he says, pointing to the T-junction at the end of the corridor. "Every time I tried to get any further, I was caught. There are usually demons blocking both ways, left and right, but tonight I'm hoping that they'll all be preoccupied with rebuilding the Earthery."

"You've tried to escape before?" *Without me?*

"Nope. I've scoped out this place before. I was waiting until it was safe enough to bring you."

I shouldn't care. I have no business being so excited that he always planned to bring me. I gawk at him as he pulls off his shirt and once again, I'm taken by how gorgeous he is and how the lines of his tattoos compliment the curves and angles of his body

"I don't think this is the time or place for a quickie," I deadpan as heat flushes through me.

"Give me the pen," he instructs.

Confusion holds me as I hand him back the pen he gave me earlier. He takes the pen from my hand and jabs it on his right shoulder. "This is where we are," he says, looking over his shoulder and drawing a crude X.

I stare at the spot in bewilderment. My mouth falls open as I look closer at the lined patterns that I tattooed on him a month ago. Suddenly, his tattoo becomes clear.

"It's a map!" I gasp.

"It is."

I step back from his back and marvel that from just two or three feet away I still see the beautiful intricate lines that make up the skyline of Eighteenth century London. As I look closer, I see intersections and corridors amongst all the wavy lines that I thought were abstract.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I say

“I was going to, but then Remy spoiled that, if you remember?”

I blush as I remember what it was that Remy actually stopped us doing, and it wasn’t talking about a map.

“I don’t understand why you’re telling me this now.” My voice is a whisper. “I thought you were a murderer. I ran from you.”

“But you aren’t running from me anymore.” He reaches up and runs his hand through my hair. The gesture pins me to the floor with shock. Heat floods through me as his fingers stroke the soft skin beneath my ear. My breathing deepens as his eyes fall to my lips.

“What’s happening?” I murmur.

The memory of past kisses heats me up to my core. It’s like a sweet torture.

“What do you want to happen, Valentine?”

We’re in a demon infested hellhole, running from an unknown assailant who showered concrete down on us twelve hours ago. I should want safety. I should want a million things over the one thing I do want. There’s nothing safe about Dade’s kiss, and yet I want that. This is not the time nor the place, but I want the danger, the exhilaration of feeling his lips on mine. I don’t answer with words. He groans as I bring myself to my tip toes and press my lips to his, and it’s like it’s

exactly what he's been waiting for. He kisses back, and it's everything I remembered. Exhilarating, terrifying, beautiful. Everything.

"I thought we were just friends?" I remind him, breathlessly.

"This feels very friendly to me," he jests, parting my lips with his tongue.

I'd forgotten that he'd taken his top off to show me the map tattoo, but I remember it all too well as my hands graze down his hard chest, feeling the dips and curves of his muscle, the beat of his heart under the skin. He pulls me to him, claiming me recklessly. Because this is reckless and dangerous and glorious and so fucking hot. His hands move down to my ass, pulling me into him until we're practically dry fucking standing up. My back crashes into the wall behind me, sending a shockwave both through me and down the corridor.

"Fuck!" He leaps back.

"I wanted it," I whisper.

He gives me a grim smile. "I could tell, but we can't make that much noise without expecting demons to appear. I think most of them are upstairs dealing with the Earthery, but it only takes one of them with a portal and they'll all be down here. This will have to wait." He plants another short kiss on my lips, shocking me back into reality. My world is spinning and my body is buzzing, so it takes a few seconds to remember the danger we're in.

"We'll take the right-hand path," he says, grabbing my hand, sending a shiver of electricity up it and right to my core. I don't know how he can be so composed after sending me

into utterly glorious madness, but it seems he's a pro. I'm the one constantly one glorious step behind.

"I want you to draw the route we take because you will be tattooing it on my back later." Even though we're in great danger, my heart skips a beat at the thought of once again touching his back, following the valleys and hills with inked lines. We walk... well, I walk and he hobbles, for what feels like another twenty minutes, twisting and turning. Each time we come to an intersection I painstakingly draw it out on Dade's skin to ink on his back later. Finally, the walls change color and the corridor we are running down opens up into a large vestibule. In front of us is a huge set of doors with gold edging. Above the doors is a set of numbers and above that, in gold lettering, the words SECOND CIRCLE.

"It's an elevator," I breathe out in heady excitement.

"This is it!" Dade says excitedly. We just need to take this elevator to the very depths of Hell. Then we can get out of here."

I shake my head as terror consumes me. "We can't."

His gaze darkens. "What do you mean, we can't? We need to. This is the only way out of here." His expression softens as he sees the panic in mine. "We'll get her out first."

I almost cry in relief at his words.

He pulls me to him and kisses my forehead lightly. "I wouldn't dream of leaving Hell without Jenny." He presses his hand to the call button. Excitement mingles with fear as the numbers above us light up. We are seconds away from getting out of Lust.

Suddenly my heart drops. "What about Juliette and Rowena?"

He turns to me and runs his hand through my hair. “I cannot take everyone. I’m sorry, Valentine. They will have to find their own way out.”

Devastation sweeps through me at leaving my friends behind, but he’s right. Rowena is unconscious in hospital and Juliette wouldn’t come without her.

When he sees me wavering, he adds. “This is our only chance to get out of here and get to Jenny. You have to make the choice. Your friends or your sister.”

“I have to get Jenny,” I choke.

He takes my hands and threads his fingers through mine in comforting gesture. “Your friends will understand that.”

I hold my breath as the doors open. Inside is the most ornate elevator I’ve ever seen, with red velvet wallpaper patterned with pictures of the ten circles of Hell descending from Purgatory at the top to Satan’s lair at the very bottom. Dade presses the button marked 7- VIOLENCE. I pull out my Hell Cell and take photos as the doors close and we start to descend. The elevator moves eerily slowly.

I’m going to get Jenny!

I’m going to the seventh circle of Hell in pajamas.

I’m going to the seventh circle of Hell with Dade!

It’s absolutely insane.

“How will we know which Tower Jenny is in?” I ask, remembering all the hundreds of thousands of towers I’ve seen outside through the windows of both Lust and Purgatory.

Dade pulls me to his chest, wrapping a protective arm around me. “I don’t know, but we will keep looking until we find her.”

“Why are you doing this?” I whisper. “You hated me. I hurt you.”

“And I, you.” I feel his head shake and the movement of his hair tickles my face as he pulls me closer. “I never hated you, Valentine. I have endured a great many emotions where you are concerned, but hate is nowhere close to any of them.”

“Endured?”

“Endured!” he declares with conviction. “It’s been a more profound form of torment than this place. I’ve longed for you, yearned for you, but earlier, when it became clear that neither of us might survive this ordeal, I knew I had to be with you. The idea of enduring eternity without you is far more agonizing than any games or trials the demons could devise. It’s ironic, really. They invest so much effort in devising ways to torment us, yet all they had to do to truly torture me was to make me believe I might have to spend eternity without you.”

I exhale deeply, overwhelmed by emotion. He kisses me again, and this time I draw every ounce of warmth and security from it. I could stay like this with him for the rest of eternity.

The lovely feeling is abruptly broken off by the elevator, stopping with a lurch. We turn to the doors, waiting for them to open, but they don’t. The elevator jolts again and then we start moving back up. I look at Dade in a panic, but it’s clear he doesn’t know what’s going on any more than I do. It seems to take an age for the elevator door doors to open, but when they do, a number of guards rush at us. In an instant, Dade scoops me up, slinging me over his shoulder, and unfurls his wings. He crashes into the guards, sending them sprawling, and then bursts out of the elevator.

Once more, I'm swept away through a labyrinth of corridors, but this time, we're soaring through the air. Fear clenches at my heart as the walls of the corridors rush by in a dizzying blur, given the incredible speed at which Dade is carrying me. The sense of urgency and danger is palpable and I can barely gulp in breaths of air. Once upstairs, he flies me up through the atrium to the seventh floor, where he deposits me at my door.

He's pale and shaky and out of breath. "They've seen me, but I don't think they saw you. The safest place for you right now is in your own room."

"For me?" My heart plummets, a mixture of fear and dread welling up within me. After his declaration in the elevator before, I can't believe this is over. I raise my Hell Cell to the door and unlock it with a shaky hand. "What about you?" I pause. "I don't want to be alone," I admit.

He bundles me inside and shuts the door quietly behind him. "Who said I was going to leave you alone?"

YOU SHOULD WARN A LADY

QUINN

My breath catches as we lock stares. He's devastating in the darkness. An outline of obsidian wings and muscle. His naked chest is all too apparent in the dim light, highlighted against his long black hair and black pants.

I lick my lips as I stare at him. I'm terrified, and upset and my whole body is shaking, but none of that matters when Dade steps forward and kisses me with such intensity, it almost makes me forget how close we were to getting out of here.

I'm swept away in an urgency, kissing him back, matching his dark fire with my own.

Urged on by the terrifying closeness of getting caught and the probable chance that demons will be at our door within the hour, we fumble to the bed in a mess of ripping each other's clothes off. By the time my back hits the sheets, I'm already naked and my clothes are in shreds on the floor. It's the first time I've seen him fully naked and I'm not prepared. I knew he had a tail. It's not a secret, but seeing it laid out on the bed unfurled is thrilling and weird. The picture of the woman and demon in stained glass flashes in my mind. I've never been more scared and more turned on in my whole life. I'm trembling and I can't say if it's due to terror or the fact I'm

finally going to have sex with Dade. Probably both seeing as sex with Dade is a frightening and exhilarating prospect in itself.

“You know the demons will find you eventually,” I heave out breathlessly.

“Don’t even think about answering the door this time.” He growls into my ear as he pins my arm to the bed and runs his tongue down the sensitive spot under my ear.

I can barely breathe with his weight and sensation, but this time I’m doing it on my terms. “I wouldn’t dream of it!” I wrestle my arm from his grip and flip him over so I’m on top. He’s done enough controlling. Now it’s my turn.

He grins up at me as I grab his wrists and pin him down, just like he did to me. My hands barely wrap around the thickness of his wrists, but I know he won’t resist. I straddle him, feeling his hard cock nestle in the groove of my ass.

“You’ve got me!”

Is that mirth I see in my huge demon? Will he never cease to amaze me?

I bite my lip as I look down at my triumph. I’ve finally caught him. “Now, what should I do with you?”

In an instant, he pulls his hips down on the bed, pressing them into the mattress and then back up, impaling me on his cock.

I cry out from the shock of intrusion as he steals victory from me.

If this is defeat, I welcome it.

The sheer size of the man brings tears to the corners of my eyes, but I’m so wet, I take him in. Even beneath me, his arms

pinned to the bed, he's still in control as he thrusts his hips up and down.

I have to let go of his arms and grip his chest to stop from falling off. It's brutal and painful and everything I expected it to be. He pulls himself up with me still straddling him, and begins to kiss my neck, fervently biting me as I dig my fingernails into his back.

"You should warn a lady," I heave out breathlessly.

He pulls away from my neck to growl out, "You caught me. I was only the helpless prey."

There's nothing helpless about him as he moves his mouth to my nipple, drawing it in, then clamping his teeth down. I respond by pulling on his hair as we grind our bodies against each other.

"Fuck, Valentine, You're so soft." There's nothing soft about what we are doing. It's not making love. It's unashamedly fighting. Passion meeting passion. Fire meeting flames. It's all consuming and agonizing and sexy and breathtaking, and I freaking love it.

"If you're angling for me to tell you, you're so hard, I'm not going to say it," I tease.

He gives me a growl, then flips me back over so I'm once again under him. The prey, not the predator. "That's no fun," he grinds out, but he has a smile on his face. The knowledge that he'll be found soon hasn't left my mind, but it has created urgency.

I grip my hands on the side of his face, bringing him down to me and kissing him wildly.

The whole bed is shaking with our efforts.

“How’s that for fun?” I’m out of breath and slick with sweat.

“You’ve no fucking idea, My Valentine.”

He clamps my hands together over my head, binding my wrists with one hand. The other comes down between my legs and rubs circles over my clit as he thrusts deep inside me. I can’t move beneath him and even when the orgasm takes hold and my body bucks with the sensation, I still can’t actually move any part of my body save my fingers and toes, all of which curl as sensation rocks my body. I cry out, clamping my eyes together as he draws out my pleasure.

“Open your eyes, Valentine.”

“Call me Quinn,” I hiss out as my core pulsates around his cock.

His voice is softer now. “Open your eyes, Quinn.”

It’s a small victory, but I take it. I open my eyes as he releases my hands. He’s so painfully beautiful and so darkly intense that I can barely stand it. He has no need to pin me down with his hands when he’s pinned me down in other ways. He thrusts more quickly and his eyes never leave mine, even as he clamps his lips together and lets out a murmur. Pushing into me one last time, his aura seems to explode in light as he comes inside me.

Just as quick as the light erupted, the room falls back into darkness. It’s only when Dade rolls off me that I realize just how heavy he is, and how much I enjoyed his weight pinning me to the bed. I turn to roll in the other direction, desperately needing a shower, but he grabs me and pulls me back to him, pulling me under the covers. He kisses me again and this time it’s slow and drawn out and... well, it’s just lovely.

“You fucking hurt me,” I say, swiping him. It’s hardly a sincere admonishment, seeing as I can’t keep the smile from my face. “Give me a warning next time.”

“I’m sorry. Where did I hurt you?”

My entire body aches and stings and hurts, but in the very best way. “Here,” I say, pointing to my neck, where he nibbled. He kisses it lightly, sending a ripple through my over sensitive body. “Here,” I repeat, pointing slightly lower. He kisses exactly where I pointed.

“That’s it,” I lie. I’m satiated and doubt I can take any more.

“Here?” he asks, lowering himself to lightly kiss my bruised nipple.

“I can’t take any more, Dade. Come back up here. I try to pull him back up, but it’s like heaving a brick. He trails his tongue down my stomach and comes to rest on my clit.

“Seriously. I can’t do this again. I can’t take anym...”

My words are swept away as he laps his tongue over my clit, eking out the second orgasm I professed I couldn’t cope with. My hands fist his hair as I break apart again, and this time I buck beneath him, no longer shackled.

His semen is still trickling down my legs, and it feels deliciously filthy as I come again. Do men still give orgasms after they’ve finished? Not in my experience, but then I’ve never experienced men giving me any orgasms, and Dade isn’t like any other man. I’m so not used to this. I’m not used to anything close to this.

“You need a shower,” he professes after poking his head back out from under the covers.

I muss his hair up. “You can talk.” His hair is dripping with sweat and his chin is coated with my juices, and probably his own cum. I’m not sure if it’s gross or the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

“Let’s take one together.”

My body feels like a limp rag as we make our way to the bathroom. He turns on the shower. I barely have the energy to stand, so I cling to him as he washes my hair, taking deliberate care before softly washing my body. When he’s done with me, he gives himself a quick clean and carries me back to the bed.

I don’t think I’ve ever been so exhausted in my entire life. So much has happened in the last twenty-four hours. It’s been horrific and amazing in equal measure.

Dade pulls me into the cocoon of his body where I would stay forever if I could. I do stay there for hours, sleeping softly in his arms and wings, tail wrapped round me, pretending the outside world doesn’t exist. I only wake up when my Hell Cell beeps.

“Don’t answer it,” Dade moans. “I’m not ready for this to be over.” He kisses me lightly on the forehead and my whole traitorous body reacts to him with a shiver of lust.

“It might be about Rowena. I need to know if she’s okay.” I stifle a yawn as I pick up the Hell Cell. There’s a message like I’ve never seen before. Unlike normal messages, it’s bright red with the word ‘alert’ written on top. I sit up and swipe right to read the full message. Panic engulfs me, and I inhale a breath as I read.

ALERT FOR DADE ANGELIS

“Shit!”

“What?” He sits up in bed. “Is Rowena okay?”

“It’s not about Rowena. It’s about you.”

I hold up the Hell Cell for him to see. We read the full message together.

DADE ANGELIS IS WANTED IN RESPECT TO AN INCIDENT LAST NIGHT. IF SEEN, PLEASE CONTACT NOÉMI LAURENT IMMEDIATELY.

He jumps out of bed and pulls on his trousers quickly as my heart begins to race.

“Where are you going?” I blurt out anxiously. “Stay here. Hide in my room.”

“There is no hiding,” Dade says. “If they want me, they can have me. I won’t put you in danger. As I said last night, they don’t know you were with me. They didn’t see you. If I stay here, your life will be in danger.”

A whisper of desperation escapes my lips, “And what about yours?” In an instant, I’m out of the bed blocking his path.

He grabs his shirt from the ground and strides over to me. “Mine isn’t as important as yours.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Of course it isn’t,” he says, bringing his hand to my face. “You have Jenny to get to. My plan to get out of here is selfish. Yours is not.”

“You have the same reason to get out of here that I do. What about Emily?”

His eyes fill with a profound sadness. “Emily will already be in Heaven. There’s nothing to rescue her from. My wanting to get to her was always a selfish endeavor.”

“I’ll go with you,” I say in a desperate panic.

“No.” He shakes his head and then pauses as though he’s contemplating something. Something awful. When he speaks, his voice is resigned. “Stay here. Go to Remy and be with him. He is the perfect cover. They will never think it was you with me if they think you are dating Remy. You should go to him this morning.”

I stare at him in ragged disbelief. “Are you insane? I don’t want to go to Remy.”

I’m shaking and I don’t even try to hide it. My face is wet with tears and I feel like he’s ripping my heart right through my rib cage.

Again!

He grips my shoulders and presses his lips against mine. It doesn’t soften the blow. Not nearly enough. “Right now, Remy is the only way you’ll get out of this.”

“I won’t do it. I can’t.”

“Promise me,” he demands vehemently. His eyes and aura are full of pain that’s mixing with my own.

“You can’t order me around,” I say, but my voice is small and no match for his.

“I can’t abide the thought of you and Remy together, but I like the thought of you being tortured by demons a hell of a lot less. And that’s what they will do to you. You’ve seen what they did to me. I will not allow it to happen to you.”

“But how can I pretend to be Remy’s girlfriend after last night?”

After us.

After everything!

I turn and follow as he steps around me to the door, my face downcast. “I can’t let you do this. I cannot let you be tortured again.”

He turns to me. The way he looks at me is beautiful. My Dark Angel is all light as he cradles my face in his hand and kisses my cheeks where the tears are falling before kissing me once again on the lips. I taste the salt on his tongue.

“I will not see you harmed. I will bear a thousand lashes to keep you from being hurt. I will take everything the demons give me to keep you safe, and if that means watching you spend eternity with Remy, then so be it. You now know the way out of here. Maybe one day in the future, if you don’t get through the games, you will finally be able to find a way out. Draw out the path, Valentine. Draw the way we went last night.” It’s another promise I can’t keep, but I find myself nodding.

My heart is crushed as he leaves. I run to the balcony and watch as he walks down the stairs. He gives me one last look and then disappears from my view. I run round the balcony to see him, but he doesn’t look back as he enters his room. With a heavy heart, I turn around, go back inside my own room, lock the door, and fall onto my bed. Finally, I let myself succumb to the sobs.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

“**H**e looks fucking disgusting. Isn’t there something you can do?”

The doctor doesn’t flinch as Anthura squares up to him. “He’s suffered a lot of damage. Hell magic will help the healing, but I can’t promise he’ll look the same way he did before.”

“Half his fucking head is missing!” she snarls, gesticulating at me with her long red claws.

Bitterness floods through me at her words.

I tune her ranting out and flick my eye to the empty bed next to mine. Rowena left earlier with Juliette. I’m glad. As if this isn’t enough of a fucking embarrassment without her witnessing it.

“I’m getting you out of here,” Anthura fumes. It sounds like a threat.

“He can’t leave yet.” The doctor protests as she rips the covers back from my bed.

“He can fucking do what the hell he likes and if you have a problem with that, tell Noémi I discharged him.” She turns to me and her face falls into a tight grimace. “Get up.”

I grit my teeth against a wave of anger, but I do as she says. I want to get out of this shit-hole and back to my room away from prying eyes.

A host of disgusted stares follow me as I follow Anthura from the hospital wing to my room.

“So far, very few people know what happened to you,” she says as she opens the door for me. “If anyone sees you looking like the elephant man’s uglier brother, your popularity rating will be shot to shit and I don’t care what Noémi says. She’s going for the popular vote. So stay in your room and, for Satan’s sake, don’t show your face to anyone.”

I step over the threshold and slam the door in her face.

Anger burns white hot at the callous way she talked about me, but what really fucking stings is that it’s true. I’m a fucking monster.

Someone knocks at the door.

Fucking Anthura! I yank open the door. “What?”

I open the door to find Rowena standing there, looking startled. *Shit!* I turn my bad side away from her and close the door until there’s only a couple of inches between it and the doorframe.

“What do you want?” I bark.

She looks uncomfortable. “I think you saved my life.”

“Yeah, so?” I snap. I do not need this right now.

“So you did save my life? I couldn’t understand why you were with me when the ceiling collapsed. I remembered I was with Moloch when the ceiling began to fall, but apparently Moloch got out unscathed.” She points to her head and gives me a shy smile. “My memory is still a little hazy.”

I thought she'd come to get some gossip for those friends of hers, or worse, to give me pity, but this is much worse than either of those things. She's here to offer gratitude. "Don't get your panties in a bunch. The ceiling fell, and you were in my way as I was trying to get past."

She knits her eyebrows together. "I don't remember it that way. You shielded me. I'd be dead if it wasn't for you." She gives a nonchalant shrug. "Well, more dead."

I narrow my eyes, skeptical. "I thought your memory was hazy?"

"I think I remember that," she admits tentatively. "I just wanted to make sure."

"Yeah, well, it didn't happen like that." I bite out in annoyance. "You were in my way."

"Anyway. You still saved me, and I wanted to say thank you." She pauses. "How's your..." She points to her head again, then mine.

I lean back from the door, irritated. "It's fine," I grind out. "Look, you've said your thanks, now fuck off."

Her expression turns somber. "I brought you some food, you ungrateful prick," she says, holding up a paper bag. "Donuts. I wasn't sure if you'd be up to eating."

She means if I'd want to show my hideous face down in the restaurant.

"I got room service." I clench my jaw, which shoots a shock of pain reverberating around my skull... What's left of it.

"Fine. Whatever." She turns to leave.

Damn it! "Wait."

She turns back to me and damn it if she doesn't have a hint of hope in her eyes.

“Jesus, fuck. Just come in. I forgot to order dessert.” I open the door wider and do the unthinkable. I let Rowena Bagshot into my room.

Her face has a few scratches, but the matted blood has been washed from her hair, which she's curled. She's changed into one of her god awful dresses. At least this one isn't like the usual floaty tents she wears. It actually clings to her, giving her a surprisingly feminine figure.

“I'll pop them here, should I? I can feel her nerves. The way her eyes dart around the room as though I'm going to pounce on her. It's not like her. Usually she's a catty bitch. I'm not sure if I like it. I've gotten used to her sharp tongue.

I stride over and take the bag from her and peer inside. Inside it are four donuts, each covered in pink frosting.

“That's the only color they had,” she apologizes.

“Fucking pink,” I complain. “It's like living in a fucking Barbie Dream House in this place.” I hand over one of the donuts which she takes.

“I never played with Barbie's as a kid,” she confesses as she takes a bite of the donut. “I was more into trucks.”

I snort. “I bet.”

“Mock me all you like. I lived on a farm. Everyone worked. I was driving tractors at the age of eight.”

My eyebrows inch up as I bite into the donut. It tastes sickly sweet, like everything else in this flea pit. “You drove tractors at the age of eight? Really?” I didn't expect that, but then again, I didn't expect her to give great head. My eyes are

drawn to her lips at the thought. She's got a smudge of pink frosting on her bottom lip that's more inviting than I want to think about. I bring my focus back to my own donut.

She shrugs. "I drove more than that, but only on the farm. I wanted to play with Barbie, though."

She's wavering, hovering near the door and apart from one tiny bite, she's not touched the donut I handed to her.

"Why don't you sit down?" Her dithering is making me nervous.

Her eyes take in the lack of seats in the room, then stop at the only place to sit - next to me on the bed. She stares at it.

I hold my hands up in the air. "I'm not going to punch you."

"I'm not worried about that," she snorts. "I'm the one with the great right hook, remember?"

"All too clearly." I raise my hand up instinctively before remembering the part of my face she punched doesn't exist anymore. "So what are you worried about, because you've been standing like a caged cat by the door since you came in?"

"You..." She looks at my face then stops.

"I look like a fucking monster? Is that what you were going to say?" I feel my anger flaring. I should have slammed the door in her face when I had the chance.

She steps across the room and sits on the bed, keeping a distance between us. "It's not the outer monster that's the problem with you, Barclay. You know your face will heal and grow back. We're in Hell. They fixed Quinn last year after..."

She pauses and her eyes go down to the donut on her lap.

I already know what she's thinking, so I finish the sentence for her. "After I poisoned her?"

She licks her lips and turns her eyes to me. "You really are a total shit. You know that, Felix Barclay? It's a good job you're good looking." Her mouth quirks up at the edges, and damn if it doesn't make my mouth smile, too.

"I'm a real fucking male model. Maybe I'll have Halloween Weekly Magazine call me up to be their cover model. I won't even need make-up."

She clamps her lips together to stifle laughter, and the donut drops from her knees to the floor. As she bends to pick it up, I see her whole body shuddering with silent laughter.

I hate being laughed at. Really hate it and yet, I don't mind this. It's funny.

"It probably tastes better with bits of carpet on it," I mutter. "Less sugary."

She sits back up and props the donut back on her knee. She has tears from the laughter, making her eyes sparkle.

"Eat it," I dare her.

She stares at the donut, then slowly brings her eyes to me. She picks the donut up slowly and brings it to her lips. Bits of carpet threads are stuck in the pink frosting. She fixates on me and in her stare, I see a challenge.

I match her stare. "I fucking dare you."

I fully expect her to put it back in the bag, but she calls my bluff and takes a bite. "Mmm. Delicious." Her face tells another story. Her face contorts, and she wrinkles her nose. And all the while, she doesn't take her eyes from me.

“You are a fucking nut job.” I shake my head. “There’s no way that’s delicious. It tasted shit without the carpet on it.”

She shakes her head. “No, it’s really good.”

I stare back, rising to her challenge. “You do know that I’m pretty sure I jacked off on the end of my bed and some of my spunk probably hit the floor right where the donut landed.”

Her mouth pulls down as she grabs the bag with the last two donuts in and spits it out. “You are truly revolting.”

I lean back with a satisfied smirk. “You know I didn’t do that. I just wondered how far you’d take it.”

She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and folds the top of the paper bag over. “Remember I’ve already tasted your stuff and let me tell you, it aint no donut frosting.” She spits once again into the bag. “Just don’t come crying when you’re hungry, because I spit on your remaining donuts.”

I take the bag from her and throw it toward the trash can. “Those donuts were awful, anyway. Couldn’t you at least have brought me a steak?”

She shrugs. “They’d probably coat that in pink frosting, too.”

She’s not wrong. “Or some chicken wings,” I add.

“You know what I miss?” She stares into space, lost in a memory. “Ribs! Barbecued ribs and a bottle of bourbon.” She sighs.

I reach down under my bed. “I can’t help you with the ribs, but here.” I pull out a bottle and toss it to her. She catches it with one hand and stares at me.

“Consider it a thanks for the donuts and something to wash that shit down with.”

She holds the bottle of bourbon up. “Do you have a glass?”

“Nope. I usually drink it straight from the bottle.”

She hesitates for a second, then unscrews the cap and takes a long swig. “This is good. Why do you have a bottle of bourbon under your bed?”

I take the bottle back and suck down the dark liquid before passing the bottle back. “Anthura is easier to deal with when I’m drunk, so I keep a stash handy.”

“I hear you.” She smirks. “Anthura would drive me to drink. Course, I’m not fucking her.” She raises an eyebrow.

I bite back a bitter smile. “Yeah well. She made it pretty clear that she thinks I’m disgusting, so I don’t think that will be happening any time soon.”

Rowena runs her thumbnail over the edge of the bourbon label and begins to peel it off. When she speaks, her voice is quieter. “Yeah, it’s not nice when people call you disgusting, right to your face.”

Shit. “I’m sorry.” *Fuck.* I instinctively raise my hand to my face before remembering it’s barely there.

“Two apologies in one week,” she says, handing back the bottle. “Can I borrow your coat?”

I look up at her, confused? “What? Why?”

A sly smile curls at the corners of her lips. “Hell must be freezing over.”

“Tou-fucking-che. I’m an asshole.” I take the bottle from her and raise it in a mock toast, downing more of the bourbon than I should.

“Just leave some of that for me, Barclay. It’s been a really awful week.”

I wipe the top and hand it to her.

She sits thoughtfully for a second. It gives me a chance to study her profile. She’s actually not that bad looking in a weird sort of way. If she didn’t wear those ridiculous flowery headbands and styled her hair in a more modern way, she’d actually be fuckable.

Damn. I need to curb it on the bourbon. I don’t like the direction my thoughts are taking me.

“Do you know anything about Hades or Twila?” She finally asks. “Has Anthura mentioned where they are?”

“Is this why you’re really here?” I mutter. “To ask about your friend?”

She shakes her head. “Self-pity isn’t your style,” she observes, her tone contemplative. “I’ve already told you my reason for being here. Yet, you’ve managed to avoid my question.”

“Anthura doesn’t tell me shit,” I spit out bitterly.

“I meant about why you saved me yesterday.” The bottle shakes as she holds her finger up to me. “And don’t give me any of that crap about me being in the way. The Felix Barclay I know would have bulldozed me out of the way to get to safety.”

I suck on my teeth in discomfort. I honestly don’t know why I saved her. Instinct? “I just did. Can we drop this?” I grab the bottle back from her and take another swig.

I feel dizzy with the medication mixing with the alcohol. I hand the bottle back to her. “The rest is yours. I don’t want any

more.”

She gives me a curious look. “Why? You’ve hardly had any.”

Embarrassment coils within me. “Because last time I did, I ended up with a black eye.”

Her eyes lock onto mine. “No,” she asserts firmly. “You were completely sober when you kissed me.”

The atmosphere between us grows taut. I don’t know if it’s the medication, or the alcohol, or the reaction to my face being fucked up, but I can’t keep my next words in my mouth. “I want to kiss you now.”

We both stare at each other, neither of us speaking. She could run away or she could punch me again, but she does neither of those things. She just stares.

Her breathing deepens.

“Fuck. Say something.” She doesn’t. For the first time in her entire life, she’s speechless.

She furrows her eyebrows and I’m sure I see sadness in her eyes. “What do you expect me to say to that? After everything...”

I’m stressed and humiliated and she can’t give me one damned word? I lean forward. “I guess you won’t have to decide which eye to punch this time.”

I expect her to recoil in disgust, but she’s as still as a statue as I press my lips to hers. She stiffens. It’s like kissing cold marble.

I am so fucked up.

Shock paints her features as I pull back slowly.

“Well, you didn’t punch me, so I’ll call that a win,” I joke bitterly.

She looks on the verge of panic. Her chest is heaving, and she’s got a manic look in her eyes.

Damn it all to hell. This is a fucking mess. “Look, I’m sorr...”

“Don’t go for the hat trick, Barclay,” she says softly, then leans into me and claims my mouth.

NOT SCARED

I know we're both lost and angry and probably more drunk than we ought to be, but kissing him isn't as awful as I expected it to be. My brain is screaming at me to pull back, but it's been a long time since I was desired by anyone. I never thought I'd want to kiss Felix. I don't want to kiss Felix, but he's so good at it that my resolve is somewhere in the bottom of a bourbon bottle, along with my pride and morals. As he parts my lips with his tongue, I find I don't even care. If this is what shame feels like, I could live on it. I can taste the bourbon on his lips. I'd forgotten how good kissing could be. A sharp shock of electricity shoots through my veins as he runs his fingers through my hair.

I'm kissing Felix Barclay!

It's insane and awful, exquisite and wonderful and I hate it and love it. I suck in a breath as he rips open the top of my dress and begins to kiss down toward my breasts. It's a terrible and terrifying feeling being in such a vulnerable position with the one person that despises you above anyone else, but my body is desperate for touch and I can't bring myself to stop this. He rips some more, then pulls my dress down over my shoulders until I'm naked from the waist up save for a bra. I always wear pretty bras and this one with its lace cups and

ribbon opening at the front is no different. But now, as he stares at my breasts, I wish I'd have worn something else. Something less obvious, less sexy. He'll think I anticipated this, which couldn't be further from the truth. How could I have anticipated feeling this way?

With him?

He unfastens the ribbon excruciatingly slowly. I wait for the revulsion. Before I died, my breasts were hard, filed with silicone and underscored with two long silver scars. Now they are real. All flesh. The bra falls open. He stares at them, then palms one in his hand, grazing the underside of it with his fingers. He looks at it in awe and in that moment I realize he's as scared of this as I am. Mr. High and Mighty is terrified of my breasts. Not because he's never seen one before. I'm sure he's seen hundreds in his time, but because he's not sure what to expect. He's not the only one, but I can't guide him on this. I'm so desperately lost as it is.

He's completely mesmerized, as though he was expecting something different. "They're so soft and..." He looks up at me as though wanting me to finish the sentence for him.

"Normal looking?"

"Fucking beautiful," he corrects. My heart races as he drops and places a kiss on the flesh above my nipple before running his tongue around it. Goose bumps erupt along my skin and I have to clamp my lips together to stifle the murmur threatening to escape. I coil my fists in his sheets and lift up slightly as he takes the top of my dress and eases it down over my hips. My panties match my bra in delicate white lace with little bows on them. He pulls me to my feet, which makes the dress and my bra fall to the floor. He pulls me to him and kisses me again. He's fully clothed and I'm almost completely

naked and it's both terrifying and thrilling and I've never felt more vulnerable or more turned on. His kiss is everything it was before, but I'm disheartened by how quickly he skirted over my panties. It's like he didn't want to look. I feel his erection pressing against his pants so it's not like he's not turned on, but despite all this, he's still fearful.

Or disgusted.

He pulls off his jacket and begins to unbutton his own shirt, but I put my hands to his and stop him.

I lick my lips and, in silent prayer. I lower my hands slowly to my panties and begin to pull them down. His eyes never leave mine as I ease them over my knees and let them fall to the floor.

“Look at me.”

His breathing is ragged and I can see how turned on he is, but he keeps his eyes locked on mine. It's like a line he's terrified to cross and I've never seen Felix terrified of anything before.

“Felix. Look at me. All of me.” My voice is quiet, but it is a demand. I've pushed myself way past the point of comfort. My breathing is ragged and my heart is pounding and the anticipation is overwhelming.

I sit back on the bed and open my legs, my feet planted flat on the floor. I'm trembling, remembering the way he looked at me back in the first trial. It must have crossed his mind.

I swallow back my fear as he contemplates his. He licks his lips, then slowly brings his eyes down.

It's like I've scored a point in this insane game we're playing, and either stupidity or bravado I don't really have, forces more words from my throat. “Closer,” I whisper. “I

cannot have sex with a man who is frightened of looking at my pussy.” I hold my tone. “I’ve done many things tonight that I might well wake up and regret tomorrow, but I draw the line at that.”

A muscle tics in his jaw. “I’m not scared of...”

“So show me.”

His eyes are still fixated on mine as he kneels on the floor between my legs. He had no problem with my breasts, but this is a hurdle I don’t know if he’ll be able to cope with.

I hold my breath as his eyes skim down over my chest and stomach and come to a stop. His eyes flick up to me one more time, then without hesitation, he bends lower and nestles his face between my legs. My breath releases in a loud moan as his tongue touches my clit.

I’m not used to the sensation and I have to grip the bed to stop from taking off as he laps at me quickly.

“Oh fuck!” I let the profanity fall from my lips as my body is elevated to heights I never knew could exist.

“You asked for this,” comes a murmured retort, “Now lay back and fucking take it.”

“Yessir!” I gasp as he sends my body into a cataclysm of sensation. I fall back on the bed, splaying my arms out. There’s no fear or hesitation in him now and I inhale sharply and grip onto air as my body breaks apart.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, ohh!” My legs clamp down round his ears and my hips buck wildly, almost propelling me off the bed.

I’ve never had an orgasm as a woman, given to me by a man. It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced, and I wasn’t

expecting it to feel so amazing.

“I’m not fucking scared of anything,” Felix finally says as he brings his face up for air. The dark intensity mingled with the pride in his features is almost comical, but I don’t have the energy or inclination to laugh at him. My body wants more.

I sit back up and kiss Felix roughly, tasting myself on his tongue. My body is no longer in my control. I’m crazed and needing to feel something that I don’t understand. I pull him down on top of me, desperate to satisfy a craving I’ve never had before. He doesn’t bother with removing his shirt, nor any other item of clothing, and yet he still manages to remove his cock from his pants, because suddenly I know what it feels like to be fucked as a woman. I let out a long sigh as he pushes into me. It hurts for a second and I have to grab his hand against the pain, but then it stops and becomes something wonderful.

My hips rise to meet his and it’s so damn natural and not weird and it’s not awful at all.

“I like this,” I hiss out. I know I look way more satisfied or smug than I want to, but it’s the truth. I do like this.

He kisses me deeply then whispers into my ear, “me too.” He follows it with a groan, which pulls more desire and want and need from me.

“Felix!” I breathe out as another wave of sensation, different from the first, but no less intense, takes my breath away. With my free hand, I pull his face back to mine to taste him again. I can’t seem to get enough of him, even though he’s already on me and inside me and still I want more.

I clench around his cock as the orgasm hits and it’s all I can do to hold on. He thrusts into me one last time, filling me

with his own orgasm as he comes with a loud groan.

I can't breathe. I wouldn't have told the girls to stay away from men as much as I did if I'd have known how amazing this could feel.

"Shit, I hurt you!" Felix's eyes widen in horror and he practically falls on the floor as he leaps off the bed. I follow his line of sight to the patch of blood soaking into the bed sheets between my legs.

"Fuck! I didn't..."

"If you apologize one more time, the sorry fairy is going to magically appear." I breathe back the shame that's beginning to creep in, but then realize I have nothing to feel shame for. "You didn't hurt me, you idiot. You took my virginity."

He stares at me as though this is a new concept to him. "You were a virgin?"

I pull back on the bed and wrap a sheet around me, suddenly feeling foolish. "As a woman in this body, yes, I was a virgin."

And here it is. The reminder that my body hasn't always been this way. That I didn't always look the way I look now. It suddenly feels cold and I'm sobering up at a rate I don't want to. But I can't hold back reality, no matter how much I want to.

"I have to go!" I leap out of bed and practically rip the sheet as I grab my dress and underwear from the floor. I vault for the door. Running down seven sets of stairs wearing a bloodied sheet will be humiliating, but it can't be anymore humiliating than being crushed under the weight of Felix's horrified stare. I hurl his door closed behind me with a bang and race as fast as I can to my own room. Tears stream down

my face as I collapse onto the bed and dissolve into my own misery and humiliation.

KILL ME NOW

“**K**ill me now.”

Juliette looks up from her breakfast as I take the seat opposite her. “Can it wait until after breakfast? I don’t want to get blood on my pancakes.”

I shake my head and my brain rattles around in my skull. “I don’t know how you can eat that shit.” I turn to the waiter who’s just appeared at my side. “Can I have something that doesn’t taste like it’s been boiled in pure sugar? I miss salt. I’ll have scrambled eggs and toast and bring us a bottle of champagne so I can make mimosas.”

Juliette raises her eyebrows in confusion. “Are we celebrating your impending death?”

“No. just want to get drunk, but I thought asking for a bottle of vodka for breakfast would raise too many questions.”

She puts down her fork. “What’s going on? Is this to do with Dade?”

Dade? I screw up my eyes. “What?”

“I saw the alert this morning. I messaged Quinn to ask what’s going on, but she hasn’t answered. I figured seeing as you are acting weird, you might have seen him.”

“There was an alert?” I’ve not looked at my portal all morning, terrified it might contain a message from Felix.

“Did I hear my name being mentioned?” I turn as Quinn squeezes into the seat next to me. Her hair is a mess and her eyes are red as though she’s been crying.

“There’s an alert out for Dade and Rowena is planning on drinking herself to death for breakfast.” Juliettes eyes roam between the pair of us. “You both look like shit. Are either of you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“I slept with Felix.”

“I slept with Dade.”

Juliette’s face registers a second of complete shock at our twin admissions, but is stopped from saying anything by the arrival of the waiter.

“We’re gonna need two of these,” she says to him as she pulls the bottle of champagne from his hand.

He puts the scrambled eggs, which are inexplicably covered in pink syrup, in front of me.

“Bring me anything with lots of carbs,” Quinn moans.

The second he leaves, Juliette pops the cork and hands the bottle to me.

“Babe...Babe... Jesus.”

I pour the champagne into the two glasses the waiter brought and push them to Quinn and Juliette before taking a swig right from the bottle.

“Dade I can understand, but Felix? Fucking hell. I miss all the fun.”

“You’ve been having your own fun.” I point out. “It’s not escaped either of our notice that you’ve been secretly running around this place, coming down to breakfast in the same clothes you wore the night before. I’m guessing Orlin is some kind of superpower in bed and you just don’t want to tell us.”

Juliette’s face curls in disgust. “I sincerely doubt it, but you don’t get to turn this on me. Girl, what were you thinking? Felix fucking Barclay!”

I slump down in my seat. “Please don’t speak so loudly. It’s bad enough as it is. I don’t want anyone else to know.”

The waiter arrives back with a plate of pink muffins for Quinn and another bottle of champagne.

Juliette reaches over the table and grabs one of the muffins.

“Why focus on me?” I complain. I gesture to Quinn, who looks as miserable as I feel. “She slept with Dade.”

“I do want to know all about that, but it was kinda inevitable. You sleeping with Felix is as fucked up as me sleeping with... well, Orlin.”

“Which I’m not convinced you’re not doing.”

“I’m not,” she snaps. “What the fuck happened?”

I feel the weight of their stares on me and half wish I’d not told them. If Juliette can keep secrets, I should be able to... But I don’t want to. It’s burning me to get out. I have to tell someone. I need the validation that I’m not a complete idiot, which is how I feel.

“I was drunk,” I begin.

Quinn picks up a muffin and takes a bite. “Say no more.”

Juliette shoots her a glance. “No, do say more. Say a lot more. I know you wouldn’t fuck Felix if you were pissed as a fart. Unless... don’t tell me he...”

I sigh. “I do enjoy your way with words over the breakfast table. It was consensual and though I was drunk, I was sober enough to stop it if I wanted to.”

She pulls a face. “He’s super hot, but why would you want to? He’s awful. He’s an absolute nightmare. I could see me being that stupid and falling for the asshole in a moment of drunken weakness, but you? Jeez, Ro. Why?”

“People do stupid things,” Quinn says pointlessly. I get the feeling it’s not me she’s talking about.

“I think he saved my life in the Earthery.”

“You were holding hands when they pulled you out,” Quinn tells me. I didn’t know that. Somehow it only makes me feel worse.

Juliette’s eyebrows knit together. “So you fucked him to say thanks?”

I hold my hand out to her. My head is pounding with a hangover. “I went to him to say thanks and then...”

“You fucked.”

I give Juliette a sharp stare. “Then we started arguing. At some point, a bottle of bourbon appeared and...”

“You fucked.”

“Felix apologized.”

Juliette scoffs. “While it’s a miracle that Felix apologized for anything, you should have accepted his apology and left, not thrown all your clothes off.”

“He took my clothes off,” I admit. “He was fully clothed, and I was completely naked.”

Juliette’s eyes widen.

“That sounds like typical Felix behavior,” Quinn points out. “He’s taking all the power.”

I take a deep breath. “He did. I felt so vulnerable and yet it felt like he was in a vulnerable position, too. It wasn’t like what it sounds like.”

“So what was it like?” she asks quietly, “because it sounds like he took advantage of you.”

“Do I have to go and murder him?” Juliette asserts.

I rub my head. “No. I wanted it. I can’t explain it. It wasn’t like he had power over me, but that I had to claim some of that power back and I did.”

“I don’t get it.” Juliette hurls her hands up into the air as though we’re in a middle of a national disaster.

I shrug my shoulders. “Neither do I, but I enjoyed it.”

“Oh Babe.” Juliette runs her hands over my hair, but I see the hint of a smirk. “What now? Are you going to do it again?”

“Before you answer,” Quinn pipes up. “May I remind you, Felix Barclay is a disgusting prick who fucked my fifteen-year-old sister causing her to kill herself. I love you, Rowena, but I don’t think I’ll be able to cope if you tell me that you’ve suddenly decided you’re in love with him.”

I snort. When I raise my head back up, I feel tears of laughter falling down my face. “Sorry for laughing, but that’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard.” I put my hand on Quinn’s. “I promise this is not a Hallmark movie waiting to

happen. I still can't stand the guy. I'd forgotten about Jenny in the moment of bourbon and possible brain damage from the Earthery. Can we chalk this up to a moment of complete insanity and move on? I promise I would never do anything to hurt you."

She gives me a smile. "I just want to make sure you're okay."

"I am." I lean in to hug her. "I'm embarrassed and more than a little sore, but I'm good."

Across the table Juliette snorts. "I bet you are. Okay, moment of truth. We all know he's an asshole, and it was a one-time thing and it's going to be never talked about again after this morning, but I gotta know, babe. Was he any good?"

I push the eggs to one side and press my forehead down to the table as I feel my cheeks flame. "It was really good."

"Really good?"

I look up through the hair that's escaped my headband. "I actually said the f word when I came." I feel the mortification in my very soul as I admit to Juliette and Quinn the one thing that I didn't want to admit to myself. I've been going over all the reasons that it was awful and there were way too many to count, that I didn't give myself a chance to think about the one reason it wasn't awful. Because it felt amazing. It felt natural and above anything else. For the first time in my life, sex felt perfectly normal.

"Dade was amazing too." Quinn finally says. "And that's turned into a nightmare. What is it with us? Why can't we just find nice guys and be normal without all the drama?"

"It's not possible," I reply. "Why do you think I've kept away from men for so long? Tell us what's happening with

you two. We thought you hated him again.”

“He kidnapped me,” she sighs, “and we tried to escape from Hell and...”

“Hold up.” Juliette puts her hand out. “He kidnapped you? Jeez, I really do feel like the boring one today.”

“Yeah, well we almost got caught by demons. Dade flew me back to my room and we did it.”

“Was it awful?” I ask. “You’ve had a face like a slapped bottom since you got here. It’s the only thing that made me able to tell you by sob story. Sorry.”

She gives me a wry smile. “It was perfect and amazing and oh, exactly how I thought it would be, but that’s not the problem.” She picks up a muffin and begins to pull out the raisins. “Someone saw us where we shouldn’t be. Or should I say they saw Dade. They issued an alert for him. I think he’s going to be thrown out of the games.”

“But they didn’t see you?” I question.

Quinn shrugs. “I guess not. The alert was only for Dade. He asked me to get back with Remy to throw suspicion away from me.”

I scrunch up my nose. “That’s a shitty thing to ask you to do. You’re not going to do it, right?”

“Remy told me that he didn’t care if I was out of the games or not when he thought I was Candice,” she admits. “My getting thrown out is just collateral damage to him.”

I blow out a long breath. “I knew he was an asshole.”

Juliette nods. “Yeah. Me too. So, what are you going to do?”

“I can’t win,” Quinn says emphatically. “Either I get back with Remy and lead him on, which makes me a deplorable ass, or I don’t and then more than likely end up wherever Dade is being tortured for a billion years.”

There’s a long silence before Juliette breaks it. “Fuck Remy!”

Quinn snorts sadly. “After last night, that’s the very last thing I want to do.”

NOT A MONSTER

QUINN

I barely ate any of the muffins at breakfast, but that doesn't stop the little I did eat from churning in my stomach. Even before I slept with Dade, I was ready to throw in the towel with Remy. Dade just hammered in the point that Remy and I aren't meant to be together.

And oh, how he hammered in that point.

My Hell Cell beeps, and for a second my treacherous heart hopes its Dade. It isn't. It's a group message from Noémi telling all the contestants to head down to the Atrium for yet another meeting.

I look at my reflection in the mirror. My face is red and splotchy, my eyes still teary. I splash water on my face, trying to regain composure. Dade asked me for two favors before he left this morning: to draw a map of the lower floor from memory and to pretend to date Remy. I'm about to break both promises. I can't recall the map well, and I can't summon any interest in pretending to be with Remy, even if it's just for show. I'm not willing to endure that, not even to avoid torture. Just the idea of faking a relationship with Remy feels like its own kind of torture. I've made up my mind. I'll go downstairs and confess to Noémi that I was with Dade in the lower level

last night. And if that doesn't help the situation, I'm determined to find Dade and help him escape.

I open my door and startle as I come face to face with Remy. His arm is up as though he's just about to knock.

"Hey. Sorry, Remy, but I have to go somewhere," I say, pushing past him. "There's a meeting in the atrium."

"I'll come with you," he says, following me towards the stairs. "Did you hear about what happened to Dade?"

I pause. "I saw the alert," I say as nonchalantly as possible. "Why? What did you hear?"

"I saw those two big guys of Noémi's dragging him into the elevator that takes them down into the demon floor," Remy explains. "I wonder what he did?"

My heart begins to pound. "When did you see them take him?"

He shrugs. "A few hours ago. Why?"

If he's been taken to the lower floor, there's nothing I can do. I can't get down without a key and he's the only non demon person I know with one except Twila and she's still MIA.

"Quinn." He takes my hand, spinning me to face him. After what he said in the Earthery. I can barely bear to look at him. "Can we get over what I said? I'm sorry. You know I am."

I look at Remy, torn by conflicting emotions. "Remy, I—" I begin, but he stops me, his finger gently pressing against my lips, silencing my words.

"I know, I know. I was an ass. I'm sorry. I should have stayed with you last night. I shouldn't have taken no for an

answer.” He steps towards me and kisses my lips, so delicately. As he does, all I can think of is Dade and the promise I made to him. The one I can’t keep.

Revulsion fills my senses and I pull back quickly. “I can’t be your girlfriend, Remy, not after what you said.”

His face falls slightly, but he recovers quickly. He takes a step back and puts his hands up. “I get it. I wouldn’t want to date me either, but I can’t let us finish like this.”

Growing irritation simmers within me. “It’s news to me that we had anything worth finishing, Remy,” I retort, my tone sharp. “We’ve had a handful of dates since descending to this level, and then you casually told Candice I was beneath your consideration.”

A flicker of hurt crosses his expression, and I find a twisted satisfaction in his reaction. “I suppose I earned that,” he concedes, his hand brushing his chin’s stubble. “But I don’t want things to fester between us. Even if we can’t date, can’t we at least be friends?”

I shake my head, resolute. “Friends don’t tell other people that they don’t care about them,” I remind him, sidestepping him as I begin descending the stairs. He keeps pace, matching my stride.

“It was a mistake, Quinn,” he insists, his urgency evident as he grasps my hand, forcing me to halt. “Let me make it right. I can’t bear the thought of you despising me.”

His contrition is palpable and though I’m irritated, I soften. “Alright, we can try being amiable to each other, but friends is pushing it. I’m still fucking angry with you.”

“It’s a start,” he says. “And maybe in the future, you’ll change your mind about dating me?”

“Remy...” I respond under my breath.

“Just think about it.”

“That’s just it, Remy. I don’t want to think about it. I just want to get through this...” I gesture to the meeting place. “Whatever this meeting is.”

Noémi appears distressed as we take our places on the sofas. I hear Dade’s name being whispered around, and my heart tightens, anxiously awaiting Noémi’s explanation.

“We finally figured out what ‘appened in ze Earthery,” Noémi announces, and I exhale in relief. It seems this meeting isn’t about Dade after all.

“It was Dade, wasn’t it?” someone accuses. “We all saw the alert. We know what a monster he is.”

A surge of panic courses through me as I glance toward the origin of the questions. It’s a guy I’ve never had a conversation with. One I didn’t know before coming down to Lust. I don’t even remember his name.

“He’s not a monster,” I blurt out, causing everyone to turn my way. “He didn’t do anything.”

Noémi calmly shakes her head. “Dade ‘as nothing to do with this. Zat was a different matter entirely.”

The guy turns his eyes from me to Noémi. Anger radiates from his features. “Really? So what’s this then?”

He presses a button on his Hell Cell and holds it up so everyone can see. My heart almost combusts when I see what it is he’s showing everyone. It’s the video Remy showed me of Dade killing Michael and Lucia.

“He murdered two people in the last circle,” someone else shouts out.

It feels like everything is falling apart. “That’s bullshit,” I shout, standing up. “It’s fake. Someone made that to frame him.”

“You would say that,” Candice sneers. “You’re his partner.”

Remy steps up to me and grips my hand in his. “She was his partner for the sake of the trials. She’s not sleeping with him and she has no reason to lie.”

Guilt crushes the breath from my lungs as Remy looks into my eyes. “She’s with me,” he says, “And I happen to believe that the footage is doctored too. Dade is innocent.”

I bite my lip. So many lies. So much deceit. He doesn’t believe that anymore than he believes that we are suddenly a couple, but he could have kept silent. I offer him a silent thank you.

Noémi takes the Hell Cell from the guy and waves her hand. “Eet ees most definitely fake. Dade ees being interrogated for an entirely different reason wheech I weel not elaborate on. I asked you all down ‘ere to let you know zat ze Earthery ees being fixed and weel be ready for ze third trial. Wheech brings me to ze most important announcement...”

“You said you know who did it,” Anthura interjects, her features contorted with displeasure. “If it wasn’t Dade, please enlighten us to who it was.”

Noémi’s lips pull tight. “I deed not say I knew ‘oo deed eet. I only said I found out what ‘appened. Someone inside placed a magical charge beside one of ze pillars. When eet detonated, ze Earthery came down.”

My mind tries to take it in. “So someone *inside* the Earthery did this?”

Noémi nods. “Oui. Eet ‘ad to be someone inside, or someone ‘oo placed ze charge and left just before eet was detonated.”

I look around the group I’m sitting with. Every single person here is now a suspect.

Maggie raises her hand. “How do you know it wasn’t put there before we all went in?”

“We deed a sweep of ze Earthery before ze start of ze trial. Eet can only ‘ave been done from ze inside. We believe ze charge was magical and was taken from ze lower floor. Zere ees no ozzer possibility.”

“But none of us have access to the lower floor?” Maggie says. Rowena and Juliette both turn their eyes to me. There is a person who has access to the lower level and currently the demons have him.

“We are doing everyzing we can to find out ‘oo deed zis and ‘ow zey got down to ze lower level. Ze good news ees zat Ze Earthery weel be fixed soon.”

Remy is still holding my hand. It feels alien to me, but I don’t let go. It’s the only thing grounding me.

“And now for ze tres exciting news. I ‘ave made ze decision to move ze ball to tomorrow.” Her black and pink curls bounce as she flings her hands into the air... “We weel ‘old ze most magical, magnificent ball ‘Ell as ever seen.”

Behind me, the hundred or so spectators cheer, but those of us in the competition remain silent. My pulse pounds in my ears. The ball can’t be tomorrow! It’s the last trial and my last chance to get me and Dade out of here. I panic as Anthura races out, quickly followed by other contestants. All I hear is

mentions of Dade under their breaths. They've already convicted him in their minds.

I pull my hand roughly from Remy's. "I need to talk to Noémi." My legs are shaky, but my resolve is strong as I make my way over to her. I'm almost there when Rowena and Juliette block my path. Both of them have determined looks on their faces.

"We know what you're about to do." Rowena whispers.

"Don't do it, Babe," Juliette adds. "You won't be helping him. Everyone thinks he destroyed the Earthery. Even Noémi. Why do you think she put an alert out for him? She obviously thinks he did it."

Frustration rips through me. "He didn't do it. I know he didn't. He was with me when the Earthery came down. He shielded me with his wings. There is no way he would do that. He wants out of this place as much as the rest of us."

A look passes between them. "Are you sure he..."

"No!" I say abruptly. "I saw the shock on his face. He wasn't expecting it. He didn't do this."

Rowena pulls me off to one side. "Fine. If you say he didn't do it, then he didn't do it. Felix didn't do it, Moloch didn't do it and Orlin didn't do it either." She gestures to Juliette and herself. "The three of us were with them when the Earthery came down."

Juliette swallows. "What we're saying is, don't get yourself into this mess. Whatever is going to happen to Dade is going to happen no matter what you do. He wouldn't want it happening to you, too."

"I saw you holding hands with Remy at the meeting," Rowena says. "I think that's the only reason Noémi didn't

question you.”

Anger flares within me. I guess I’m the only one who doesn’t want me dating Remy. I feel ambushed. “He grabbed my hand,” I point out. “I didn’t get a say in the matter.”

Juliette puts her hand on my shoulder. “And in doing that, he saved you a lot of nasty questions. Lie low. Be seen out and about with Remy. I know you don’t want to date him anymore. No one expects you to fuck the guy. Once this all dies down and they catch whoever destroyed the Earthery, we’ll help you figure out what to do about Dade. I’m pretty sure they’ll have bigger fish to fry with the capture of the culprit.”

“All that sounds great if it wasn’t for the fact that the ball is tomorrow and I still don’t know where Dade is.” My breathing becomes ragged. “I don’t have a partner and I don’t know how I’m supposed to do this.

Rowena’s eyes dart behind me and she stiffens. She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek. “Look, I gotta go finish our dresses. Come to the ball with me and Juliette.” With that, she disappears through the door to the platform. Seconds later, Felix follows through the same door.

ENTERING THE DEMONS' DEN

Pretend to be with Remy.

Keep dating Remy.

Remy is your only chance.

My mind is whirling with all the advice I've been given as I take the platform back up to my room. I've barely walked through the back door when there's a knock on the front door. I open it to find Remy. "Speak of the devil!" I sigh, opening the door for him to come in.

He surveys the room. "You were talking about me? With whom?" He pauses, then adds, "Never mind. I'm glad you were talking about me. It means you were thinking about me."

His twinkle is back, and he's looking as gorgeous as ever, but it's not enough. It's not nearly enough. I can't be someone I'm not and Remy can't be Dade. I'm going against every piece of advice I've been given, but suddenly everything is clear.

"I'm grateful for what you did down there, but I can't be your girlfriend, Remy." I turn away from him. "I have thought about it, but I can't keep pretending."

His expression falters slightly. "No one is asking you to pretend to be anything."

“That’s just it. You are. You want to be friends to see where this will lead, but it won’t lead anywhere. It can’t lead anywhere because...” I pause and my heart squeezes in my chest. “I’m in love with Dade.”

Remy’s expression tightens, his features growing stony.

It might be my death sentence, admitting that, but my heart is pounding in a way that’s telling me I’ve made the right decision. “When you and I dated in Purgatory, you made me feel something I’d never felt before. No one ever wanted me, not least someone as utterly gorgeous and popular as you. You made me feel special. As though I was someone. But it’s become very apparent to me that you don’t want me.”

“I’ve always wanted you,” Remy responds, his voice steady. His eyes meet mine, holding a mixture of intensity and sincerity. “Why else do you think I’m standing here?”

“You need someone by your side for appearances, whether it’s for these trials or to satisfy your ego. Candice wouldn’t fit the role because she possesses something I’ve always lacked: self-assurance. I, on the other hand, was an easy choice because I carried loneliness and desperation, having grown up without parents, money, or any real support. Your charm offered me an escape, and my vulnerability fed into your need for dominance. I was a convenience to you.” I take a step closer to him, searching his eyes for any sign of understanding. “Until it wasn’t. We both saw what we wanted, but it’s not enough for either of us.”

He brings a hand to his forehead, looking conflicted. “I’m sorry you feel this way, but Dade isn’t here anymore. You heard Noémi. He’s being interrogated. They’ll probably convict him for whatever he’s done. I defended him only for your sake, but I honestly think he did kill Michael and Lucia.”

I open the door. “I know you do. Goodbye Remy.”

He steps through and turns away without looking back.

There’s a flicker of sadness, but mostly it’s just relief I feel as I rush through my room to my back door. Relief and a thrill of excitement that for the first time I’m going to listen to my own heart and not be swayed by other people’s advice. I hop onto the platform and steel myself for the ride to the top floor. I finally know what to do. I’m going right to the dragon’s den.

I slam my foot on the stop button, one floor up, as an idea comes to me. Jumping off, I run round the balcony until I get to the right door.

My heart is in my mouth as I pound on it.

Felix looks like total shit as he opens his door. He’s got black circles under his eyes and his clothes are rumpled as though he slept in them. Five o’clock shadow coats his chin. “What the fuck do you want, Snowflake?”

“I need your help.”

He gives me a look of pure contempt. “What makes you think I...”

“Shut it, Barclay,” I snap at him. It’s the longest of long shots, but I’m willing to bet Rowena isn’t the only one troubled by what they did together. If I know Felix and I’m pretty sure I’ve got a read on the asshole now, he’ll have been sitting in his room, trying to unpick his life choices to match it up with his feelings. I’m hoping Rowena has completely broken him. I’m counting on it, because now that I’m talking to him, I realize I can’t do this without him. “You’ve done nothing for anyone since coming to Hell. You flounce around pretending you’re better than everyone else, but look at the

state of you. Not even Anthura would sit near you at the meeting today.”

He narrows his one eye in stony anger and opens his mouth as though he’s going to chew me out. I hold my hand up to stop him before he even starts. “I think you’re a mess right now. I actually think you’ve always been a fucked up mess, but now I think you’re only just beginning to notice it yourself.”

“Jesus, fucking Christ.” He gives me a cold, hard stare. “Has Rowena put you up to this? The bitch wanted it, alright.”

I know I’m probably pushing my luck to stretching point, but I need him and he’s not the type to respond to polite requests.

“I think you wanted it, Felix. I think you want Rowena so badly, but years of prejudice make it so you are too afraid to admit it to anyone. I saw how you followed her out of the meeting earlier. Let me guess. You wanted to talk to her, but bailed at the last second.”

He’s seething. I can see it in his eye, but beyond that I can see that I’ve hit a nerve. I just hope it’s the right one.

“You don’t know jack shit about me. Why don’t you just fuck right off?”

“I can’t. There’s something I need and I can’t get it without you.”

He grabs the door to slam it in my face.

“I need to get into Anthura’s room to steal something.”

The door stops moving. He opens it again. “You want me to get you into Anthura’s room? Why?” His anger has cooled

slightly and he's replaced it with a look of curiosity. "And for that matter, why the fuck should I?"

"What I want isn't your business, but I think you know why you should. Anthura hasn't looked at you since..." I nod to the mess of his face. "She wouldn't sit near you at the meeting. She wouldn't even look at you."

He pulls back into his room and I think I've lost him, but he returns a few seconds later with his shoes on.

"Fucking bitch."

I have no idea if he's referring to me or Anthura, but I take the win. Now I just need to figure how to use him to get into Anthura's apartment.

I focus on him to stop the familiar feeling of queasiness as we travel up. "Rowena is the only woman that's not cringed at the sight of you, isn't she?"

"Shut the fuck up before I change my mind, Snowflake."

I smirk. "Rowena told me once that telling young girls that boys like them if they pull on their pigtails is a way of instilling abuse as love."

Felix turns to me. Up close, the damage to his face is shocking, but it's already better than it was when he was in hospital. Anger is rolling off him in waves. If I'm not careful with my mouth, he's going to push me off the platform.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

I shrug as we reach the top floor and the entrance to Anthura's penthouse suite.

"Just don't keep metaphorically pulling on Rowena's pigtails because she's way too smart for that."

He gapes at me as though he has no clue what I mean.

“Don’t hurt her because you don’t know how to love. Figure your shit out yourself and don’t expect her to do it for you.”

He lets out a huff, then turns to the door. “Wanna use that mouth of yours to tell me what you want me to do right now?”

Fuck, right! “Knock on the door and get Anthura away from her apartment.”

He shakes his head, but does as I ask. I sprint around the balcony, disappearing from view, and press myself against the wall. My heart threatens to burst out of my chest, and the floor seems to sway beneath me. Placing my palms against the wall, I take deep breaths in an attempt to quell the vertigo that’s washing over me.

I hear the click of a door opening. “Felix,” Anthura drawls. “I’m surprised to see you out of your room.”

“I won’t be hidden away, Anthura,” he snaps. “Just because you can’t stand the sight of me doesn’t mean others can’t.”

Shit. I don’t want to stand here listening to them brawling. I cross my fingers.

“Darling. Who says I can’t stand the sight of you? I had to leave the meeting quickly because there was something I had to do up here.”

“So prove it.”

There’s a long pause before she makes a low strained sound. “What do you want me to do, Felix? I’m too busy to be playing games.”

I hear Felix's sigh from where I'm standing. He and Anthura really do belong together. Despite what I said to him, I doubt Felix has the capacity to dig deep enough into his heart to become worthy of Rowena.

"Come down to my room. I have something to show you."

"I just told you," she snaps. "I'm busy."

"Damn it, Anthura," he says, frustration evident in his tone. "Stop bullshitting me. I need you right now."

There's wheedling in his voice, but I can hear the lie beneath it. I just hope Anthura doesn't.

"Fine." She sighs. "Come on then. I don't have all day."

There's the sound of a door banging shut, then silence. My heart bottoms out as I realize they've both gone into her apartment and not down on the platform. I rush around the balcony to confirm what I already know. Damn Felix for screwing with me and damn me for thinking I could get into his brain.

The platform has already been called down, leaving me with no choice but to loiter outside Anthura's room, waiting for it to return. Gritting my teeth, I slam my foot down on the platform button and cross my arms.

I lean back on Anthura's door but seconds later find myself sprawled on my ass in her apartment.

Looking up, I realize the door hadn't been securely closed.

Felix intentionally left it ajar.

I spring to my feet noiselessly and survey the open-plan area. Although I can't spot them, the unmistakable murmur of voices reaches me from her bedroom.

Way to go Felix!

I'm on edge as I creep further into the room. The place stinks of Anthura's perfume. Any second Anthura could open the bedroom door and find me sneaking through her stuff. Silently, I open the drawers in her kitchen. Each one is filled with bottles of Dragonfire Whisky and very little else.

I shake my head in disbelief as Anthura's laughter mingles with an unmistakable lustful groan. I only hope Felix can keep it up as long as I need to find the marble key to the elevator that I know she owns.

Ignoring the very fake cries of passion, I delve into the credenza at the side of the living area. The top drawer is full of paperwork. I push it to the side quickly and rummage around in the back of the drawer. The marble isn't there, but as I pull back my hand, the top layers of paper fall to the floor.

Shit!

The sound of a bed banging against the wall spurs me on. Swiftly, I snatch the papers and begin stuffing them into the drawer, but a glint of red catches my eye. Setting aside the top two papers, my heart leaps to my throat as I discover a handwritten letter. Addressed to Rowena in red ink, its contents are utterly repugnant. Yet, it's not the words that churn my stomach. It's the exact same style as the letters that were sent to me in Purgatory. My heart almost stops as I come to the only possible conclusion. It was Anthura writing them the whole time.

"Oh Felix!" The sounds of Anthura's fake orgasm comes in the version of a series of long screams.

Quickly, I grab all the papers and shove them in my pocket. As the last scream pierces my ears, I frantically open

the other drawer. A sigh of relief escapes me as the blue marble shaped key rolls into sight. I seize it and bolt out of the apartment, gently closing the door after me. Ignoring the wait for the platform, I sprint down the stairs, almost exhausting myself in the process. Finally reaching my room, I collapse onto my bed, gasping for breath.

**PSEUDO-PSYCHIATRY
BULLSHIT**

FELIX

My ears are practically bleeding from Anthura's screams. It used to turn me on. Bitches that come loudly used to make me feel like a man. Not that I ever really cared about whether they came or not. Certainly, I never gave a shit about Anthura's pleasure. She's my ticket out of this hellhole and if I happen to get a good fuck out of it every now and again, then great. She doesn't have to enjoy it. Rowena didn't scream when she came. She let out a long sigh that sounded like she couldn't quite catch her breath before swearing. I've never heard her swear before.

I did that!

It was so much more real than the symphony orchestra of screaming that Anthura forces me to listen to. I pull away from her and grab my shirt.

"Where are you going?" she asks breathlessly. A lighter clicks then the air fills with the acrid stench of cigarette smoke.

"You know I can't stand you smoking. It stinks." I pull my shirt on and make to walk away but she wraps her claws around my upper thigh. "Felix," she purrs. "Don't go. You wanted me to prove something, and I did."

I pull away from her and turn to find her pouting. “You’re right. You did prove something to me.” No point telling her that she proved that fucking her is a miserable experience, one I don’t want to repeat. “I have to go.”

She exhales a puff of smoke in resignation. “Fine, but I’ll need you for this stupid ball Noémi is throwing. There’s no way I’m spending the entire night with fucking Moloch. You’ll be my partner.”

It’s a demand, not a request.

“Sure. Whatever.”

Snowflake has already gone by the time I open the bedroom door. Whatever it was that she was looking for, I hope it was worth it.

Stepping out onto the front balcony, I inhale deeply. Just above me, the tower’s circular window frames the sky, its ominous, swirling clouds mirroring my own mood. I walk down the curved stairs, taking my time walking round each balcony until I reach the next stairs. I’ve literally just busted my nut and yet I don’t feel sated. When I reach the eighth level and my door, I don’t stop. Snowflake’s words keep going round in my head after her ambush earlier. I’m not pulling on anyone’s pigtails. Fuck Snowflake and her pseudo-psychiatry bullshit and fuck Rowena too. I don’t like her. Not in the way Snowflake makes out. Hell, I don’t like the bitch at all. I fucked her as a mercy fuck and for no other reason. I was fucking drunk and my head was messed up and yeah, maybe I was a little curious. So what if I took her virginity? And so what if she’s the first woman I ever went down on? And so what if her orgasm was more real and genuine than anything I’ve ever experienced with the hundreds of women I’ve been with?

My anger and confusion reach a crescendo as I come to a stop outside her door. I don't even know why I stopped here. There's no way I'm going to knock. I'm not going to let her know that she's gotten into my head.

I clench my fists in silent frustration, the tension radiating through my body. The creak of a nearby door opening grabs my attention, and I quickly straighten up, only to see Juliette stepping out of the room next door.

Her eyes widen as they lock onto me, but her expression quickly transforms into a knowing smirk. "Well, well. Fancy seeing you here."

I grit my teeth, resisting the urge to snap at her. "I'm just on my way to the gym."

She tilts her head, eyeing the door adjacent to mine. "Funny how you managed to take a break right outside Rowena's door. Quite the coincidence, don't you think?" Her lips curl into a suggestive smile.

I gesture impatiently towards the staircase I've just descended. "It's hardly a coincidence that I'm at the bottom of the stairs, needing a breather."

She saunters over to me, her face full of mirth. "Here's what I think, lover boy. I think you were hoping for a secret tryst with my best friend, and now that you've been caught, you're scrambling for excuses. Maybe you should ask yourself why you feel the need to do that?"

My jaw locks as frustrated anger burns through me. "I'm not in the market for a mercy fuck from that freak," I mutter.

Her features darken as she comes closer. "I guess not. I can smell Anthura on you a mile off. You should stick to fucking

her. She's on the same level as you. You're both on par with an ant's ball sack."

I'm so angry because she's right. I should stick to fucking Anthura. It's not just anger flooding my veins like poison, but a strange kind of grief.

"Go fuck yourself, Juliette." I turn to leave and as I take the next set of stairs, I hear her call out. "Unlike you, Felix, I don't need to."

I reach the bottom and stalk across the lounge. My anger pauses when a group of hot women race after me and hold out autograph books and pens. They want my fucking autograph.

A blonde "accidentally" rubs her pert tits on me as I ask her name.

"Joanie," she whispers with a suggestive smile. This is what I'm talking about. This is who I used to be. People used to stop me and ask me for my autograph all the time when I was alive. Every woman I met wanted to fuck me and I did. A long hot line-up of pussy, ripe for the taking. After signing a few of their autograph books and a couple of their tits, a guy shoves through them with a book of his own.

"I'm your biggest fan, Felix Barclay."

I take the pen and book from his hand. "Name?"

"Simon. Just write to Simon, Love and Kisses, Felix."

I write out To Simon quickly and sign it. He looks a bit pissed off, but I'm not writing all that crap. Let him get his autographs from the others. The fucking weird couple who are practically shagging each other all the fucking time would probably love to write a sappy essay in his book.

“Thanks,” he says with a wink. “You know, if I’d have known you were into guys, I’d have loved to get in on that action.”

I thrust his book back at him and bite back the urge to punch his lights out. “She’s a fucking girl. I’m not into dudes.” I push past him and the women and slam my hand on the elevator call button.

When I get to the gym, I turn on the running machine, inclining it as far as it will go. I want to sweat. I want to feel pain. I want to feel anything other than what I currently do.

I pound away on the treadmill, stretching my lungs to the limit with each breath and burning my muscles. Sweat is dripping down my face, but I don’t stop. The irony is, this isn’t going to make me fitter at all. I’m already dead and I look and feel better than I have in years. Physically, I’m in the best shape I can be, so I don’t know what it is that’s making me feel so shit.

My breathing hitches up a notch when I see Rowena walk by through the gym window. She turns slightly and I see that it’s not her, just someone who looks a bit like her. Except now that I look closer, she doesn’t look like Rowena. Maybe she has blonde curls, but they don’t fall in the same way. Her body doesn’t move with the same confident gait.

Fuck! Frustration courses through me, and I slam my hand onto the stop button, abruptly halting the treadmill. Snatching a towel, I wipe the sweat from my face, trying to quell the fucking stress that seems to take up every part of my being these days.

Stress that only one thing cut through and it’s the one thing I have no intention of doing ever again. I will never, under any circumstances, sleep with Rowena Bagshot ever again!

Now I just need my brain, dick and emotions to agree with the sentiment.

HATEFUL LETTERS

My heart pounds as I look through the papers in disbelief. She's got a full collection of hateful letters to Rowena all written on the same thick paper that mine were written on. I should have guessed. She wrote these letters because of jealousy. Felix tries to hide that he's got feelings for Rowena, but Anthura would be blind not to see that there's something going on. Felix isn't that great an actor. And in Purgatory, she didn't make it a secret how much she hated me. She wrote these letters framing Dade for it. My mouth fills with bile as I realize she probably killed Michael and Lucia, too. She's a demon. She used Hell magic to fake that video, then she sent it to Felix who forwarded it to Remy. It all makes sense.

I think back to my first day in Hell where Michael asked Anthura lots of inappropriate questions. She thought he was disgusting. Granted, we all did, but she called him on it. Right there in front of all of us, she called him a disgusting prick. I lay back on my bed and close my eyes. Every single person she hated has either been killed or framed or, in other ways, tortured. She burned my wrists down to the bone when I was fifteen minutes late to her room and who can forget the time she laughed while forcing me to eat poisoned leaves that destroyed me from the inside out.

Lucia is the only exception, but if she was with Michael down in the depths of the swimming pool, she was probably just collateral damage. The pieces of this twisted puzzle have come together.

She's a fucking demon. How many times have I been told to never trust demons? Twila told me. Juliette and Rowena told me. Even Noémi told me and she is a demon.

I need to find Dade and then I need to tell Noémi what's been going on. Anthura has been playing us all and if I don't stop her, who knows who she'll hurt next?

Shit! It's Rowena.

I sit up, sending the letters scattering to the ground. Rowena will be next. If Felix decides that he's going to stop being an asshole for one second at the ball tomorrow and tell Rowena that he actually likes her, Anthura won't let it lie.

Clutching the marble tightly in my hand, I rush down five flights of stairs and pound on Rowena's door. As she opens it, I find her draped in layers of fabric, scissors gripped in her hand.

"I haven't finished yet, but your dress will be spectac—" Her words falter as her expression shifts. "What's wrong?"

"Stay in this room, no matter what. Don't answer the door and don't even glance at your portal."

Her eyes widen in alarm. "You're scaring me."

I pull her into a hug, causing the swathes of fabric around her to cascade to the floor. "I'm sorry. I'll tell you everything when I get back. If I don't get back by the time the ball starts tomorrow, tell Noémi to go into my room and look at the letters on my bed."

“Letters?” She calls after me, but I’m already sprinting away. The less she knows, the safer she’ll be. Anthura has no reason to hurt her tonight as long as Felix stays away, but if Rowena dances with him, I can’t see her being able to contain her anger.

Down in the atrium, the demons are already putting up decorations for the ball.

Opulent fabric drapes from the ceiling, flowing in rich hues of deep blush and velvety crimson. They shimmer with an eerie iridescence, reflecting the soft, flickering light that bathes the atrium. Ethereal lanterns sway intermittently, casting a gentle, pink glow across the fabric’s surface.

Massive banners hang from the walls, depicting all the contestants of the Inferno Games. With a jolt, I notice that Dade’s image isn’t there. They’ve already decided he’s out of the games. I race past the demon workers and jump into the first available elevator. A heavy weight pulls on my stomach, but it doesn’t eclipse the pounding of my heart as the elevator slowly lowers past the entertainment level.

The last time I was down here, I nearly got caught and the time before that I was almost killed. I know it’s madness, risking myself yet again, but Dade is down here somewhere. I need to get him out and then tomorrow we can all try to escape.

My breath catches in my throat as the elevator doors part, revealing the imposing figures of two massive demons stationed as guards at the entrance. Panic grips me, and I’m momentarily frozen in place, my heart pounding wildly. Swiftly, I jab the button to reverse my descent, willing the doors to close and remove me from their line of sight. As the doors shut, obscuring the view of Asmodée and Arch, a heavy

exhale of relief escapes me. I've not been caught, but if they are guarding the elevator doors, my chances of finding Dade are non-existent. Frustration and exhaustion overwhelm me as I make my way back up to Rowena's room. I knock on her door again. "Rowena. It's me."

She opens the door gingerly. Fear is etched along every line. "Quinn, what's going on?"

I step inside, my heart racing. "Can I sleep in with you tonight?"

"Of course," Rowena replies, her voice softening as she lets me in. The room is scattered with fabrics and mannequins dressed in various colors.

"Never mind the mess," she mutters, brushing glittery fabric aside. "I was hoping to get these finished tonight."

I take a deep breath. "Anthura sent those letters to us. I think she killed Michael and Lucia, too."

Rowena's mouth drops open in shock as she collapses onto the bed next to me. "How do you know?"

I hastily recount my discovery, the words tumbling out. "I was in her room earlier and found the letters."

She shoots me a skeptical look. "How did you get into her room?"

I pause, weighing my words. She doesn't need to know Felix helped me. "It doesn't matter. I needed to get the marble to access the lower level to break Dade out."

"Quinn. Maybe it's time to let Dade go?" she says softly. "He's made his decision. You have to think about you and Jenny. Maybe pretending to be into Remy won't be so bad. It will take the heat from you for the time being."

“There isn’t any more time and I’m sick of pretending.” I huff out. “The ball is tomorrow and if it’s anything like the last trial in Purgatory, those of us that get through will be sent down to the third circle without ceremony.” I take a deep breath. “I can’t let him go, Ro. I love him.”

Rowena’s eyes widen, her expression softening as she processes my words.

“I tried to find him,” I continue quickly, wanting to get it all out. I gesture with my hands, emphasizing my urgency. “That’s where I was just now.”

“So what happened? You were only gone for five minutes.” She raises an eyebrow inquisitively.

“Noémi’s goons were at the elevator doors,” I explain, my voice tense.

She leans forward, concern evident on her face. “They saw you?”

“No,” I shake my head. “They were facing the other way. It’s weird. It’s almost as though they were watching for people escaping the lower level rather than trying to get in.”

She leans back, processing this information. “So, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I need to go to the ball in the hope that Noémi will give me a score without my Dade but I think Asmodée and Arch will be there. They guard Noémi like hawks. If they are, I’ll have to sneak out before the points are awarded and find Dade. Then we’ll all have to tell Noémi what’s going on. That brings me on to another thing.” I look up at her. “I think Anthura might hurt you if Felix tries dancing with you.”

Rowena snorts. “Believe me, that’s not going to happen.”

“I’m not so sure. I don’t trust Anthura as far as I can throw her. If I do manage to get to the lower level tomorrow, I want you to stick to Juliette like glue. Don’t let Felix or Anthura split the two of you up.”

Her face turns ashen. “You think Felix is in on this?”

“Honestly, no, but he might be. Just stick with Juliette.” I pull out my Hell Cell. “I’ll call her now and get her to come over here. I’ll feel safer with both of you here.

“Don’t bother,” Rowena says as she folds the fabric into a neat pile. “She’s been out pretty much every night since we got here. She’s still fucking Orlin and pretending she isn’t.”

I scrunch up my nose. “Do you really think she is?”

Rowena shrugs. “I honestly don’t know, but she’s up to something. Come on, try your dress on. It’s pretty much finished, but seeing as you are here, I can see how well it fits.”

I don’t want to be playing dress up with Dade stuck downstairs, but I’m at a loss.

Tomorrow, this is all going to end one way or another. I may as well be dressed spectacularly when it does.

INFERNAL NIT PICKING

“**D**arling. Try this one on. It’s specially made.”

I wave off Anthura and her infernal nitpicking. “I already have a suit. I don’t need another one.”

She’s been at my side needling me for hours about how everything needs to be perfect.

“Just try it on for me,” she purrs in my ear. “We have to look better than anyone else at the ball and you need all the help you can get with your face looking like...” She pauses and idly waves her hand at me, “...that.”

“Damn it Anthura.” I gnash my teeth together, angry at how fucking pathetic I feel in her presence. I despise everything about her and yet I know she’s the only one that’s going to get me through this.

“You think that bitch Noémi won’t be giving out points for how we dress?”

“I’m going to be shackled to Rowena, so what either of us wears won’t mean a fucking thing if she turns up in one of her flowery monstrosities.” I ignore the jolt the prospect gives me.

“Fuck that shit,” she says, holding out the suit to me and giving me a sinister grin. “You’ll be with me. When Noémi

sees how powerful we are together, she won't be able to keep points from us."

"Look at my face, Anthura."

She puts her eyes anywhere except the dent where part of my skull used to be. It's healing insanely quickly, but there's no way half my skull is going to grow back in one day.

"Look at me!" I demand, then wince as I remember those are the words Rowena used on me before I...

Damn, she tasted so good.

"I've got a plan for that," Anthura mutters. "I've ordered the most wonderful headdresses for us. No one will see the top half of your head."

She looks away quickly, probably to hide the repulsion on her face.

I snatch the suit from her hands, irritation flooding through me. "Fine. I'll try it on, but I don't see how this is going to make us look any better than anyone else. Even reprobates like Dade Angelis can pick this stuff up in the shops."

She waves away my concern. "Noémi has taken care of Dade, remember? Anyway, you don't need to worry about him or anyone else. I've reserved every available salon on the entertainment level and purchased every suit and dress from all the clothing stores. You and I are going to be pampered beyond belief. And when the others are scrambling to find something to wear, they'll all discover they're out of luck."

Once again, I'm reminded of why I put up with her. Even out of the leadership team for the games, she still holds some sway amongst the other demons. "You're a conniving cunt, Anthura."

“Yes I am,” she agrees, stepping up to me and baring her pointed teeth, “but luckily for you, I’m your conniving cunt.” She reaches down and grabs my balls roughly through my underwear. “Take em off.”

The tension is boiling away under my skin, but a quickie with Anthura isn’t going to scratch this particular itch. I grab her hand and pull it away.

“I tell you what? I’ll try this suit on alone and surprise you with how good it looks on me at the ball.”

“Alright,” she demurs with a sigh, before brightening up. “As long as you let me take it off you after?”

“Looking forward to it,” I lie, “but now I think I’ll go and hit the gym. Need to get myself looking my best for the ball, eh?”

I don’t know if she believes me and really I don’t give a fuck. I just need her off my back so I can breathe. I put my own clothes back on and pull a hat over my head to cover my face.

It doesn’t matter if Anthura has procured the best tailor in all of Hell, nothing twins with crushed skull and if Noémi is awarding points for beauty, I’m out.

I leave her penthouse and call the platform. As I descend, I bristle when I pass room twenty-four but the door remains shut.

I pass Noémi’s body guards who’re walking up the stairs and continue down to the ground floor.

The atrium looks like a flamingo threw up in it with the sheer amount of pink. The area is teeming with demons, setting the stage for tonight’s ball. Noémi has gone all out.

Ignoring the tight feeling, I lower my hat, covering my face and sprint through the atrium and step into the elevator, descending to the entertainment floor. It's just as vibrant and bustling with pink, though most of the commotion is concentrated around the entrance to the Earthery.

Only days ago, the whole thing came crashing to the ground, but now no one would be able to tell. Gold swathes of fabric are being erected by the entrance and, for some reason, there's a large red windmill next to the entrance.

"Zat's not straight," Noémi instructs a demon standing on a ladder with a handful of gold fabric. "Tonight 'as to be perfect. I want zem all to witness my triumph surrounded by ze very best decorations!"

The demon grimaces, but pulls the fabric tighter, straightening it up.

I stick to the shadows, avoiding any chance of Noémi spotting me. "Ades and ees stupid girlfriend won't know what 'it eem tonight."

I rush past her to the gym, which is mercifully empty at this time in the morning. I pound out my frustration on the treadmill, which is marginally better than pounding it out with Anthura. There's a tornado of emotions running riot through my body. I hit the incline and keep running. I barely used to go to the gym when I was alive, but here, it's my only refuge and I need to feel the burn of my muscles. I need to feel something other than the unrelenting void that nothing else can fill. Once upon a time, I thrived off the thrill of money and power, but since dying, both of those things have been ripped away from me. Fucking Anthura only gives me the illusion of power and that's not been much of a thrill from the very start. I can't help but cast my mind back to my one drunken night with Rowena.

The moment it sneaks back in, a sense of revulsion overwhelms me, yet beneath that, there lingers the sheer exhilaration of it. She didn't look at my face in disgust the way Anthura does. She desired me. Everyone has always desired me, but with Rowena it was different. She didn't give a shit that my face looked like shit. She flipped that shit round and demanded I look at her. That I taste her. It's a taste I can't forget no matter how much I want to.

I jab my finger back on the incline button and put the treadmill to full tilt before pushing the treadmill to top speed. My entire body screams in pain as I push it to the limit, but even though I try to exercise Rowena from my thoughts, I know I'm never going to be able to exorcise her from them.

HOLY HELL ROYALTY

“Will you stop pacing the room and get dressed?” Juliette says, flexing her body in front of my full-length mirror, showing off the pink corset top and matching frilly panties.

It’s easy for her to say. She’s the only one in the whole games that has full points except for Orlin, and she’s not going to have to dance with someone she accidentally, drunkenly lost her virginity to.

I know I’m going to have to see him tonight. He’s still my partner in the games, which means I’ll probably have to dance with him to satisfy Noémi’s weird perversions. I don’t know how to feel about it. On one hand, he’s still Felix Barclay and maybe I crushed through a massive barrier of his. It’s going to take more than one drunken sex session to make him into something resembling a decent human being. I’m not naïve enough to think that I magically changed his entire personality in one night. On the other hand, I never in my whole life felt anything remotely resembling what I felt the other night.

“You’re supposed to wear the skirt with that,” I snap at Juliette, taking all my frustration with Felix out on the one person I know I have no doubts about. I hold out her matching

pink skirt and give her a smile to soften my tone. “It has twelve layers of tulle and took me forever to sew together.”

She pulls a face. “I don’t remember Christina Aguilera wearing a skirt like this,” she says with a pout, holding it up to her.

I let out a frustrated sigh. “The ball is themed on the actual Moulin Rouge circa Noémi’s time, not some movie. That’s a can can skirt.”

“Can can I not wear it?” she quips. “I wanna show off my legs, and this corset top is amazing. I honestly don’t think I need the skirt.”

“It has pockets!” I gripe.

“Pockets!” Quinn inhales, grabbing her green skirt from where I’ve laid it out on the bed. “Great! I need somewhere to hide this.” She holds up a long sharp dagger, a determined expression on her face.

“Do you really think you’ll be able to find him?” I ask, taking the dagger by the tip of my fingers and laying it out of harm’s way away from the clothes. My mind is filled with some scumbag when Quinn is planning on doing something so outrageous, I can only look at her I awe. I’m fretting about one or two dances and she’s going to be putting her entire existence at risk for her man.

“I have to.” She bites her lip and I know she’s not as confident as she’s trying to make herself out to be. “I’m not leaving this circle without him and if Noémi was telling us the truth about this being the final trial, I have approximately...” She picks up her portal and looks at it, “six hours to find Dade.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing. babe,” Juliette says, swishing her skirt around. The layers of tulle float like a pale pink cloud beneath the dark crimson of the outer skirt.

“Not in the slightest,” Quinn admits.

I sigh as I pull on my own skirt. “That makes two of us.”

“Maybe you won’t have to dance with Felix for long tonight,” Juliette says, sitting next to me. “Come on. Get dressed and I’ll do your make-up. I’m going to make us all look amazing tonight. With your dresses and my make-up skills, no one will be able to keep their eyes off us.”

“I wish Twila was here,” I say as Juliette squints at me, a full palette of make-up in her hand. “She knew how to do make-up.”

Juliette scrunches her nose. “If you want to look like an extra from Night of the Living Dead.”

“She did those amazing eye flicks!” I say, miming flicking up eye liner.

“I can do flicks. She’s not the only one who knows how to make herself gorgeous. Has anyone heard from her, anyway? She’s not answered a single message I’ve sent her.”

“Something’s going on,” Quinn says ominously. “I’ve tried calling her. I’ve messaged her. She’s not even seeing her messages.” She’s quiet for a second and then, “Do you think Anthura has something to do with her disappearance?”

Juliette snorts as she applies what feels like the third coat of make-up to my skin. “I get that you think she’s going to murder Rowena in a fit of jealousy at the ball tonight, but I can’t see her getting one over on Twila. She’d have to go through Hades, and have you seen the size of that demon?”

From my periphery, I see Quinn lay back on the bed, her hands underneath her head. “But what if she did? I know you both think I’m crazy, but I did find those letters in her room. She was obviously planning to send them to Rowena like she sent them to me.”

“But she didn’t.” Juliette points out. “We’ve been here a while now and she’s only managed to send one of them. If she had a great stack, why only post one?”

Quinn sighs. “I don’t know. Maybe she’s too busy fucking Felix and forgot?”

“Damn Ro!” Juliette complains. “You just jumped. You’ve now got a line of black eyeliner right down your face. I’ll have to start again.”

“Sorry.”

She starts wiping the layers of make-up from my face as I try to breathe. I shouldn’t be affected by the thoughts of Anthura and Felix together. It’s not like they’ve not been together since we got here. The other night was a one-time only event. A mistake with an asshole that I really thought I was too sensible to make. One that I have no intention of repeating.

Hours later, after two meals delivered to the room and multiple attempts at make-up, the three of us take one last look at ourselves in the mirror.

Juliette and Quinn look amazing, but it’s my own face I can’t keep my eyes from. I’m beautiful. Thanks to Juliette’s ministrations, I’ve never looked so utterly stunning and yet I feel like I’m wearing a mask. Beneath our skirts, we’re all wearing fishnet stockings and our hair holds a couple of peacock feathers each.

“We are three hot af babes!” Juliette exclaims.

I flick my eyes at her reflection. She does look striking with her bright green eyes and thick black eyelashes. Next to her, Quinn looks beautiful with her red hair flowing over her shoulders, but her expression is one of steely determination, with an undercurrent of nervous sickness.

“Come on,” I say with a hint of resignation. “Let’s get this over with.”

Even before we step onto the pink carpet, the screams start. The pink carpet carves a route amidst the cacophony of shrieking fans separated from us by glistening gold barricades. Our images tower above us on moving banners, and the fans have made their own. Amidst the home made banners for Juliette, I spot one or two with my name on. Walking along the pink carpet, I feel like a rock star and all the nervous energy I’ve been feeling falls away. I can do this.

“So this is what it feels like to be royalty,” I whisper to Juliette and Quinn as we pass the fans being held back by tuxedo-clad demon bodyguards.

“More like Hollywood royalty,” Juliette replies, waving to everyone like the queen she is.

“More like Holy Hell royalty,” Quinn says. “Look at this. Everyone wants us. Even the girls.”

“Everyone wants us, babe. Make the most of it.” Juliette says with a wink. “I certainly plan to.”

Quinn stiffens beside me as the elevator doors open and Asmodée and Arch step out. I think she was kinda hoping that they’d still be downstairs, giving her an excuse to not have to go through with this.

We pass them and step into the elevator. The doors close, blocking out the screams and giving us all a few seconds of respite. Unlike Juliette, I don't think I'll ever get used to this. It's overwhelming.

Quinn brings out a blue marble and stares down at it in the palm of her hands.

"You don't have to do this," I remind her. "We can all go to the party together and forget Dade. He chose this." Even as I say it, I know she won't.

She heaves in a determined breath. "I'll see you later."

The moment the doors open, I'm blinded by a sea of camera flashes. Hell seems to have pulled out all the stops for this event, complete with another pink carpet downstairs. Similar to upstairs, where fans were stationed, photographers and fans flank the carpet.

"You can do this." I give Quinn a hug. My heart feels like it's being pulled in a million directions as Juliette and I step out of the elevator. I force a smile, even though my heart feels heavier with each passing second. I hurry forward toward the Earthery to escape the weight of the fan's stares, but I'm forced to wait for Juliette, who is making the most of the spectacle. When she finally reaches me, we hold hands, stepping up to the doors of the Earthery together. A frisson of fear passes through my body. A few days ago, this was nothing but rubble, and I was trapped underneath it with Felix. I swallow back my fear, and gripping Juliette's hand, step inside. If I thought the exterior of the Earthery was stunning, the interior is breathtaking. I've never been inside a palace, but I'm almost certain that wherever the Earthery modeled itself after, this must be it. We step into a massive banquet hall with long tables lining one side and a spacious dance floor at the

other. Men in red livery stand as sentries along the walls. I can't help but feel a pang of discomfort as I realize the guards are here to ensure the contestants' safety.

Noémi greets us with a wide smile. She's dressed in a tight pink sequined dress that clings to her curves.

"That's a beautiful dress," Juliette comments as Noémi envelops her in a hug. I scan the room, my nerves on a knife edge. I don't want to admit it to myself, let alone anyone else, but I'm searing for Felix. He isn't here yet, but he will be.

"Were ees Quinn? I thought you three would come down togezzer."

I turn my attention back to Noémi and give her a tight-lipped smile. "She'll be down soon." She might be a bundle of sunshine, but she's the reason my nerves are pulled taught. My entire future is in her hands tonight, and how well she thinks I dance with Felix.

"Ah, Maggie. You look perfect," Noémi says, turning her attention away from us. "And Colin. Glad to see you are all better. I love ze matching shirts. Tres cute."

"Let's grab some food," Juliette suggests, making a beeline for the banquet table already laden with a variety of dishes.

"This must be a dream come true for you," I observe, watching Juliette pile her plate so high that it might topple over under its own weight. "All the food and sex you could want, without having to work for it."

"Oh, believe me, I've been working out," she replies cryptically. "Oh, look, vol-au-vents!"

I give her a questioning look. "Is Orlin going to whisk you off your feet tonight? Or knock you off them?"

Juliette pops a vol-au-vent straight into her mouth. “I sincerely hope not!”

“So where’s this secret date of yours that may or may not be Orlin?”

She gives me a sly smile but doesn’t answer my question.

What with Juliette’s secrets, Twila missing and Quinn risking her life on the lower floor, it almost takes my mind away from Felix. Almost.

My breath hitches in my chest as he finally walks in the door. He’s damnably beautiful. I could have coped with him when his face was a mashed up mess. Honestly, it took the edge from his impossible good looks and gave the illusion of humanity. That’s long gone tonight. Tonight he looks like a god brought from the heavens itself. And on his arm is a goddess. A goddess in red. Anthura. A shiver runs down my spine. I turn away from them before they see me and concentrate on the vol-au-vents. Quinn’s warning runs through my mind. *Anthura is going to hurt you tonight if you show the barest hint of interest in Felix.* The problem with that is, I need to dance with Felix and make it the sexiest dance ever if I want to get through to the next Circle.

In other words, one way or another, I’m totally and completely screwed.

THE BOWELS OF HELL

The corridors of the lower floor are eerily quiet as I race down them. The rustle of my skirt seems magnified as it swishes around my legs, but I'm way too nervous to slow down and tip toe. What I'm doing is madness. I'm in the den of demons who I know can burn me to a crisp with a single touch and will show no mercy if they happen to catch me. They like to torture humans. It's in their very nature and yet they are prohibited from doing just that upstairs. Down here, I'm a sitting duck, because I won't stand a chance at outrunning anything in this skirt, and my only hope for defense would be to face one or two demons with my dagger. If they swarm me, I'm done. Over. Extinguished. Dead. The only reason I escaped last time is because Dade flew us out of here. I just need to find him and free him, and then he can fly us both out again.

Simple

Except I have no clue where he is. The lower floor stretches for miles in every direction and there's probably a demon waiting to sink his teeth into me around the next corner.

I've never seen a jail or holding cell down here. It could be anywhere. Maybe I'm a fool for even attempting this. Dade

could already have been taken down in the elevator to the very depths of Hell and has been judged by Satan for his crime for all I know. I can't even remember the way. I pull out the map I hastily sketched out. It's just a blur of lines with no meaning. Without Dade's tattoo as a starting point, I have no reference to where this map starts.

I vow that if I do find him, I'll finish the map tattoo. I turn down a corridor, but as I do, my heart skips. I can feel Dade's aura. It's extremely faint, but it's there. With all the panic about maps, I'd forgot I had my own inbuilt Dade sensor. I can also detect the aura of another demon, too. I just need to relax my thudding heart and concentrate. I take a deep breath and center myself. I can't sense as much as I would expect. Maybe most of the demons are upstairs at the ball like Arch and Asmodée. The other aura is much stronger than Dade's and it's coming from the same direction. It makes sense if he's being guarded, but it's unnerving how strong it is.

I steel myself and follow the feeling. With each step, Dade's aura becomes stronger and stronger, but so does the other demon's. I'm nervous as I continue on the path, but the lack of other demon auras fuels my confidence. The lack of actual demons trying to chew my head off is also helping, though I'm acutely aware with every turn I make that I might just be being led by a false sense of security. Yet with every turn, I find empty corridors. I race down each one, my fist pulled tightly around the hilt of the dagger.

Just in case.

My nerves buzz as I come to a stop outside a door. I know this place. I've been here before and the last time I knocked on the door, Dade got his foot almost twisted from his body. I'm at the Demon's lounge. It's the one place in Hell that I know

Demons will be and as I try to concentrate on Dade's aura, The Demon's aura practically radiates through me. I should be happy that I can only detect one demon's aura, but the sheer force of it has my body rippling with undulating fear.

I'm not going to wait for whoever's guarding Dade to prepare themselves. I won't be knocking on Hell's door; I'm going to barge right in uninvited. As I grab the handle, I mentally brace myself and turn it.

There's an almighty ear-piercing shriek that fills me with raw terror and sends my heart thumping round my ribcage. I lash out instinctively, thrashing the dagger to my side, where it connects with something with a squelch. The shriek turns into a scream that hurts my ears and the smell of flesh burning hits my nostrils half a millisecond before the screaming agony hits my senses.

I cry out in shock and confusion as I try to comprehend the unfolding chaos. When I turn, my heart sinks as I come face to face with a demon, its eyes wide with agony, blood oozing from a deep six-inch gash across its chest. My horror deepens as I instinctively yank the dagger back, unintentionally tearing through its flesh even more. The effort sends another searing wave of pain up my arm. With a start, I see what happened. The demon had pounced on me, and in my desperate attempt to defend myself, I thrust my dagger forward. It was unable to halt its momentum, impaling itself directly through the heart. In its death throes, it clung to my upper arm, refusing to let go, and its touch scorched away layers of skin, leaving a painful, burning mark.

It gives a last death rattle and falls to the floor. It's dead, but not in any way that is normal. We're in Hell and it's a demon. It's no longer breathing and blood is pooling around its

lifeless body, but give it enough time and the hole I've ripped across its chest will repair itself. The only way to truly kill it is to lop its head clean off its body. I try to judge how long that would take. Dade is only part demon and he could limp on a leg that had been twisted backwards within twenty-four hours. Ideally I'd chop its head off easily, but my dagger is too small and I'll have to cut through sinew and bones. My stomach turns at the thought of it. I'll only need a few minutes once I'm inside the demons' lounge. Either I'll free Dade or I'll be killed by the demon within seconds. With sweaty and blood-splattered hands, I take hold of the door handle again and twist it. I hold my breath and grit my teeth as the door creaks open. I let out a shallow whimper as a sharp light hits my eyes, almost blinding me in its intensity. Instinctively I cover my eyes with my hands and slowly peek through my fingers while my eyes adjust.

Terror seizes up my lungs as the source of the massive aura and the light becomes apparent. "Hades?" I choke out.

His body is chained to the far wall, arms stretched wide over his head and his legs stretched out beneath him. His head is flopped forward as though he's unconscious. Thousands of shards of light shine out of him in every direction and when I squint I can see why. At the source of every shaft of light is a hole in his body made my knives. His demon aura is literally pouring out of him in the form of light. He looks like a giant pin cushion.

I'm a mess of panic as I race toward him, and it's difficult to breathe with the sheer magnitude of the light emanating from his body. When it touches me, my skin burns, but it's impossible to get to him without touching the light. It's like the world's worst laser room. I step back, keeping between two beams of light as I assess the damage to my skin. It's a

mess. My arm, already burned from the demon outside, now has lines burned into the flesh where Hades' light has touched me.

“Quinn? Is that you?”

“Twila?” My heart races as I strain to see through the overwhelming light to the left of where Hades is chained to the wall. By the direction of her voice, she's somewhere close to Hades.

“Help us!” she pleads desperately.

“I can't!” I breathe out in frustrated panic. “Every time I touch the light, I get burned. I can't even see you.”

“You can do this, Valentine.”

My eyes dart to the right of Hades, and my heart races even faster. Although I can't see Dade, I know he's here. His aura flares slightly in response to my voice, but it's overshadowed by the overwhelming power emanating from Hades.

I'm seized by paralyzing fear as I respond. “What can I do? I can't get to you. Is there a way to turn the light off?” As I say it, I know it's a ridiculous thought. Hades aura is leaking from him through a thousand tiny holes. I'd need a huge magnet to pull all the sharp objects from him without getting any closer.

“There are keys to open our manacles over by the door,” Twila instructs. I see them hung up on a huge rusty ring, but having the keys isn't really any help if I can't get to the manacles.

I grab them anyway. “Can I throw them to you? and you open your manacles?”

“No.”

“Our hands are nailed to the wall, Valentine. You’ll need to open our manacles and then pull the nails from our hands.”

Holy shit. I fight the rising panic and try to breathe through tremors coursing through my entire body. Hades’s aura has an incapacitating effect on me, and I haven’t even made contact with the light yet. Stepping into one of the beams of light would result in my skin being scorched, and I can’t see a route forward without becoming entirely engulfed by it.

“I can’t!” I exclaim.

“Please!” Twila pleads. “She’s kept us trapped against this wall for weeks.”

“You have the strength, Valentine,” Dade urges. “I believe in you. Release Hades, and he can rescue everyone upstairs. You can return for Twila and me afterward.”

“Them?” I respond faintly.

“She’s completely insane!” Twila shouts. “Hades is the only person strong enough to stand up to her. She’s planning on torturing all the Inferno Games contestants at the ball. We need to get to her and stop her before the ball starts.”

I swallow thickly as I remember what Anthura is capable of. “The ball has already started.”

JUST AN OBSERVATION

FELIX

Anthura looks every inch the queen in her long fitted red leather number and spiked crown that would take an eye out if anyone was unfortunate to get close to her. Screw Noémi and her fucked up games. Parties are one game I know I can win. I've never been to a party where I'm not the center of attention and with Anthura at my side looking the way she does, those points up for grabs are going to be mine. I might not know what criteria Noémi has in mind to dish out the points, but whatever it is, they'll be going to me. If Anthura is a queen, I'm the fucking king as we enter the ballroom. All eyes swivel our way and I'm sure I hear a collective inhalation of breath at how fucking gorgeous we are. I'm dressed in the best suit money can buy with a hat that masks half my face. A quick scan of the room is enough to see Anthura's plan has worked. Everyone is dressed up nicely enough, but not a single person is dressed spectacularly. Not like us. Rowena isn't here. She's probably crying in her room with her friends. Good! I don't need to be dealing with any shit tonight, least of all, her. In a few hours, I'll be descending to the next Circle, and she'll become a distant fucked up memory.

Anthura leans in and whispers in my ear. "Noémi may as well just give us the points now rather than going through this exhibition."

As if saying her name has conjured her, I spot Noémi at the front of the room on a golden swing.

“Rowena’s not here,” I point out.

Anthura gives me a funny look. “Why is it we can’t have a conversation without her coming up every time? It’s like you’re obsessed.”

“I’m not fucking obsessed,” I bite out. “It’s just an observation.”

Fortunately, her focus shifts away from me as Noémi descends from the swing at the opposite end of the hall. When she speaks, her voice is magnified. “Welcome everybody! You all look absolutely beautiful. I ‘ave never seen such a wonderful spectacle. Eet is a beeter sweet moment for me. This ees the last time I’ll see you, for after the party, those of you weeth enough points weel go down to ze third circle. I want all of you to ween, but I also want all of you to lose so you can stay wiz me for all time.” She laughs. ““Ere are ze scores so far.”

She waves her hand and a scoreboard magically appears behind her. Juliette and Orlin are tying for first place. The dude hasn’t even bothered to show up, so fuck knows what he did to get so high. I scan down the list for my name. We are only in the top ten because of Rowena blowing me and the fact that no scores were given for the second trial due to it being a complete failure.

“Tonight, I want you all to ‘ave a lot of fun. Everything you do is being broadcast to everyone on ze main screen in the restaurant so make eet amazing. Okay, partners, please take to ze dance floor and let’s see what you can do.”

I'm suddenly aware that the whole room has gone quiet. The quiet collective inhalation of breath that happened when Anthura and I walked in has repeated itself, but now everyone is staring at someone else.

Anthura's expression twists into such disgust that she becomes ugly. "Fuck!"

I follow her angry stare to the two women at the food table who have both just turned around. One of them is Rowena. Her long blond curls have been pinned up on top of her head with blue ribbon threaded through and a blue green peacock feather held in place. She's a fucking vision.

Unease along with surprise rips through me as she steps onto the dance floor as though she owns it. Her long skirt ripples as she walks beside Juliette. Even Noémi is staring at them with apparent delight.

"What the fuck are they wearing?" Anthura mutters.

Irritation prickles at me as the memory of Rowena naked, coming apart on my tongue fills my mind. I want to drag her to a dark corner and fuck her so hard she sings my name and yet I still hate her with the same intensity I always have. Maybe even more, because now I can't keep my mind, or my eyes from her.

Fuck.

The music starts and I haven't moved. Rowena and Juliette stand, both of them still. Rowena's eyes are pinned to me. She's not begging me to come out, rather waiting for me to join her.

Remy and Candice waltz in front of them, followed by the weirdoes with the matching shirts. His says I DON'T DO BALLS. Hers says BUT I DO. I think I may vomit.

“Why don’t you go play with your boyfriend,” Anthura quips. “I’m going to dance with Moloch. The idiot will probably fuck it up for all of us and step on my feet, so you might want to give us a wide berth. I’ve got something secret planned for later and I don’t want you not being able to move.”

My muscles tense and my fingers curl into fists and Rowena stares, her eyes sparking with defiance. Seeing her waiting for me to cross the dance floor is harder than I imagined. I fucked the damn bitch, so why can’t I dance with her? It’s one fucking dance and then I never have to go anywhere near her again.

But I can’t and that makes me angry. I’ve never been in a situation where I’m rendered incapable before. I make sure I’m ready for anything, knowing all my opponents moves beforehand. But now I’m in check mate. If I don’t dance with her, I lose. It’s as simple as that. I don’t go down to the next circle and I’m stuck in this pink perverted cotton candy fueled nightmare for the rest of eternity. That should be enough of an incentive to step onto the dance floor, but something is stopping me.

Because if I dance with her now, I’ll never have the excuse to go near her again and this will be over.

Everyone else is already dancing or in the process of finding their partners. There’s an aura of anticipation and a desperation to be the best. It’s fucking cut throat. As I watch, someone shoves another dancer, sending them sprawling to the ground.

And still I don’t move. Juliette whispers something in Rowena’s ear. It must be something bad because she doesn’t take her eyes from me as she nods her head. The music speeds

up and I'm acutely aware that I'm losing points with my inability to move.

Juliette grabs hold of Rowena's skirt and yanks at it. Layers of some kind of floaty fabric drop to the floor, surrounding Rowena's feet like a cloud of blue. Juliette does the same with her skirt, dropping it to the floor. Somewhere someone screams with delight and there's a collective murmur of excitement rippling out from the two women. From Rowena. She's wearing black stockings and black frilly panties and fuck me heels with an expression to match. She's no longer quietly asking me to join her, she's demanding it. She's fucking intimidating. I step forward and grab her by the waist. No one intimidates me.

Not even Rowena fucking Bagshot.

GRUESOME RITUAL

QUINN

I've been burned through before. My entire body once collapsed in on itself because of the burning poison Anthura inflicted on me and now, because of her, I'm going to have to go through the same thing, except this time my body will burn from the outside in. And this time I don't get to fall down unconscious and be taken to the hospital wing. This time I either save them despite the pain or my body burns to ashes and everyone gets tortured for eternity.

The prospect is as terrible as it is terrifying, but there is no decision to make. I'm going to be tortured whatever I do, so I might as well make it mean something.

I take a deep breath. "I love you!" I scream as I run forward into Hades' light.

The searing maelstrom engulfs me in an instant, igniting my body with insurmountable fire, robbing me of breath, and flooding my lungs with torment. The blinding pain forces my eyes shut, casting me into darkness as I navigate solely by touch and instinct.

"I love you too!" I hear twin voices tell me as I reach Hades.

I can't speak through the pain, so I have to feel up his arm to where he's manacled.

"Don't use the keys yet, Valentine. Pull the knives from Hades first. It's the only way to stop the light."

My fingers are already charred and swollen and there's a horrible hissing sound reminiscent of bacon frying in a pan that my body is making as it blisters. A surge of panic overwhelms me, causing the keys to slip from my grasp, clattering to the floor. Swiftly, I wrest the knives free, flinging them to the ground. With each pull, Hades body heals slightly, and as his wounds heal, the light stops shining. But there are so many knives and so many points of light that each one feels like an eternity to pull out. I'm gripping four or five at a time, using both hands to yank them and fling them to the floor, but my body is breaking up.

Every facet of this gruesome ritual resounds with horror and agony. My skin is sloughing from my body and the flesh underneath is oozing to the floor, sizzling and spitting. There's nothing about this that isn't horrific and excruciating, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have to keep yanking. I can't see them, but I can feel that it's not just knives that have cut through Hades's body. I pull pieces of sharp glass, swords, and even darts from him. As the room becomes darker, I try to open my eyes, but as I do, my eyes fizzle and with horror, I lose both of them to the light. I choke with terror and my throat fills with the smoke of my own body burning.

All the while, I hear words of encouragement from both Dade and Twila, but eventually, I can't hear anything beyond the sound of my body hissing and popping and fizzling.

"My hand, Quinn!" Hades' voice cuts through the noise and I'm not sure if I'm hearing him or if his voice is only in

my head. It's the first words he's spoken since I came in here.

Summoning my final reserves of strength, I extend my hand, seizing the nail embedded in his palm. I scream out a dying breath as I pull on it, leveraging my full body weight. And then, in a moment that feels both endless and fleeting, it's over. My bones in my fingers crumble to ash and I fall backwards onto the floor and turn to dust.

A DANCE OF DECEPTION

ROWENA

Letting Juliette rip my skirt off was a moment of madness, but it was all too clear that Felix needed a nudge. Now, though, feeling the fabric of his suit on my almost bare legs is a torment in itself. He dances amazingly. Of course he does. He excels at everything, and thanks to the numerous dance lessons I took in Purgatory, amazingly I keep up with him. In my peripheral vision, I see everyone watching us. The contestant's eyes are fixated on us as they waltz past and the demons lining the walls can't keep their eyes from us. It would be a dream if it wasn't for the venom in Felix's eyes. We're locked in a dance of deception shrouded in layers of disdain. The lilting melody of the waltz seems to taunt us, a cruel reminder of our situation, as our eyes lock in a silent battle of wills. "This doesn't mean anything." Felix hisses. "We need to win. That's all." He rests his hand on my waist. His touch sends an unexpected shiver down my spine, an involuntary reaction that I quickly mask.

I grimace. "I'd believe you if it wasn't for your dick pressing into my thigh." It's not, but I'm in a bad mood and sick of him minimalizing everything.

He twirls me and I gracefully spin away from him. Not far enough away.

“Bitch!”

I move back to his side. “Disgusting ass-wipe.”

I allow him to lead me through the intricate turns and graceful twists, my body poised as if under the sway of his control. In return, he masks his hostility with practiced charm, his gaze fixed on me as we put on a show for the audience.

His eyes are narrowed in anger and his grip on me is tight to the point of pain. “After this dance, I won’t have to speak to you again.”

“Please stop,” I deadpan. “You’re turning me on!”

He really is. Desire courses through me, setting my senses ablaze in a way that I both crave and despise. My mutinous body is enjoying the thrill of being so close to Felix and yet I’m forcing myself to look unruffled as he tries everything he can to hurt me.

“I’m going to fuck Anthura’s brains out after this,” he snaps, his words laced with irritation “Just so you know.”

It’s meant to wound me and I really despise that it does. I keep my expression as neutral as possible. “That shouldn’t take too long, which I suppose is good news for you.”

He lowers his hand from my waist and grabs my ass, pulling me into him so we’re no longer waltzing but grinding against each other. It’s nerve-wracking and exhilarating. At the edge of the dance floor, some of the couples have already given up. I can see Anthura’s hateful stare boring into us. It’s as if the waltz itself has become a battleground.

His other hand curls around my back so my breasts are crushing into him. “You really are a smart mouthed bitch.”

The resentment hurting my heart is matched by the desire coursing between my legs. “I don’t remember you complaining about my mouth when I was sucking on your dick, Barclay.”

And now that’s all I can think about!

His face hardens at precisely the same time as his cock and the shock of it has my lips parting and my panties dampening. If any of the spectators watching us on the big screen can lip read, they are in for a field day.

“Fuck you, Rowena!” he growls under his breath as the music intensifies to a crescendo.

I look into his eyes as he still holds my body locked to mine and my voice comes out in a strangled sob. “You already did, Barclay.”

And then it’s silent. The dance is over. The only percussion left is my heart pounding wildly.

My whole body is electrified as people begin to applaud. I don’t even know who they are applauding for, and neither do I care, because Felix’s mouth is on mine, his tongue in my mouth. My senses are all over the place and my head is reeling, but I can’t back away. I don’t want to. It’s as shocking as it’s thrilling. It’s hostile but it’s wonderful at the same time. Felix Barclay is kissing me.

Kissing.

Me!

In public.

Someone wolf whistles and still I don’t stop kissing him. I’m aware that we’re causing a scene and I don’t care. I don’t have the capability to care when all my senses are centered on

Felix and how good he kisses. It's passionate but not the battle that our first kiss was. My mouth moves against his and my whole body is ignited. The exchange of cutting remarks between us was nothing more than a form of foreplay.

When we untangle from each other, I become acutely aware of the spectacle we've caused. Noémi looks positively thrilled and the sight of Juliette's gaping mouth suggests that I've finally managed to surpass even her capacity for shock.

But then my gaze lands on Anthura. Her face is twisted with a malevolent fury, radiating waves of malice and rage.

"I think we broke Anthura!" I whisper, still reeling with shock at what I just did.

Felix glances her way, then back to me. "That should get us some points with that bitch, Noémi."

My heart contracts as he walks away heading right to Anthura leaving completely lost and humiliated, alone on the dance floor.

BACK INTO THE EARTHERY

QUINN

I heave in a long, shocked breath as my entire body feels like it's being hit by a bolt of lightning. Seconds later, a feeling of glorious euphoria runs through me, making me feel light as a feather and better than I have in my whole life. It's like a billion orgasms followed by flying on a cloud.

“Back to new.”

I sit up and rub my eyes. I have eyes again. I can see. I stare around me as I try to piece together what happened. I can see in crystal clarity my eyesight better than it was before. Everything is more vivid. A surge of strength courses through my body, each fiber and sinew feeling more alive than ever before.

“Valentine?”

I focus on Dade. His worried expression is the balm to my soul that whatever just happened was to my body. He bends down and lifts me up gently into a standing position. I've never seen him look the way he does now. He's worried but his mouth is pulled into a smile. I lean forward and kiss him. It's like coming home. A cough cuts through the air and I pull away to see a massive demon looking at me with a friendly but grave expression on his face.

“Hades?” Suddenly, everything comes back to me. I frantically search the room for Twila and find her right next to Hades. She gives me a reassuring smile, which I return.

“What happened to me?” I look down to find my body completely intact, not a mark on me. Even my skirt with its seemingly million layers of tulle that Rowena made has regenerated.

“I fixed you as you fixed me,” Hades responds good-naturedly. “Now, we need to get you all out of here before other demons come back. We need to stop the destruction upstairs before it happens.”

Shit! Rowena. The ball! It started ages ago. I don’t even know how long I was out.

“You said that she’s planning on torturing everyone,” I say in a panicked voice. “What exactly is she going to do? My friends are up there.”

Hades doesn’t answer me as he strides forcefully past me toward the lounge door.

“We don’t know,” Twila replies, her voice urgent as we all sprint after Hades, our steps struggling to match his long strides. “We do know she’s so sick of the contestants that she’s been planning this for a long time.”

“She’s been sending nasty letters to Rowena, too!”

Twila nods. “We know.”

As we tumble out of the lounge, the demon I stabbed earlier lunges at us. I knew I should have chopped his head off. Dade shields me protectively, but it doesn’t matter. Free from his shackles, Hades power has returned. He points at the demon and light emanates from his fingertip, hitting the

demon and reducing it to a splatter of green goo that coats the gray walls.

My stomach churns uncomfortably as we step over the sticky mess on the floor. I hold tightly onto Dade's hand as we race down the corridor, following Hades and Twila. My mind is swirling with a multitude of questions, making it challenging to decide which to ask first. I settle on the most immediate one: "How come you can run now? Your leg..."

"Hades performed the same demon magic on me as he did on you. It healed me," Dade explains as we run.

I process this information, my confusion deepening. "But how? He was still manacled to the wall when I passed out. I didn't unlock them."

"He just needed enough knives pulled from his body to gather his strength," Dade says, his voice tense with urgency, "and then you to pull the nail holding his hand to the wall so he could point. After that, it was only a matter of blasting through all our manacles and removing what was left of the knives."

I goggle at the retreating form of Hades. Naked from the waist up, I get a good look at his back, which is perfectly scar free. I wonder if I could bottle Hell magic and sell it. I'd make a fortune.

"What's he going to do with Anthura when we get up there?"

Dade stops and looks at me. "Anthura? Nothing. Why?"

I narrow my eyes, feeling confused. I gape at him. "Because of everything she's done. The letters, the murders... The fact that she's going to torture everyone tonight? Need I go on?"

“Quinn. It wasn’t Anthura that did all that. It was Noémi. Noémi kidnapped all of us and had us manacled to the wall.”

“What?” I gasp in shock. “No. It can’t be.”

“Come on,” he urges, “we don’t want to lose Hades down here. He’s our only way out.”

Dade takes my hand, and together, we race down the corridor to catch up with Hades and Twila at the elevator.

“That’s not possible.” I heave out a breath. “Noémi can’t have done all that. The charge that brought the Earthery down with us in it was planted when we were already inside.”

“So Noémi told us.”

I shake my head, struggling to understand. “No. I found the letters to Rowena in Anthura’s drawer.”

Hades turn to me as the elevator doors open. “They were given to her by one of the demons down here. She has been trying to prove that Noémi was out to sabotage the games from the very moment we arrived. She did try to warn me on the first day, but I didn’t pay her any heed.” We step into the elevator. “I’ve learned a lot from being chained up in the demon lounge. Not every demon is on Noémi’s side. Some risked their lives to help Anthura, but it wasn’t enough.”

My mind is reeling. “If Anthura was given letters by a demon, why didn’t that demon tell her about you being locked up in the lounge?”

Hades shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe he was too scared? I do know that the demon never came back. I’m guessing Noémi put him out of action when she found out he was a traitor.”

The elevator doors open. The entertainment level is strangely quiet. A shiver runs down my spine. If we're too late, I'll never forgive myself. Then I realize it's quiet because all the contestants are in the Earthery and everyone else is upstairs watching the ball from the restaurant.

I shake my head in disbelief. "I started getting those letters in Purgatory! And what about Michael and Lucia?"

Hades turns to me, placing his finger against his lips. "We need to go in with the element of surprise. I don't have all the answers, but I think she's in this with one of the contestants."

"That doesn't make sense," I argue. "She didn't even know any of the contestants before we came down here."

Hades raises an eyebrow. "Didn't she?"

Suddenly, Noémi's cryptic warning to me weeks ago resurfaces in my memory: "Trust no one." She knew. Even back then, she had an accomplice.

Still, there are way too many unanswered questions about Anthura. She hates Noémi, but the both of them are demons. Only she and Moloch were able to go from Purgatory to liaise with Noémi in Lust before the games started here. They were the only two that knew the way. Not even Dade, who had spent an age mapping out the lower level, knew the whereabouts of the golden elevator before we stumbled upon it a few days ago.

Hades comes to a stop outside the Earthery entrance. "Is everybody ready?"

No

I don't think I'll ever be ready, but as Dade pulls me to him and kisses the side of my head, I find the strength I need.

“Let’s go in and bring her down!”

I GAVE YOU EVERYTHING

FELIX

Anthura roughly takes my arm in hers as I step off the dance floor. She's radiating animosity. "What the fuck do you think you are playing at?"

I have an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach as I lean into her. "We don't all have the privilege of being a demon like you, Anthura. I had to put on a show or I'm going to be stuck here with these assholes forever more."

"Well, you did a good job of it," she snipes. "A little too good."

I look up at the scoreboard. The scores have been changing constantly since we arrived. Juliette and Orlin are no longer at the top. A grim smile tugs at my lips as I witness my name ascend to the top, a place it rightfully deserves. It's a satisfaction laced with bitterness, knowing that this position was rightfully mine all along. Rowena's name comes to a rest next to mine. We are tying for first place. She's still on the dance floor but now Juliette is hugging her. I know I've been cruel to Rowena, but it was a necessity. If I left it up to her, we'd still be griping at each other from the edge of the dance floor while everyone else darted up the scoreboard in front of us. Harsh as it was, I've done her a favor. Still, I feel more

uneasy than I expected to. Truthfully, the kiss wasn't planned, but she had me so rock hard that in the moment I went for it.

Juliette turns her slightly and I catch tears sparkling in Rowena's eyes. I turn away and grip Anthura's arm. "I've done enough. Let's get out of here."

I'm a fucking mess as we walk toward the door. My emotions are as turbulent as a tornado, but I don't look back to the dance floor. I did what I came to do.

The doors to the Earthery open inexplicably before we reach them. Through it come Hades, the goth freak, Angelis and Snowflake.

"Holy shit!" Anthura gasps. Then out loud, she speaks. "It's about fucking time, Hades. Where have you been, hiding from your responsibilities?" she peers behind her to where Twila is standing. "Too busy fucking the scum to do your job?"

"Step aside, Anthura." Hade's voice booms out, silencing everyone.

I turn to see everyone staring beyond me at Hades. Noémi's face twists into something unrecognizable. "Get him!" she shrieks.

All at once, the livery clad demons glamors fall away from the demons to reveal their monstrous forms. Wings erupt from their backs and we're instantly swarmed by them.

Another set of wings folds in over Anthura and my head, knocking us both to the floor. It's only when I see Snowflake and Twila on the floor with us that I realize it's Dade's wings above us, shielding us from the onslaught.

"This isn't a ball," the goth chick whispers. "It's an ambush. Malcanthet was going to torture you all to entertain

her people. Why do you think there were so many demons here tonight?”

My confusion bristles, and I can't help but hiss out, “What's going on? Who the fuck is Malcanthet?”

“Noémi,” both goth chick and Anthura utter in unison.

“She's the queen of Succubi,” Goth chick elaborates, her words rapid. “Noémi is her chosen name. Malcanthet is her real name.”

“I thought she was a human once?” Snowflake asks, angling her head to goth chick. “She worked at the Moulin Rouge.”

“Sweet Lucifer,” Anthura mutters with a mix of exasperation and disbelief. “You're so pathetically gullible. She told you that, did she?”

There's an almighty roar and flash of light. Beneath us the floor quakes.

“Fuck!” I hiss out under my breath. I duck down to scramble under Dade's giant wings, but Anthura hauls me back.

“Where do you think you're going?” she demands.

I grit my teeth. “Rowena is out there.”

I feel the weight of her stare and can practically feel the heat flowing from her as she stares at me with incredulity. “Are you fucking serious right now, Felix? There's a fucking demon war being played out and you want to go play kiss and make up with your fucking freak of a boyfriend?”

Anger surges within me as another flash of light crackles over Dade's wings. I pull my fist and aim it right for Anthura's face. My fist stops a millimeter from her skin. She glares at me

with unbridled anger as I pull my fist down and unclench it. “You’re not worth me messing up my knuckles.” I pull the ridiculous hat from my head, revealing the true state of my mangled face and head. Goth chick gasps at me as Dade pulls his giant black wings back. I jump up, no longer caring that I look like a monster, and scan the room and find Rowena. Her and Juliette are clinging to each other on the dance floor. I let out a breath of relief when I see she’s alright.

Two demons have Noémi is a straight jacket. Without her glamor she’s still stunningly beautiful, but two giant horns curl out from between her pink curls. Her face is manic as she’s dragged across the dance floor towards us.

“I did everything for you people!” she rages, glaring at us. “Every fucking thing and this is how you repay me?”

Her French accent has gone the way of her glamor and now her voice is deeper and raspy and strangely at odds with her appearance.

“Juliette. I let you have your wish!” she screams out as she’s dragged past Juliette and Rowena. “You asked to be railed by multiple men. I gave you Arch and Asmodée. You liked using them as your playthings these past couple of weeks, didn’t you?”

Beside me, Snowflake gasps audibly, and Juliette’s face drains of color as the two massive demons shed their glamors as they are placed in glowing manacles. They reveal themselves as warty imps, no taller than a couple of feet, and both a putrid shade of green.

“And Quinn” Noémi continues, her hair getting wilder and wilder with each passing second. “You wanted to get through this challenge to go through to the next circle. Look at the scoreboard. I did that for you!”

I flick my eyes up. Indeed, both Snowflake and Dade are in the top ten. As she's pulled closer, I see that she's not as beautiful as I thought. Her skin is cracked and dry and her eyes have a tinge of red. Her hair is as wild as her expression. She licks her gray lips and swivels her head around. "Rowena." She shouts out. "I gave you your wish too! We're friends, right?"

Rowena's eyes go wide and her mouth drops open. I try to remember what it was Rowena asked for in the first meeting. Something about me dead naming her. As Rowena's hands fall to her belly, the realization hits me like a freight train.

"I'm pregnant?" she heaves out quietly.

My heart stops dead in my chest. Rowena's mouth hangs open as she stares at Noémi's retreating form. I know her eyes are going to eventually move to me the second she comes to the same conclusion I have. I've never felt terror the way I do now. Emotions are for the weak, except I'm feeling every fucking emotion it's possible to feel.

I could walk away. Everyone is looking at Rowena. No one except her and me know what happened between us. I could do what I've done my whole life and pretend this isn't anything to do with me, leaving her to deal with my mistakes. Except it doesn't feel like a mistake. I can't explain it. It's the worst fucking news I've ever received in my life. Everyone will know. There's no way of hiding it, and yet underneath the terror is a feeling I don't understand. I've never felt this lost before in my life.

I'm going to be a father.

Rowena is going to make me a father.

As her eyes turn slowly to me, my stomach bottoms out. My throat is thick with a lump so large I can't swallow.

"Fucking gross," Anthura hisses. My hands curl into fists at her words, but it's not Anthura that's capturing my attention. Rowena fixes me with a gaze filled with abject horror, her eyes wide with disbelief and fear.

"What about Felix?" Anthura shouts out as Noémi is dragged past us. "What does he get?" She pulls at my sleeve, pulling my gaze from Rowena.

Noémi gives her a sly smile. I've spent all this time thinking she's a bitch, but now I see how astute she is. In any other situation, I'd hire her to be my chief of staff. I already know what she's going to say before she says it. She turns her head to us as the demons bring her to a stop in front of Hades. When she answers Anthura, she doesn't take her eyes off me.

"I gave Felix exactly what he asked for, Anthura. Every. Fucking. Thing. Everything it was in my power to give him and everything he needs." She shrugs her shoulders as she's dragged from the Earthery. "What he chooses to do with that is up to him."

Anthura strides after her, following behind Hades. "What the fuck? You didn't give him anything."

"Maybe I did and maybe I didn't, but my time is at a close. Au revoir mes amis, eet 'as been a pleasure serving you."

Anthura turns to me, her face as black as thunder, but under that anger is real fear. I think it's the first time I've seen Anthura scared of anything. "Do something. For the love of the almighty Satan, tell her you want to go through to the Third Circle with me."

It's then that I realize that Anthura and Moloch are not in the top half of the scoreboard. They didn't get through.

I turn back to Rowena who's being supported by Juliette and Snowflake, who ran over to her. All three are staring at me in pure horror. It's a drop in the ocean to the immense dread and turmoil that I'm feeling.

"Tell Hades!" Anthura shrieks as the clock begins to chime midnight.

I look at her, then I look back at Rowena. Despite everything, she gives me a small terrified smile. "I'm sorry, Anthura," I spit out. "There's nothing to tell."

As the darkness closes in around us, my final image is that of Anthura's face, contorted in a mix of revulsion and anger.

THE END

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Elise Knight is the secret pen name of a USA Today bestselling author. In this guise, she reads by candlelight while eating dark chocolate and wearing slippers. Her books contain fearless women and men you'll either want to kiss or kill (sometimes at the same time!)

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