

RORY MILES



BAITED

A BLOOD MAFIA
NOVELLA



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Chapter One

EVELYN

The vampire screams as I punch my hand through his chest, penetrating skin and bone. My fingers, tipped with sharpened nails, grip his heart. A wicked smile slashes across my face. The alley is scarcely illuminated by a dingy yellow lamp on the side of one of the two brick buildings surrounding me, but with my enhanced vision, I catch the shimmer of fear in his eyes.

“Remember me when you burn in hell,” I whisper before ripping the still beating organ from his chest. But I’m not done. Five vampires surround me, circling like they even have a chance. I tip my head to the side and bring the heart to my mouth, running my tongue over the top of it, tasting the blood. My lip curls, and I toss the heart aside. The fear turned his blood bitter.

Pity that.

The remaining vampires exchange quick, nervous glances. Mateo sent me to deal with the vermin for a reason. Well, for two reasons. One, Demi is near the end of her pregnancy. Two, the Blood Mafia takes out its own trash, and I’m damn good at what I do.

Dealing with vampires who don’t know how to follow the rules—and by dealing, I mean killing, and by killing, I mean the final death. Head chopped off the body, both parts burned in different locations sort of dead.

Ripping the hearts out of vampires who mindlessly kill humans—kids, teenagers, adults, the elderly—is just an added bonus. It's the 21st century. Blood is given freely now that humans know we exist. These assholes taking it from people who didn't consent is problematic, and the only thing Mateo hates more than vampires who defy his orders are politicians who think they have any right telling him what to do.

And if these vampires continue their killing sprees, that's exactly where we'll end up.

A brave little vamp with swooping bangs and black eyeliner—the early 2000s called and they want their emo back—rushes me.

Show time.

I squat and push off the ground, launching myself into the air. I twist and grab her hair. As I land, I yank hard and fling her over my body. The vampire, who cares what her name is, screams like a banshee. The concrete cracks and dust flies.

Well, isn't that a magical sight? One of her friends jumps on my back before I can finish killing her.

Goody, a two for one deal.

Some might be worried about their odds. Some might've called for backup before they hunted the group down. I'm not some. The only people I trust to truly have my back are preoccupied with a pregnant hunter. I'd rather take on this little crew alone than allow someone to remind me why I don't trust easily.

I drop to my knees, taking the jackass with me as his fangs sink into my skin. A growl rips from my throat. Fucking vampires. The female's hair is still wrapped around my wrist, and I jerk hard enough to crack her neck, putting her down for a few moments.

She'll heal soon though.

Cursed supernatural healing.

Don't get me wrong, I love the whole nearly immortal bit, but right now, it's a pain in my ass. Just like the fucker sucking

my blood. Reaching up, I grab his neck, dig my nails in, rip through skin and arteries, and tear his neck apart.

A guttural groan rumbles over my skin and blood seeps into my blouse. Dammit, it's brand new.

Now I'm mad. I shove him off my back, punch through the female's chest and rip her heart out, tossing it aside like trash. The warm and bloody muscular organ splats onto the poorly paved ground. That'll keep her down for a bit longer. I turn to do the same to the asshole who'd bitten me, but the other two vampires jump on me.

"Give it up now, bitch." The one covered in tattoos that look more like a child's drawing than art growls in my ear, arm clamping around my throat in a chokehold.

The other's hand settles above my heart. "I'll rip it out."

"It's so cute you think you have a chance," I say with a dark laugh. "But you're forgetting one thing."

"Yeah, what's that?" the one holding me snaps.

"Evelyn."

"Who the fuck is Evelyn?"

Oh these sweet summer children.

Why does everyone remember Mateo's name but not his sister's? Sure, he may be the leader of the Blood Mafia, one of the world's most notorious vampire mafias, but I'm his beautiful, arguably smarter sister. What about me? It's always *Mateo, Mateo, Mateo.*

"I'm Evelyn," I hiss. Before they can say another word, I slam my head into the nose of the vampire behind me and bring my knee up between the legs of the one threatening my heart.

It only takes another minute to deal with them the same way I took care of their friends. By the time I'm done, I'm drenched in blood and more than a little annoyed.

My outfit is ruined.

I should have changed before I left, but I like to look good, even when sent out to kill.

Taking a calming breath, I take in the mess I've made. Five hearts lie together on the concrete. Five bodies with mangled chests and bloodied faces.

"A job well done, wouldn't you say?" I glance into the shadows of the alley and arch an eyebrow. "I didn't think you'd enjoy stalking, Blaze, but here you are, again."

A deep, rumbling laugh caresses over my skin, and I try not to shiver as Blaze steps out from the shadows, naked. Seven feet tall, thickly muscled, strong jaw covered in a five o'clock shadow, and an arched eyebrow aimed at me. His dark hair is tousled and my fingers itch to comb through it.

Bad Evelyn. We don't want to pet the dog.

"I distinctly remember you being able to do that while keeping your clothes on."

"Maybe I just wanted you to see my cock." His voice is rich like velvet, and gooseflesh runs over my skin at the sound of it.

My gaze drops to the massive hammer between his legs. God, it's pretty, but I won't tell him that. "I've seen better."

"That's not what you said when I bent you over my couch."

Scoffing, I wipe my bloodied hands on my pants and pull out my phone. "Fuck a wolf one time and they think they own you."

"I'm not stupid enough to try to own you," he says.

I bite my cheek and turn away. Cheeky bastard always says the right things.

"Yes, Evelyn?" Alissa, a mid-level vampire in the Blood Mafia, answers my call after one ring. She's a good one.

"I need clean up on aisle four."

"Send me your location."

“Thanks, babe.” I hang up and shoot her a text, keenly aware of the approaching alpha and the way my undead heart begins to beat a little faster. Cursing the vampires again for getting me bloody, I discreetly straighten my blouse before turning and grinning up at the giant before me.

Blaze looms over me. The Heir Alpha of the Southwest. The prince and the princess face off. Wolves and vampires aren’t meant to be together, but something about the way that otherworldly yellow flickers in his gaze makes my stomach flip.

That wolf thinks I’m his.

And part of me wants that to be true, but I know better than anyone that attraction and lust is fleeting. If I let him in, Blaze will take his fill and leave me wanting.

Can’t have that now, can we?

“Has anyone ever told you that you look like a cute little puppy when you follow me around?”

His gaze darkens. “Only you. Repeatedly.”

I grin. “Isn’t that what friends are for? To tell you the hard truths while everyone else blows smoke up your ass?”

“We’re not friends.”

“*We’re* not anything.”

He arches an eyebrow. *Liar* the look seems to say, but he doesn’t call me on it.

“Why are you here?” This was a job Mateo gave me, and it has nothing to do with the shifters. We’ve always taken care of our problems on our own.

“The Elders wanted me to remind the Blood Mafia that it’s their responsibility to deal with these vampires before they become a problem.”

I gesture to my shirt. “They’re taken care of.”

“They killed 6 people first.”

“What am I, a mind reader? How was I supposed to know they’d go rogue? Mateo issued the order as soon as we learned what they’d been doing. Maybe your elders need a reminder that the Blood Mafia shouldn’t be fucked with.”

His deep chuckle vibrates over my skin. “And what sort of message do you want to send? Will you try to kill me?”

“I could.”

“Doubtful.”

I’m tempted to try, but he’s far too pretty, and it would be a shame to rid the world of a cock so perfectly thick and—*stop thinking about his cock. It was one time. He’s a shifter. A wolf. You are a vampire. You want his blood, not his dick.*

My pussy aches in disagreement.

Okay. Maybe I want more than his blood, but again, I’m not going to put myself in another situation that’ll leave me with a broken heart. The last man I loved was a vampire who tortured me. Blaze might be attractive, but I know better than to trust a pretty face.

My phone rings as we’re staring off. I answer it, holding Blaze’s gaze. “This better be good news,” I growl into the phone. I’m too high up in the Blood Mafia to be on clean up duty. I’m the sister of the head honcho for fuck’s sake. Not to mention, I’m far too pretty.

Vain? Maybe.

Liar? Not about this.

“Demi is in labor,” Lincoln, one of my brother’s more trusted soldiers, says.

“What?” I whisper, terror seizing my heart. Most people would be elated at the news, and I’m excited to meet my niece, but I’m not excited to see what that bitch from the underworld wants. In an attempt to save my brother who was moments away from dying, Demi had foolishly agreed to give Mazzikin, Princess of the Underworld, a piece of herself. It wasn’t until after Mateo was saved that we found out exactly what Mazzikin wanted.

Demi's first born.

My niece is bravely making her way into a world that's already set against her. My eyes must reflect my fright because Blaze's eyes flash, and he steps in close.

"Demi's having the baby?" he asks.

I glare at him for eavesdropping. He may have supernatural hearing, but the least he can do is give me the illusion of privacy.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I tell Lincoln.

"Hurry. Mateo, Colt and Grayson are losing it."

Demi screams in the background, and my grip tightens on the phone. "Where's the fucking doctor?"

"Here, but Demi threatened to castrate him."

I chuckle. That sounds about right. "Try to keep her calm." I hang up before he asks me exactly how he's supposed to do that. In truth, I'm not sure. Demi grew up thinking she was human but after she stumbled upon a territory dispute and put herself in the line of sight of my brothers, things got... a little stabby.

We all quickly realized she wasn't human. Demi awakened as a hunter, and the rest is a history fraught with fighting, broken necks, and knives. Regardless of the fact that her kind was destined to hunt mine, she's become the sister I never had.

And I won't let her have that baby without me there, and I sure as shit won't let some pretty blonde from hell rip her away from my family.



DESPITE MY ATTEMPTS TO ditch the overbearing alpha, he shifts and races after me. I flit through the city as fast as I can, but with his own supernatural speed, he's just as quick. Any other day, I'd consider screaming at him to warn him off, but my panic claws at my chest.

What if I don't get there in time?

What if the baby's already gone?

What if Demi kills everyone?

I hardly slow down when I get to the Blood Mafia building in the heart of San Francisco's business district. Blaze, the fool, races in after me. Almost like he doesn't care he's entering a vampire owned and occupied building. More than a few vampires curl their lips as we flit past, but they're all too afraid of me to say anything.

My heart hammers against my chest as I yank the stairwell door open, accidentally ripping it off the hinges. The elevator will take too long. I carelessly toss the door aside. Blaze growls as he races after me. He was there when Mazzikin laid claim on Demi's first born, he knows what's at stake, and most important of all, he doesn't like the princess of the underworld any more than I do.

Good.

My niece will have more protection than any other baby in the world. She'll be safe. If I have anything to say about it, she won't know a day of suffering.

The screams hit me as soon as I burst onto the twenty-first floor. Mateo, Colt, and Grayson had it modified into a maternity ward. An entire 2,000 square-foot ward for one little hunter. State of the art hospital supplies. One well-trained crew of delivery nurses, all supernaturals of some sort, of course.

Humans would probably piss their pants if they saw Demi, red eyes blazing and snarling at them to get the baby out.

Blaze shifts behind me, the sound of snapping bones and shifting muscle and skin is barely discernible over the shrill noises Demi is making.

"Did anyone go over the birthing plan?" I snap as soon as I'm beside Mateo.

He startles and growls at me. "Evelyn."

"Brother, lovely to see you. The birthing plan. Where is it?" I glance at him, but he looks like a deer caught in

headlights. Colt and Grayson exchange nervous glances. “Fucking men. You,” I call to a nurse with pretty blonde hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. “Did you give her an epidural?”

“She asked for it, but every time we try to move her she threatens to stab us.”

And clearly they’re all terrified she’ll make good on the threat. Sighing, I shake my head and approach Demi. Her brunette hair is a sweaty mess, and her skin glistens. Those normally brown eyes are bright red; the hunter has come out to play.

Good thing I enjoy a good fight.

“You’re scaring everyone.”

“Fuck them. Fuck Mateo. Fuck Colt. Fuck Gray—” She cuts off and growls, panting through a contraction.

“I think fucking them is what got us into this predicament, hmm? Why don’t you let the nice doctor’s give you an epidural?”

Panting, she shakes her head. “Have you seen that needle?”

“Have you seen your face?”

She snarls at me.

“Seriously.” I pull out my phone and open the camera, turning it to selfie mode and showing Demi what she looks like.

Her mouth turns down.

Almost got her.

“Do you really want your daughter to come into the world with you threatening to kill everyone?”

Normally she’d snap back with some snarky comment, but she stares at herself in the camera for another moment before pinching her eyes shut. “Fine. Give me the stupid medicine.”

“Good girl,” I purr, helping her sit up because I don’t think she’d let anyone else assist her. “I think Blaze is stalking me,” I tell her as I watch the medical team get the needle ready. The epidural is a special kind made just for supes, one that can outlast the power of supernatural metabolisms.

“I’ll take care of him after the baby is out.”

“What? No,” I say quickly, laughing and shaking my head. “I can handle him on my own. I’m only telling you because I thought you’d have some advice for shaking him.”

“Advice? I couldn’t even—ahhhhh.”

“Breathe,” someone says, and Demi glares up at me.

If I didn’t know she loved me, I might be worried.

I give her a sweet smile. “You were saying?”

“I couldn’t even shake the guys, and I broke their necks.”

“Yes but that was when you decided to stay.”

“I tried to stab them too,” she says around a dreamy sigh. “Oh shit, that’s nice.”

I hum and ease her back onto the bed. “See? That wasn’t so hard, now was it?”

“I’m so happy you’re here.” She drops her head onto the pillow. “If stabbing him doesn’t work, I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe bite him?”

I snort. “I have a feeling he’d like it.”

She makes a little noise, but it’s a far cry from the grunting and snarling of moments ago. “I hate being pregnant.”

“Yes, but think about the cute little baby,” I tell her with a grin.

“Okay, the baby is almost ready,” one of the nurses says.

Demi’s eyes fly to meet mine. “I’m scared.”

I grimace and nod. “Me too, but I won’t let her take your baby.” With that promise, I turn and call my brother, Grayson, and Colt over. I pat Demi’s hand before stepping away and letting her mates huddle around her.

She smiles at them now that she's not in so much pain. Mateo brings her hand to his lips. Colt smooths her hair, and Grayson climbs onto the bed beside her, coaching her through some breathing exercise. There's so much love between them I have to take another few steps back.

It comes so easy to them. Despite how they came together, Demi trusts them implicitly and the same can be said for them with her. They've been to hell and back—literally—and they're still together.

If they can do that, why can't I allow myself to enjoy companionship?

Scream like a good little toy.

The harsh voice of my creator, once a man I loved as my husband, slices through the walls I erected around those dark memories. The room flickers, morphing into that horrible cellar I'd been kept in until Mateo rescued me. The snap of a whip cuts across my skin, a familiar agony radiates from my back. I take another step away from the bed and crash into a hard chest. Strong arms wrap around me and drag me into the present. A smarter vampire would pull away, but the voice is gone and the room no longer wavers.

I shouldn't find haven in the shifter's arms.

"She's going to be a good mom," Blaze whispers into my ear.

"Of course she is," I say, voice strained.

"What's wrong?" His voice is low, deadly. The voice of a wolf not to be crossed.

I shiver despite myself. "Nothing."

"Liar," he says into my ear.

Wrenching out of his hold, I toss a haughty glance in his direction but before I can make a snappy comeback, a nurse starts shouting that they can see the baby's head. Everything, the unlocked memories, the desire for Blaze, the annoyance with him, fades away. Everyone but the medical team waits, braced in silence.

Demi's child comes into the world screaming and the nurses and doctor exhale with relief. The rest of us stay vigilant. Their job is done, but ours has just begun. The baby is lightly cleaned before they place her on Demi's chest. Her hands immediately come to the baby.

Love, pure and weightless.

I grind my jaw against the spike of jealousy. I don't want children, I decided that a long time ago, but I want so much of what my sister-in-law has.

But the moment of peace is fleeting. At first, it's a slight rumble, almost like a truck passing through the street below, but then the rumble turns to a tremble, and the walls begin to shake, and the lights begin to flicker.

"Earthquake?" one of the nurses asks.

My brother and his friends share knowing looks as the atmosphere thickens around us and the vibrations and tremors grow stronger and stronger. No, this isn't an earthquake. This is the daughter of the devil coming to claim what she thinks is hers.

Mazzikin is coming.

My pulse races, and I exchange a look with Blaze. While we may not agree on the state of our relationship, we agree on one thing.

There's no way that bitch is taking the baby.

My brother and the guys turn their backs to Demi, shielding her and the child as the air thickens with smoke and ash. The space a few feet in front of her bed shimmers and out steps a five-foot-five blonde with porcelain skin and an air of entitlement. The Princess of Hell is wearing a velvet dress that molds to her curves. She'd be pretty if she weren't here to take a child.

Her gaze skates around the room, passing over me and Blaze, narrowing on Mateo, Colt, and Grayson before settling on Demi.

"Hello, Demetria."

“Mazzikin,” she grits out between her teeth.

Mazzikin flicks her hand and Mateo’s body flies across the room, smashing into the far wall. I hadn’t even seen him rush her. “Silly vampire.”

I ready myself but wait for the right moment. She’s too aware of the opposition she faces. She needs to be distracted before I strike.

“We made a deal,” Mazzikin says with a sigh.

“You didn’t explain what it meant,” Demi argues, shielding the baby as much as she can.

“I clearly said I’d take a part of yourself and that,” Mazzikin points to the baby, “is part of you. Or was, but either way, your blood runs through her veins, and I’ve come to collect what belongs to me.”

“Like hell.” Grayson launches himself at her but she tosses him as easily as she did Mateo, and he crashes into the glass window. It shatters, and he snarls as he falls.

Demi stifles a scream.

He’ll be fine. The fall might kill him, but he will heal, and if our security team is worth what we pay them, they’ll bring him inside the building and give him a safe place to recover.

Something in the atmosphere changes, like the air growing thinner, coated with cinder. The temperature in the room rises until my skin is feverishly hot. Mazzikin is doing something. Demi’s eyes are nearly all red now, but she can’t do anything. She’s holding the child she just delivered against her chest.

The demon raises her hands, posed to strike or cast a spell or something equally as malevolent. I’m moving before I can think better of it. Flitting to protect the child. A snarl chases after me. My feet slam against the tile floor. My heart hammers against my chest, and my vision tunnels.

I have to get there in time.

In my peripheral vision, wisps of fiery orange power crackle in the air.

Fuck. I'm not going to make it. I crouch and lunge toward the bed. Blaze's wolf catapults over me, a flash of black fur and fang. An explosion of that fiery magic slams into my gut and cocoons around the two of us.

A voice, drawn up from the very depths of hell itself, scratches through my head, etching each muttered demonic word over inside my brain. I don't understand any of it but I understand the sensations it brings. Darkness. Evil. Death. Destruction. Forces I can't see clutch at my neck, heavy like iron shackles. Blaze's wolf snarls but he's suspended in the air just like me. Held up by Mazzikin's spell.

Speaking of.

The Princess of Hell is screaming and cursing in that same demonic language that the voice inside my head is using.

A final rasped word echoes inside of my mind and another blast of power slams into me. I jerk away from it, but it's too late. Something slimy like oil coats my veins. A secondary life force that somehow linked itself to my own.

"Fucking fools!" Mazzikin screams in English, and a portal appears behind her, fire and blackish smoke swirling together. I couldn't see it before, but whatever spell she cast must make it so I can see her magic working.

"You're as good as dead but there's no time to waste," Mazzikin snaps and spares Demi a final glare. "You're one lucky bitch, you know that?"

Demi bares her teeth. "Fuck you."

"Maybe one day you will," Mazzikin says with a razor-sharp smile. "Come along, pets," she says to me and Blaze as she steps back into the swirling fire. Our bodies are still wrapped in her power, but I don't know if it'll protect us from the fire.

Blaze and I float toward the portal, and my stomach turns, but it's worth it. I saved the baby. I finally did something worthwhile.

I crane my neck as much as the magic allows and find Demi's gaze. "Take care of her."

“Evelyn! Fight it!” Mateo shouts.

As if the portal were impatient, we’re sucked through with such vicious force I black out.

Chapter Two

EVELYN

I come to in a room with high ceilings, grand stone walls—like a castle forged long ago—and black and gold marble floors. My body is splayed across it like a doll a child had tossed aside. Smoke clings to the air.

Hell. I've been here before.

I roll my head to the side to find I'm not alone. Blaze is in his human form, but he's not moving. Pushing up from the floor, I hurry to his side and check his pulse. I breathe out a sigh of relief when a strong and steady heartbeat greets me.

“Aw, worried about lover boy?”

Whipping around, I find Mazzikin draped over a gleaming black throne. She's changed since I last saw her, wearing a silky white dress that cuts low across her chest, exposing ample cleavage. Almost as though she's trying to impress someone.

But who? Me?

Unlikely with the way she's glaring at me.

“What's wrong with him?”

“He'll wake up soon enough, just like you.” She releases a bored sigh. “Fucking mutt.”

“Watch it,” I warn her. I'm the only one that gets to insult him like that.

She arches an eyebrow. “Touchy, touchy. Careful with that heart of yours, keep leaving it out on your sleeve and someone is bound to break it.”

“God, you’re an annoying cunt,” I say right as I rush her.

But she’s faster and stronger. I knew this, but I had to try. Her hand catches me around the throat and up close, I can see the darker shades in her irises. “Well, aren’t you a riot of fun,” she murmurs, interest flashing across her face.

I snarl and try to rip her hand off me, but she simply laughs and tosses me. I careen through the air but tuck my legs in, managing to land in a crouch with a growl.

“That was rude.”

“You attacked me,” she counters.

“And I’ll do it again,” I warn, just not right at this moment.

She smiles, completely unfazed. “I was mad, you know, when you messed up my plans, but now I’m wondering if you and I can’t have a little fun together.” Then the smile falls and her eyes go dead: ruthless and cold, evil embodied. The change is so sudden, so jarring, I ready myself for an attack.

But her gaze moves to the door.

The little hairs on my arm rise and my instincts are screaming at me to run. Something is coming. Tremors, each one bigger than the next reverberate through the gilded onyx marble. San Francisco has earthquakes all the time. I’ve grown used to them over the centuries but this? It’s no simple quake. With each shake comes a vicious chill, one that sinks through my skin and settles deep in my bones.

Wrapped in dark iron, the dark stained wood doors should be infallible to gusts of wind but they fall prey to a blast of shadowy power. The black mist rips the doors from their hinges and it flies through the air toward me. I dodge to the side, moving to Blaze’s prone form.

Four men—no, four demons—storm into the throne room dressed in identical black robes that cover most of their forms.

The cowl hoods are down, the loose material resting on their backs to reveal sharp features and handsome faces.

The first, with skin so pale it's almost translucent, but somehow, his presence is so otherworldly that it makes me nauseous. The second, tall, dark, and broad, built for battle, has my hackles rising. The third, lithe but the dangerous aura, almost like he'll take everything you have and more, lingers around him. And the fourth, with bottomless black eyes and one hand that's half bone, is the most terrifying of all.

I swallow as the last of them looks at me, trying my best not to cower, but my undead heart threatens to stop beating at the sight of him.

This reaction isn't normal.

"Oh, goody. The boy band is here for my party." Mazzikin leans back on the throne, unbothered by their grand entrance.

"A little early to celebrate, don't you think, Princess?" The one with the edgy swath of dark hair arches an eyebrow.

The pale skinned one slides his gaze over me and Blaze. "There's a naked shifter on the floor," he observes. "Mazzikin, have you been a bad girl?"

She hops off the throne and struts over, hips swaying seductively. "I thought I'd surprise you, seeing as you've been asleep for six hundred years or so."

"Six hundred years and seventy-five days, but who's counting?" The touch of sarcasm is at odds with his expression which is devoid of any emotion.

"Mmm. Pity your little nap had to end." Mazzikin stops before the four demons and flips her hair over her shoulder. "Since you're up, how about a game?" She glances over her shoulder and smirks at me. "I've found us some toys."

The one with broad shoulders takes me in, eyebrows rising. "I'm not into brunettes."

Okay, *rude*. Since there's some sort of power play going on, and I have no idea who these demons are, I keep my mouth shut.

“She’s mine. You can have the wolf.”

“And what, curse tell, are we going to do with a vampire and a wolf?” The one with the black eyes glances at Blaze, and I place more of myself in front of the shifter. The demon’s gaze lifts to meet mine once more, and I shudder despite myself.

He’s the one to worry about.

“Three tests. Winner takes the throne.”

“Princess, you know the prophecy—”

“The oracle can kiss my ass. I’m the rightful heir, and I won’t rule over that which you plan to destroy. Besides, I wouldn’t mind having a few pets to sit at my feet.” She steps closer to and runs her hand over his chest. “Or a few heads to hang from the ceiling like chandeliers.”

He catches her wrist and leans into her space. “Then talk to your daddy. Tell him you don’t care that the horsemen have risen or that the prophecy has already begun, tell him you want a crown to place on that pretty head.”

Uh, back up. The Four Horsemen? Pestilence, War, Famine and Death? There are various stories about what happens when they rise and they all end in mass annihilation of what would be considered sinners, and on Earth, well, there are plenty of victims waiting for slaughter.

And then there was the incident with Mazzikin and Death at a school Blaze is responsible for. Raven, the red headed medium and newly appointed headmistress, somehow managed to steal one of his minions and Death wasn’t too happy about it. When he came to get his retribution, Mazzikin was there to stop him.

What is she playing at?

She wants the throne, she made that much clear, but how does she plan to stop the apocalypse? And what did Demi’s child have anything to do with it? It doesn’t make any sense.

Mazzikin is silent for a minute, and the four of them stare her down. I expect her to concede, but she tips her head to the

side and unleashes a chuckle that makes me shift to shield Blaze a little better.

Now would be a great time for the big burly alpha to wake up. I could take one or two demons on my own, but the Horsemen and the Princess of Hell? I'm not trying to die the final death today.

"Silly, silly, ponies," she whispers. "Death has already agreed."

The three glare at the dark and mysterious one.

He scowls at Mazzikin. "What she means is she conned me into a binding oath."

"Mmm, that was a fun ride, wasn't it?"

"Unbelievable," the pale skinned one—perhaps Pestilence—mutters. "You fucked her."

"Twice," Mazzikin says.

"You were asleep for a long time," Death explains. "I was bored."

Mazzikin bristles. "Bored or not, you still made an oath. The game is set to begin now that my player is here."

"I thought you needed a few years to train her." Death studies me. "She's not a baby."

Mazzikin shrugs. "I found a better contestant."

An unwilling one. Whatever game she's playing apparently now involves me being some part of a contest. Better me than Demi's child.

Death hums, eyes bouncing between me and Blaze. "It's cruel to pit lovers against each other."

"Imagine the fun," Mazzikin says. "At least it'll be more entertaining than a night with you."

Scowling, he cuts his eyes toward her. "I seem to remember you being more than pleased."

"Perhaps you're channeling memories from one of the souls you've led to hell." She spins on her heel and strides

toward the throne. “Evelyn. Come.”

Right. See that line there? She fucking crossed it. I plant my feet and glare at her. She doesn’t notice I’m not following her little command until she sits upon the throne. Arching a single eyebrow, she releases a tiny sigh.

“Fine. Have it your way.” She flicks her hand and Blaze screams.

My heart sinks, and I turn, searching for an injury but nothing is visible. There’s only one way to stop what she’s doing. Blood trickles from his nose, and he begins to convulse.

“Okay!” I shout. “I’ll do it, just stop hurting him!”

“You learn so fast,” Mazzikin teases and swishes her hand through the air.

Blaze groans on the ground and struggles to rise. His arms give out, weakened from whatever Mazzikin has done.

“Tick. Tock.”

God, I hate her.

Swallowing my pride, I scurry to the throne. Mazzikin gestures to a pillow at the side of it. She expects me to sit on it like an actual dog. I consider fighting her again but I don’t want Blaze to suffer for my stubbornness. Sinking to my knees, I find the best position to keep me ready to spring up and fight if it comes to it.

Mazzikin chuckles under her breath. “See? She’s ready for battle. Can’t say the same for the wolf.”

Blaze finally manages to sit, casting a miserably cautious look around the room. Like me, he realizes we’re not the big bads in this situation.

“You’re sure you can’t break whatever this oath is?” War, the one with broad shoulders and the literal embodiment of warrior asks Death.

Death frowns and shakes his head. “I’ve already tried.”

“Three trials,” Mazzikin singsongs. “Three tests to see who rightfully belongs on the throne.”

Pinching my eyebrows together, I puzzle over this information. The Horsemen have risen. By all modern accounts, the beginning of the apocalypse should have already started. What does the throne have to do with anything?

I don't make a habit of reading the Bible, but I don't recall anything having to do with the Four Horsemen and a throne.

"And if you lose, you'll submit?" Death demands. "You'll step aside and let us do what we were destined to do?"

"If I win, *you* will submit," Mazzikin tosses back with so much venom even I recoil away from her.

Home girl has some anger issues. Maybe it's a demon thing.

"Fine," War bites out. "You have your wish. Three trials."

"Mmm, wonderful. The first trial will be tomorrow at sunset."

I snap my head in her direction, and she arches an eyebrow at me as if to dare me to protest. I don't.

She shoos the Horsemen away, and I hate that I admire her for so casually dismissing the creatures who could ruin Earth so easily. "Take your pet and fix him up; he'll need all the strength he can get."

Blaze is pulled to his feet and he shrugs off Pestilence's help. His burning dark eyes jump to mine, and he grimaces. Nodding at him, I smirk as though nothing is wrong but his gaze darkens, seeing through my armor as always.

My chest aches as he leaves the room, but I bite back questions about where they're taking him and how Mazzikin knows he'll be okay because honestly? The bitch doesn't care.

"Well, Evelyn, I guess we'll see which of you is stronger tomorrow. It would be a pity for the wolf to rip that gorgeous head from your body." She pats the strands of my hair. "Perhaps I could turn it into a memento though."

Slapping her hand away, I scowl at her. "What exactly is the first trial?"

She flashes blinding white teeth at me. “I was hoping you’d ask.”

Chapter Three

EVELYN

The castle is like a gothic wet dream. Shiny onyx floors cut with bright orange streaks, like black Marquina veined with fire, grand windows with black velvet drapes, smooth dark stone, fire lit torches, chandeliers with three levels of blood red candles with blue wax dripping down. I'm not sure what sort of magic is involved in that last bit, but it creates an eerily beautiful effect.

Mazzikin's tall heels click over the floor in steady beats. Tap, tap, tap. I bet if you looked close, there'd be mice cowering in the corners waiting for her to pass.

Out of thin air, a shadowy form that is somewhat human shaped appears at her side.

"Wraith, Evelyn. Evelyn, Wraith." She side eyes the swirling mass of smoke. "Did you prepare the room?" The wraith tremors, and she nods as if he answered her question. Maybe he did, I'm not fluent in wraith speak.

She turns down a wide corridor and four demon guards—horns, glowing red eyes, hooves for feet and razor-sharp teeth—snap to attention. Mazzikin gestures to a door, and one guard leaves his post to open it. Without thanking him, she breezes inside.

Guess I'm supposed to follow.

"Thanks," I say to the demon, and he recoils like I've insulted him. "Er, fuck you, I mean?"

Giving a slight bow, he moves back to his position.

“There’s no need for manners in the underworld, love. Demons don’t like kindness.”

“And that’s what’s wrong with this place,” I grumble, stopping beside the gorgeous blonde princess of Hell and eyeing the large bed. A silky red fabric hangs over the top like a canopy and the sheets are a deeper shade of crimson.

“Right. Well, rest up now, the fate of humanity depends on you,” she says with far too much cheer and turns to go.

“Wait,” I grab her arm.

Her gaze drops to my hand and slowly lifts until she’s staring at me, one perfect eyebrow arched in challenge.

“You want me to win, right?”

She yanks her arm away and scowls at me. “Of course.”

I smirk. “Then I guess you’ll need to give me a little more information about what exactly I need to be prepared for. Otherwise…” I trail off and glance around the room with a shrug. “I guess those sexy horsemen might get what they wanted all along.”

“Don’t speak of them in that way,” she hisses.

Gotcha, Mazzi, you horny bitch.

“Mmm, but they are delicious, aren’t they?” I’m playing with fire, but seeing as she needs me, I doubt she’ll hurt me. “And War, I bet I could lick his abs and die happy.”

Her hand lashes out to catch me around the throat, but given her first reaction to me calling them sexy, I expected it. I easily dodge her, flitting to the other side of the room. Mazzikin doesn’t chase me though. She must realize she’s shown her cards.

The princess wants the throne and the horsemen.

“What a predicament we’re in, Maz.”

“Mazzikin,” she says with a huff.

“Maz is cute though, rolls off the tongue, don’t you think?”

“Don’t push it, vamp. I’ll shove you in the tenth circle and find another contestant to take your place.”

“Would you tell me a bit about the first trial?” I bat my eyelashes and add a little curtsy. “If it pleases her majesty.”

She harrumphs and then drops onto the fainting couch with such dramatic flair I can’t help but wonder if she’s the reason they were invented. “A simple fight to the fiftieth blood.”

“Fifth?”

“Fiftieth,” she drawls. “Five-oh. Fifty blood draws to win.” Rolling her neck, she studies my form. “You look strong, but I’ll admit I’m worried that big dog—”

“Wolf,” I say with a huff. I’m the only one that gets to insult Blaze. “He’s a wolf.”

She smirks. “So it seems you and I are more alike than I first thought.”

“We both want things we shouldn’t?” I guess.

“The only difference is I won’t let lust stop me from winning. Will you?”

I don’t have an answer for her. Fiftieth blood between supernaturals could be deadly. There’s no immediate desire to kill Blaze. He’s never done anything to warrant it. It would be easier if I hated him.

“Do you think you can trust him when it comes down to choosing you or himself?” Mazzikin rises from her seat and smooths her hands down the fabric covering her torso. “Or will he be as ruthless as the one who broke your heart?”

Sucking in a breath, I narrow my gaze on her. “How do you know about that?”

“Oh, I don’t, but damage recognizes damage, Evelyn.” She tips her head and studies me, or perhaps she’s reading me again, seeing through the badass facade I put on and digging her hellish claws into memories best left forgotten. “He’ll come to you tonight, try to convince you to refuse to play our little game. Don’t trust him. The horsemen are nothing if not predictable, and they’ll try to trick you into complacency only

to unleash him on you in the trial. In hell, there's no room for love."

With those wise words, she snaps her fingers and her whole form dissipates. I blink and wait for her to reappear. She never does.

That's a handy little trick.

Will he be as ruthless as the one who broke your heart?

A chill sweeps through the grand suite, and I shiver, wrapping my arms around my middle and battling centuries old demons.



EVENTUALLY, I get tired of sitting in the lavish bedroom and venture out into the hallway. The guards glance at me, uninterested, and go back to staring at the wall. Their horns are rough and tawny in color. But that's not the strangest part. Those red eyes remind me a little of hunters when they go into kill mode.

Some might consider Demi close to being a demon.

God, I hope Mateo was smart enough to move her and the baby somewhere outside of the Blood Mafia tower, though if Mazzikin wanted to find them, I doubt a change in location would stop her.

There's a door across from mine, and I step toward it but a large, gnarled hand slaps into my chest. "Don't."

Hissing, I shove his palm away and bare my teeth at him. "Touch me again and you won't live to regret it."

The guard chortles, then looks at the others and they all burst into laughter at the same time. The harsh, almost braying sound echoes around the corridor and I grind my teeth. They're so confident I'm harmless?

Two things I hate: being underestimated, and people laughing at me.

“Right then, I’d apologize but I don’t like lying.” And then I’m moving. Flitting to the one who touched me, I duck under his sword and lunge up, wrapping my hands around his jaw and shoulder in the process and running up the wall, roughly jerking his jaw around. It takes a bit more force than I’m used to, but his neck breaks with a satisfying *crack* as I catapult myself to his other side. He drops to the ground with his neck nearly spun all the way around.

Beautiful.

There’s commotion, and I refocus and make quick work of the other guards. They’re big and strong but slow compared to my supernatural speed. The second falls when I break his wrist and jam his own sword into his gut. Yanking that very blade out, guts fly through the air as I spin and slash at his buddy. The tough skin around his throat opens and ichor floods out. He reaches up to stop the flow, but I slam my foot into his gut, launching him back into the stone wall.

One of the guards manages to punch me.

My head snaps to the side, and stars dance across my vision, but I don’t lose my grip on the sword. Blood trickles from my split lip. I taste it and growl. “Nobody makes me bleed my own blood.”

Flitting, I crash into him, plunging the sword into his gut and drawing it up, opening him from belly button to sternum. I shove my hand into the bloody mess and rip his intestines out.

“Bon appétit,” I hiss as I shove them into his mouth.

He chokes and jerks as his organs begin to fail. It’s a dreadfully slow process. With a laugh, I pull the sword out of his body.

“Must I do everything for you?” I yank the sword back, blood flying off of it and splatting onto the wall, and then I swing hard enough to decapitate him. His head slides from his body and the latter topples to the ground.

I jump away to avoid being hit.

“Are you done?”

Blaze.

Turning, I let the sword dangle at my side and run my arm over the blood splattered across my face. “You didn’t think to help?”

He’s dressed in soft black pants and a matching loose top, casually leaning against the corner of the hallway, blocking my escape. “You had it under control.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” I lie. Part of me appreciates that he knows I can handle myself. “How long until they regenerate?”

“Do they?”

Hm. Good question. I know next to nothing about the underworld. “Guess we’ll find out.” I toss the blade to the ground and glance at my blood splattered shoes. “I’m so annoyed.”

“Perhaps Mazzikin has a pair you can borrow.”

Placing my hands on my hips, I strut toward him, letting my gaze roam over every delicious inch of the shifter. He is quite beautiful. “Did your new friends let you borrow that outfit?”

He nods, eyes glowing the closer I get to him.

He’s threatened.

“You know about the trial?”

“Fiftieth blood,” he responds. “We should refuse to fight.”

Ugh. I had hoped Mazzikin would be wrong. Disappointment trickles through my veins. If he wants to play games, then we can play games. “Do you think it’ll work?”

He searches my face. “We have to try. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I almost laugh in his face, but manage to keep my features smooth and concerned. That sentiment is painfully similar to what my creator promised right before he chained me up in his basement and tortured me.

“And how do I know I can trust you?”

“Because,” he growls. “I’m not going to be their pawn and neither should you.”

I almost believe him. Almost. “Okay, Blaze.” I put my palm on his chest and his body tenses in response. Is he scared of me? Aw, how cute. “We’ll play it your way. Tomorrow, when they demand a battle, we’ll refuse.”

His harsh exhale brushes over my face. “Good.” Reaching up, he places his hand on the back of my neck and draws my mouth toward his. My stomach flips, and my core tightens in response. Normally, I’d fight him, but I want to taste him before his deceit rips whatever we had apart.

Tomorrow changes everything.

Chapter Four

EVELYN

Mazzikin paces in the small fighter's room, glaring at me as I tug on the outfit she had made for me. It's strappy and mostly made of leather. Thankfully, it covers all the important bits. My tits look fabulous too. I turn and check out the backside. Yup. Ass looks fantastic as well.

"Am I seducing Blaze or kicking his ass?" I ask her with a laugh, smoothing my hand over my braid.

"Why not both?" Mazzikin looks me up and down. "You're hot." She says it matter-of-fact versus paying me a compliment.

"No lies detected." I drop a hand to my hip. "So. What sort of weaponry am I working with? Sword? Bow and arrow? I hope not, I'm no Katniss."

"Actually." She gestures to the wall of weapons. "I was hoping you'd take the whip."

"Hmm." I eye the almost shiny black braided rope tipped with a wicked sharp silver spike. "I guess that'll do. What is Blaze going to use?"

"I don't know," she says with a shrug. "It shouldn't matter so long as you do your job and fend him off."

"You have a lot of confidence in my abilities for someone who's never seen me fight."

She tips her head. “You have passion. Your desire to keep your niece safe will drive you to defeat him. He’s strong, sure, but you have more at stake.”

“It’s demented to want to take someone’s child,” I tell her.

“Perhaps.” She narrows her eyes. “But I’ll do whatever it takes to keep those four from ascending.”

Releasing a sigh, I head to the weapon wall. “Maybe you should bang out your frustrations. Perhaps once your little ponies get laid, they’ll decide the apocalypse isn’t worth it.”

“My little ponies?” she asks with a frown.

“Mmm. Death. Famine. Pestilence. War. You might know them?”

“Thanks for the sarcasm. Yes, I know who you mean, but mine?”

“Uh, yeah.” I grasp the whip and lift it off its hook. The leather is soft against my palms. High quality. Sleek. “I just thought since you slept with Death maybe you’d take them all for a ride?”

“Don’t be obscene,” she says with a tittering laugh. “Four of them to one of me? I don’t even have enough holes.”

“That’s what the hands are for, love. Or I guess if they’re a little fluid with their sexuality, you could make a chain.” I wrinkle my nose. “Demi’s with my brother and his friends, but I don’t make a habit of asking about their sex lives, no matter how loud they may be when they do the deed.”

“Even if I wanted to, it’s out of the question.”

Whirling around, I uncurl the whip and point at her. “But you do want to?”

“No,” she says too quickly.

I *knew* she was a horny little princess.

“What’s the prophecy again?”

She rolls her eyes. “Win the battle and I’ll tell you.”

“Bitch.”

“Cunt.”

“Fair,” I say with a wicked grin. Wait, I’m not supposed to enjoy talking to her. I adjust my face into a proper scowl. “Lead the way.”

She searches my face then nods and flicks her wrist to open the door that leads to a hallway. A circle of light glows at the end of the corridor, and a rush of sound hits me all at once. Stomping. Cheers. Clapping. Brawling.

The roaring of hundreds upon hundreds of demons in the stands.

I trail behind her, studying her movements as we go. Her shoulders tense about halfway down but she forces them to relax with a harsh exhale. Interesting. Is she nervous? There’s a lot riding on the fight. Maybe she’s not as confident in my abilities as she led on.

Stopping just before the tunnel ends, she turns and waits for me to join her. The whip drags across the stone ground with a delicious scrape. I’ll have to invest in one if I make it back to Earth.

No. Not if. When. I will get back. Somehow, I’ll find a way to stop the apocalypse.

Easy peasy vampire squeezy.

“They’re going to eat you up,” she murmurs as she checks me out again. “Especially when you bleed.”

“How sweet,” I mutter, eyeing what I can of the stands. The architecture is reminiscent of the Grecian colosseum but with onyx stone and flickering, red lanterns floating high above the ground. A warm red glow bathes the sand-covered battle ground. Soon enough, blood will paint the ground red instead.

Movement from the tunnel across the field catches my attention. Blaze stops at the edge of his corridor and holds my gaze, giving me a brief nod as if to remind me of the promise we made last night. The one his Horsemen put him up to.

Speaking of the devils, the four demons appear riding grand steeds. The crowd goes into a frenzy, and Mazzikin grumbles. The Horsemen in person are intense, but seeing them on their actual horses and wearing looks that could turn flowers to ash, is terrifying. Those are the faces of destruction.

Moderately handsome faces if you're into death and destruction.

"Who's ready for a battle?" War's shout rings through the stadium, chased by enthusiastic cheers and whoops of confirmation.

Death turns and gestures to Blaze who struts out of his tunnel on command. A pup well trained. The crowd gets louder upon seeing him, and I can't say I blame him. His battle gear is a simple leather speedo type garb. Literally only his package is covered, and it's clear he's working with a lot. His muscled thighs are thick and powerful, flexing with every movement. Those abs I've admired so many times gleam, some type of slick oil has been spread across every ridge and it only highlights how solid his middle is.

Pecs.

Biceps.

Shoulders.

Head, knees, and fucking toes.

Blaze is a powerhouse and the Horsemen picked the perfect outfit to showcase that.

Fuckers.

"Let's not let them have all the fun," Mazzikin tells me before strutting out to a renewed chorus of blood thirsty screaming. "My, my, what a pretty victim you've brought me." She stops ten feet away from the Horsemen, gazing up at them like they couldn't just trample her and be done with it. It's kind of badass. "Evelyn, love?"

It's hard to be annoyed with the command when she calls me love, and part of me is curious to see how the demons react to seeing me. They were so amped up for Blaze. Arching an

eyebrow at the wolf, I start my walk and work. My hips sway dangerously with every step, and I spin the whip around and let it snap in the air.

The crowd doesn't disappoint me. Almost deafening, they shout and cheer and yell as I strut to stand beside Mazzikin. I spot wings and horns, snouts and hooves, blue skin, red skin, one fish, two fish. So many types of demons it's almost overwhelming. So many salivating just for me. I dare say they make more noise for me than they did the wolf.

I shoot Blaze a cocky smirk and he rolls his eyes.

"The battle ends at the fiftieth blood," Mazzikin calls. "And my sweet vampire is vicious and deadly enough to finish the job. Who wants to see the wolf's head on a spike?"

Keeping my features smooth, I try not to let my internal panic show. I'm good with kicking his ass if I have to, but no one mentioned anything about killing him. It certainly never came up during our little pep talk.

"No one will die tonight," Death shouts. "Fifty bloods. No fatal wounds."

"Let them die!" someone shouts.

"Then what fun would the other trials be?" Death calls back. "Rest assured, there will be one winner by the end, but tonight's game isn't to the death." He shoots the demon princess a reprimanding look.

She simply shrugs and turns to me. "Give him hell." Mazzikin snaps her fingers, disappearing and reappearing on the dais that overlooks the battleground. The Horsemen trade looks and kick their horses into a trot, heading back to the tunnel Blaze had come from. They dismount and a demon with two ruddy brown horns takes the reins and leads the animals away.

Death turns and gazes up at Mazzikin who is studying them, as if waiting for them to attack. Swaths of onyx mist circle around the four demon's feet, and slowly the shadowy clouds carry the Horsemen into the air and up to the dais.

Pestilence steps onto the raised platform first, strutting past Mazzikin and side-eyeing the princess like a predator watching its prey. She purses her lips as the other Horsemen join her. The dark magic dissipates and the noise from the crowd grows loud and incessant.

A low chanting starts but quickly takes hold, slithering through the stands until it's so loud I grimace.

Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight.

Blaze casts me a wary look.

Stepping back, I fall into a fighter's stance and lift an eyebrow in challenge.

He lazily prepares as well, but it's almost like he thinks this whole situation is a joke. Or maybe he's trying to trick me into believing the promise he made.

“MAKE HIM BLEED!” The blood thirsty cry comes from nearby, and I glance to the side, trying to find the owner of the voice, but more than one demon begins to demand the same thing. Some call for my blood as well.

“Shall we?” I ask Blaze.

He frowns and comes toward me.

I flit to the left, creating a wide arc and race up behind him. He could have easily tracked the movement, but he's slow in turning, like he's playing dumb, and I lash out with the whip. It cracks across his back, and he grunts. An angry sliver of red appears where I'd hit him.

“First blood!” Mazzikin shouts.

The crowd erupts into chaos. Bets are waged as I circle him again.

When he'd come to me last night, after being separated, he said we should refuse to fight. But his fists clench tight, and his jaw grinds. Vibrant glowing eyes land on me. The wolf doesn't like that I made him bleed.

This is a game of life or death—literally—and I'm not going to be fooled by another man. Never again.

So I attack. Once more he's slow to react, and the metal tip of my whip slices across his skin. Fur ripples down his arms, but he struggles to control his wolf, biding his time. Perhaps he's waiting for me to exhaust myself. He should know better though. Without him fighting back, I'm able to flit around him, swinging the whip around as fast as I can, hit after hit landing all over his body.

Mazzikin bursts out laughing, the sound cruel and cold. "Fifteenth blood. Is your wolf broken?" she asks the Horsemen.

The demons in the stands don't care, they're practically foaming at the mouth as the blood continues to drip down Blaze's skin. His supernatural healing should have kicked in by now, but it hasn't. The silver of the whip must be coated with something that inhibits that ability.

"The fight isn't over," Death says, nodding at Blaze, sending him some secretive message.

Narrowing my eyes, I swing the whip around again and catch Blaze across the cheek. A deep snarl bursts from his mouth, and the yellow of his eyes pulses. Baring his sharp canines, he prowls toward me, his deep growl brushing over my skin.

Unbelievable.

Mazzikin was right.

He was never going to refuse to fight. He was just waiting for the right moment to start his attack.

Well I'll be damned if I let him get to me. Drawing my arm back, I clench my abs, grimacing as I use my legs and stomach muscles to propel my arm forward. The whip moves fast like a bullet, sailing toward his thigh. Blaze races forward, catching the whip and quickly curling it around his hand over and over, reeling me in with supernatural speed.

Snarling, I try to wrench my arm back, but the leather is tightly wrapped around his fingers.

"Evelyn." My name is a guttural curse slipping past his lips. The wolf is so close to the surface I can practically see

him lunging for me.

“Fuck you, Blaze.” Releasing the handle of the whip, I flit away, running straight toward the opposite wall.

With a growl, he drops the whip as well and charges after me.

My heart races, but I don't falter. Feet pounding across the sand, I launch myself at the six-foot stone wall, running up it and flipping myself over as Blaze tries to grab for me. I glance at him as my body arcs over him. Fur is covering his arms now, and he partially shifts, his hands extending into long claws that could slice someone's neck open.

I'll be damned if it's mine.

Landing in a crouch at the end of a flip, I shove myself up in the next millisecond, sprinting with supernatural speed to the discarded whip.

“Evelyn!” He screams, voice so full of rage that it sounds like the echo of the man who tortured me hundreds of years ago.

Stupid, foolish girl. They're all the same. They'll rip you apart as soon as you give them the chance!

My hand closes around the whip and I swing it around again, grunting as I use every muscle to send the silver tip slicing across his torso.

He growls and storms toward me.

I swing the whip around again but this time he dodges it, jumping to the side before surging forward and slicing his hand through the leather, cutting the whip in half. The weight of it leaves my hand, and with a snarl, I toss it aside.

“Evelyn,” he hisses. Face scrunched in anger, fists clenching and unclenching. Glowing eyes promising pain. Blaze stares at me like I'm his worst enemy.

“Don't,” I snap, lunging out of reach when he grabs for me with those clawed hands. “I should have known you were a snake.” His eyes narrow, but I don't wait for his reply. I flit away, moving faster than I ever have before, practically flying

as I circle back around and jump onto his back. My legs clamp around his waist and I dig my nails into either shoulder.

Two more bloods.

Then with an animalistic snarl, I slam my fangs into his neck. Rich and smoky copper bursts across my tongue. Of course Blaze's blood would taste divine. Fucker.

His knees buckle, and he reaches back, dragging his claws across my back. "Shit, sorry," he mumbles.

Yeah, fuck that. I'm not falling for his act.

"Two bloods from the wolf," Death shouts. "Fucking finally."

Snarling, I take a long, deep pull from Blaze's vein. Dragging my nails across his skin, I half-heartedly listen to Mazzikin tick off number after number. Blaze begins to stagger, and I come up for air, licking my bloody lips and placing my mouth at his ear.

"So much for refusing to play," I murmur, sucking the lobe of his ear into my mouth before biting it hard enough to draw blood.

"Forty-nine!" Mazzikin's voice is ecstatic, and distantly, I hear clapping and demons calling my name.

I tsk and move my mouth back down to his neck, finding a new spot to mark. As my teeth sink in, Blaze releases a heavy groan and drops to his knees.

"I'm not fighting you, Evelyn," he says with a growl. "I'm trying." He grunts as I draw hard, blood flooding into my mouth. "I'm not going to hurt you."

His words shock through my system, and I recoil from him, jumping off his back and wiping my mouth across the back of my forearm.

"Fiftieth!" Mazzikin screams, and the crowd goes wild. "She got fifty! Your pitiful wolf only got two!" she taunts the Horsemen.

The sounds from the stands fade away, every sense focusing on the wolf who hadn't fought back.

Blaze falls onto his ass and glances at me over his bloodied shoulder. His eyes are still glowing yellow, but the fur on his arm has retracted, and his fingers are no longer claws. A deep frown burrows into his face as he looks at me, and suddenly, shame floods through my veins.

The blood on my back has already dried; my supernatural healing has already sealed the wounds. Two. He only got me twice. And he apologized for it. My eyebrows pinch together as he groans in agony.

Fuck.

He wasn't lying. He didn't want to fight. He sliced through the whip, but only to stop me from hitting him again. He held back. Blaze isn't weak. He's strong enough to give Mateo a run for his money, but he hadn't hurt me, not intentionally.

I don't understand.

"Evel—" Blaze topples forward.

"Blaze!" I race to his side and roll him onto his back, wincing at how much blood is covering his skin. The wounds from the whip are still seeping. The gouges from my nails have healed, leaving behind faint pink lines, and the places where I'd sunk my teeth into his skin are sealed as well. I hurt him, sure, but there's no reason he should be collapsing.

His eyes flutter open and find mine. "Mate," he whispers before his eyes roll back.

What the fuck did he just say? What is happening? I pat his cheek. "Wake up." His head lolls to the side, and I growl, ignoring the way the sand digs into my knees. "Blaze," I snap, shaking him. "Blaze!" My voice pitches and a deep, rumbling laugh rolls down from the dais.

Glancing up, I spot Death gazing down at me, holding a shining yellow orb. "How much is his life worth to you, vampire?"

"That's not the game," Mazzikin snaps.

His life? My eyes shoot to the orb. Is that his soul? I shake my head. Impossible.

Is it? An oily voice slithers through my mind. It's fascinating that you're so worried considering how brutally you attacked him. You did a lot of damage. Death glances at the orb. *I could easily finish the job.*

My jaw clenches. "What do you want?"

"Shut up, Evelyn," Mazzikin growls. "Death, you're cheating."

"There are no rules in hell."

"Bullshit. You're bound by our agreement. Play fair, or I'll go pay Rollo a visit."

Death's features grow stormy, and he glares at her. "The child has nothing to do with this."

"Put the wolf's soul back." Mazzikin gestures to Blaze's lifeless form.

"Fine," Death says with a bored sigh, flicking his wrist. The yellow orb sails toward us and slams into Blaze's body which jolts in response.

Blaze sucks in a harsh breath and jerks up, eyes wide and glowing. "What the fuck?"

"You're okay," I tell him, holding up my hands to show him I'm not a threat, at least not any longer. "I'm sorry," I murmur.

His gaze searches mine, and sadness leaches across his face. "I told you to refuse."

"She told me you'd say that to trick me," I confess. I shoot my gaze to the dais, but Mazzikin and the Horsemen are gone. There are still demons in the stands, but they begin to disperse now that the fight is done, leaving me and Blaze alone.

I guess the princess doesn't care what I do after winning the first battle.

With a disgruntled sigh, I turn back to Blaze. "We should clean you up."



BLAZE

As soon as we're inside of my suite and the door closes, I use the last of my strength to push Evelyn against a wall. She releases the softest sound of surprise. Seeing as she half carried me here, she definitely didn't anticipate me cornering her, but I need her to listen to me for once in her fucking life.

"What are you doing?" Her eyes flare in surprise, and her pulse jumps as I wrap my fingers around her throat. "Is this where you try to finish me off?" she whispers.

She knows I can't fight her right now. I'm a joke to her. Chest tight from whatever Death did, my breaths come in hard pants and it's taking every ounce of energy to hold her in place.

"Evelyn." Her name comes out half growled, and a sexy smirk tugs at the corners of her mouth.

"What is it, boy? Timmy fell in the well?"

Glaring at her, I tighten my fingers just enough to shut her up. Her mouth forms an O shape, and I ignore the way my cock twitches. "I told you not to fight."

The smile falls, and her emotions shutter. "I thought you lied."

"Why would I do that?"

She presses her lips together.

"Dammit, Evelyn. You're the only one here I trust. Why would I lie to you? Why would I lie to my—" I cut off. What the hell was I about to say? That we're mates? My wolf has had his sights set on her since the first time she kicked my ass, and he hasn't let up. But vampires and wolves? That's not heard of. "I wasn't lying," I grouse. Darkness dots my vision, and I grunt but try to keep my shaking hand around her throat.

I need her to stay put. I need her to know that I would never hurt her. I'd sooner die. I almost did. Was it worth it?

Absolutely. These hellish beings want us to be their pawns, and I refuse. I won't hurt the one woman who means more than she should. I can't. My head swims, and I make an annoyed noise.

“I won't hurt you.”

“I realize that now,” she says, features softening and hand wrapping around my wrist. “You're hurt, Blaze.” She easily peels my fingers from her throat, and my knees buckle, but she catches me like I weigh nothing. “Fucking Death,” she grumbles. “All right, big guy, let's get you to the bed and then you're going to drink my blood.”

A mumbled protest tumbles from my lips, but the sounds don't make any sense. And yet, she understands.

“Don't argue with me, pup.”

God, it's annoying when she calls me names, but I love that she does. She doesn't do that with other wolves. I haven't heard her do it with other vampires. That has to mean something.

“Here we are.” She shoves me and I stumble back, the backs of my knees hitting the mattress before I tip over. She climbs after me, settling with her knees on either side of me and her center pressing into mine. She's so soft. So fucking delectable.

If I had any energy left, I'd be hard as a rock.

Through my hazy vision, I barely register her bringing her wrist to her mouth and biting it. Crimson blood spills down her forearm, but before I can protest, she presses the bleeding wound to my mouth.

“Suck it, Blaze.” Her lips curl into a grin as I do as she asks, sealing my lips over her skin.

The first splash of blood on my tongue is so rich—coppery and metallic and smokey—I moan and roll my tongue over her wrist, trying to work more out of the wound. She tastes so good. I pull at the vein, and she hisses and moves her hips ever so slightly.

Vampire blood trickles down my throat and into my system, the supernatural essence shooting through my body. Bit by bit, my strength comes back. I'm still exhausted, but not to the point of collapsing. I coast my tongue over her wrist again and pull hard, wanting a little more before I stop.

"Fuck, pup," she says, voice breathy. Her center grinds over my thickening cock.

Everything inside me wakes up, and I lift my eyes to meet hers, holding her hooded gaze as I suck again, this time a little harder. She digs her teeth into her bottom lip and rocks against me again. A pleased rumble emits from my chest, and I'd bet money my eyes are glowing.

This is what she does to me. I almost died but none of that matters. All that matters is feeling myself inside of her.

I take another mouthful of her blood, letting it buzz through my system, and reluctantly let her go. She brings her wrist to her mouth and runs her tongue to seal the wound. My hands fall to her hips, and she hums in approval, placing her palms on either side of my face and slowly coming down until her mouth is inches from mine.

Arching her back, she rubs over my cock. "I guess I should thank you," she whispers, rocking against me again before teasing her lips over mine. "My god, you're massive."

A dark chuckle tumbles from my lips, and I move my hand to the back of her neck, tugging her mouth against mine. For a moment, she resists, but then I nip her lip and she relaxes, opening her mouth and letting me in.

Fucking finally.

Kissing Evelyn is like playing with a viper. She's wild and unpredictable. She could kill me, but her tits press into my chest as she melts into my hold. She softens for me, and only for me. I don't take that for granted.

It doesn't take a genius to know she's been hurt before. She's always so guarded, so tough. But right now, she lets herself be vulnerable. My inner wolf howls in approval.

Deepening the kiss, I try to roll us over so I can be on top, but she blocks it, breaking the kiss.

“You can’t be on top, not like that,” she says with a gasping breath. Her wide eyes find mine, and I see it. I see the doubts, the fear, the terror at the idea of being trapped.

A growl builds in my chest, not anger at her but rage at whatever fucker did this to her. I stifle the sound and thrust my hips against hers. “How would you like me?”

If she needs to be in control for this to work, I’ll happily hand her the reins.

She searches my face, fingers clutching my chest like she’s afraid I’ll ignore her request.

Silly vampire.

“Tell me what you need me to do, baby,” I say softly. “You’re in charge.”

Perhaps I’m dumb for handing my heart to her, but there’s something about the way warmth spills across her features, the trust that blossoms in the depths of her gaze, that tells me it’ll be worth it.

“Stay,” she demands, slithering off the bed.

I bite back my protests, watching her from where I’m lying as she peels off the ridiculous outfit she’s wearing. My fingers itch to touch her, to roam over the bare expanse of skin, but I wait patiently, knowing how easily I could fuck this all up.

Evelyn’s breasts are full, nipples pebbled. Her narrow waist is accentuated by beautifully curving hips and thighs. She steps toward me, and I watch them sway, licking my lips as she crawls up my body until her knees rest on either side of my head. My eyes don’t leave hers, not yet, and she watches me, carefully, almost like she’s waiting for me to break the bits of trust we built, but I stay put and wait.

“You look famished,” she teases, arching an eyebrow in challenge as she slowly sits.

“Can I touch you?”

“Yes,” she says, and only then do I allow my gaze to move to her glistening cunt.

Bare, save for a small trail of soft, curling hair that leads to her clit, her pussy is the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen. My hands trace up the back of her legs, cupping her ass as she settles her lips against my mouth. Breathing in her sweet scent, I grip her ass and spread her with my tongue, running it up the length of her, coasting over the sensitive nerves before repeating the process.

Her fingers dive into my hair, and I hum, devouring her bit by bit until she trembles and bucks against my mouth. Keeping one hand on her ass, I move the other between her legs and push two fingers inside of her as I focus on her clit.

She moans at the intrusion. Pumping my fingers, I lash her sensitive bud until she’s grinding down on me, chasing the orgasm I’m offering. My digits curl inside of her, and I suck on her clit.

“Blaze!” she screams, and my cock jerks in response to the salty cum spilling across my tongue.

I clean her up and carefully extract my fingers, bringing them to my mouth. Our gazes collide as I suck them clean. Evelyn’s cheeks are flushed, and her breasts heave with every breath.

“Now, let’s see if I can’t repay the favor,” she murmurs, scooting back, gliding her soaking cunt over my torso, leaving a trail of her scent until her center is lined up with my throbbing length. She grabs it and guides my tip to her center, lifting her eyes to meet mine as she sinks onto my length.

Her walls are soft as velvet and slightly ribbed. They stretch, clamping around my girth.

“Fuuuuuck,” I groan. She feels as good as I remember. Perfect. Warm. *Mine*.

“Mmm,” she says in approval, lifting her hips and coating my length before sinking all the way down.

I swear my eyes roll back as she takes me all the way. My cock is buried so deep inside of her, gripped so tight by her,

and her eyes rove over my face.

“Touch me,” she whispers. “Touch me while I fuck you.”

God, yes. I roll one of her nipples between my fingers and coast the thumb of my other hand over her clit, earning a little gasp of pleasure.

“Like that, baby?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “Good boy, just like that.”

And fuck if my cock doesn't pulse in response to her praise. She circles her hips and rocks up and down my length, pace quickening in time with my circling thumb.

“Is this okay?” I ask as I slam my hips up to meet hers, startling another noise out of her.

“Fuck yes,” she moans.

With permission, I thrust up as she fucks me, helping her take more and more of me until she's a trembling, shaking mess above me. I relentlessly play with her clit until she's moaning my name. I pinch and knead her breasts until she arches into my touch.

I give Evelyn everything she needs, and soon enough, she's begging for release.

My balls tighten, and I grunt, fighting the urge to come until she soaks my cock. Clenching my muscles, I meet her hips with harder thrusts.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she whines. “Yes, please, please.”

Pressing hard on her clit, I slam into her hard and grind deep inside of her, working her g-spot and clit at the same time. And then she shatters. It's beautiful, the way her lips open as she screams my name, the way her body tightens around mine, the way she arches into my touch and allows me to fuck her through the bliss.

Only when she's done whimpering do I let go. I thrust into her, and she surprises me by bouncing on me with renewed force, grinding down hard, clamping around me until my cock convulses inside her velvety walls.

“Evelyn,” I roar, toes curling as cum sprays inside of her. Stars dot my vision, and I moan, jerking into her again.

“Oh my, God, yes, fuck, that’s amazing,” she gasps, clenching her muscles around my length, milking more and more of my come from my cock until there’s nothing left.

I smooth my hands over her thighs and watch as the beautiful vampire slowly undulates with me inside of her. Like she never wants me to go. Like she wants me to go again. My cock already starts to harden again. I’ve waited for this moment for so long and it’s better than I imagined.

“There you are,” she purrs. “Are you with me, big guy?”

“Yeah.” I grip the back of her hip and help her roll up and down my length. “You feel so good.”

“So do you,” she confesses, palms pressing against my pecs. “Are you ready?”

For her? Always.

Eventually, we fall apart, gasping for air and slick with sweat. I tug her into my side, spooning her, and she hums in approval. She’s soft in my arms, and I can’t help but feel like I’m holding something fragile and beautiful.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” I tell her, kissing her shoulder.

She releases a soft sigh. “You called me mate.”

I stiffen for a moment, waiting for her to tell me it’s not possible, but she doesn’t say anything else. “Because you’re mine,” I tell her. “So long as you’ll have me,” I add, reminding myself she may not feel the same way.

A beat of silence passes before she says, “I’m terrified to say yes, but this is the safest I’ve ever felt.” She snuggles into my hold. “Don’t break my heart.”

“I won’t,” I vow, knowing I’d rather die the final death than hurt her. My wolf howls in triumph and I tuck my nose in the crook of her neck and breathe her in.

We may be in a fucked-up situation, but holding her makes me feel like everything will be okay.



I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER than to think my little stunt would go unpunished. Evelyn's head is resting on my chest when coldness begins to slither over my skin. My eyes swing to the door right as it's opened, Death pushing through and into the room.

Evelyn gets up with a snarl and places herself in front of me.

Death's dark glare settles on her.

A deep growl builds in my chest. My wolf and I don't like the way he's looking at her—like he wants to find a way to destroy our mate. And I know in my heart—in my cursed soul—that's what she is. It doesn't matter that she's a vampire or that she's terrified to trust again, all that matters is that this wild woman, the one who makes my heart race with excitement and fear, is safe.

Rising from the bed, I move to her side, positioning myself slightly in front of her.

"Leave us," Death says, voice flat and bored.

Evelyn tuts. "Where are your manners?"

"I grow tired of your mouth." Death flicks his wrists, and dark shadows begin to pour from the tip of his finger, snaking around Evelyn's body.

"Don't touch her," I growl as I try to rip away the shadowy binds. My fingers pass through them, almost like they're not even real, but Evelyn grunts as they clamp around her middle.

"What are you—" Her words cut off as she's dragged from the room by those onyx shackles which have detached from Death. Shadow minions.

Channeling my supe speed, I surge forward, but the door is slammed in my face, and I crash face first into it. "Evelyn!" I

jump to my feet. The door didn't even splinter. I slam my body against it again with as much force as I can muster.

It hardly rattles.

What the fuck?

"It's enchanted against breaking, but please, feel free to tire yourself out."

I turn on Death. "If you hurt her—"

"Your bloody little bride will be fine, but you..." He trails off and searches my face. "What happened today was unacceptable. You're here as the Horsemen's champion, not some white knight."

"I'm not going to hurt her."

A dark smile cuts across his face. "War thought you might say that, which is why we'll be taking matters into our own hands."

My hackles rise. "What does that mean?" My wolf paces inside my head, baring his teeth and growling in the face of death.

"Your mind is what bars you from doing what's been tasked." He moves his hand in front of his body in a grand sweep, and I prepare for battle though I have no idea how to fight his shadows. But those aren't what come for me. Instead, something pierces through my brain, like the talons of an eagle grabbing hold.

I release a strangled cry as the pain worsens until my vision dims and all I can hear is my own haggard breathing. My wolf tries to break through the surface, but something blocks him. He snarls and lashes out against the cage, but he can't break free. His howl of agony reverberates inside my head, and I suck in a shaky breath. Something layers on top of the cage. Something foreign and cold.

Perhaps another one of his shadows?

"And now," Death says, striding toward the door. "The next time you're commanded to battle, you'll do as you're told."

Chapter Five

EVELYN

I haven't seen Blaze for two days. Ever since Death forcefully removed me from his room, I've been locked inside of my own. Food, fresh goblets of blood, and water magically appear. Almost as though they're too afraid to send someone other than Mazzikin to open the door. To be fair, I'd probably see how easy it is to detach a demon's head from its body, so the fear isn't unwarranted.

The door finally opens and Mazzikin struts in, the train of her burgundy dress dragging across the smooth floor behind her.

"Where's Blaze?"

"What? No hello? I'm hurt." She pretends to pout. Her eyeliner is done in precise, sharp lines, a cat eye that most humans would die trying to replicate, and her lips are stained blood red, glistening in a way that gives the illusion of real blood coating her mouth.

"Hello, Mazzikin. How's the whole dominating the underworld going for you? What did Death do to Blaze?"

She rests her hands on her curvy hips. "Thank you for asking, it's rather daunting. These Horsemen are... infuriating. As for your lover boy, you should know Death placed a compulsion over him. Now he'll have no choice but to follow orders." She twists her lips. "Which means the next fight won't be so easy for you."

No. Blaze wouldn't hurt me, not even with a compulsion. I know that now. He's stronger than any magic these demons have. Though I do fear what happens when he refuses to comply. Will his soul be ripped from his body for daring to defy the Horsemen?

I shudder at the thought.

"Mmm, yes. It does complicate things. I had hoped his affection for you would see us an easy win." She releases a hard breath and walks to the bed, perching on the side of it with a grand flourish. "But, as it were, we're still fighting to keep the prophecy from coming true."

"You keep talking about the prophecy like I know what it says." I study her. "Maybe if you tell me I can help us find a way to win." I have no intention of hurting Blaze again but knowing what's got her panties in a twist might help me find a way out.

Squinting at me, she takes my measure before relenting with a nod. "We'll need to work together for the next two battles so you may as well know. The Soothsayer of Old prophesied that the Four Horsemen would rise and plant the seed of damnation and destruction, nurturing it until it reigns supreme. He wrote a letter to my father in warning a century ago."

I frown. "And what about that means the apocalypse?"

She rolls her eyes. "It was on the parchment. There's an old demonic symbol that roughly translated means the end of the world."

"Can I see the letter?"

"Why, do you suddenly read Demonia?" she asks with a laugh.

"Well, no, but perhaps we should look at the letter again, see if there's any hints as to how to stop them."

"That is an intriguing idea," she admits, smoothing her blond hair; her matte black nails are a stark contrast to the lightness of her hair. "But I've never even seen it."

It's my turn to laugh. "Are you serious? You're here fighting for the throne, and yet you've never seen this mysterious letter or prophecy in person?"

She bristles. "My father told me."

"Your father, the man presently on the throne of Hell?" I arch an eyebrow. "Has it ever occurred to you that maybe he wants to keep it for himself?"

She opens her mouth to protest, but the words die in her throat. Her eyebrows slam together and she glares at me. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know that power can make people do vile things." I shrug. "But it's whatever, if you're ready to just go into the rest of the competitions without seeing the prophecy for yourself, that's your decision." I walk over to the mirror and check my hair. It's slightly wavy after the bath I took earlier. I wish I had a blow dryer or curling iron. My gaze strays to find the demon princess in the mirror. Her forehead is lined, and she's not paying any attention to me.

There's a seed of doubt.

Rightfully so, too. She's banking on the fact that the Devil told the truth. I'm not one to toss out TSTL without good reason, but I mean, come on. He's the Devil for fuck's sake.

"I'd go with you, you know," I say, pulling her deeper into the idea. "We could find a way to lay eyes on the letter together. Find a way to win and put you on the throne. The Horsemen don't deserve it."

She nods, half listening to me.

"They've only just risen, whereas you've spent years preparing to rule."

"No need to keep kissing my ass," Mazzikin says with a dramatic sigh. "Come along then. Time to snoop through Daddy's office." She stands and sashays out of the room.

I turn and chase after her, swallowing a sudden rush of anxiety. "What happens if we're caught?" I ask her once I catch up.

She shoots me a smirk. “I guess I’ll blame it on you.”

“Bitch.”

Mazzikin laughs. “Oh, come now, burning for an eternity can’t be that bad.”

“I’m glad my potential damnation is entertaining you.”

She links her arm with mine. “Can I tell you a secret? This is the most fun I’ve had all week.”

And for some reason, that makes me sad. She’s the Princess of Hell. The Heir to the Underworld. And this is the most fun she’s had? “You need to get out more, Mazzi.” I pat her arm. “Maybe find some fuck boys to play with.”

She hums. “As much as the idea sounds appealing, I find sex rather dull as of late.”

“Because you fucked the grim reaper and no one can compare?”

“Careful with that tongue, love, but if you must know, yes. There’s nothing quite like Death gripping your throat as you ride his cock.”

“That sounds... terrifying. I love a good choking, but one that might actually kill me?” I shake my head. “You’re braver than I am.”

She grins at me. “Or more fucked up.”

We turn down a hall and Mazzikin shoots the guards a venomous look. They blanch and move around the corner, and she chuckles under her breath, dragging me deeper and deeper inside the castle. I thought perhaps dear old dad would have his own place, but all along, I’ve been sleeping under his thumb. The fact that we’ve been walking for well over ten minutes gives me some solace.

“And right here,” she whispers, dragging me toward a wall.

“Uh, Mazzi—” I cut off as the wall swallows us, dark filmy magic coating my body. The illusion vibrates over my skin.

“Don’t stop walking, or we’ll become the castle’s next meal,” Mazzikin mutters, tugging on my arm.

That gets me moving. “The castle is alive?”

“Mmm, an ancient beast that feasts on unsuspecting visitors or those who really piss Daddy off. He likes to hear them scream as the castle crushes their bones.” I can sense her at my side but I can’t actually see her.

Well that’s a lovely picture she paints. Why did I agree to snoop through his office again?

“Oh good, he’s here.” Her words are followed by a soft buzzing and pop. The arm around mine yanks against my skin, and I hear muffled curses and mumbles as she tugs again.

But I’m stuck inside the wall. My hackles rise as a slithering presence makes itself known, curling around my ankles and flicking its tongue over my skin, tasting me. “Listen, castle, or ancient beast, whatever you like to be called, I’m flattered you think I’d make a delicious meal, but Mazzikin needs my help.”

The heaviness around my ankles rises on my legs, like a snake coiling around its prey.

Another unsuccessful yank on my arm.

“Right,” I say with a shaky breath. “What if I promise to find you a snack, something with wings? Will you let me go? Surely demons taste better than vampires.”

The beast’s invisible hold tightens.

“You’re very strong,” I say around a grunt. “What if I give you some of my blood?” The grip pulses around my body. Is that a yes? Fuck, it’s worth a shot. I bring my wrist to my mouth and open my vein before holding my arm out and flexing my fist, letting the blood spill out of the wound and onto the invisible floor.

A deep groaning sound rumbles over me.

“That’s vampire blood,” I tell it. “Not as strong as demon’s blood, I’m sure. Wouldn’t you want a tasty snack? Mazzikin can help me find you something delicious.”

The air around me vibrates and the arm on me tugs once more, and this time I'm pulled from the wall, my body coming through with a pop. The wound on my wrist is dribbling blood, but it's quickly healing.

Mazzikin arches an eyebrow at me. "I thought I'd lost you."

I take a sharp inhale and look around the room. The walls of the Devil's office are dark green—nearly black—and wooden furniture with gold accents making the rest of the decor. "You almost did. We owe the castle a demon snack."

"Easy enough," she says. "Daddy, this is Evelyn. Evelyn, meet the Devil."

I swing my gaze around, startled to find someone standing beside the princess. Where was he a moment ago? More hellish magic? My breath hitches as I take him in.

The Devil looks like a simple man. Short hair. Sharp jaw. Strong nose. Lightly bronzed skin. He's even wearing casual slacks and a dark blue button up, like he's about to head to the office and crunch some numbers. But there's no getting over his dark, seemingly soulless eyes that rove over my face. There's a glimmer within his irises that tempts me to break all the rules, to do something abhorrent.

I've met plenty of monsters in my time, but something about him sends a chill down my spine and I resist the urge to cower before him. "Lovely to meet you," I manage to say. "Mazzikin's told me all about you."

His gaze slides to his daughter. "Has she now?" Even his voice is rich with sin.

Mazzikin rests her head on my shoulder like we've been friends for years. "She's my friend."

"Uh-huh," the devil says. "And why exactly did you bring your friend to meet me?"

"Well, you remember the bargain I made with the Horsemen?"

He lifts an eyebrow. "How could I forget?"

“Sarcasm is unbecoming, Daddy,” Mazzikin chastises the Devil. “I want to read the prophecy.”

The Devil looks at me. *This is your doing.*

“True,” I respond to his unspoken accusation. “I thought if we looked over the letter, we might find some type of clue to help us.”

“A clue,” he says with a frown. “You think the Soothsayer of Old left a clue for Mazzikin, a demon he’d never met?”

Well, when he puts it that way...

I tip my chin. “Perhaps not for her directly, but for whoever might need to defeat the Horsemen.”

“Daddy,” Mazzikin cuts in. “What can it hurt to just look at it?”

The Devil pinches his eyes shut and takes a deep breath. “Fine,” he snaps. “Look at the letter if you must but I’ve told you everything it said.” He shoots his arm out to the side and his hand disappears into the aether, reappearing with a scroll.

“Well, that’s a handy little trick.”

He glares at me. Something tells me it’s not a good idea to annoy the Devil.

“Right, shutting up.”

“Be nice to Evelyn. I like her,” Mazzikin says, taking the scroll from his hand. “We’re quickly becoming friends.” The truth rings in her statements.

“That’s lovely, dear,” the Devil tells her with a soft smile. He kisses her temple before walking around his desk. “The castle is growing impatient. Best be on your way.”

Mazzikin nods. “Thanks again.” This time she drags me to a door instead of through the wall. “Don’t want to take any chances,” she murmurs. As soon as we’re out, she spots a guard with wings and snaps her fingers at him. “You. Come here, please.”

The guard hesitates before complying. Once he’s within reach, Mazzikin grabs the collar of his shirt and tosses him

toward the wall. The stone shimmers, and a hole opens, stones pulling apart like jagged teeth, and the demon guard screams as he's swallowed by the castle. The floor vibrates under my feet.

"You're welcome, beasty," Mazzikin says with a pleased hum.

I feel a little bad that she sent that guard to his death, but better him than me. "Well, what are you waiting for? Open the scroll."

She shoots me a look before gingerly unrolling the parchment. The lettering is made up of strange symbols I don't recognize—I didn't really expect to be able to read it—and Mazzikin reads the prophecy out loud.

"The Four Horsemen would rise and plant the seed of damnation and destruction, nurturing it until it reigns supreme." She frowns. "That's weird."

"What?" I search the paper like I might be able to see what's wrong.

"This symbol"—she points to the paper—"means destruction... but here where the line slightly breaks, could change its meaning."

"Or maybe the scroll is just old?" I run a finger over the fraying edges.

"You're probably right." She hums and reads the prophecy again then releases a frustrated breath. "Right, well thanks for nothing, Soothsayer."

"It was worth a shot," I tell her.

"Well, I hope you're better at solving puzzles than figuring a way around the prophecy. The next trial starts in just a bit."

"What? Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

She shrugs. "I guess I forgot what with all the excitement."

"What's the puzzle?"

"Guess you'll have to find out for yourself," she says, smirking at me. "Oh, look. The portal to the puzzle." And then

the bitch shoves me into a swirling vortex of fire.

Chapter Six

EVELYN

I'm pacing the length of my room when Mazzikin finally comes for me again. After the brutal shove into the last trial—which I failed by the way—I was escorted back to my room and left to my own devices for three days. I still haven't seen or even so much as heard Blaze. I've tried screaming his name, but the walls must be soundproof.

Crawling over my skin like thousands of ants, frustration and rage make me itch to rip someone's heart out.

"Well, you look like shit," Mazzikin says, taking in my air-dried hair and wrinkled clothes. "Did you drink the blood I sent you?"

"Yes, I'm not an idiot," I snap. "Where's Blaze? I want to see him."

"You'll see him soon enough. We're going to dinner with him and the Horsemen before the next battle tomorrow. I came to prepare you and see that the outfit I had made for you fits properly."

I lift an eyebrow. "A last supper? Really?"

"What? It's rather fitting, don't you think? One of you will die tomorrow, though I don't think there are plans to resurrect the fallen..." She trails off and waves her hands as if to dispel the doom. "Don't worry your pretty head about that. I think you'll win."

The door to my room opens and a demon with cat-eye glasses pushes in a rack of clothes. Without even hesitating, I flit toward the door but demonic magic catches me before I even make it three feet. It was worth a shot. The magic holds me frozen in place, my leg lifted off the ground mid-flit, and the short demon closes the door.

“Now, let’s try this again, shall we?” Mazzikin asks, cheery as ever. The magic slips away.

My feet carry me forward, but I skid to a stop moments before I would’ve crashed into a wall.

“Oh, Margot, these are lovely,” Mazzikin croons.

Shaking off my annoyance, I turn and glare at the clothes. Margot practically trembles with nerves as the princess inspects her work. Her eyes flit to me and she cowers even more, as if I’m someone to worry about too.

“What’s this?”

“Well, dinner may not be an official trial, but it is a battle. I want your wolf salivating all over the table when he sees you.” Mazzikin holds up a hanger with strings and tiny scraps of material.

“Surely that’s not for me.”

“All the important bits are covered, Evelyn.” Mazzikin tosses it at me, and I snatch it out of the air, holding it up to my body. A bikini has more material than this fucking thing. If it were any other time, say a dinner I planned and wasn’t forced to go to, I’d be all for it. I don’t like being her doll. “Please don’t make me force you,” Mazzikin whines.

Bristling at the thought of more demonic magic, I grudgingly carry the outfit into the bathroom.

“And I got this for you, Your Majesty,” Margot says with a trembling voice. I glance over my shoulder, catching the slinky red number—Mazzikin’s favorite color—and the princess’s smirk of approval.

“Perfect.” Mazzikin starts to strip, and I roll my eyes.

She's bold and a little unhinged. If she weren't forcing my hand, I might actually admire her. I close myself in the small en suite and disrobe and tug on the strings. My ass is 100% fully out but at least my cunt is covered. Thin, gauzy like strings crisscross over my nipples, creating the illusion of coverage, but if I squint hard enough in the mirror, I can totally see them.

With a growl, I storm back into the room but stop short when I see Mazzikin in an equally baring outfit. Margot is holding up two hangers with sheer, floor length shawls. One is black, and the other is red.

"My god, Evelyn. Has anyone ever told you you're hot?"

"Often," I say as I walk over and grab the shawl. "I'm sure you know you look sexy."

Mazzikin chuckles. "Indeed. This," she sweeps her hand down her body, "is a weapon."

I snort. "What, you'll fuck them until they forget about the apocalypse stuff?"

"If that's what it takes," she says with a sigh, like it would be some great burden.

I mean... maybe that's not such a bad idea. I know I've mentioned it before, but they all obviously have the hots for each other. Maybe there's a way to trap them in an orgy room. That'll plant the seed.

Shrugging into the shawl, I breathe out in relief. It actually makes me feel a little more clothed even though it's entirely see through. At least this way my ass is mostly covered, and it's not like Blaze hasn't seen it before.

"Right, well, let's do something with this hair." Mazzikin waves her hand in my face, and I flinch back only to realize she cast some sort of spell. My hair straightens, the ends of it brushing over the middle of my back. "Perfect. Shall we go torture the men?"

"Do I have a choice?"

She grins at me. “No.” And then she flicks her hands through the air, and the room around us warps and morphs, collapsing in on itself and instantly expanding, the bedroom quickly replaced by a grand dining hall.

Candle-lit chandeliers hang from the ceiling, casting bright and warm flickering light around the space. The table is made of onyx marble and surrounded by high-back leather chairs. A burgundy runner stretches the length of the table, covered with candles, decanters of blood and wine, breads, desserts, platters of meat with steam rising up from it, side dishes of all types.

A legitimate feast fit for a queen.

Demon servers stand around the room, waiting for their cue. Blaze and his entourage of ponies have yet to arrive.

Mazzikin snaps and a server rushes forward to do her bidding. “Demon wine for me and a goblet of blood for my vampire friend.”

Friend. She keeps using that word as if she truly means it. In the time I’ve been here, I haven’t seen her with any friends or demons-in-waiting. Granted, I’ve been stuck in my room most of the time but this fight between her and the Horsemen is arguably the biggest event of her life.

And yet she only has me by her side.

She seemed to get along well enough with the seamstress, but even then the winged demon warily watched the princess. Full of fear. Sort of how vampires within the Blood Mafia treat me. They’re either scared or secretly calling me insane.

Demi was the first person to really look at me as a friend.

She’s lonely, I realize. Mazzikin and I are more alike than I understood. We’re both living in the shadows of powerful men. We’ve both fought to prove ourselves worthy to stand on our own and not be coddled.

Mazzikin takes her demon wine and sips it. Thick, vermillion liquid is poured into a stone-stemmed goblet. Carved talons cup the iridescent glass. I take it and thank the server. He gives me a weird look, so I roll my eyes and tell him to fuck off.

“Cheers?” I hold up my glass and wait.

A hint of surprise tugs at her eyebrows, but she quickly schools her features. “Let’s give them hell,” she says with a wicked grin, clinking her glass against mine.

Right as I’m taking a sip of the decadent blood, the doors blast open. Mazzikin rolls her eyes and shoves one part of her shawl away from her body, exposing her left side and all the skin she’s baring. She struts away from the table as the Horsemen stride into the room.

The ground quakes beneath their feet but to my surprise and Mazzikin’s demented delight, the four of them stumble to a stop when they see her. To be fair, the way she sways her hips and glides over to them snares my attention as well.

She’s hot as sin.

Death recovers first, dark eyebrows drawing down his pale face. “Princess.” His voice is husky and full of gravel. Oh, he definitely enjoyed himself when they got together.

I bet he planted the seed—wait. Maybe there’s something there. Plant the seed of damnation? Maybe all along the soothsayer was just talking about a baby.

Hm. I focus on the Horsemen again, trying to imagine them together. War and Pestilence and Famine take Mazzikin in like they’ve never seen a naked woman before, gazes roaming over every inch, hunger burning in their eyes. She stops before them and pushes the other side of the shawl open and lets them look their fill.

“Hello, boys,” she purrs, and I can’t help but smile.

Movement behind them catches my attention. Blaze steps to the side, trying to see what stopped the Horsemen in their tracks. Jealousy surges through my system, but his eyes skip over Mazzikin and find me. I swear they flash yellow, almost like his wolf wanted to say hello, and his jaw drops open as he checks me out.

He’s shirtless, wearing leather pants that hug every inch of muscle and power those thighs hold. His dark hair is tousled,

almost like he's been running his hand through it. Has he been begging to see me too?

"Evelyn," he rasps, and I know he has. Blaze was just as pissed as I was at our being forced apart.

Heat unfurls inside of me. "Blaze," I say with a genuine smile.

I saunter over, putting on a show just for him, and stop beside Mazzikin. The Horsemen are still recovering from their... surprise... I don't even think they realize there are other people in the room. Blaze surges forward, yanking me into his arms and smashing his lips against mine. I'm shocked for a second, but then all I can think about is how good it felt when we were together, how much I wanted to see him for the last week.

Moaning, I link my wrists around his neck and jump, wrapping my legs around his waist and melting against his hard body. He steals the air from my lungs, brands my soul with that demanding mouth, and growls in approval as I open for him, letting his tongue beat mine into submission.

"And that is why we kept you separated," Mazzikin says with a dramatic sigh.

Blaze and I break apart with gasping breaths. I turn my head and see that everyone is watching us now. The Horsemen look less than happy with Blaze, but a devious smile tugs at Mazzikin's lips.

"If you two are done, dinner is ready." She turns and heads to the table and all four of the Horsemen watch her ass.

Men.

Blaze's grip on my thighs tightens but he reluctantly lets me down as the Horsemen make for the table. "I missed you," he murmurs.

"I asked to see you," I confess.

He smirks. "So you missed me too?"

I consider lying or snarking, but instead, I find myself saying, "Of course."

Chest rumbling with a pleased purr, he reaches for me again but stops short when War's voice cuts through the room.

"Why are there only five chairs?"

Blaze and I face the princess and her men. Mazzikin is nursing her wine and blinks at them. "Oh, dear," she says with a frown. "I guess we'll have to share."

"This is ridiculous," Pestilence snaps. "You," he says to a server, "bring us more chairs."

"If you listen to him, consider yourself dead," Mazzikin says. "What's the big deal?" she asks him. "Are you scared?"

The Horsemen glare at her from across the table then exchange looks. Something passes between them and War releases a frustrated breath. "Fine, Maz, we'll play your game this last time."

She hums and gestures to the table. "Well then, gentlemen, take a seat."

Blaze and I share a look. I roll my eyes and pull him toward the table and the chair on the right side next to Famine who is the least threatening. Not that any of the Horsemen are meek, just he's quieter than the rest of them.

Sitting, Blaze grabs my hips and pulls me into his lap. The movement is so natural, so normal, I immediately melt against his chest. Mazzikin circles the table, like she's about to play duck, duck, goose, and eyes each Horsemen as she goes. Death watches her with a clenched jaw. War scowls at her. Pestilence gaze roams over her body, and Famine avoids looking at her.

"Fam, love," she purrs, stopping right beside him. "Make some room."

I expect him to tell her no, but he pushes his heels down and the chair scrapes across the floor. He finally meets her eyes, and she smirks in delight, draping one arm around his neck, pushing her tits right in his face, before dropping into his lap with a happy little sigh.

“Well, who’s hungry?” she asks, dragging her fingers through his hair. The poor bastard nearly moans, like he’s starved for touch. Servers appear and begin dishing out the food onto each plate, moving around us with quiet, hesitant movements. Almost like they’re waiting for a bomb to go off.

War and Death share a look. Pestilence’s eyes are narrowed, jealous nearly coloring his skin green, and Mazzikin ignores them all, petting Famine. I can picture them all trying to get her pregnant.

Blaze reaches for a piece of buttered bread and brings it to my mouth. “Open,” he whispers, like we’re alone and not surrounded by enemies.

And for some reason, I listen. My lips part, and my teeth tear through the soft bread. He hums in approval and takes a bite as well, placing his mouth right where mine had been.

“For the love of curses, what’s a demon have to do to get a man to treat her like that?” Mazzikin asks.

My eyes fly to hers. She studies us, oblivious to the way Famine is practically putty in her hands. Her nails scratch over his head, and his eyes flutter closed.

“Have you asked your Horsemen to take care of you?” I ask. Death’s glare turns to me, and my skin chills, but I pointedly ignore him.

“Don’t be silly, all they care about is destroying the world.”

“Hmm,” I say and take the sip of wine Blaze is offering. His erection digs into my ass, and I press against it. “I thought they wanted to plant the seed of damnation and destruction.”

“Yes, exactly.” She tugs on Famine’s hair, and this time he does moan, low and throaty.

“Right, well in my world, seed also means sperm.”

Mazzikin narrows her eyes. “What are you suggesting?”

“Think carefully before you speak,” Death growls.

“Or what? You’ll kill me?” I fight off a laugh. “Someone already beat you to that.” Sighing, I turn back to Mazzikin. “They’re supposed to plant the seed and nurture it until it reigns supreme. I know everyone thinks that means the end of the world, but I’ve been thinking... What if you all are meant to be together and have a baby? What if the baby is the one who will reign supreme?”

Mazzikin’s eyebrows rise in surprise, and she’s too stunned by the idea to say anything. I guess when you’ve spent your whole life preparing to fight someone for your throne, it might be hard to imagine co-parenting.

“A baby?” Pestilence says, eyeing Mazzikin’s stomach.

“Why not?” I say with a shrug. “You all obviously want to fuck her.” Blaze’s grip on me tightens, as if to warn me to tread carefully. “Perhaps you try planting that seed before you go all *end of the world* on us?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” War grumbles. “The prophecy—”

“Oh my Devil,” Mazzikin gasps.

“What?” Death demands.

She glances at me. “That symbol. Something about it was off, and I didn’t think about it until now.” She pauses and frowns at the table.

“You’re going somewhere with this?” I prompt.

“Holy shit,” she says. “That’s it. It wasn’t ever the symbol of destruction, it was fertility. Two things that can’t exist without the other. Birth”—she turns and looks at the grumpiest of the Horsemen—“and Death.”

“Don’t tell me you believe the vampire,” he drawls.

“We’re friends,” I tell him with a snotty look. “And if you keep being a jerk, I might tell her to just cut you out of the group.”

He presses his lips together and cuts me down with his simmering gaze.

Right. He's pissed, but we're on to something here.

"You'd rather destroy everything?" I ask, glancing at War and Pestilence. "Literally everything, including her?" I gesture to Mazzikin, and she stiffens. "Because if you all follow through with these silly *apocalypse* shenanigans, there won't be anything left. You'll be all alone... with nothing."

Mazzikin's hand falls from Famine's hair. "If you don't believe her, let's go look at the scroll together."

"We'll go look at the scroll, but if this is some underhanded attempt—"

"It's not, War," Mazzikin says softly. "You know I don't want the destruction. You know how I feel about you all. I wouldn't lie about this."

This being the possibility that they were always meant to be together. The possibility that all this time, the Horsemen had been her fate.

"Very well," Death says, shoving away from the table. "Let's go."

And with that, the five of them leave Blaze and me alone in a room full of demon servants, food, and wine.

"Are you sure about this?" Blaze murmurs.

"I'm sure about their feelings. Whether or not the symbol means what Mazzikin says it does, less sure, but she's a demon."

His hands run over my thighs, smoothing over them with his rough palms. "If we get out of here—"

"When," I correct. I refuse to believe we'll die.

"When we get out of here, I plan on telling the world you're my mate."

"Rather bold of you, pup," I whisper as his thumbs brush over the skimpy material covering my pussy.

"Mmm, love makes you brave."

“Love?” I ask, breath hitching when he hooks one finger beneath the material and teases the wetness he finds.

“Love.” He kisses my shoulder. “Obsession.” He kisses my neck. “Devotion,” he purrs into my ear and plunges his finger inside of me.

I gasp, fully aware of our audience but too turned on to give a damn. “And what about your precious council?”

“They’ll deal with it.” He pumps his fingers into me and groans. “You’re so tight around my finger.”

I rock into his touch. “Everyone will be against it.”

His thumb rolls over my clit. “Fuck them,” he growls into my ear. “You’re mine, and I’m not letting you go.”

Be still, my undead heart.

Coasting his other hand up my side, he cups my breast and pinches my nipple, tugging on it as he plays with my clit; pleasure boils my blood, and I arch into his touch. Perhaps this is our last night together. What if this is the last time he holds me in his arms. I push his hand away and spin in his lap, letting my legs fall on either side of him.

He grabs my ass and tugs our centers together. “What do you want?”

“You,” I confess. Only ever him.

Lips tugging into a cocky smirk, he shoves his pants down enough to free his cock and yanks my panties aside, lining up with my center. Our eyes lock, and his flash yellow. I lower myself onto him with a gasp, loving the stretch and everything about how he feels inside of me and against my body.

“Say it,” he demands, holding my hips as I rock over him. “Let me hear you confess it in front of all these demons.”

Panting, I bring myself down hard on his length, moaning and not giving a damn that the demons are watching. All that matters is him. “I love you.” I whisper the words, terrified they’ll break in the air once they’re spoken.

Blaze's chest rumbles, and his palm grips the back of my neck, bringing my lips to his. "That's fucking right," he growls against my lips before devouring me in every way possible.

Chapter Seven

EVELYN

The princess and the Horsemen never come back, so eventually Blaze and I break apart and head to his room. As if it'll be the last time we're ever together, we make love and touch and caress until we both fall asleep, locked in a lover's embrace.

Truth be told, if we died this way, I wouldn't hate it.

Someone bangs through the door, and Blaze is up and out of the bed, shifting into his wolf as Mazzikin breezes into the room. I arch an eyebrow at her from where I crouch on the bed. She takes in my naked state before sliding her gaze to the giant black wolf in the room.

"How charming," she says with a smirk. "The vampire and her dog."

Blaze growls, yellow eyes flashing with menace.

"Watch it," I warn.

"Don't get testy with me when I'm letting you go. Besides, he is a canine, is he not? Well, part canine, but still, you get the point."

"Dogs are domesticated and—wait. You're letting us go?"

Blaze chuffs, almost as if to say *yeah, right*.

Mazzikin rolls her eyes. "Is it so hard to believe? Your little speech was... very moving. The Horsemen and I have

come to an agreement.” Her gaze flicks away at the last word.

“Oh my god, you fucked them.”

She bristles. “You suggested it.”

“I did, but I didn’t think you’d actually listen to me.” I hop off the bed, snatching the blanket and quickly wrapping myself up before shuffling toward her. Blaze lets out a warning growl, and I shoot him a look. “Don’t get bossy.” Then I turn back to Mazzikin. “So,” I whisper, conspiratorially. “Did they plant the seed?” I waggle my eyebrows.

Her cheeks turn bright red, and I can’t help but snicker.

“And the whole world destruction bit? That’s over?”

She nods. “It seems priorities have changed,” she says diplomatically, a hint of smugness shining in her eyes. She’s their priority now. My chest aches for how much it means to her because it meant she was alone for so long.

I know more than enough about that, but now I have Blaze.

“Before you send us, we’ll need our clothes.”

“And I’ll need the compulsion Death put on me lifted,” Blaze says

She nods. “Thought you might say that.” Waving her hand, she gathers a handful of demon magic before shooting it at his chest. Blaze staggers. The magic zings back to her palm and fizzles out.

“Thanks,” he grunts.

She snaps, and a demon carries in the clothes we’d been wearing the night we were magically portaled to the Underworld. My blouse, the one that was covered in blood splatter, is spotless.

“You cleaned it.” I clutch the shirt to my chest. “Thank you.”

She smiles. “You’re welcome, Evelyn. I hope we can be friends after all of this.”

Normally, I'd tell her to get fucked but there's something about the princess that I like. Maybe it's her sense of fashion or her ruthlessness or the way she's always been in the shadows of her family. Whatever it is, I kind of admire her determination.

“So long as you don't threaten anyone I care about or their children or their children's children and beyond, I think we can arrange that.”

She sighs. “Spoil sport.”

“Bitch.”

Mazzikin's tinkling laughter echoes around the bedchamber. “Right, well, I'll let you get dressed and then send you home.”

Once the door is closed, Blaze shifts. He's still naked, and I take a moment to appreciate how beautiful he is. Also, I'm happy he didn't shift back while she was in here. I can't be held accountable for what I might've done if she looked at his cock.

As if sensing my thoughts, Blaze hums and grabs his clothes. “Jealousy is a lovely color on you.”

“Shut it,” I grumble and tug on my clothes. After wearing such obnoxious outfits, I feel like this getup is ultra conservative, but I'm not complaining. Portal travel in the scraps of material I wore to dinner would be awkward.

Checking that Blaze is done, I head to the door and let Mazzikin in. She studies us both and nods, as if she's only just decided this is the right thing to do. “Okay, bye,” she says quickly, swirling her hands through the air.

A crackling portal appears and sulfur and smoke flood through my nostrils and in the depths of the swirling vortex, a fire roars. Or maybe that's the sound of magical energy. Either way, I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Blaze's hand encloses around mine and he pulls me toward the portal, steps quick and purposeful. The air heats the closer we get.

“Tell the ponies I said fuck you,” I call over my shoulder right before Blaze steps through, tugging me along behind him. Mazzikin’s cackle follows me.

I hate to admit it, but I might miss that bitch.



WE RETURN to the birthing floor, which is now devoid of all equipment and traces. The air is tinged with cleaner, and if I hadn’t been here to witness it, I’d never know that Demi had her child in this room.

Blaze tugs on my hand and spins me into his chest, grasping either side of my face and crushing his mouth to mine. I moan and open for him, meeting his lashing tongue stroke for stroke until someone pointedly clears their throat.

A growl rumbles in his chest. I clutch Blaze’s shirt and break away from him, sucking in a breath and glaring at my brother.

“What?”

He lifts an unimpressed eyebrow. “You stepped in front of a demon’s magic and were ripped away from Earth for a little over two weeks and *what* is all I get?”

Sighing, I release Blaze’s shirt and turn around. His arms immediately come around me. Mateo clocks the touch with a narrowed gaze but smartly keeps his thoughts to himself. “How’s the baby?”

His jaw works, and his eyes search my face. “She’s good.” Voice hoarse, he clears his throat and says it again. “She’s really good. Healthy.”

“And Demi?”

He nods. “Happy.”

I smile. “Well then. My work here is done.” I grab Blaze’s hand and try to lead him around my brother, but he grabs my arm.

Blaze growls.

Mateo glares at him for a second then looks at me. “Evelyn.” And in the way he says my name there’s so much weight, so much history. I’d like to say I saved myself from my creator, but in the end, it was Mateo who found me, who rescued me from the dungeon of torture and who nursed my broken mind until I could sleep without screaming.

All of those memories pass between us, and it’s then I realize his fingers are trembling on my arm, almost like he’s scared.

I shake Blaze off and wrap my brother in my arms. “It’s okay, Teo. I survived.”

He doesn’t break down and cry, but he hugs me like he’s afraid I’ll float away. My brother is a lot of things—an overbearing asshole, controlling, maybe a little gruff—but he saved me. And now, I got to repay the favor.

After a few moments, he pulls away with a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m the one that stepped in the line of fire,” I say with a shrug. “Are we done here?”

He gives me an exasperated once over. “Of course not. Tell me everything now.” His gaze cuts to Blaze. “And you,” he says, voice low and deadly.

Great. Here comes the *vampires and shifters can’t date* talk.

“If you so much as make her cry, I’ll rip your intestines out and hang you from them while I let Evelyn stick a thousand silver tipped needles all over your body.”

“What the fuck, Mateo?”

He ignores me and holds Blaze’s simmering stare. My mate—that’s still a weird thought—simply tips his head to the side and says. “And if you so much as make her cry, I’ll kill you.” Much less graphic but still, a respectable threat in my opinion.

“Aw, pup,” I say with a sniff. “Murder is so romantic.” Both of them turn their glares on me, and I bristle. “Oh, don’t look at me like that.” I walk toward the door. “Is it time for your bedtime story or what, Mateo?”

Blaze smirks.

Mateo’s scowl deepens.

My smile grows. “Should I warm up a bottle for you too?”

“Evelyn,” my brother snarls.

And I laugh, because now things are truly back to normal. Mateo half ready to throttle me and the shifter looking at me like I’m a beautiful, unhinged vampire goddess.

I mean, he’s not wrong.

Chapter Eight

EVELYN

My heart trembles in my chest as I make my way down the hall. It's been forever since I've been around a baby, let alone one that means so much to my family. Mateo said Demi's recovery is going well—apparently you can hardly tell she had a baby and she's as stabby as ever.

Soft cries filter through the doorway, and I suck in a breath. I don't know why those sounds surprise me. Babies cry all the time. I guess I just didn't expect such a visceral response. I don't want children of my own, but something about the noises brings out an instinct that's hard to fight.

Is the baby okay?

Hungry?

Safe?

I knock and push through the door when Demi yells at me to get inside. The new mother is gazing down at the tiny bundle in her arms with so much affection my own chest warms.

“Oh my gosh,” I gush, flitting over to Demi and wrapping my arm around her. “How's my niece doing? I heard you named her Evelyn.”

Demi chuckles. “Nice try. Her name is Belladonna.”

“How sweet, you named her after deadly poison.” The baby in question blinks and stretches, tiny babbles tumbling

from her little lips. “She’s so fragile.”

“Mmm,” Demi says. “But she’ll be a fierce little warrior one day, won’t you, Belladonna?”

Her eyes flash red, and her face contorts. The most god-awful cry tears out of her chest, and Demi shushes her and brings her to her breast. I look away from the intimate moment, out of respect not disgust, mind you, and take in the mess of a room.

Usually my sister-in-law and her mates are so clean, but they’ve all been adjusting to life with the baby. Quick as a switch, I flit around the room, tossing the towels, discarded baby clothes and blankets into the laundry bin.

“You don’t have to,” Demi murmurs softly.

“I want to,” I tell her, pausing long enough to shoot her a pointed look. “You should sit down while you feed her. No reason to tire yourself out.”

“I’m fine.”

“Just sit down, woman!”

She laughs but complies, dropping into the rocking chair. “God she’s always so hungry. I swear she nurses more than a regular baby.”

I make the bed and fluff the pillows before moving to organize the stacks of books on the bedside tables. “Maybe she needs some blood. She is half vampire after all, right?”

“Mateo suggested that, but I’m worried she’ll prefer that over milk, and I like breastfeeding her.”

“I think she’ll still need both. It’s clear she wants milk... she might need a bit more sustenance in addition to it. But what do I know? I’ve never heard of a hybrid before let alone how to raise one.”

Tidying now done, I perch on the edge of the bed and study Demi. “Are you happy?”

“More than I’ve ever been,” she confesses, lifting her gaze to meet mine. “And I have you to thank for that.”

My chest squeezes. If I had to do it all over again, I still would have protected them from Mazzikin. “Yes, well,” I say with a haughty huff. “Clearly not enough to name your baby after me.”

Demi rolls her eyes. “Her middle name is up for grabs.”

“Oh?” I ask, studying my nails instead of bouncing up and down. “I guess I could settle for a middle name.”

“Good, because it’s already done.” She smirks at me and arches an eyebrow. “So you and Blaze, huh?”

“He is quite handsome for a shifter, isn’t he?”

She bursts out laughing. “Honestly, I can see it. He’s all *alpha listen to me* and you’re all *silly boy, I do what I want*. The tension is probably hot as hell.”

I don’t correct her and let her know he’s actually more submissive when it comes to our relationship. Some things are better left private. “Mmm. There was some fun hate sex in the underworld.”

“Was it awful?” she asks me, eyebrows slamming together. “I was so worried.”

“Nah, it wasn’t so bad.”

“Please don’t lie to me.”

Sighing, I nod. “Okay, fine. It wasn’t a cake walk, but I’ve been through worse.”

She arches an eyebrow in disbelief.

“I’m serious,” I say. “There were a few moments where I wasn’t sure we’d find a way to get out of it, but we did and now we’re here. The rest is history.”

“So... Mazzikin won’t come for Belladonna?”

I shake my head. “No. She got what she wanted and then some.”

“The Horsemen, huh?”

“Mateo is such a gossip,” I mutter. “He told you everything?”

She grins. “Yup.”

“Bastard. I was prepared to tell you all the dirty details.”

“Oh, you still can,” she says, looking down at Belladonna.
“I want to know everything.”

Settling in, I flop back onto the bed and release a long breath. “Right, well. It all started with Death.”

THE END

A Note

Thank you for reading this fun little novella. When I originally started the Blood Mafia world, I had planned to do a spinoff series for Evelyn that would cover this plot thread and introduce some new ones.

For about two years after Demi's books, my muse wasn't feeling the idea. Rather than leaving this plot thread open indefinitely, I decided to give Evelyn her happily ever after and close the loop on the thread from the last book in Demi's series.

So! Thank you, dear reader. Thank you for loving Demi in all her wildness. Thank you for the support for the Blood Mafia world. I appreciate your patience while I worked to get my muse to cooperate. I know this may not be the trilogy you were hoping for, but I do hope that you've found closure with Demi's promise now that you've read this novella.

Thank you to Jennifer for making sure there wasn't blood thirty creaming (how embarrassing). And thanks for talking over what to do with this book on countless occasions and helping me find my way.

Thanks to my family for their continued support and love. You're the best <3.