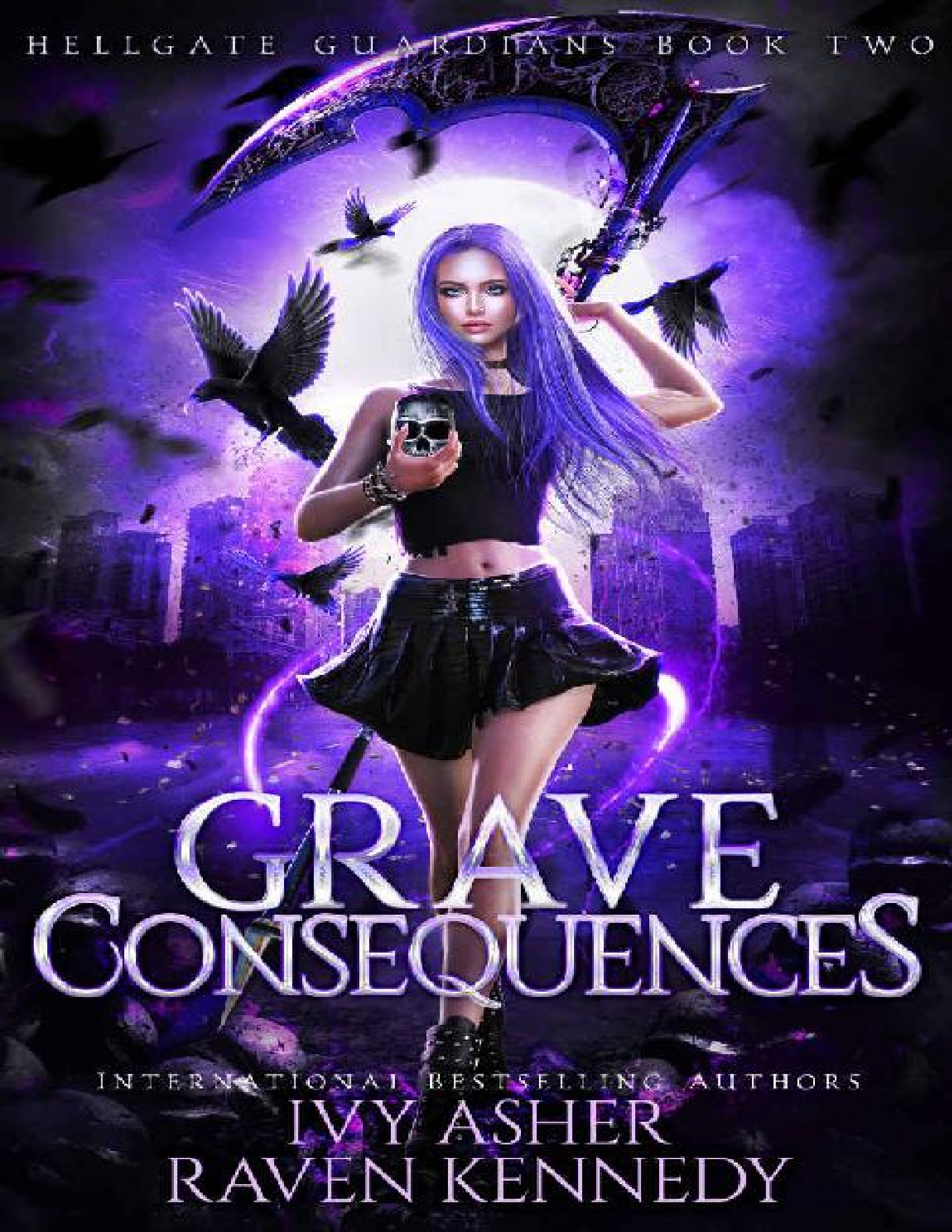


HELLGATE GUARDIANS BOOK TWO



# GRAVE CONSEQUENCES

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHORS

IVY ASHER  
RAVEN KENNEDY

# **GRAVE CONSEQUENCES**

---

IVY ASHER  
RAVEN KENNEDY

Copyright © 2020 Ivy Asher and Raven Kennedy

All rights reserved. This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the author, except in cases of a reviewer quoting brief passages in a review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Edited by Polished Perfection

Cover by Sanja Balan of Sanja's Covers

Chapter Headings by Eerilyfair Design

*To that one chick we both blocked but forgot why. We still stand by our decision.*

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Hellgate Guardian Series](#)

[Also by Ivy Asher & Raven Kennedy](#)

[Also by Ivy Asher](#)

[Also by Raven Kennedy](#)

[Ivy Asher](#)

[Raven Kennedy](#)



**A** whimper escapes my lips and consciousness rubs against me like a purring cat. I try to bat it away. Fucking needy pussy. I already have one of those, I don't need another. I try to fall back into the decadent darkness, but awareness butts up against me, refusing to be ignored. Which sucks because everything hurts and I have no idea what's going on.

Grumpily accepting that oblivion is now out of reach, I slowly blink open my eyes. Did I forget to close my curtains? I squint against the bright white light surrounding me and let out a groan. Damn, did the sun go supernova or something? It's bright as hell today.

I try to push up from my bed, only to quickly realize that the hard surface I'm lying on is not the semi-comfortable mattress I'm used to. Shit, did I hook up with someone last night? My brain is foggy, and my body is sore. Not the *just had amazing sex* kind of sore that would make sense given my unfamiliar and bright surroundings, but more akin to *just survived a beating* kind of sore.

I groan as I get up from the pure white surface underneath me and look around to figure out where I am. My eyes keep stinging from the overwhelming radiance in the room, and I have to swipe at them to get the tears away. There's nothing but bright white and nothingness as far as the eye can see, and unease fizzles in my stomach like carbonation in a fresh beer.

Where the hell am I?

The question bounces around my perplexed mind like it's looking for a soft place to land. But instead of breaking things to me gently, the answers

come pouring into me like boiling water, painfully scorching my insides all at once.

Jerif.

His name punches me mercilessly in the face, and then I take another hit and another as my thoughts recall Echo, Crux, and Iceman.

Anguish roosts in my chest, and a pained sob crawls out of my shocked mouth. I lost them. One minute they were there, and then the next, Hell exploded around me, swarming with demons, and then I...I...

I look around frantically, trying to understand what's going on. I fell through the Nihil gate...didn't I?

My sterile whitewashed surroundings aren't helping me make sense of anything. Did I die? Did I think I was falling through the portal into the Center Ring of Hell, when really, I was just dying? Maybe this is what happens when you try to go into Nihil when you don't belong. You just become nothing?

Another sob wants to break away from my throat as I try to straighten up on shaky legs. I turn in a circle, but only whiteness surrounds me with no end.

Can a demon go to Heaven? Is this some in-between place that no one thought to tell me about?

"Jerif?" I call out, the fear-laced yell racing away from me and quickly getting lost in the nothingness all around.

"Iceman?" I try instead, but I'm met with only silence.

If they died, wouldn't they be in this in-between place too? My voice takes on a shrill, desperate note.

"Crux...Echo!"

Nothing.

Tears drip down my cheeks as everything once again grows quiet around me. I'm alone. I don't even bother to wipe the watery tracks from my face. Iceman said they'd have my back...always. But they aren't here. They slipped right through my fingers, and it's all my fault. If I hadn't been such a coward, if I had figured things out sooner, I might not be here. This is the consequence for my inaction. For my unwillingness to step up to the plate.

The memories of the last time I saw each of them, fighting for their lives against hundreds of demons at once, makes my entire body shake with sorrow-sodden anguish. I feel damp with it, all the way down to my marrow. Like I was caught in a terrible rainstorm, my body soaking wet and



trembling, unable to escape the onslaught.

My knees give out as I'm pelted with emotion, and I look around one last time before letting my body slump down onto the cool milky floor. Tears drip from my cheeks and pool on the smooth ground, and I know without a shadow of doubt that I'm not in Heaven. This has to be Hell, and I'm being punished. Why else would I remember all these terrible things? Isn't there supposed to be no pain in Heaven?

I don't know how long I lie there and let desolation leak out of me onto the pristine floor. I curl up into a pathetic ball and mourn the loss of what I could have had if I had just pulled my head out of my ass sooner.

Those four demons...they meant something to me. More than friendship. In such a short time, they somehow became cornerstones to my life. I feel their loss in every pore, crack, and crevice of my body.

I lie here, cursing fate for being so cruel and bringing me so low. I don't know why the world hates me so much. It constantly takes every good thing from me, and I wish I knew what I did to deserve it. I wish I knew what I could do to make it stop.

I stare numbly at the tiny puddle of tears I've left on the ground, tapping it with my fingertip. I haven't felt this gutted since the night I got the news of my parents being killed. I never wanted to feel that again, and yet, here I am. Grief is acting as my gravity, holding me right down on the ground.

It takes me a minute to recognize that the sound filling my ears isn't the rhythmic beating of my own battered heart, but rather, distant footsteps. I lift my head slowly to try to track where they're coming from, and spot a small figure in the distance. They're moving hurriedly through the chalky nothingness, as if they came from some secret door and have to traverse this endless space to get to another. The figure's steps have purpose, and for some reason, that gives me hope.

"Hey!" I call out as I push up from the ground.

The figure jumps and releases a startled shout.

"Can you help me?" I ask, squinting as I try to make out what they look like as they balk and stop in their tracks.

I stand all the way up and then awkwardly wave like I'm in a crowded room and I'm trying to help them identify that I'm the body attached to the voice that just scared the shit out of them. Being that I'm the only thing in this place, it's easy for their shrouded attention to land right on me.

I pause and wait for them to respond, but instead, the figure turns and

sprints away like their life depends on it, disappearing into nothingness.

Panic rises up in my throat.

“Hey!” I shout after them. “Come back!” I plead, hopelessness once again resuming its stranglehold on me. “Please!” I try, my voice frail and wounded. I don’t want to be alone, stuck in this place forever.

When the figure doesn’t come back, frustration bleeds into my sorrow, and the combination makes me heady with anger.

“Fuck you then!” I yell at nothing, pissed that after everything I’ve been through, *this* is what I get.

I look around, the need to rage taking hold of me, but there’s nothing to break or throw. I bend down and wedge off my shoe. I throw it as far as I can, on a grunt-scream that oddly makes me feel better. I pull off the other one next and chuck that too. It lands with a hollow thump, but instead of feeling satisfaction, it just reminds me of my hollow heart.

Heaving out a sigh, I feel like a weight of regrets has settled on my shoulders. But then that weight at my back isn’t just emotional. It’s physical too. It feels like I’m wearing a backpack.

With a frown, I turn to look over my shoulder, but I spot my scythe about ten feet away and rush to get it, the weight forgotten. I scramble for the Hell weapon like it’s my last hope. I wrap my hands around it and pick it up, but as soon as I see the ash still on it, I’m slammed again with more painful memories.

I bring the black wood and silver metal-ringed staff to my chest and hold it like it’s precious. The faces of the Hellgate Guardians flash past my eyes. I thought I was going to spend my life connected to the four of them, but that reality was just yanked away, and an overwhelming feeling of drowning takes over.

Iceman’s patient blue features and crown-like horns swim forward in my mind. Crux’s twinkling, mischievous green eyes and beach bum good looks fight for my attention next. I can practically feel the heat radiating off of Jerif as I recall the look on his face when the lava demon told me to run. I wish more than anything right now that I could crawl into the deep abyss of Echo’s eyes and live the rest of my life there with him in the shadows that he commands so expertly. I miss them. I want to be where they are. Anything would be better than this white nothingness all around me. I hate this.

*I hate it.*

I stare at the scythe in my hands and shake my head. Like I’m some

fucked up, possessed human Uber not in my right mind, I wrap both my palms around the staff and then slam the end of it against the smooth, colorless ground. I want to smash this place into smithereens. Break it until it resembles what I feel on the inside.

I slam the scythe down again and again, the hits reverberating up my arms and into my chest, like they're trying to soothe me. With inky black rage bleeding into my vision, I scream like a banshee and fling the tears from my cheeks as I do my best to gouge the snowy floor under my feet.

*Bam!*

For my mom.

*Bam!*

For my dad.

The scythe thunks loudly as it connects with the ground again, and I picture each of my demons' faces and demand retribution. I won't stop until this place is as cracked as my heart.

*Bam!*

"For me!" I shriek out as my arms grow heavy and my body tired from the fury I'm expelling and the abuse I'm delivering to the only thing I can punish in this place other than myself.

"Excuse me!" The voice thunders all around me, making me jump. "Exactly what do you think you are doing to my meditation room?" the smooth arrogant voice demands.

I whirl around, shocked, and find a breathtakingly beautiful winged man stomping toward me. I'm so stunned by his presence, that it's like my brain just stutters to a stop, in need of rebooting. Tanned skin and a chiseled body quickly closes the distance between us. He has long flowing golden blond hair, and the massive wings behind him are the same lustrous tones of sepia-gilded feathers.

He's terrifyingly beautiful and clearly *very* pissed. His gray-wash skinny jeans hug the thick muscles in his thighs, and the white Henley he's wearing looks damp like he just threw it on after a shower.

"Who are you, and how did you get in here?" he demands. As he gets closer, I can see his eyes are gray with gold flecks around the pupil. If looks could kill, I'd be dust already.

Instinctually, I tighten my hold on my scythe, and the slight movement immediately draws his attention. His aristocratic features and sharp jawline tense, and his eyes take on a wary caution as he studies me.

“Has your tongue been cut out?” he asks haughtily. His unimpressed eyes rake over me. “You’re not a Grim,” he declares more to himself than me. “I demand to know what you’re doing in my house. Who let you in?”

The word *house* forces me to look around with confusion. How is this a house? All I can see is endless white. Unless...

“Are you...God?” My tongue nearly sticks to the roof of my mouth.

I was expecting God to be older and less pompous, but what the hell do I know about anything?

A wry smile sneaks across his handsome face. “No, but if you’re here to join my menagerie, be sure to scream that out when I visit you,” he tells me, one eyebrow shooting up in invitation. Did he just...proposition me for sex? I frown, studying him. His lips go a little too Zoolander to be considered attractive, in my opinion. I’m not sure who this is, but I feel like I’m suffocating on the conceit that’s wafting off his heavily muscled body.

I mean, I guess he might scratch an itch for a certain kind of girl, but I’m not her. My brow furrows, and I take a step back like his arrogance might be contagious. This seems to puzzle the angel-guy even more.

“Um, if you’re not God, then who are you?”

He puffs out his chest with indignation, his wings flaring out behind him. “I asked you first! This is your last chance, or I’ll have you hung by your wings and flogged at Luce’s next revelry,” he threatens, like I know what any of that means.

Wait. *Wings?*

I twist and look back over my shoulder, but all I catch is a lot of purple. “What the...” I reach over my shoulder to push my hair out of the way, but instead, my hand lands on the crest of a wing that appears to be covered in soft bright violet feathers.

*What the fuck!*

I lift my shoulders nearly to my ears, and the wings fucking move with them. I snatch my hand away like I touched something gross and snap my face forward, my eyes wide and horrified. “I have bright purple wings!” I shriek.

“Any imp could see that.” Not-God snaps, clearly fed up with my lack of answers.

“Get them off me!” I try to lean away from the feathered appendages that are evidently attached to my back. “Get them off me right now!” I squeal, like it’s a spider attacking me and not bird parts fused with my parts.

“How dare you!” Not-God bellows, his face reddening as my panic climbs to an all-time high.

*The sound of flapping wings and the feel of beaks pecking at me fills my mind. I tried to throw the last of the food in my hand as far away as possible, but the peckerhead doves were too stupid to realize that I didn't have anything for them anymore. In a matter of seconds, I was swarmed. The vile beasts were intent on ending my life one flap and nip at a time. I screamed for my mom, terrified. But by the time she cleared all the evil doves away from me, I was traumatized for life.*

Not-God yells at me, but I'm stuck in the horrible memory. I keep turning around to look at them, like I can try to find a way to get them to detach. I barely make out the fact that he yells for someone else. I'm clearly too freaked out to do anything but lose my shit over the fact that I have wings now attached to my back. I fucking hate birds, and now the parts I hate the most are the parts of them that are stuck to me.

I run my fingers through my hair as anxiety pumps through me, but I scream when my hand brushes a wing again.

“Oh, God, gross! So fucking gross! Get 'em off!” I demand again, and something in my tone sends Not-God into a panic too.

“Get what off?” he yells at me, his golden blond wings snapping irritably behind him as he looks all over my body, like he's expecting to find a bug crawling on my skin.

Another panicked shriek rips out of my mouth as I watch his wings move closer to me, and it's like I'm right back in the park, ten years old again and screaming as the flock descends on my body.

Someone else comes running toward us, but I'm hyperventilating at this point and have to put my hands on my knees and force myself to breathe, so I'm unable to make out who's here. My disgusting wings are heavy on my back, making me feel like I might topple over. They make their presence known like a whispered threat telling me I'm never going to get away now.

“Is Lucifer pranking me?” Not-God asks of whoever is also in the room.

I don't hear what they say, because the sound of my heart in my ears is too loud. The black spots around my vision aren't the inky rage I'm used to, but an indication that I'm not getting enough oxygen in my lungs thanks to the panic attack I'm currently suffering from.

“They're not there. It's just a fuzzy backpack,” I tell myself, like it will convince my brain it's true. “I'm just carrying stuff, that's all. Just a

backpack. A big purple one.” It’s not working.

Out of nowhere, my scythe warms in my hand, and in the blink of an eye, the blades pop out of each end. The action startles me, forcing me to stand up straighter. A lanky, wingless man jumps back from me with a shout like I just tried to burn him.

“How am I supposed to detain her, sir, when she has *that*?” he asks, an Irish lilt to his worried voice.

Detain me?

I shove thoughts of my wings to the back of my mind with a shiver and force myself to focus. I hold my scythe out threateningly and narrow my eyes at the blond winged man and his little friend.

“I need to get out of here now,” I bark, still not sure where here even is. The blond prick said something about his house though, so I’m hoping that means there’s a way in and out of it.

“You,” I snarl at the lanky guy, pointing at him with the scythe, since it seems to scare him the most. “Show me the way out.”

He looks over to Not-God, like he’s not sure which of us is scarier. The crazy bitch with the scythe, or his boss.

The winged blond eyes me with a hard look, his jaw tightening as he glances over the scythe. “Do as she says,” Not-God instructs, and relief floods me. “But, kitten, know that I will find out who sent you, and when I do, I will hunt you to the Outer Rings of Hell. You’ll learn *very* soon that you’ve messed with the wrong Abdicated.”

I brush off Not-God’s Liam Neeson-eque threat and focus on the lanky Irish guy. He doesn’t have wings, so I like him more. He’ll get me out of here, and then this douche can search Hell all he wants, because I’ll be back in my world, trying to not get killed in an Outer Ring demon attack or dissected by scientists because *I* now have wings. I’ll just buy a big trench coat like John Travolta in *Michael*. It worked for him.

Goosebumps rise up all over my arms at the thought that I have these things stuck to my back, and a chill licks up my spine like some kind of bad omen.

The Irish guy leads the way, and I follow him, moving my scythe in warning toward Not-God, just in case. The *don’t you even think about trying anything* is clear in my glare, and he sends his own haughty sneer right back at me. Only when I’m far enough away do I turn my back on him. The lanky man leads to what looks like a white endless wall, but he touches something I

don't see, making a door magically open.

I quickly follow him out of the white nothingness, beyond grateful to see there's colors on this side of wherever I am. The moment I'm through the doorway, I immediately feel like I'm in some kind of tropical destination. I don't spot any palm trees, but there's a heavy humidity in the air, and I'm surrounded by lush greenery and flowers that are clearly thriving in the comfortable climate. I look behind me at the white nothingness of the room I was in and then back at this tropical paradise in confusion.

"This way," Lanky urges, and I quickly hurry forward, my legs brushing against fauna as I stumble past the plants and into some kind of courtyard, but I falter slightly when the sounds of sex immediately fill the air.

There are tall white pillars lining both sides of the picturesque garden I find myself in, but instead of plain white colonial columns, each pillar looks to be a sculpture straight out of the Kama Sutra.

I'm completely befuddled by the sights and sounds all around me. I spin in awe, trying to take it all in, and that's when I feel someone tackle me from behind.

I go down like the chick on her knees who's carved into one of the columns in front of me. My attacker elicits a pained grunt from me as I slam onto the ground and feel my scythe go bouncing away.

*Shit.*

I knew that needy pussy was going to be my downfall.



**W**elp, I'm in a dungeon.

It's a far, far cry from the sex pillars and multicolored hibiscus plants, I can tell you that much.

I guess when Not-God ordered *do as she says*, that was really code for *befuddle her senses with a fake sex garden of paradise vision and then shove her into a dungeon*.

I should've known it wouldn't be that easy. While I was reeling from the tackle and my head's subsequent meeting with the unforgiving ground, Lanky dragged me backward and shoved me into this cell. I heard the sound of metal bars slamming shut just as my vision was blinking back into focus.

The sight of my new prison overwhelms me with trepidation. I'm surrounded by spiked walls and ceiling, the jagged, uneven metal thorns looking like they're trying to leap out at me. I guess I should be thankful that the floor isn't covered in them too. Small mercies.

Lanky left me in here with nothing but a metal bed and bucket for company, and I've gone through four different stages of freak out since then. I'm not sure how many stages there actually are until I can get to the end, or even if I *can* come to terms with my reality right now.

I pace the room for a while, but my sore body puts a stop to that pretty quickly. I know for a fact that I was injured badly during the Vestibule battle, but all I'm suffering from are simple aches and pains. I feel sore all over, inside and out, and the weight at my back doesn't help things at all, but I don't feel like anything's broken or damaged beyond repair.



“Hello?” I call out, my hands gripping the bars of the cell as I try to peer down the flame-lit hallway. “I didn’t do anything wrong!” I cry, wincing as my voice echoes back to me.

Echo.

I clamp my eyes shut, leaning my forehead against the metal bar as pain overtakes me again. It keeps coming in waves, crashing right over my head and sending me sprawling and choking.

“Let me out,” I call, but my heart isn’t even in it, and my voice is already scratchy from yelling the same things many times before. As far as I can tell, no one else is down here, and there’s no one to hear my pleas.

Dragging myself away from the bars, I settle on top of the metal frame that’s nothing but a hellish exam table posing as a bed. I really hope its presence in this place isn’t foreshadowing anything. Wiping my feet free of dirt and grit, I’m really regretting that whole angry shoe toss I did earlier, because I’m pretty sure I’m going to step on something and catch some form of hepatitis or tetanus or both. Plus, it’s kind of cold.

I lie down on my back, but when my wings touch the smooth metal, it sends a weird, unfamiliar sensation through me that I’ve never experienced before. I cringe away, turning onto my side, and hug my knees against my chest with a shudder.

So many questions swirl in my head. I have no idea where I am. I’m pretty sure I’m in Hell still, but am I dead? Did I end up in Nihil—the Center Ring of Hell? Or am I in some jail for demons who try to go places they’re not supposed to?

My chest aches for everything I’ve been through and lost in the last twenty-four hours. I’m not even sure how to process anything. With nothing else to distract me, the memories of the fight assault me. Jerif’s last plea is like a broken record beating on my eardrums.

*Don’t let me die for nothing. Run.*

He knew, right then and there, that was it for him. Maybe if I’d been paying more attention, I would’ve seen that same grim look of acceptance on all of the guys’ faces. But I just couldn’t fathom it. Even when we were overrun, I thought we could get away. The four of them are larger than life. Powerful. *Other*. So fucking special that I couldn’t really even begin to believe that they could possibly die.

But we didn’t stand a chance. Five against hundreds? Thousands? I was so fucking naive. So totally unprepared.

*Bring her to the Ophidian.*

The memory of those words being growled makes the hairs rise up on my arms. Something or somebody wants me. They attacked us, killed my demons, because those Outer Ringers were told to come get me.

How the fuck did they even know I was there in the first place? And more importantly, *why*? Why me? What the Hell could anyone possibly want from me?

These questions plague me, but try as I might, I don't fucking know the answers, and I have no way of finding out. I have no one to ask. I'm so terrified and brokenhearted that it feels like I'm being weighed down with cement blocks and water is slowly, threateningly, rising up from my feet. It feels like it's only a matter of time before I can't breathe anymore and everything is over for me.

I can't help but wonder what's happening with the Hellgate. I know I didn't really want anything to do with it, but now, I feel some sort of kinship to the damn thing. We both lost who we were counting on to stabilize us.

Is the Gate broken beyond repair? Are imps and Outer Ring demons pouring out into the mortal world right now as I'm stuck here? Am I still a Gate Guardian even though I was never inducted?

My gray eyes blink at the spikes on the wall across from me as I stare off into space, questions swirling in my head. The metal is black and rough, and there are stains in some of the crevices between the sharp points. Not only does it look intimidating as hell, but it also makes all the sound in the room muffled, as if whoever built it wanted to make sure your own sobs suffocated in the air, not allowed to drift out.

That's exactly what I feel like—like the sadness is going to smother me.

What would Jerif do if he knew that he would die just for me to end up here?

It makes me angry on his behalf. He wanted me to get away, not to be stuck in this place. I need to get out. But my one and only weapon is gone. The scythe dropped right out of my hands, and I didn't get to see what happened to it before I was dragged into this cell.

Exhaustion tugs at my eyes, making my lids feel heavy. I try to fight it because it terrifies me to sleep in this place and to be caught unaware. So I force myself to get up and pace again, but the soreness in my body screams at me to sit back down.

I grip the bars, yelling once more, shouting words that get swallowed up

in the darkness. Defeated and utterly drained, I lie down on the bed again, and then I just cry. My tears go hot and cold. My body sweats and shivers. My mind whirls until my overflowing emotions make me go numb instead.

A long time passes by the time my heavy lids take over, shutting my burning eyes against my will. Sweeping the last of my tears away, my eyes force me into sleep, like I've been strong-armed in a wrestling contest and the only thing I can do is tap out.

I dream about them dying over and over again.

---

I wake up because of a sound, but my groggy body doesn't pinpoint it right away. I groan at the hard metal bed that I'm lying on and rub my hands down my face. I was really hoping that when I opened my eyes, the spiked walls and overall doom of my circumstances would have been gone, nothing but a nightmare.

One look over my shoulder sends all hope away. Those grotesque, horrible multihued-purple wings are still attached to my back, some of the feathers nearly matching the shade of my hair.

I always thought it was weird that I've been dyeing my hair purple since I was sixteen. I just...had to. I've always been drawn to it. My mom didn't even mind it; she said it suited me. I can't help but wonder if that's because she *knew* I had wings to go right along with it. It's like every time I got a purple box of dye, I was fulfilling some omen or giving fate a hand up. Maybe this is why I only have to dye my hair every six months. It takes to the color like it's claiming it as its own.

Did my parents know that if these blocks on me were removed, this is what I would really look like? Was I born with violet purple hair and wings? Is that why they put some sort of demon power block on me, because there was no way for me to blend otherwise?

I dismiss the barrage of frustrating questions. I shouldn't keep looking for answers when I know I'll probably never find them. Instead, I search my body for any other hints of change. I don't feel any horns or tails. I still have two eyes and normal teeth, and my skin is what it's always been. I don't have a forked tongue like Crux, or blue skin like Iceman, or moving tattoo shadows like Echo. I don't have fiery hair like Jerif. Aside from the wings

and what I now suspect is the real color of my hair, I'm still me.

Sitting up, I look around, testing out my body as I stretch and crick my neck, trying to work out the soreness from the bed and figure out what the noise was that woke me up. When my eyes scan over to the bars of my cell, I jump so hard that I ram my wings back against the spiked wall, instantly piercing one.

With a pained yelp, I stand up, nearly falling face-forward as I overcompensate for the weight of the wings at my back. I've been awake for about forty seconds, and life already sucks.

With a hand over my racing heart, I stare at Lanky who's just standing in the shadows, watching me like a creeper.

"Fuck, how long have you been standing there like the king of pervs?" I demand, reaching around to rub my smarting wing. I try not to flinch at the feel of feathers against my hand, but I don't succeed. Fuck. I don't think I'm ever going to get used to this.

Ew.

I pull my hand away, and luckily, there's no blood, so I guess that's a good thing. I doubt leaving my blood cells behind in a place like this would be a good thing. Who knows what could happen? I don't trust this Lanky fucker.

"So what's going to happen to me now?" I ask my audience of one, not at all expecting that he'll answer me.

He looks pretty determined to just stand there and creep me out, but what he doesn't know is that I'm on board with not being down here alone. Slap my ass and call me misery, because company—whether silent and voyeuristic or not—is better than nothing.

I notice that he doesn't have a chair, so either he's an epic stander or he's not planning on being down here for too long. I try not to think about what that means for me.

"Next time your friends come to you and say, *hey let's pop down into Hell real quick. It'll be fun and totally fine*, don't believe anything they say. Run as far away from them as you can. And if you're being attacked by Outer Ring demons like I always am, stick with your posse. But overall, just say no to Hell," I advise him.

He doesn't crack a smile, and even trying to joke about the other Gate Guardians hurts my heart. I shake my head and try to get comfortable on the morgue table that's doubling as a bed.

“I have an idea,” I announce. “I’m going to ask you a bunch of questions. You can stay perfectly still and creepastic. If I’m right, you can snort, and if I’m wrong, then you can blink twice or something. Okay?”

Lanky just stares at me blankly.

“Perfect, that’s exactly right, I’m so glad you got the rules of the game so fast,” I encourage sarcastically.

“Okay, first question, am I still in Hell?”

I study his face, but he’s got this stony thing nailed. I nod like answers are just pouring off of him.

“Okay, still in Hell, good to know. This next one is a little harder...am I in Nihil?”

Nothing. Hmm.

“Am I somewhere else?”

Lanky sniffs, and my eyes widen. I spring up from my lunch tray bed and stare at him excitedly. “So I *am* in Nihil?”

“I didn’t say that. I just had to sniff,” he defends, his Irish lilt making his words sound more appealing than they are.

“Did you really?” I challenge. “Okay, so I’m in Hell. I’m in Nihil, which means that I *am* a Nihil?” I recount to myself as if that’s going to help everything connect. “But how? Jerif said that it was impossible.”

“Who’s Jerif? Is that who helped you break into Tazreel’s house?” Lanky asks.

“Tazreel?” I ask. “Is that the name of Not-God with the blond wings and hair and a Gaston complex?”

Lanky stares at me, unmoving.

“Tazreel...” I repeat again, like saying the name will jog my memory. “Nope, no idea who that is. And no one helped me break in anywhere; I fell through the Ring portal and woke up in that creepy white room,” I supply. “Blame the Gate, not me.”

“Everyone knows Tazreel,” Lanky argues, like he’s not buying my defense at all. “He was part of the original wave of Abdicated. Everyone knows that.”

“Abdicated?”

Why did I know that word? I quickly recall the blond winged dude claiming he was one, but that isn’t it. I’m pretty sure one of the guys used the term before, I just can’t quite remember.

“Yes,” he says, looking at me like I’m an idiot. “Tazreel is one of the

angels who left Heaven.”

Understanding dawns on me, and I look at Lanky excitedly as I piece it together. “Holy shit, the blond dude is a Fallen Angel?”

“*Abdicated*, not Fallen Angel. No one *fell* from anywhere. Fallen...” He snorts, like the thought is ludicrous.

I stare at Lanky as my mind wraps itself slowly around what this all means. I’m in Nihil, the Center Ring of Hell, where only the Abdicated and very powerful live. I have wings. I shiver. And I’ve been hidden from the demon world my whole life up until now...

“Shit, am I the Anti-Christ?” I ask, shocked. “I mean, I don’t feel like I want to burn the world to the ground, but what other explanation is there?”

Lanky busts up laughing. I turn a glare on him, not appreciating the levity he’s experiencing during my existential crisis.

“You are not the anti anything. All you are is in big trouble for messing with Tazreel. As soon as he finds a Savior who can come on such short notice, we’ll know who you are and just what to do with you.”

“A Savior?” I ask, confused, because that sounds like a good thing and not the ominous threat that Lanky meant it as.

“A Savior,” he repeats.

“Savior?”

“Savior!” he mouths more slowly.

“Shaver?” I ask, feigning confusion.

“SAVOR!”

I got it on the second mention, but fucking with him right now is just too good of a distraction. We go for another minute until I run out of things that sound like Savior, and he finally clues in.

Lanky glares at me, not at all amused, and silence spreads out between us like slowly rising bread. As soon as I stop talking and focusing on only the here and now, loss ripples through me, reminding me of things I wish I could bleach from my mind. Or maybe it’s just the guilt and responsibility that I wish I could run from.

A loud clang of metal on metal reaches Lanky and me, and heavy footsteps follow the sound like a haunting drumbeat counting down the seconds before I die. I gulp audibly and try to ignore the spark of excitement that flares in Lanky’s eyes.

Tazreel, in all his winged glory, comes into view down the hall, stepping out of a stairwell that I didn’t know was there. What is with this place and

having secret magical doors? He's followed by a demon who could be a dead ringer for Hoggle from *Labyrinth*.

"This is her?" Hoggle grunts out as they stop in front of my cell.

"This is," Tazreel confirms, his lips pursed and his gray-gold eyes steely.

"Hmm," the demon hums, looking me over. "She's an interesting specimen. Her wings and hair alone make her a collectible. Are you going to keep her for your menagerie?" He asks it like I'm a puppy and not a person.

"Hey!" I voice in objection, but it goes ignored.

Tazreel looks at me for a moment. "No, I think not. I'm not drawn to this one in that way. I'll probably trade her. I did, however, promise her I'd hang her by her wings at Luce's next get-together, and I'm a male of my word. So after that's been done, I'll entertain bids."

"You can't sell me," I say, fear and anger gripping my neck like they're trying to find my pulse point. "You don't own me."

"Exactly. Which is why the Savor is here to find out who is responsible for you," Tazreel barks back. "Once we know that, we can hold them accountable, and they can pay for the damage you've caused or trade you as payment instead."

"What damage?" I counter.

"The damage you tried to do to my meditation room."

"I didn't do any damage."

"But you tried, and your actions have consequences. When I find out who sired you, I'm going to have a strong word with them. You're practically feral," Tazreel accuses.

Pissed, I approach the bars of my cell. Is he seriously saying I have to be punished for trying and failing to break his stupid floor? I didn't even scratch that shit!

I lean in toward him. "Well, good luck finding my parents and trying to make them pay. They're dead," I snap at him, ignoring the sting that I feel in my soul as I fling that fact around like a weapon.

"That explains a lot," Tazreel jibes, and at the same time, I feel a flash of pain at my shoulder. I flinch back away from the bars and look to see that Hoggle has one of my purple feathers clutched in his hand.

My face goes indignant, and I instantly feel betrayed. I love the movie *Labyrinth*, and I expect so much better of its characters. I watch, horrified, as Hoggle puts the feather in his mouth and starts to chew it. I reel back with disgust and fight the dry-heave that tries to work its way up my throat.

That's fucking nasty.

"Mmm," Hoggle comments as he tilts his head to the side like he's trying to work through a tough problem. His eyes are far away as he chews, as if he's savoring and identifying notes and flavors in my feather like it's some fine wine.

Savoring...I guess that makes sense given what he's called. He's like some creepy demon sommelier. I try not to think about what he eats if a feather isn't available.

Another dry-heave explodes out of my throat, and this time, I can't do much to stop it.

Tazreel and Lanky are watching him intently, ignoring me as I gag. "She's very sweet, almost too rich and decadent," Hoggle says, still chewing, rolling the feather around on his tongue. "There's a bitterness too that I suspect will linger as an aftertaste for some time. The combination is rare." He finally swallows it down. "I don't think I've ever tasted layers like that before, and I'm the oldest of my clan."

*Bitter aftertaste?* Let me out of this cell and I'll show him bitter aftertaste. Then again, what exactly do I think I'm going to do to this guy? Flap him to death? That thought conjures the memory of my almost death by doves, and I quickly try to shove it away.

"Explain," Tazreel orders.

"Well, there's the expected smoky taste that all Abdicated possess, but her mother is a mystery to me. I've never tasted the like of it before, but we're in luck, because I've been able to easily pinpoint who her Sire is."

When Hoggle doesn't say anything more, Tazreel's face turns thunderous. "Spit it out."

I can tell Hoggle enjoys keeping this Abdicated on pins and needles. It's probably the only power exchange where he's able to come out on top. He gives Tazreel a loaded look. "The Sire is most definitely...*you*," he declares with an expression on his face like he just tossed a bomb of information at our feet. Shrapnel goes flying straight into my heart.

"What?" I shout out at the same time Tazreel bellows his own, "What!"

"Indeed," Hoggle states with a nod.

"No. That's not possible! I've sired no one in my lifetime," he defends.

I stare at Tazreel, completely gobsmacked.

This asshole is my dad?





“Who sent you?” Tazreel’s screaming voice jars my ears. The sound reverberates around the spiked walls of my cell, pinning me in place.

“No one sent me!” I scream right back.

Tazreel growls like a pissy wolf. He turns and paces the dark corridor of the dungeon, his blond wings flickering in the fiery light. “This must be a mistake.”

“It is no mistake,” Hogle assures him. “She’s yours.”

Tazreel cringes, as if the very idea of me being his daughter is disgusting. Well, right back atcha, fucker. “I already had a dad, and it definitely wasn’t you,” I say, sending a scathing look at the pompous jerk.

He ignores me and starts pulling at his hair, running his hands through the blond locks aggressively. Beside him, Lanky immediately digs into his pocket and passes over a hair comb. I’m fairly certain that it’s made of bones.

Without a word, Tazreel snatches up the comb and starts to fix his hair, while I look at him like, *what the actual fuck?*

“You know what this means,” Hogle says, arching a ridiculously bushy eyebrow. “You’ll have to host.”

Tazreel grinds his jaw as he finishes his primping and passes back the comb to Lanky. “Absolutely not.”

“You must, sir. Not all of course, but the Originals for certain,” Lanky says, eyes wide. “Any time an Abdicated procreates, they must host and present their offspring to the other Nihils. It’s the rules.”

“I know the rules!” he roars back, making Lanky cower. “I damned well helped write them!”

“Well, then you know I have to report this,” Hoggle tells him. The glare he gets in return looks like Tazreel is trying to smite him or some shit. I’m really glad I’m not the recipient of it.

“We host when offspring are birthed. Look at her!” Tazreel shouts, flinging an arm in my direction. “She’s ancient.”

“Hey!” I snap. “I’m only twenty-eight years old.”

“In demon years?” he questions.

“What? No. I don’t fucking know. In regular human years.”

He stops his pacing and turns to look at me. “Human? What do humans have to do with anything?”

“My parents were human.”

“False. Your parents are demons,” the Savor intervenes. “Well, at least one of them was for certain. I can’t imagine that your mother was anything else, but I can’t say for sure. Any pixies in your menagerie?” he asks Tazreel.

“What? No. How would that even work? They’re three inches tall,” Tazreel snarls at Hoggle, who in turn just shrugs.

“I’m not one to judge what an Abdicated is into; all I know is, no humans were involved in the creation of this one,” he announces again and gestures to me.

“I’m getting real tired of you, Hoggle,” I snap at him, not liking the myriad of shit that’s being dumped at my feet to deal with. I thought it was going to be hard accepting which one of my parents fucked a demon or the fact that they kept their demonic origins from me. But knowing my mother hooked up with this arrogant windbag...it’s too much.

The deep shelf of the Savor’s brows lowers in a frown. “What is a Hoggle? My name is Borf.”

“The point is, this asshole can’t be my father,” I say, nodding at Tazreel, who gives a short, “Agreed.”

Borf-Hoggle shakes his head, clearly annoyed with our mutual denial. “I must go. I’ll be reporting this, so you should ready yourself,” he tells Tazreel before spinning in a circle and disappearing instantly without a sound.

I blink as I stare at the place where the goblin-looking demon just was. “Fuck!” Tazreel yells, making both Lanky and me flinch.

He starts stalking away, but Lanky quickly intervenes. “Sir, you cannot leave your offspring in the dungeon. The other Nihil will never let you live it

down.”

Tazreel stops in his tracks and looks back at me, like he forgot about my actual presence, too disturbed by the crisis of my theoretical existence.

“Oh, right,” he grumbles with a put-out sigh. “Take her to a room, but I want her watched at *all times*,” he says harshly, sending me a warning look that promises Hellish retribution if I try anything. “I must get ready. Those Abdicated fucks will be pissing themselves to come here. I haven’t let anyone other than Luce here since the humans’ Black Plague.”

“That was a fun party,” Lanky chirps.

I look at him with exasperation, but he just comes forward, grabbing a skeleton key out of his pocket—he probably keeps it right next to the bone comb—and unlocks my cell door.

I step out into the corridor, lifting my chin up to face Tazreel’s aggressive stare. “I will find out which female birthed you and lied to me,” he promises darkly. “And when I do, she will be punished.”

My hackles rise. “My parents are *dead*,” I say again. “My mom did nothing wrong. And for the last time, she was a human.”

He makes a revolted face again. “I would *never* lie with a human,” he tells me, looking practically nauseated at the very idea. I bristle. “Which means someone lied to me and stole you away,” he goes on, every word making his austere face grow harder and colder. “She pretended you were a human, and I intend to make her pay.”

I swallow hard, trying and failing not to shake. I can *feel* wrath coursing off his skin, and for the first time, my brain really catches up to the fact that this guy is *other*. Menacing power prickles my senses and tugs at my arm hair. Behind me, my wings snap against my back, like they’re trying to hide beneath my skin.

“I will find out what you know and mete out judgment,” he promises me. In this case, I have no idea what I should even say back. How do I dig myself out of a hole that I didn’t even know I’d fallen into?

“I just answered a Help Wanted ad,” I reply lamely. One measly job listing put me right on the path to Hell. How’s that for fair?

His gray eyes shimmer, catching on the gold speckles. “Who are you? Tell me everything. Now.”

There’s zero room for argument, and that power of his is back in full force, nearly taking me to my knees. My teeth grit and my body locks as some outside force presses into me.

I take a deep breath, trying not to let it sound too shaky. “I’m Delta Gates. I’ve always thought I was a human. Never even knew demons existed until a little while ago. My parents were human, Tanya and Ray Gates,” I supply, the words just falling off my tongue without my permission. “I saw an ad for a job to guard a graveyard, but it turned out to be a job to guard a Hellgate. I didn’t know anything before that.”

An exhale expels out of me with force as my eyes widen. “Did you just...?”

“Yes,” he answers arrogantly while my blood turns hot.

My hands curl into fists. “If you could’ve just forced me to tell the truth this whole time, then why didn’t you just question me instead of sticking me down here?” I demand.

“I do not answer to you, daughter.”

“I am *not* your daughter.”

“Unfortunately, it appears that you are,” he says back to me.

“No,” I shake my head adamantly. “You said so yourself, you don’t *lie with humans.*”

“Correct. Which means someone dumped you on earth to be raised by humans.”

My mouth drops open. Is that...true? Were my parents...not my parents at all?

I knew that when the whole *I’m a demon* truth bomb dropped, that either my mom or dad had kept a secret from me. But I didn’t expect for *neither* of them to be my blood. Distress soaks through my stomach and churns in the acid. Was my mother *other* too, or not my mother at all?

“I will discover the truth,” Tazreel says, but I barely hear him. “Until then, you will be prepped for the party.”

“I don’t want to go to a fucking party,” I snap, feeling way too overloaded right now. Dealing with Tazreel is enough. I don’t know if I can handle dealing with more of these Abdicated at the same time.

“Neither do I,” he growls back, like this is *my* fault. “We will discuss more about how you got here afterward. Until then, *do not* anger me or step out of line. You may be my offspring, but I will still hang you by your wings if you do anything to displease me.”

*Gee, thanks, pop!*

He turns and stalks away without another word, leaving me behind in the dank, fire-shadowed corridor.

“This way,” Lanky says at my back.

I turn and follow him in the other direction where he opens another mystery door out of thin air. We climb a steep set of stairs, and as soon as we reach the top, the lighting is that bright white hue again, making me squint.

I look around as I follow behind him, our steps muffled by the floor made of sleek black fur. I have no idea what kind of animal this hide is from, but it’s big enough to stretch throughout the entire space of the room, so under no circumstances do I ever want to meet it. All around, there are weapons hung on the gray walls, along with every torture device imaginable.

“Did you really have to take me through this room?” I ask Lanky while sidestepping a shrine of pliers that are the perfect size for pulling teeth. There’s even a wall at the end of the room where two large clamps hang from a wire. It’s the perfect size to hang someone up by their wings.

He shrugs, unconcerned at my inner dismay. “This is the shortest route.”

“Mm-hmm,” I say, not believing him for a second. This was done on purpose, probably on Tazreel’s orders, to scare me and make sure I behave. And I gotta be honest, it’s working.

Once we leave this room, Lanky takes me into a hallway, the floors and walls made of polished black stone, while the ceiling gleams white. The walls are bare, and there are no windows, but the ceiling seems to be lighting everything up like it’s emanating daylight. We pass a lot of doors, all of them shut tight, and then I follow Lanky up a set of stairs.

I grip the smooth black banister as we start ascending, but my mind shoots back to the trek down a very different set of stairs. If only I’d stopped the guys right then and there on our way to the Vestibule. If only I’d made us all turn back. I wish so much that I would’ve, because then they’d still be alive.

They’d be alive, and I’d be with them.

Unwanted tears try to pool on my bottom lids, but I quickly wipe them away. I can’t break down again and again. My life is in danger here. I don’t know what these Abdicated are going to do to me, so I need to save all my energy on staying alive and getting the hell away. If I can go back, maybe I can find the demons from the other Hellgate, Flint and Alder. Maybe they can help me, or at least tell me who the hell the Ophidian is.

I can’t keep thinking like I’m Delta Gates, boring human woman. If I’m going to make it out of this, then I need to start thinking like a demon. The wings at my back and the fact that I’m walking through Hell right now

proves that. No more fighting what I am.  
It's time I embrace it.



**T**he room I get dumped into is very different from the dungeon cell.

Lanky leaves me alone as soon as he drops me off at a large white door that stands out against the polished black walls. There are already two demons standing on either side of the door, obviously here fulfilling Tazreel's decree that I be *watched at all times*.

The two of them are huge, probably hired for their sheer size alone. I thought Iceman and Jerif were big, but these two have to be almost eight feet tall. Instead of wings at their backs, they have crisscrossed swords, and the blades are made of that same gleaming black stone as the daggers that the Outer Ringers were using to stab Jerif. I can't stand to look at them.

With a quick "stay here" from Lanky, I'm left alone, shut into a room.

I take a small, relieved breath as I look around. The room has a small entryway, holding a head bust of Tazreel on top of a short red column. Rolling my eyes, I walk past the white marble likeness of his arrogant face and pass through the archway that leads to a large bedroom. My eyes widen as I take everything in. The floor has that same black fur acting as carpet, and there are two other doors on the left, probably leading to a bathroom and closet. But straight ahead, past the black and silver canopy bed, there's a balcony.

With a surge of excitement, I rush over to it, flinging open the double French doors. A breeze instantly hits my face as soon as I step out. I gape as I walk up to the railing and look over. It's night. At least, I think it is, but I really don't know how these things work in the Center Ring of Hell. Maybe it

always looks like this. The sky is black with red pinpricks of light bleeding into the darkness like magma stars. Down below, I can see a huge, winding river that casts off an eerie blue glow.

As far as I can see, there's nothing other than the river and a smattering of houses far in the distance, but I can only make out their shadows since there's no moon in sight. The landscape looks fairly normal, other than the stars that flicker like flames, but there's a taste to the air...it doesn't smell or feel the way a breeze does on earth. There's a sweet taste to it, and it's...invigorating. Like every breath I inhale is making me stronger, like it's restoring something in me that I didn't realize was lacking.

I stand there still, absorbing the quiet of the moment and hoping it will silence all the uncertainty and worry I feel inside. I don't know how to start trying to process everything; it all just feels so overwhelming. I sigh and turn around, forcing myself to leave the refreshing air as I walk back into my room.

Washing all the ash and filth off of me is probably a good place to begin to unravel the knot that is my life right now. I make my way to the black and gray wall at the far end of the room, blinking slightly at the sight of a fern plant potted right beside the first door. I gape at it but then shake my head and toss that into the *not gonna talk about it* pile. So what if the only plant in this room just so happens to be a fern that's identical to the only plant at my house?

I shake off the sense of déjà vu and walk through the doorway, finding a very masculine looking bathroom. There's no shower or even a conventional tub, but there is an onyx toilet built to accommodate wings, and a large sunken pool filled with steaming water.

The hot water is calling to me, and my clothes and skin are still covered in dead demons and wrinkled from my time in the dungeon. I waste no time stripping down and stepping into it. I hiss at the boiling temperature, forced to lower myself inch by overheated inch until my body acclimates enough to be submerged. I let the hot water cocoon me for a minute, trying to get my tense and knotted muscles to relax.

There's a platter of soaps within reach, so I grab the first bar I see and start going to town, scrubbing myself down. My wings are incredibly heavy now that they're wet, but they seem to like the hot water, because they flutter out, the ends moving to pop the bubbles that form on the top layer of the water. I jump at the intrusion on my peaceful moment, grimacing at the sight



of them.

Ugh.

I don't want wings. I don't care if people think they're cool or pretty or badass. They one hundred percent freak me out, and they don't belong on me.

"Go away," I hiss at them. The purple feathers are darker now that they're wet.

The unwelcome appendages don't seem to care how I feel about them, and my left one reaches out like a defiant toddler and pops another bubble. I roll my eyes and do my best to ignore them, but I get the distinct impression that they're taunting me.

Feathers continue to pop bubbles, and I bat the wings away. "Fucking settle down," I grumble at them, and I'm a little appeased when they actually seem to listen and stop moving, pulling tightly against my back again.

I scrub my skin, but I refuse to look at anything. I keep my eyes trained forward onto the piss throne instead. Seeing any ash or blood will set me off, and I can't afford to lose my shit. Not when there are a shit ton of Abdicated apparently coming here as Tazreel hosts some fucking useless party because apparently, it's the "rules" to be like, *hey, I stuck my dick in a female and procreated another Nihil. Who's bringing the keg?*

Once I'm sure that I'm clean from hair to toes, I frown at the cloudy gray water I leave behind. I look around, trying to find some sort of drain or plug to pull, but I can't find anything. I step out, grabbing a towel that feels more like a blanket as I dry myself off. The silky, probably priceless material doesn't absorb nearly as well as my Dollar Tree thin cotton towels at home, which is a little pathetic.

I search the room for other toiletries, but there's nothing else in here except for a mirror and a red free-standing sink. I stare at my reflection for a long moment. I'm still me, but not quite the same. My hair is electric and practically glowing. The purple is stunning, and I now have some lighter natural looking violet highlights mixed in with the darker. Just as I suspected, the color looks natural now, some strands lighter like they've been kissed by the sun. It's long and voluminous, and as much as I hate the feathered appendages, they match my hair exactly.

My skin is smooth and radiant. I look at my knee where I used to have a scar from when I skinned it really badly in eighth grade when I was trying to look cool and ride a skateboard. The scar is gone. My gray eyes flicker like the embodiment of storm clouds, but beyond that, there's nothing overly

demonic about me. I'm suddenly a level of hot I don't really know what to do with, but that seems to be the Abdicated way, judging from Tazreel and his obvious vanity.

Eyes flicking over, I notice that the hanging mirror I'm staring at myself in has some little knobs, and when I pull them, it opens and I find the toiletries I was looking for. I snag a brush and start to comb through my hair as I let the silk blanket-towel hang over my wings, which are dripping huge piles of water all over the floor. I have no idea how to dry these fucking things, so I end up going outside on the balcony again, sitting there wrapped up in a blanket I steal from the bed, deciding to just let them air dry.

It takes a long fucking time. I really wish I had my blow dryer right about now. I lean back in the chair, soaking up whatever it is in the air that feels so invigorating. My thoughts race, but I dread trying to focus on any one of them. They're all too overwhelming, and I need to focus on getting out of here.

I can lose my shit when I'm in the privacy of my own home again. Until then, I need to shut everything down that wants to derail me.

Just when I'm starting to relax, Tazreel pops out of nowhere, landing right in front of me on the balcony. "How old did you say you were again?" he demands.

I shriek and nearly fall backward in my chair. I clutch my chest and shoot him a scowl, irritated that he thinks he has the right to appear whenever the fuck he wants to. He's staring at me expectantly, a large looking ledger in his hand. It's bound in what I would guess is black dragonhide, but I don't know if that's my imagination running away with me or if that's an actual possibility.

"Could you knock before you come barging in?" I scold.

"No. This is my house. How old?" he asks again.

"Twenty-eight," I repeat on a sigh, and his brows dip in concentration as he flips through the pages of whatever book is in his hands.

He's mumbling to himself, like he's doing conversions in his head, like I'm a dog and he's trying to see how old that would make me in—I listen closer—Marakas, Zael, and Goblin years.

I cringe. "You fucked a goblin?" I ask, my tone bleeding with judgment.

His eyes briefly swing up to me. "They are actually very attentive and gentle lovers. They do amazing things with one's taint," he tells me matter-of-factly, like it makes a difference.

“Ugh. I don’t want to hear about your taint,” I snap, suddenly wondering if I jump off this balcony, how quickly could I fly away from this dude.

But just the thought of having to use my bird parts gets me feeling all anxious and squeamish, so I decide against that plan of action.

“I need another book,” he declares, and suddenly, he’s just not there anymore.

Getting up, I head inside, locking the balcony door after me. Not because I think it will actually keep him out, but it feels like a small act of rebellion I can get away with to irritate him.

I make my way over to the second door in the room and pull it open, finding a walk-in closet just like I guessed. Everything hanging up is mostly made of leather, fur, and chains.

Swiping through the clothes, I finally manage to find a semi-normal looking pair of pants, and although they’re made of leather, they’re not stiff, shiny, or squeaky like the pair from the graveyard uniform. Instead, they’re supple and soft.

I find an array of underwear and stare at the pile for a moment, debating what to do. I’m not sure who this stuff belongs to, and I’m trying to decide which is worse: wearing someone else’s underwear, or wearing someone else’s pants *without* underwear. I snag a pair of panties and sniff a corner just to be sure they’re clean. I side-eye myself as I do it, irritated that Hell has forced me to become a creepy underwear sniffer. Luckily, they’re clean, so I pull them on, huffing at the black silk thong that goes right up my ass crack.

Finding a shirt is more difficult because there are no bras in sight. I’m not exactly ready to put on the one I was wearing before, but going without isn’t an option either. Going back into the bathroom, I clean the bra in the sink absently, refusing to focus on the ash tainted water that flows from it. I wring it out as much as I can and put the wet bra back on, cringing.

*What the hell? This doesn’t fit right.*

I look down at my chest, and my cups runneth over. I try to grasp what the fuck is going on. Did the Hell water shrink it? I pull the bra off and squeak in surprise when my boobs don’t do the normal sag. I push one boob down and then let go and watch, shocked, when it bounces right back up, perky as a Playboy Bunny.

*Did I get a Nihil boob job to go with the rest of the changes to my body?*

I twist and turn, looking at myself in the mirror. It’s undeniable, they’re bigger and higher up than they have been since I hit my late twenties. I put

my wet bra back in the pile of dirty clothes that reek of trauma and pain and go back to the closet.

Inside, I grab what I'm pretty certain is meant to be a dude's tunic that has a hole for wings in the back. It's really difficult to put the damn thing on and line it up with the wing holes. When I finally manage to get it on, I'm sweating and out of breath. The hem hits right below my ass, and it's really loose in the front, but it's better than the half-naked women's shirts hanging up. I don't even think I could manage to get dressed in those without help.

As soon as I walk out of the closet, I see Tazreel appear outside on the balcony again. His face is buried in another black book. I see his mouth move like he's asking me another question, because he hasn't noticed he's missing an audience. When he doesn't earn a reply from me for whatever he said, he looks around, noticing that I'm not out there. I snicker, but the noise makes him turn his head, eyes landing on me on the other side of the glass panes.

He turns the handle to the balcony door, frowning when he discovers that it's locked. He gives me a droll look, like I'm a petulant child trying to escape a time-out.

In a blink, he disappears from the balcony and reappears in my room. "Do you dispel black glitter during intercourse?" he asks without preamble.

"What the fuck? No!"

He crosses something off in the book, looking smug. "I knew you couldn't be part pixie."

I blink at him. "So...you *did* fuck a three-inch pixie?"

"No," he replies brusquely. "She was only a quarter pixie."

I sigh and rub a hand down my face. "Why the creepy question? What's in that book?"

"I keep a catalogued account of everyone I've fornicated with. I'm searching to see if I can determine who your mother might be."

My lips purse in full icked-out mode. "Eww, how many books do you have?"

He opens his mouth, but I quickly throw up my hand. "You know what? Never mind. I don't want to know."

He nods and keeps reading, but then Lanky appears in my room right beside him, making me jump back, a small yelp coming out of me. "Fuck, can you guys not just pop into my room like that?"

They both ignore me. "Sir, the first guests have arrived."

Tazreel snaps the book shut with a scowl. "Dammit," he hisses before

finally looking over at me for longer than a second. His eyes narrow as his gaze runs over my damp hair and drooping wings. “What in Nihil are you wearing? You can’t go like *that* to a party I’m hosting.”

Self-conscious anger lifts a blush into my cheeks. “I didn’t know the party was going to be right fucking now. And besides, I told you before I don’t want to go.”

“You’re going, even if I have to drag you by your purple wings,” he says without room for argument.

“Pass.”

In one smooth movement, Tazreel tosses the book aside, making Lanky dive to catch it before it crashes to the floor. Tazreel stalks toward me, and I scramble backward, until my wings collide with the wall, not liking the menace that’s coming my way. I really should watch my fucking mouth when I’m talking to an Abdicated.

He stares down at me with dominant fury, power pulsing into the room to showcase his anger. “I am your Sire,” he tells me, his gray-gold eyes holding me in place as he looms over me. “Which means everything you do, every move you make, is a direct reflection on me. You will do everything I say, without argument, and uphold my reputation at all costs. Are we understood?”

He doesn’t wait for me to answer. He seems to just expect that his little temper tantrum will put me in line. It does. For now.

Turning his head, he looks over his shoulder at Lanky. “Get Lousen up here to properly attire my offspring.”

Lanky nods and instantly disappears to do his bidding, as Tazreel turns back to me. “And remember,” he says, his tone threatening once more. My breath gets stuck in my throat as his eyes fill with promised vengeance. “If you embarrass me at this gathering, I will hang you up on the wall like a moth, with pins.”

In a blink, he disappears, leaving me reeling. I slump against the wall, my heart racing about a million miles per minute. I barely have time to take in a single shaky breath before another demon is popping into my room.

“Let me guess, Lousen?” I ask the she-demon. She has polka-dotted skin, making it look like someone took an entire box of Crayola markers to her. The large circles are all different colors, while her hair is tar-black, reaching all the way down to her knees.

She looks around, confused for a moment, and I notice in her left hand is

a small hanger with what looks like a jeweled diaper on it. Her yellow eyes focus back on me.

“Deltagates?” she asks, like my first and last name are just one word.

“That’s me,” I confirm, and she takes me in from head to toe.

“Oh. Well, it seems we won’t be needing this,” Lousen comments, nodding to the diaper on the hanger. In a flash, it disappears.

“They didn’t tell me we had such a...*developed* situation on our hands,” she observes, her yellow gaze settling on my perky chest. I cross my arms, suddenly feeling uncomfortable.

“The masses are never going to believe that Tazreel stepped out of line so exponentially,” she squeaks with a smile, like the thought makes her incredibly excited.

“Is it really that big of a deal?” I look around the weird room I’ve been stationed in and try to wrap my mind around all the weird rules this place seems to have.

I feel like I’m hanging with the Mad Hatter at some fucked up tea party. I want to be home alone with my grief so I can mourn in peace and try to figure out what to do next. But instead, I’m here, being forced to go to some ridiculous party, while demons salivate about spilling the tea and bringing my prick of a demon sperm donor down a peg. Not that I can fault them for that. He is shallow, arrogant, and insufferable, and I’ve only known him for a couple of hours.

“He won’t be purged for it, but it *will* be the talk of the Rings for a bit before someone else does something else shocking. I’ve never heard of a Nihil child not being molded to become the next generation of Hell’s Generals right from birth. That’s usually what these gatherings are for, the little one’s life needs to be carefully mapped out from the start.”

I let her words settle in my mind and try not to sigh. Great. Just what the hell are they going to do with me, then? I don’t want anyone fucking *molding* me. It was hard enough coming to terms with becoming a Hellgate Guardian. A Hell General sounds a thousand times worse. How am I going to get home now?

Lousen claps her hands together excitedly, pulling me from my racing and worried thoughts. “Enough of that. We need to get started! We have an Abdicated party to get you ready for,” she announces, as if I could possibly forget that fact. “I’ll have you looking positively edible in no time,” she assures me cheerfully, revealing a smile of multicolored teeth as a vanity

table and two bushels full of fabric appear behind her.

The second she says *edible*, my thoughts immediately go to the Savor and his proclivity for eating demon parts, making me cringe.

“You can just call me Delta, and I’d settle for looking not embarrassing instead of edible. Don’t want to give anyone any ideas,” I tell her on a chuckle that sounds nervous even to my own ears.

She gives me a knowing smile and a wink, and I decide to interpret that as capitulation. “So, on a scale from zero to I’m fucked, exactly how bad are these Abdicated assholes?” I ask her.

She looks at me warily, the smile slipping from her face. “Let’s just...get you dressed,” she replies carefully, which answers that question without her even having to say anything more.

Trepidation sinks into my toes, making it hard to move. I have a really bad feeling about this.



“**T**hat should do it!” Lousen declares in an elated tone. She steps back, her yellow eyes taking me in and filling with warm pride. “You’ll be the envy of every menagerie,” she states, like that’s a good thing.

“Just to be clear, a menagerie isn’t a zoo filled with demonic animals, is it?”

She chortles, her colorful teeth glistening. “Of course not. The menageries are the Abdicated’s harems.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that,” I grumble under my breath.

I look down at the gown that Lousen practically Bibbity Bobbity Boed out of nowhere and run my hands over the soft thin material now covering my body. I’ve been squeezed into a corset bodysuit that’s the color of my pale skin and will be impossible to get out of on my own. Over that, she’s draped a muted periwinkle fabric that’s softer than chiffon and looks just as delicate.

The gown is strapless, although two very romantic, but otherwise useless, sleeves are dangling down my upper arms. The soft pastel fabric hugs my curves and swaddles the perky twins, flaring out at my waist. The entire dress is covered in what I thought were various sizes of periwinkle pearls, but according to Lousen, they’re actually a rare color of moonstone.

The she-demon has straightened my hair, parted it down the middle, and pulled it back into a sleek and shiny ponytail that rests at the base of my skull. I can feel the strands of my electric violet hair tickle my back, and my



wings are on full display.

I've never looked more beautiful, or felt hollower, than I do right now. I look so perfect on the outside, but I'm so broken on the inside.

"Deltagates, a frown is not the right accessory to go with this dress," Lousen teases, but the half smile I try for seems to make her cringe even more.

"Delta," I remind her. "Just Delta."

"Well, Justdelta, play the devoted role, and by tomorrow, maybe Tazreel will have forgotten all about you. He doesn't exactly have the longest attention span," she tells me, offering me a soft smile and a reassuring arm squeeze.

I take a deep breath and hope, for my sake, that's true. If I can play my part right, maybe this time tomorrow, I'll be home. Dismay pools in my stomach, because the thing is, I have no idea what *my part* is supposed to look like. How the hell am I going to pull whatever this is off?

---

The guards standing outside my room are apparently my new bodyguards. I feel like a Kardashian as I get escorted downstairs, except instead of them keeping paparazzi and rabid fans away, they're just making sure I don't try to run. Which would be nearly impossible right about now even if I did know a way out, because Lousen forced my feet into three-inch heeled horrors, making me wobble with every step.

The last time I was in heels was when I went to senior prom with Tyson Prince. He was on the baseball team, and I was a sucker for those tight pants. But Mr. Prince turned out to be more of a frog, because I found him making out in the limo that *I* paid for with Katie Harris.

I punched her in the parking lot and made her cry, and even though I barely hit her, I had to leave prom early. I Facebook stalked her years later and found out that she ended up divorced three times and had too much plastic injected in her face, freezing her into a close replica of the Jack in the Box dude. That made me feel infinitely better. I'm going to go ahead and blame my demon side for that.

At the bottom of the steps, my bodyguarding duo silently takes me down the large corridor, my shoes clicking against the stone floors. As soon as we

get to the end and round the corner, I hear voices, laughter, and music filtering in the air.

The closer we get, the more my nerves coil inside of me like knotted ropes. My hands come up in front of me, wringing together, but as soon as I catch myself doing it, I force them to my sides. If the guys were here, they wouldn't be nervous.

Rafferty would be cool, calm, and collected, modeling for me how easy it is. Crux would be hitting on me and helping me feel relaxed by making me laugh. Echo would make me feel beautiful and promise all kinds of naughty things later. And Jerif would be put-out and say shit that'd get my hackles up, but that would help me, too. I'd be too irritated with him to feel small or intimidated by the demons in that room. I'd be able to shove aside any fear or insecurity and walk in there as my best self. It's funny that I realize now that's what each of them do for me. They each bolster me in a different way.

That was their magic. They showed me who I could be. Instead of realizing that and embracing it, I was fighting to hold onto the stuck, scared person I've been for too long. Hindsight being twenty-twenty is real, and I'm going to use my newfound clarity to my advantage. I'm going to be who they were trying to help me become.

When we reach a huge set of doors, the noise is at an all-time high. I take a deep, fortifying breath. I can do this.

They're not here to guide me the way that I wish they were, but I can still carry the things Iceman, Jerif, Crux, and Echo taught me in the short time I knew them. I can still implement those lessons and become the woman that was always there just under the surface.

I walk over the threshold, noting that my guards continue to follow behind me. Inside, the room is huge. It looks like an entire length of a football field, with blood-red columns running parallel to the black walls. The floor is a muted gray, polished until it looks like it could double as a mirror. I'm suddenly very glad that my dress trails long enough past my feet that no one will be able to see up the skirt.

Imps seem to be everywhere, all of them dressed in matching red leather clothes marking them as the servants. They're carrying trays of food and glasses filled with drinks, and I make a note not to drink anything in case it's the nasty ass demon spirits that the guys were always downing.

That simple memory sends a knife to my heart. The way that the four of them sat with me in the demon bar, drinking from their cups, and the feel of

Iceman's hand on my back as he escorted me away. I remember their glares on me when they thought I was checking out Flint as he played music. That was the first time all four of them reacted in a way that resembled jealousy.

I know Echo and Crux were interested in me—that much was clear based on the flirting and with what happened on my couch that night, but Iceman and Jerif took me off guard in the best way. That's probably why I had that sex dream later. My mind had perked right up, thinking of all kinds of naughty possibilities. Possibilities that I'll never get to test out.

I force myself to swallow back the forlorn emotions, my eyes falling onto Tazreel where he's standing in the middle of the room. He's with a group of seven other Abdicated. I can tell that's what they are, not just because of the fact that they all have wings at their backs, but because they are ethereally beautiful, just like my supposed demonic father.

Aside from Tazreel, there are four males and three females, and they seem to be deep in discussion. Whatever they're saying is making Tazreel scowl, while some of the others laugh.

Aside from the eight of them, there are other demons here, too. Only some of them have wings, but all of them are gorgeous. They must belong to the menageries. It would explain why all of them are dressed so skimpily.

They're all dancing at the back of the room beside the musicians, lilting, wordless songs setting the tone as their bodies gyrate to the melody. Some dance together sensually, while others stay apart, like they're trying to gain the attention of the Abdicated, who are paying them no mind.

Yeah, fuck that. I'm not going to be in *anyone's* menagerie and begging for scraps of attention.

I turn back to the group of demonic angels in the center of the massive room. I'm surprised that there aren't more of them. I'm not religious—and I'm assuming religion in the Mortal Realm got it right—but I thought a lot more angels fell with Lucifer than this.

I'm escorted to the group slowly, and I do my best to put my *I got this* face on. One night cavorting with the hosts of Hell. I can handle this, right? After all, I was born for this shit...and that's not just a saying in this case.

"Ah, there she is," Tazreel shouts out, his eyes skimming over me and filling with approval.

I hope he tips Lousen for doing such a great job, because that whole pinned like a moth thing is scary enough as a visual.

All at once, eight pairs of breathtaking eyes turn to me. I have to actively

remind myself to breathe as the beauty in front of me drinks me in and relishes me like I'm a twelve course meal.

"Her coloring is stunning, Taz," a female comments, whose hair, skin, wings, and eyes are all different shades of red. Even her cheeks and chest have a natural rosy blush to them. It makes her look sensual, like her skin is flushed from hours of sex. She pulls off the lustful look though, because her black lace dress is nearly see-through and completely daring. Slits go up either side all the way to her hips, and the front of her dress plunges down to her belly button. I was feeling good about my rack before, but hers is ten times better. I notice that I'm staring at her perky, huge boobs, because her lips curl up and she draws a finger down between her cleavage. "You want to touch them?"

I nearly swallow my tongue.

Taz shoots Red with a look. "Elle, knock it off. That's my daughter. I won't tolerate you being inappropriate toward her."

Red—Elle—pouts slightly but drops her hand. "You're too proud for your own good, Taz."

"Still no luck on remembering who the mother might be?" a gorgeous man asks, drawing my attention his way. His skin is a smooth mahogany, his wings and eyes a soft tan, and his head bald and shiny. He swipes a silver tray from one of the serving imps and starts shoveling the little finger foods in his mouth three at a time.

"No, unfortunately," Taz tells him. "The Savor's lack of recognition is making it very difficult. I do pride myself on good taste, of course, but I can't recall ever fucking a unicorn or something so rare that it wouldn't have left an impression on me and given her that purple shade," he harrumphs.

"Hmm," the bald man says between large bites of food. "I once thought the same thing. Turned out, I had been imbibing inferno currant instead of sin gin. The procurer sent me the wrong order. I ended up tripping balls for about a month. Sired two offspring with a Rashookin and didn't even know it until fifteen months later."

All the other Abdicated cringe and make various noises of shock and disgust.

"I know. No idea how I even found a female, but it turns out, I like their sting, and the twins born from her are some of my favorite progeny to date."

"Hmm, maybe I'll try to find a Rashookin..." a woman with driftwood-toned hair, skin, and wings remarks thoughtfully.

Everyone groans. “Every fucking time,” Baldy rolls his eyes and then pops another bite of food into his mouth.

The driftwood female narrows her eyes. “Excuse me? What does that mean?”

“It means you always have to do what we’re doing, and have what we have,” Red cuts in as she fixes her breasts in her dress.

Driftwood crosses her arms in front of her, making her own boobs push together in her emerald green dress. “I do not,” she argues. “Anyway, I have a progeny that I birthed from a Krampus. None of you have that,” she says smugly.

“I forgot about that one,” Tazreel exclaims, clearly entertained by the she-demon’s weird offspring.

“Yes, but you only slept with the Krampus because he was paying more attention to *me* that night,” Red—Elle points out.

Driftwood flashes her teeth at Elle, but Taz gives the females a warning look. “No. Under no circumstances can you fight during my dinner party. The last thing I want is gossip about how the inner circle can’t get along. My home is a respectable place, and you will act accordingly.”

Both females roll their eyes.

“Well, I blame Luce,” Elle says, tossing back her red hair. “He always has the most diverse and outrageous parties. It can hardly be helped. Desire has a way of running away with you.”

Driftwood nods. “That half Krampus progeny of mine is in charge of my whole army now. I’ve never seen a more proficient General,” she brags, and that makes Tazreel look at me like he’s now seeing possibility where before there was only disappointment.

The group’s familiarity with one another and their camaraderie help me to calm down slightly. They talk about me like I’m not standing right here and like my actual presence is inconsequential, but I can live with that. Like Lousen said, hopefully Tazreel will forget all about me soon and move onto something else. These Abdicated seem like the sort to get bored easily.

“Will you be auctioning her off?” a male asks, looking me up and down like I’m a horse for sale. He has bronze skin, hair, eyes, and wings, and he looks like he’s wearing armor made of pure gold. Every finger has a gleaming ring on it, there are jeweled bracelets on both of his wrists nearly to his elbows, and he also has a heavy diamond pendant on his neck, and both ears covered in pierced gemstones. He is decked out more than an elderly

lady out for a night at the theater.

I get so blinded by all the wealth he's wearing that I nearly miss his question. But as soon as it filters in my brain, my eyes fly to Tazreel in a look that says, *don't you fucking dare*.

But before Taz can say something one way or another, a male with pure black wings and hair steps forward. He's wearing a black button up and slacks, and he's drop-dead sinfully gorgeous. "Yes, Taz. What are your plans for her?"

He looks me over as the question looms in the air, and I'm about two seconds away from drooling. I can't take my eyes off him. I've never witnessed anyone more beautiful in my life.

He's just standing there next to Taz, like he doesn't have a care in the world, but the pent up power that's pouring off of him is mind-blowing. He feels dangerously enticing and sinisterly forbidden all in the same breath, and my mind can't quite decide if it wants to fuck him or run and hide and hope he never finds me.

I find myself leaning toward him without realizing it, like a flower trying to reach for the sun. I jerk back as soon as I notice what I'm doing. Elle smirks over at me knowingly, and I feel like the flush on her cheeks is now reddening mine as well.

"That's a good question," Tazreel muses. "I haven't given it too much thought yet. She's a bit too seasoned for proper training. Very rough around the edges. Perhaps some time with your cavalry could be beneficial, Luce, but we'll see."

Luce—the black-winged gorgeous one—continues to stare at me, and I can't look away. His eyes are such a light blue that they're almost white, and he nods his head, like he agrees with Tazreel's assessment of me. He's so stunning that I'm legitimately stunned in place. I even have a hard time blinking because it's like my eyes don't want to miss even a fraction of a second of seeing him.

A slow smile spreads over his face as I continue to stare, and it literally takes the breath right out of my lungs. I gape, reeling, alarm bells going off in my head that scream *not normal!*

It takes a lot of effort, but I force my eyes away back to Tazreel, denying myself to look at Luce again and be caught in his overwhelming hypnotic pull. I clear my head of the confusing, salacious thoughts I have about him and try to focus on what they're saying.

“Cavalry?” I say with a frown as my mind catches up. “Oh, no thanks. I don’t like horses.”

All of them start laughing, like what I said was some sort of joke, even though I’m perfectly serious.

“Let’s eat and get to know the newest member of the ranks, shall we?” Luce declares cheerfully, and just like that, a massive table filled with all kinds of things appears out of thin air right next to us.

*Well, shit.*

Like they all know exactly where to sit, all eight of them move into position. But to my surprise, Tazreel doesn’t take the head of the table. Luce does. Interesting.

I stand there awkwardly as eight of the nine chairs fill up, until there’s only one seat still empty, right across from Tazreel, to the left of Luce.

Not wanting to stand there like an idiot, I move to the empty chair and take a seat, lifting away the fabric of my dress so I can sit without ripping it. I’m not used to the wings behind me, so I slump forward, despite the fact that there are notches in the back of the wooden chair that let them hang unhindered.

Driftwood cocks her head at me where she sits to my left. “You hold your wings like a youngling,” she says with an air of criticism. “Or like Ace,” she says, pointing across the table to where a male with ashy hair and wings sits. Actually, more like slumping. He has his arm propped up on the table and his chin in hand, his entire body slumped over like he wants to fall asleep. Ace doesn’t even reply to Driftwood’s observation. He just looks at her boredly.

Cringing that I might look as apathetic as that dude, I try to sit up straighter in my seat. “I’m just not used to them,” I tell her. “I’ve never had my wings until today,” I answer honestly, trying and failing at keeping the irritation out of my tone.

Her fork clatters down onto her plate, nicking the glass. Everyone’s eyes rise up to me. Even the imps who’ve come over to serve drinks pause.

“What do you mean you’ve never had your wings until today?” she asks, shock clear on her gorgeous face.

I fidget in my seat at all the attention and immediately regret saying that.

“What is going on, Taz?” This is asked from the third female and last Abdicated. She has ginger-orange wings and hair that’s cut close to her scalp, brown skin, and her face is dotted with black freckles. Her eyes are dark and hardened, her mouth drawn into a serious line that doesn’t have room for

amusement. She looks like a warrior, with a strong rectangular jaw, and muscles cord her arms beneath a supple leather dress.

“When the invitation mentioned mature offspring had been discovered, I thought that meant that you just found her, not that she just found herself too,” she adds, making all eyes fix on Tazreel.

He shifts his weight uncomfortably in his chair, an irritated flash in his eyes that I know is for me. “To be frank, I’m not exactly sure. She just showed up in my meditation room like an angry storm. I caged her and called a Savor to find out who she was and who she belonged to, but things did not go at all like I thought. I figured I was being pranked by one of you. I know I’m due since I sent that kappa demon into your toilet, Ace.”

Ace snorts out a tired laugh while the rest of the Abdicated chuckle at the table like they’re remembering something fondly.

“Could’ve done without that,” Ace tells him.

Tazreel just grins. “I heard the water demon bit your balls and clogged your plumbing,” he says, like this feat is something to be proud of.

I stare at them, flabbergasted, trying to comprehend how I found myself in a place where putting a fucking *water demon* into someone’s toilet is a prank that they’re all giggling over. Finding some creepy demon when you’re trying to pee sounds fucking terrifying. I vow to always look down before sitting on the toilet here from here on out.

As the laughter dies down, everyone resumes looking at me once more. No one says anything, but it’s clear they’re waiting for an explanation about how I just found out I was a demon. I feel the sudden need to hold my cards close to my chest instead of just blurting out everything that happened to me. I don’t trust these Abdicated at all, toilet demon notwithstanding, and there’s so much I don’t know about this world that I don’t know what could be used against me.

“Umm...” I try to search for a usable lie, but I have no fucking clue how to explain my wings away without telling them everything, so I go for vague instead. “I just never keep them out,” I say, hoping that this is a thing and they can actually put their wings away. If they can, I really need to learn that trick, because I hate these things. It’s only a matter of time before I get scoliosis.

“Lie.”

My eyes snap over to Luce. He’s holding a clear glass of blood-red liquid in one hand, regarding me as he lazily swirls the drink around and watches



me with an icy, unforgiving gaze. I swallow hard.

Across from me, Tazreel's eyes harden on me. "Forgive her, Luce. She's new to this. She'll know from now on not to lie to the King of the Underworld. Won't you, Delta?" he asks pointedly.

My face pales, and my gray eyes widen with fear. "Wait. You're...Lucifer? As in the *Devil*?" I ask.

He spreads his arms out as if to show himself off. "The one and only."

*Shit, Delta. You tried to fucking lie to the King of Deceit?*

"Sorry," I quickly say, hoping that will appease him enough not to burn me alive.

*Fuck. Well, that explains a lot.*

It also leaves me with a shit ton of questions. Exactly who is my sperm donor that he has such an open and friendly relationship with fucking *Satan*? They're so chummy. I just didn't see the King of Hell being so jovial and easy-going. And who exactly are the other six Abdicated? Everyone here must be a big fucking deal if they're all eating dinner together like old friends. This newfound knowledge sets me even more on edge.

Lucifer lets me suffer in silence for a second, while everyone at the table is tense and still. Even the musicians and menagerie aren't moving or making a sound; they're too busy watching to see what he'll do to me. They seem excited.

Sweat beads at the nape of my neck, but I can't swipe it away. I'm too fucking terrified.

"You're forgiven," Lucifer finally says, and I nearly fall over in my chair with relief as the musicians and dancers start up again. "*This time.*" That added declaration makes a panicked laugh bubble out of my throat, but I tamp it down by grabbing my fork and shoving the first thing of food into my mouth.

Bad choice.

An overwhelming taste of charred meat attacks my taste buds until I feel like I've swallowed a piece of charcoal. What the fuck kind of chefs does Tazreel have down here? Gordon Ramsey would throw a fit.

I want to start coughing or spit the bite out, but I don't dare. So even though the burnt meat practically turns to ash on my tongue, I force myself to swallow it down and paste a forced smile on my face.

Everyone is still watching me, even as they start to eat like they're savoring every bite. "Is the meal not to your liking?" Tazreel asks me, and I

wish this fucking table wasn't so wide so I could reach under the table and kick him right in his shin. It's like he *wants* me to get smited. Smote? Smitted? Point is, Tazreel sucks ass at being a father.

"It's really...different," I choke out, while glancing around at the table in search of a drink. Unfortunately, the imps haven't filled my cup yet, so I'm shit out of luck.

"Try the Graveworms. They're Luce's favorite," Tazreel tells me.

*Oh, fuck me.*

Barely suppressing a grimace, I look down at my plate and find the pile of pink, spaghetti shaped worms in a neat pile on my plate. "Umm...you know what? I actually ate before I dropped into Hell. I'm fu—" I stop myself from saying *full*, not wanting to get caught in another lie. "I'm okay," I say instead.

"She's a nervous one, isn't she?" Elle declares conversationally.

"Indeed," Luce muses as he begins to twirl the pile of pasta-worms on his fork. "Makes one wonder if she's hiding something."

*Shit.*

My hand trembles slightly around the fork I'm gripping. Things are going downhill fast. Maybe I should've just eaten the worms? But one look at Lucifer as he slurps some up confirms that I just can't do it. No amount of imagination can make me pretend that I'm eating ramen. I'm just not that good.

"But the question is, is she in on the deceit? Did she hide herself from us? Running from her responsibility as an Abdicated, perhaps?" the ginger warrior female asks. "If so, I'd love to get my hands on her," she says, holding the butter knife in her hand like she's imagining slitting my throat with it.

My eyes ping pong between the demons. I feel like I'm one sentence away from getting dragged into that weapons room and strung up onto the wall. My wings cringe behind me, like they're trying to hide. All of the stunning beauty that is Lucifer's is quickly changing, hardening into a drop-dead gorgeous temper as he assesses me.

"Anytime any of my offspring attempt to deceive me, I have them drawn and quartered," Baldy says as he continues to shovel food into his mouth.

I have to stop myself from throwing my fork at him and telling him to shut his gorgeous lips. The picture of myself getting dragged by a Hell horse and then cut open like an anatomy project is enough to turn my already soured stomach.

My eyes fly up to Tazreel, trying to see if he's considering it. He looks...contemplative. *Fuck*. Why couldn't I have had a cool Abdicated father? Why do I have to get stuck with this asshole who doesn't seem to care whether or not my intestines are inside or outside of my body?

"It is curious why she just suddenly appeared like that. Your meditation room, was it?" the dude decked out in jewels asks, his eyes gleaming.

"Yes," Tazreel replies, but he's still watching me, and he gives me a look, pointing at his plate with his fork, in a clear warning to keep eating.

Fucking hell. Apparently, he's fine with talk about me getting killed, but he's a stickler for table manners.

Avoiding the meat, I sink my fork into something that I think might be a vegetable. It's dark brown with a kind of sauce drizzled over the top. When I put it in my mouth, it's slimy and earthy, like a mushroom. Can't there just be a damn bread roll? I flop it around in my mouth before swallowing it whole. This fucking dinner is going to be the death of me.

"How did you end up there?" Ginger demands.

There's zero chance of holding anything back. I've gotten that warning clear as crystal. All I can do is answer their questions as vaguely yet truthfully as possible. "I fell through the Nihil portal in the Vestibule," I say, trying to keep my voice even instead of shaking with nerves. *Channel Iceman*, I tell myself. *Be cool and smooth*.

"You fell," Elle says evenly, like she doesn't quite believe me.

Lucifer suddenly leans forward, and I freeze, unable to answer. How could I have thought any kind of salacious thoughts toward this guy? I can feel the oppressive predator prowling just under the surface. If I had anything in my bladder, I'd be pissing myself right about now. His eyes hold me captive, worse than the bars down in the dungeon.

"Are you a spy?" he suddenly asks, a darkness descending over the dinner table. It's menacing, and out of the corner of my eye, I see the menageries huddling in the corner, cringing away.

My heart wants to thump right out of my chest and run out of the room. This isn't a threat that hangs in the air—this isn't just a curious discussion over dinner. Everything is suddenly very clear. They won't hesitate to end me, and then probably go right back to eating their fucking worms. I'm in mortal danger.

Suddenly, my right hand prickles with heat. I flinch at the sensation, and right before my eyes, my scythe appears in my hand, sturdy and solid.

My fingers grip around it at the same time that I jump to my feet with wide, shocked eyes.

There's a collective gasp that rings through the air like a whip.

"You dare draw a *weapon*?" someone shouts—I'm not sure which male it is.

"No, I—it was an accident!" I exclaim as I try and fail to drop the damn thing. I shake my hand frantically, opening up my fingers, but the fucking scythe won't drop. It's like it's super glued to my palm. Oh, *now* it wants to be best friends? Where was it when I was fighting for my life before? Or when my prick of an Abdicated father was locking me in a cell? I glare at the black and silver staff in my hand, not sure if I want to smash it to splinters or hug it.

"Tazreel, let me kill your offspring for this grave offense," Ginger says, her face a blaze of wrath and looking even more like a warrior who's ready to behead me.

*Smash it to splinters, it is...*

"Wait."

Everyone freezes, including me, as Lucifer gets to his feet and walks over to where I'm standing, shaking in my heels.

"Luce—" Tazreel says, but the Devil just holds up a hand to shut him up as he stands in front of me, eyeing the scythe.

"I know this weapon." His light blue gaze flickers up to my eyes, and a slow, scary fucking smile spreads across his face. "I know who your mother is."



**P**eals of laughter fill the cavernous room, and I stare dumbfounded as I watch Evil Incarnate lose his mind to the giggles.

One second, he was standing over me with that creepy fucking grin after he announced the truth bomb that he knows who my mother is, and the next, hysterical with laughter.

I don't know if I'm supposed to be offended by this, but I am really fucking confused.

I'm not sure which freaks me out more about the Bearer of Light: when he's serious and exhaling pure foreboding or when he's laughing so hard he has to wipe tears from his captivating frost-blue eyes. Both are pretty scary.

The room watches Satan slap his knee and hold his side, gasping for breath in between guffaws. I look to Tazreel, who watches his friend with a look of frustration, shock, and mortification. He does not like Lucifer laughing at his expense. Not one bit. I study the other Abdicated and see a mixture of surprise, satisfaction, and burning curiosity.

Lucifer looks over to Tazreel and shakes his head as he titters. "I don't even know how you found her, let alone convinced her to fuck you," he comments, upping the need that's bleeding out of everyone to be let in on the secret that has him in hysterics.

"Who is it then?" Tazreel demands, his tone flustered and his eyes sparking with exasperation.

The Devil shakes his head. "Oh, no. It's just too good. I might just have to sit on this one for a while longer. But new rule, Taz. You're not allowed to

punish this progeny of yours. She's officially under my umbrella of protection."

Tazreel crosses his arms and sits back in his chair with a humph, like he's pouting. I jump when the Devil's hand comes down on my shoulder. Luce leans on me as if the laughter has weakened him too much to support his own weight. He's really fucking heavy. I suppress the instinct to move away, careful to hold my stick far from him so that I don't accidentally scythe the Devil. He *did* just tell Taz he can't punish me, so that's something. Whoever my mother is, she just made it so I get a free pass. I'll take it.

"You are officially my favorite niece. Oh, I haven't laughed this hard since the Inquisition," Luce chuckles, his voice merry as it comes down from his laughing fit. "I see it now. I knew there was something there that was resonating at a frequency I hadn't heard in far too long, but I get it now."

He pulls me in for a tight hug that forces all the oxygen in my body to whoosh out. He smells like bad choices and ecstasy on a warm summer night, and I have to fight to keep from nuzzling him.

*Fucking Rings of Hell, do I have a death wish?*

He pulls back and slaps me on the shoulder a couple times while fixing me with a smile that makes my brain take way too many mental pictures of his gorgeousness. We're talking *helicopter-mom on prom night* level of pictures.

"Did you fuck a Grim?" Elle demands, fixing Tazreel with a look and gesturing toward my dormant scythe.

"No!" Tazreel defends, as if he's offended at the suggestion.

"Who else carries them?" Baldy asks, like he's wracking his brain to come up with an answer at the same time that he dusts the crumbs off the front of his shirt.

All of their stares grow distant, like they're thinking it through. A Where's Waldo of demon weapons, so to speak.

"Why were you in the Vestibule? What Ring were you coming from?" Driftwood asks suddenly.

I clear my throat, still standing awkwardly behind the table with Lucifer at my side. When I send him a look, he nods, like he's urging me on. "Uh, the Guardians I was with said that I needed to see what Ring I was from before they could induct me. We were trying to find out when we were attacked by Outer Ringers."

An ache starts in my chest, and I hate stating what happened like they're

simple facts and not things that have rocked my soul beyond recovery.

“Guardians?” Tazreel questions angrily as he gets to his feet. “What Guardians? Why have you not mentioned them before?”

My eyes hook onto him. “I did! I told you I answered an ad to guard a graveyard. It turns out the job was actually to guard a Hellgate. I met the Guardians, and that’s how I learned that I wasn’t human.”

Lucifer gasps, but it sounds delighted, like this just got even more fun for him. “She hid you in the Mortal Realm? Oh, that’s sneaky,” he says, his tone sounding shocked but his eyes looking impressed. “That’s why you showed up in Tazreel’s house. It was your first trip through the Ring Portal, wasn’t it?” Lucifer’s tone makes it sound like I did something precious and adorable.

I nod warily, a little freaked out by his turn of demeanor.

He claps once excitedly and looks over at my sperm donor. “I put a fail-safe on the Ring Gates for lost progeny,” he explains, and understanding lights up in everyone’s faces.

“Ah, that makes sense,” the jewelry-wearing male says.

“What makes sense?” I ask, because I’ve been lost since the scythe somehow appeared in my hand like it was answering some silent call I put out when I thought I was about to be charbroiled.

“Why you landed in his meditation room, of course,” he replies. “Luce’s fail-safe. If lost progeny pass through our Gate, they automatically are transported into their Sire’s home.”

“Oh.”

I feel a second of resignation. I guess the Savor was right—I’m definitely Tazreel’s offspring.

Tazreel fixes Lucifer with a determined look. “What do you want for the answer? I need to know who her mother is so I can punish her for this offense. It is forbidden to keep progeny away from their Sires.”

That scary fucking smile is back on Lucifer’s face. “The price would be too dear, brother. This is a barter you don’t want,” he warns, but his light blue eyes are full of temptation and excitement.

Tazreel studies him for a moment, deciding how to proceed. “The lake house in Purgatory, two Hellhound pups for your newest twins, magistrate duty for the next millennium, and…” he trails off in thought.

Lucifer shakes his head. “Three picks from your menagerie, and Cedrice for my first born son,” he throws out casually—way too casually for it to actually be casual. Lucifer manipulated this whole thing.

Tazreel balks and looks at Lucifer, completely stunned.

“I told you it would be dear, my friend,” Lucifer teases, though his eyes are sharp and biting.

Tazreel looks at me and then back to the Devil, pained. I’m not sure what’s being bargained right now, but clearly it’s a big deal, and I have a feeling it’s for this Cedrice person.

“You know I can’t force that arranged marriage, since I’m not her Sire, but I’ll encourage it. I’ll even go so far as to give it my blessing if that will suffice,” Tazreel finally relents.

The others all watch the negotiations with rapt attention, like a pack of wolves waiting for their turn at the carcass.

Victory shines in Lucifer’s features, and he turns to me with a calculating smile. “When you see your mother, tell her the Ophidian says hi,” he tells me on a chuckle before he turns back to Tazreel.

*The Ophidian.*

I don’t know what comes over me in the next second, but just as Lucifer opens his mouth to divulge the secret Tazreel is dying to hear, I lose my shit. One second, I’m watching the Devil’s lips form *the Ophidian*, and the next, I’m hooking my now-activated scythe blade around his neck.

Every single one of the Abdicated snap to their feet and move toward me, but Lucifer holds his hands up to stop them. They obey without question, though their eyes stay trained on me and my blade. Lucifer turns back to me, like he doesn’t care that my blade is right against his neck.

His body language may be casual and relaxed, but the look in his eyes screams of the suffering he’s now planning for me. I should probably shit my pants right about now, but I can’t seem to move past the rage sparking in every synapse I possess.

“*You* attacked us? You’re the reason they were ripped away from me?” I ask on a growl. I try to work through what’s happening, but it’s a struggle. If *he*’s the Ophidian, then he’s responsible for what happened. But something about that doesn’t make sense to me. Why would he attack his own guards? Crux, Jerif, Echo and Rafferty guard his Hellgate, why would he kill them?

“Careful, niece, you’re quickly losing your coveted spot as favorite,” he quips. “I’m going to need you to be a bit more specific so I can address your accusations before punishing you.”

I tamp down a foreboding shiver at his words.

“The Outer Ring demons that attacked me kept saying they were



supposed to take me to the Ophidian. There were hundreds of them pouring out from the portals. We tried to fight, but there were too many,” I tell him, my vision suddenly far away as if I’m back in the Vestibule again, my voice haunted with the memory of it all. “Why would you do that?”

I blink away the pain and crushing grief and try to focus my anger back on Lucifer. His frost-blue eyes look confused for a moment, and I can see questions flash through his cold stare.

“Me? I wouldn’t,” he defends, and it confuses me even more when his statement and the look on his face ring true to me. “The Ophidian...that’s just something we used to... Wait.” He pauses, his eyes going distant. “That can’t be...” he whispers, his brow furrowing and his tone perplexed and eerie. His head snaps up, and his eyes focus back on me. I watch as comprehension dawns on him like the sunrise, and in the time it takes to inhale and then let it out, Lucifer is gone.

Just poof, disappears.

The blade-end of the scythe hits the ground, no more Adversary there to hold it aloft, and everyone blinks for a moment like they’re trying to understand what just happened.

“What did we miss?” Driftwood asks, looking around at the table and then back to where Lucifer just disappeared from.

I’m surprised that they aren’t all jumping on me, ready to mete out revenge for threatening the King of Hell, but they seem more interested in solving whatever riddle just went down between what I said and the apparent conclusion that Lucifer came to because of it.

“Fuck!” Tazreel says, his fist banging on the table. “He left without telling me who the mother is.”

“He mentioned the Ophidian. Who is that?” Elle asks, looking around at the others, but they all shrug.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier that you were attacked in the Vestibule?” Tazreel demands.

My eyes narrow. “When was I supposed to tell you? Before or after you yelled at me and threw me in the dungeon?”

Gasps fly out of some Abdicated mouths. “You put your progeny in the dungeon, Taz?”

“Oh, please, like you wouldn’t have done the same thing,” he says to Ginger. She just shrugs, not denying it.

“We should be able to narrow it down. If Luce knows who the mother is

based on the scythe, then that's our clue."

They all move forward until I'm being squished by Abdicated, like we're all sharing the same tiny ass elevator. They all hem and haw over the scythe, fingers grazing over the wood as they take it in, each of them very careful not to touch the blade.

"I think only Grims can call scythes," Ace—the slouched ash-colored male—says, his tone quiet.

"I didn't fuck a Grim!" Tazreel replies, his tone put-out. Some of them look like they don't believe him.

"But what is a Grim if not a true Gatekeeper? It's been so long since the other Gatekeepers were around, but wouldn't they be able to call a scythe too?" Jewelry dude observes thoughtfully. "This scythe is most definitely the key, but Borf is the oldest Savor there is. He would have tasted Gatekeeper in her if it was there," he adds.

"Unless Borf never cataloged a Gatekeeper," Elle comments.

"But her coloring..." Driftwood says, interrupting that line of discussion as she looks at my purple wings with envy. "It's very unusual."

"Hmm." The bald male taps his plush lips in thought. At least he's not still eating. "You said something about Guardians?"

I nod tersely, trying to back away from them so that they can give me a little room to breathe. "I was with them in the Vestibule. But we were overrun with Outer Ringers attacking us. I barely made it here."

"Call the Guardians, Taz."

My eyes snap over to him, but before I can open my mouth to tell him the Outer Ringers killed them, he snaps his fingers, and a puff of steam erupts ten feet away, shadowed silhouettes visible through the mist.

For a second, my heart is caught in my throat, choking me with soaring hope, but then the steam clears, and I see two familiar demons. My heart lurches and then stalls. They're not *my* demons.

"Flint. Alder."

Their eyes snap toward me, gazes widening. "Delta? What the fuck is going on? Where are we?"

The crushing sadness claws at me. Just for that split second, I actually thought I was going to see my Guardians. I thought for a millisecond that maybe somehow they came through the attack alive, even though I know better.

I have to clear my throat and blink my eyes rapidly so that tears don't

gather. “Umm, you’re in Nihil.”

Flint’s marble face stretches into an expression of shock. Alder touches his lily flower propped behind his ear, like it’s a nervous gesture, before rubbing absently at his watercolor skin. They both take in the Abdicated warily, their eyes moving from them to me.

Alder’s nostrils flare when his eyes bounce from my scythe to the purple wings hanging from my back. “So you *are* a true Gatekeeper?” he asks, and I don’t miss the hope that’s dripping from his tone.

“I—”

“Gate Guardian,” Tazreel cuts me off. “Tell me about this attack in the Vestibule,” he demands.

“No, that’s not them,” I intervene. “I know them, but these aren’t my Guardians. Mine...” My voice cuts out, like my throat is strangling me from the inside, refusing to say the words. “They died in the Vestibule protecting me.”

Flint and Alder gape. “*What?*” they both say at the same time.

I look down at the fabric of my dress, trying to count the little moonstones sewn into the fabric so that I can try to keep my shit together.

“Oh, wrong ones,” Tazreel says.

I lift my head back up, but Tazreel just snaps his fingers again, making Flint and Alder disappear just as quickly as they’d come.

“What the fuck?” I yell at him. “You didn’t even let me explain to them what happened!”

“Quiet, daughter.”

I growl, low in my throat, suddenly furious. “Don’t call me that.”

“This is getting exciting,” Driftwood chirps behind me.

Tazreel ignores me completely and then snaps his fingers again. Steam erupts, once again encasing silhouettes who are looking around wildly. “How about these?” Taz asks.

I give a cursory look to the trio of demons looking back at me. “No,” I snarl.

Another snap, and the unfamiliar trio disappears. I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to breathe in and out slowly. This is making me want to scream in anger while simultaneously shredding my heart to ribbons.

“Hmm. How about—”

“STOP! Just stop! They fucking died!” I scream, the first onslaught of furious tears escaping despite how hard I’m trying to fight them. “They died

trying to protect me, and it's all my fucking fault!" My voice rings out, silencing every single demon in the room. They all look at me like I've gone fucking berserk.

But does that stop Taz? Nope. The motherfucker—*literally*—snaps his devil damned fingers again, filling the room with so much steam, it looks like the inside of a sauna.

I turn away in disgust, hating him for putting me through this. I grip my scythe, ready to rage until I manage to destroy this room like I did my own kitchen.

But then I hear four familiar voices say my name at exactly the same time, and my blood turns ice-cold, freezing me in place. "*Delta?*"



**M**y head snaps up, and I stare at the four demons that my head and heart know well.

*Is this a trick? How are they here?*

My feet feel like they're fixed to the floor as I stare at them, scanning them for injuries or evidence of the fight I saw go down with my own eyes, but they look...fine. Perfectly okay. It doesn't make any sense. I watched Jerif go down. He was overrun. And yet he stands right there looking as sour as ever, not a scratch on him.

"How?" I ask on a choked sob.

And then all at once, I decide it doesn't matter. They're there, fifteen feet away from me. I don't care if they're dead somehow and able to be called into the Center Ring of Hell because of some Abdicated power. For the moment, I don't care if there's some other explanation, because they're *here*.

I sprint toward them, closing the distance between us in a blink. I ignore what appears to be a speedy new ability as I flash forward, instantly wrapping my arms around the first demon I slam into.

Jerif's skin is warm and soothing, and he smells exactly like I remember. If this is just a spirit or a hologram, it's a good one.

I feel bodies press in all around me until I'm wrapped up in a giant demon bear hug circle. I squeeze Jerif with all my might, so relieved to see them that it trumps every other emotion. I can feel the tears and sobs sitting in my chest like they're waiting their turn, but right now, all I can focus on is touching them, looking at them, being with them again.

“I didn’t see her going for Jerif first,” Echo grumbles.

“Same. I always thought we were her favorites. Maybe it was a trajectory thing? He just happened to be closest?” Crux adds as he pets my shoulder.

“That’s probably it,” Echo agrees, talking over my head. He places a kiss on my hair before his eyes land on my wings. “When did you get all feathery, Swampy?” he asks, and I feel them step back from me.

I laugh and shake my head as I look around at the four of them. Jerif gives me one more bruising squeeze before he sets me back down on my feet, but he does it slowly, like he doesn’t really want to let me go. My heartbeat is racing so hard that it sounds like horse’s hooves pounding on a track. His fiery eyes are filled with the same relief I’m wearing, and I get lost in them for a second. This...this is the intensity I always knew was in Jerif, but instead of the asshole side, all of that intensity is filling me with molten heat that has nothing to do with anger.

“Are you really here? Are you dead?” I demand, terrified that they’ll confirm that they are, in fact, dead, and this reunion will only be short-lived.

“We’re not dead,” Echo tells me, but I can’t quite believe it. I have a stranglehold on hope, because if they disappear, it will ruin me.

“Where are we?” Iceman asks, and all of them finally look away from me and take in our surroundings.

“Ho-ly *shit*.” Crux’s wide green eyes land on the group of Abdicated, and he drops to his knee and does this weird hand-over-heart, head-bowing thing.

One by one, Echo, Iceman, and Jerif all drop into the same bow. I watch them with confusion before noticing I dropped my scythe before I tackle-hugged the guys.

“Bow,” Iceman tells me out of the corner of his dark blue lips.

“Huh?”

“Bow,” he murmurs again, like he’s nervous at the fact I’m still standing.

I cast a look at Tazreel, who’s watching me with his arms crossed in front of his chest, a smug expression on his face. “I’m not bowing to that asshole,” I say.

In a blink, Echo is on his feet beside me, his pale hand slapped over my mouth. “Babe, you can’t call the Abdicated an asshole,” he hisses in my ear. His shadowed tattoos dance off his fingers and slither against my lips, like they missed me and want a little kiss.

I pull his hand away from my mouth, noticing that all four guys have closed ranks around me. “Relax, guys. He’s not going to do anything. Lucifer

forbade it,” I say as I smirk over at Taz, my turn to look smug.

Iceman’s eyes go as wide as icy saucers, and his hand comes up protectively to settle on the small of my back. “Lucifer...you met *Lucifer*?”

“Yeah. I—”

“I assume by your familiarity and obnoxious display of affection that these are, in fact, the Guardians who were with you in the Vestibule battle?” Tazreel says, interrupting me.

*Obnoxious?*

I send him a peeved look but give him a clipped, “Yes.”

Tazreel and the others have formed a line like a wall of Abdicated, staring down my demons. “Where did you find my daughter?” Tazreel asks.

Every single one of my demons tenses up. I can feel Iceman’s cold skin seeping through his button-down shirt on my left, while Jerif’s heat soaks into me on my right.

“*Daughter?*” Crux breathes, and I can feel the shock permeate through them like mist rising from the ground.

“Yeah. I fell through the Nihil Ring, and I guess it brought me here because...he’s my sperm donor.”

“Sire,” Tazreel corrects.

Crux turns, grinning like a loon and raises his hands in victory. “Ha! I told you guys! I totally called it that she was a Nihil. *It’s impossible*,” he mock-argues, sounding like a mix of Iceman and Jerif. “But it wasn’t, I fucking called it!”

“Quiet,” Tazreel demands, instantly making Crux’s tanned, surfer boy face go pale. When Taz is satisfied that he has their full attention, he goes on. “Is it true you found my daughter in the Mortal Realm and she had no idea what she was?”

“Yes,” they all answer, and I know instantly that he’s using that same truth mumbo jumbo magic on them that he used on me.

“You took her to the Vestibule and were attacked. How did you get away?”

Jerif’s eyes meet mine, and I can’t look away. For just a second, we share a private look, but I’m suddenly seeing him from before—when he had Outer Ringers piled all over him, stabbing into his broken body again and again while he told me to run—to save myself. I blink my eyes hard at the memory, trying to shove it away because it hurts too bad. The pain is too fresh.

A blanket of comforting heat slips against my palm, and I look down,

tears springing in my eyes when I see Jerif's fingers threading through mine. He holds my hand firmly, his hot thumb melting those shattered pieces of my heart so they can be molded back together again.

Iceman answers Taz's question. "One second, we were completely surrounded. Overtaken. Dying. I knew it was over," he says, and it's so hard to hear, but I take in Iceman's words because I need to know how this is possible. "But then, they all suddenly retreated. Just like that, all at once. They poured back into the Outer Rings."

"They didn't even attempt to break through your Gate while you were down?" Taz asks, head cocked.

"No, they just left," Echo says, with a shrug that communicates he's just as much at a loss as the rest. "It took us...a long time to heal enough to move," he adds, darting his pitch-black eyes my way as his shadows coalesce around his skin. "Jerif was in bad shape."

"I healed," he says gruffly, giving my trembling hand a squeeze.

I know he's playing it off for my sake, trying to downplay how bad it was. But I know. I know he was an inch from death. It's right there, in his flaming eyes and the way his dark skin spreads with a chill.

"We thought they took her," Crux adds, looking at me as he runs his hands through his shaggy blond hair. "We went to our Rings to heal faster, and we had a plan set in motion to go search for her in the Outer Rings. We were just meeting in the Vestibule, shoring up our Hellgate when you brought us here."

The Abdicated share a look.

"Hmm." That's all Tazreel says, not giving away anything he's thinking. "Alright, that will be all."

He raises his hand to snap them away. "NO!" My scream ricochets throughout the room, stopping him. "I need them here with me," I pant, terrified he's going to make them disappear. My hand is squeezing Jerif's so tightly that I'm surprised I'm not breaking any bones.

"Ooh," Elle purrs, looking at us as she flashes teeth and juts out her lace-covered breasts. "Your daughter is fraternizing with those below her. How scandalous."

Taz scowls at me, but he drops his hand. "Are they your menagerie?"

"What? No," I stutter as my cheeks fill with a blush.

"No? Wonderful," Elle says with a sultry smile, her red wings fluffing out behind her. "One can come with me to the party then."



“Wha—”

My question gets cut off as Elle saunters forward, grabbing Crux by the arm. “Come along.”

“I’ll take the blue one and the pale one,” Driftwood says, making my jaw grind.

*What the fuck is happening right now?*

Ginger spreads her orange wings behind her, her body in a warrior stance as she stares at Jerif. “Good. I like the fiery ones.”

I throw up my free hand. “Wait a fucking second,” I snap, my head dizzy. “They’re mine,” I growl. I didn’t even know I could sound as furious as I do.

The female who grabbed Crux and started to walk him away looks back at me over her exposed shoulder. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Oh,” I counter. “You can’t take them.”

Beside me, Echo slips closer, placing a hand on my hip. At the same time, I feel shadows slip onto the exposed tips of my toes below my dress and slowly spiral up my ankles and legs, before swirling around my ass, caressing it possessively. “Hmm, I didn’t think you had it in you to claim us like this, Delta,” he says in my ear. “I like it.”

I immediately regret embarrassing myself in front of everyone and *claiming* them without their permission, but it was just a knee-jerk reaction. The thought of my demons going with those Abdicated hussies sets my teeth on edge. And even though this is probably going to lead to a very awkward conversation later, I won’t take it back. I won’t let them walk away with anyone else other than me. I can’t. Not when I just got them back.

“This night is getting better and better. You should host more often, Taz,” Jewelry male says with a chuckle as he picks up someone’s glass from the table and gulps the contents down. “Let’s go to the party, shall we?”

“I thought this was the party,” I say with confusion.

He laughs again. “This? No. This is the private dinner party just for us. The ones in Luce’s circle. The rest of the Abdicated are at the real party. I’m sure they’re dying to see who Tazreel’s progeny is,” he says before walking off, gathering members of his menagerie with his hands slung around feminine shoulders.

“Away from them, daughter,” Tazreel orders, a displeased look falling where my hand is still gripping Jerif’s. “It’s time to introduce you.”

*Away from them? Why the hell would I get away from them?*

Tazreel’s eyes narrow when I don’t immediately obey his command.

“I have to announce you to the rest of the Abdicated, Delta. It’s the law,” he growls, like that explains everything.

“Don’t worry, dear, we’ll bring your pets along to witness the fun,” Jewelry declares, a predatory gleam in his eyes.

“They are *not* pets,” I snarl at him, my rage rising with every breath I take, but my statement seems to entertain him even more, judging by the growing smile on his face.

“Delta, come here right this minute,” Tazreel commands, fuming.

“I don’t answer to you!” I yell at him, fed up with all this bossy bullshit.

My real dad *never* treated me as shitty as Tazreel has in the last... I try to recall how long I’ve been here, but I can’t. Well, it hasn’t been longer than the nineteen years I spent with my human parents, who never snapped at me like this, and they had to deal with me during my hormonal teenage years.

“Delta...” Iceman admonishes quietly.

I shoot my blue demon a look over my shoulder that tells him to stay out of it. This is between me and the sperm donor.

“Delta, you are my progeny and therefore under my command. You will do as you’re told, or you will face consequences,” Tazreel threatens. “I will dismiss them and bring you to heel.”

“Just go with him, Jeter. We’ll be right behind you,” Crux encourages, and I stare into his pleading green eyes for a moment as I try to figure out what to do.

I don’t want to be separated, but I also don’t know what will happen if I keep pushing back against Tazreel. I just can’t help feeling like if I walk away from my demons, he’ll snap them away, and who knows how I’ll get back to them? Right now, I can’t even figure out how to get out of his fucking house. I let out an exasperated huff, frustrated that I have to behave as if I have a master. Show me the contract I signed saying this douchebag with wings should have any control over me.

I freeze, that thought sparking an idea in my mind.

“Fine, I’ll come with you to fulfill your progeny announcement obligation, but after that, I need to leave, because like it or not, you don’t own me like you think you do.”

Tazreel and the other Abdicated chuckle and shoot looks at me that say, *awww isn’t she cute? Dumb, but cute.* He chuckles. “I am your Sire, Delta. The only demon who trumps my word when it comes to you is Lucifer.”

I hold up a hand, and he pauses. “I signed a contract with the Perdition

Estate to guard the Hellgate. Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that a factor here? I gave my word as a demon to be tied to the Gate until the owners dismissed me." I look at the Gate Guardians standing protectively around me. "According to that contract, I don't belong to you. I belong to them."

The humor in Tazreel's eyes blinks out, and his mouth slightly parts with shock. His eyes flit from me to the other Abdicated, like, *can she do that?* I work to fight the smile that wants to break out on my face, because I can tell I've got him. I might not have known that I was a demon when I signed the contract to guard the Gate, but the contract didn't know that. I'm throwing the dice on the rumors being true about Hell taking contracts seriously. I mean, everything I've ever watched in the movies about selling your soul to a demon seemed pretty legit.

"I'll deal with that later," Tazreel snaps. "But right now, there's a party to address."

"Fine," I clip back.

"Fine," he repeats, like his indignation somehow supersedes mine.

I glare as he holds his hand out to me like I'm going to take it. "One sec, I need my scythe."

I turn to my demons and smile. "Check this out," I tell them excitedly as I hold my hand out and will my scythe to me. My smile dims when nothing happens. I drop my arm slightly and then lift it again, frowning my brow like it's going to help me focus harder.

"*Come,*" I command in my mind.

Nothing.

"*Here, little guy,*" I try, but I'm only met with silence and nothing else.

*Dammit.*

I give up on trying to look cool activating my Thor skills, and stomp over to pick the testy Hell weapon up. I'll have to think through what I was doing and feeling at the table when the little shit decided to pop into my hand and blow up the perfectly peaceful dinner I was not having.

"Cool trick," Jerif snarks with a teasing smile on his face. I shoot him a glare as I straighten up from snatching the scythe off the ground, but then break into a smile because, *touché*

"All right, who's ready to party?" Elle sing-songs as she heads for the door, and the rest of the Abdicated quickly follow her.

I try not to groan.

I may be a demon, but a party animal, I am not. Bring on the comfy

pajamas and a hot cup of tea, because that's a party I could get down with.

I gasp as I feel a hint of shadow caressing the globe of my ass again, and my eyes shoot to Echo, who has a very smug and heated look on his face. I forgot his shadows were still on me.

One shadow moves slowly, caressing the inside of my thigh, back and forth with tantalizing strokes like a delicious preview for what's on his mind.

Well, okay then. Hell party, here I come.



I follow the group of excited Abdicated out of the dining room and up a massive set of stairs. We weave through Tazreel's palatial house, and the more corridors we head down, the more turned around I become. I don't hear any telltale signs of a party though, which seems odd.

Tazreel drops back to walk next to me, and he shoots my guys a look that tells them to give us a moment. I try and fail not to roll my eyes. What's with this dude?

I want to refuse and reach out and grab hold of their hands, but I stop myself by taking a deep breath to bite back my temper. You catch more flies with honey, I remind myself. Then again, I'm not trying to catch flies. I'm trying to keep this arrogant demon from thinking he can rule my life. Bet there's not a Southern saying for that. Or at least I don't think there is...I'll have to ask Flint.

My guys dutifully slow their pace, falling away from my sides. Echo even took his shadows off my ass, which I miss immediately. The other Abdicated practically snatch the guys up, and I have to stop myself from growling out a warning about keeping their Abdicated hands to themselves. My anxiety over the situation climbs to its peak when we reach the end of yet another corridor, and the Abdicated and my Guardians break off from us. I try to go with them, but Taz stops me with a hand to my arm. "Hey," I say, moving away from him. "Where are they taking them?"

"Don't be so dramatic," he tells me. "They're going into the regular entrance of the party. You and I have to make a formal appearance so that I

can announce you.”

I bite my lip nervously, watching as the guys cast me looks before one by one being led off to the right, down another hallway.

“This way.”

“This better not be a trick, Taz,” I warn, though it’s not like I can really *do* anything against him if he is.

Or...can I?

I look down at the scythe in my hand, noting how the blades disappeared once again. “Do scythes work on Abdicated?” I ask.

Taz stiffens and whirls on me, nearly making me run straight into him. I screech to a halt, my heels almost toppling me over.

“Are you threatening me?” he asks, and I’m immediately taken aback by the hard glint of his gray eyes. His wings come out and so do mine, like they’re ready to show up for the face-off. His power pushes at me, making my tongue heavy and my head dizzy, and I know he’s forcing the truth right out of me.

“N-no,” I stutter. “I was just asking. I was curious.”

*Fuck, he’s scary like this.*

He comes off as shallow and a little ridiculous, like he’s the sun of his universe and can’t help but be blinded by his own light. But in moments like this, I see what he purposely keeps buried. The dark violence he’s capable of. I realize that he’s both an arrogant prick *and* dangerously strategic.

He stares at me hard for another moment, until he finally gives a terse nod, satisfied. He turns on his heel, continuing to stride straight ahead, and I swallow down the panic, but I realize as I follow him on unsteady legs that he didn’t answer my question.

Hmm.

We finally reach the end of this long ass corridor, and Taz leads me up a wide staircase. Sounds start to filter toward us the higher we go, and by the time we reach the top, I’m out of breath from the climb and my ears are pulsing with the beat of heavy trance-like music.

There is a line of guards standing on the upper level, all of them with their straight backs against the walls and eyes forward and unmoving. There’s a set of double doors in the middle of them, and Taz heads for those. Two guards swing the doors open without a word from Taz, and then the sound amplifies tenfold. I’m hit with the noise like it’s a wall, and I actually stagger back from it.

Tazreel puts a hand on my shoulder and tugs me forward, and I walk out on the balcony and look over the edge.

There are demons *everywhere*.

It's like watching the ball drop in Times Square on New Year's Eve. The outside veranda, or whatever the fuck rich people would call this outdoor space, stretches vast, with marble sex sculptures, huge fountains, and a pool that looks big enough to fit a baseball field. The black sky stretches above us with red starred pinpricks, which just adds to the ambiance.

Below, littering every inch of space, are more Abdicated and other Inner Ring demons. They're drinking, smoking from shared pipes, swimming, dancing, and...oh, yep. There's a few orgy piles going on too.

My eyes are wide as I take in the scene in front of me, and it takes me a second to realize that everyone has quieted down and stopped in the revelry to look up at Taz. I take in the rapt looks and eager eyes on the demons waiting with bated breath to see what Taz is going to say, and I get the distinct impression that he's some kind of Hell celebrity.

He raises his arms high in the air, like a king greeting his subjects. "Welcome!" he shouts, and the crowd practically eats up that one word like it's the most delicious thing they've ever tasted and they're ready for more. "It has been far too long since all of you graced my house, and I couldn't think of a better reason to welcome all of you back. Today marks a special day in my long life, and this day will go down as historic from now until the realms have fallen."

Thousands upon thousands of voices cheer at the same time, the sound so staggering it steals the breath from my chest and assaults my ears. I stare down at the sea of faces, holding my own face perfectly still as everyone stares up at me.

"As your proud host tonight, I present to you, my newly discovered progeny. Nihil, please welcome, Delta!"

A roar of more excited screams fill the air, and I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with them. Beside me, Taz's wing nudges mine.

"Huh?" I ask, dazed.

"Wave," he says, and like I'm on autopilot, I lift a hand and wave, matching his movement. Another cheer rises up.

"Now, in honor of Lucifer himself, let's fucking celebrate!" Taz's voice rings out over the masses. "Gluttonously eat, greedily drink, and lustfully indulge until you yourself stand before all of us announcing the fruit of

tonight's efforts!"

Hands clap together, practically shaking the ground even from up here, and then I'm being swept away, down a set of stairs right off the balcony that I hadn't noticed before. More guards are at the bottom, acting like velvet ropes to give us room to walk into the throng.

I thought this many people was intimidating up there? Yeah, it's way, way worse down here in the thick of it.

Speaking of thick...

I cough, waving a hand in front of my face as orange-ish smoke claws at me from the air. "What is this stuff?"

"Stupor," Taz answers. "It's commonly smoked at gatherings. It helps one relax and...revel in the indulgence."

The only things I want to indulge in are shoes without heels, a bath, some Thai food, and four very particular Hellgate demons. The guys' faces instantly flash in front of my eyes, and I bite my lip. I remember the dream I had of them back at my house, and fluttering butterflies start dive-bombing my ovaries. More Stupor smoke is blown my way, and I decide what the hell. If it shores up my courage, I'm game. I inhale deeply.

Like he can read my mind, Taz stops me, his blond wings suddenly flaring out and blocking us from view as he turns to face me. "I know what you're thinking, and the answer is no."

My brows pull together. "No? No, what?"

"It is fine to dally once or twice. Fuck them until the Hell hounds come home for all I care, but you may not claim those males as mates. They are lesser. Just Guardians. You are meant to claim a Nihil mate, of which I will select, approve, and arrange for you."

Anger fuses to the inside of my lungs until I expel a breath that feels as hot as rage. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" I hiss at him as my purple wings pop out on either side of me. I cringe inwardly when they become apparent in my periphery, but I let them do their own thing. I don't think they like Taz's wings trying to show us up.

"I am your Sire," Taz answers coolly. "Therefore, I am in charge of you."

"No, you're not," I retort. "You've known about me for a day. I've been living my life, alone, for almost ten years. You may have been my sperm donor, but you're not my dad. My dad was a construction worker who loved three things: baseball, my mom, and me," I say, emotions close to the surface from all the shit that's been slamming into me at every turn.



Taz presses his lips into a thin line, but that flash that goes through his eyes isn't regret. Can't be. No way. Abdicated assholes like him probably aren't capable of remorse.

"And like I said earlier, I signed a contract with those *Guardians* you're looking down your nose at, so I *do* belong with them, whether you like it or not. You may not find it a worthy cause, but I grew up in that Mortal Realm they're helping to keep safe, and I can't think of a worthier pursuit for anyone, Nihil included."

I cross my arms in front of my chest, all too aware that the two of us probably look like a petulant teenager facing off with an overbearing dad, but I don't give a shit. I don't even give a shit that I can hear Abdicated behind him tittering, eating up this little display of drama. This must be like prime time entertainment to these demons. Maybe they don't get out much. Or have internet. That would fucking suck. I'll have to tell them all about Carole Baskin and see if they know where her husband is.

"I don't like this," Taz says, shaking his head. "As my first-born progeny, I must marry you off. That's my right."

"Why would you want that right?" I challenge. "Then I'd just get to blame you for every dumb thing that the demon you choose does. That's a lot of pressure, and you don't seem like the type to really want to deal with that."

He doesn't look amused by that statement.

"You're not marrying me off to anyone. That's just not happening," I tell him. I refuse to back down from this. I don't care that he is some kind of Hellish prince. Lucifer basically gave me a pass. He can't punish me. He knows it, and I know it.

A growled sigh escapes his chest, and his blond wings tense up with his fisted hands. "You must only cavort with worthy demons. Nihils, preferably."

I snort. "Oh, really? Where do you get off telling me that when you've fucked so many females, you can't even narrow down who my mother is! You have a shit ton of those black books that proves just how much you *cavorted*. You even fucked a pixie!"

He scowls. "I told you, she was only a quarter pixie!"

I roll my eyes, but before any more argued words can be flung between us, Elle sways over to us like a sex goddess on a fashion runway, interrupting. "You two look so alike right now, glaring at each other like that," she laughs, making her breasts bounce. "Come now, Taz, this is a party! Let your progeny mingle."

He grumbles something to her that I don't catch, but she just laughs again.

"Where are my Guardians?" I ask her.

She lifts a shoulder. "Oh, I don't know. I wandered away. These things are so diverting, you know. I'm sure they're off partaking in at least one of the seven sins."

They better fucking not be. Not without me, at least.

Elle takes Taz by the arm and starts pulling him away, shooting me a wink as she mouths, "You're welcome." She takes his pain in the ass away to do Hell only knows what, and I'm glad for the break from his overbearing attitude.

"This discussion isn't over," Taz says over his shoulder at me.

"Yes, it is," I call back.

He says something in reply, but luckily, I don't hear it, because Red pulls him into the crowd where they instantly get swallowed up.

I stand there alone, looking around, suddenly nervous. Now that the partygoers have a clear view of me, demons are pressing closer, all of them in various stages of undress. "Look at that color. I've never seen purple wings before!" I hear someone exclaim.

In a matter of seconds, the crowd is picking everything apart: my hair, my wings, my face, my posture, my dress, even my height. The stick in my hand is also a big line of discussion, and I grip the scythe tighter, thankful that the blades aren't out right now. The gossip would be even worse.

Spotlight phobia is settling in, making me squirm on the spot. I push my way through, careful to use my free hand instead of the scythe, just in case it activates and I ash someone on accident. That would probably be a party foul.

After only taking several steps, I get swallowed up in the throng just like Taz did, and I'm immediately feeling claustrophobic. Demons keep trying to stop me or reach out to touch my wings. I'm surprised when the appendages snap out at people aggressively, like they're pissed someone would have the audacity to put their grubby fingers on them. That seems to keep people from wing touching, which is fine by me. I push ahead, moving in the general direction that I think one of the large fountains was situated. If I can get up there, then I'm hoping I can see over the crowd and spot my guys.

It takes me fucking forever to go a very short distance.

By the time my shins hit the sides of the fountain, I'm panting, sweating, and my nerves are pretty much shot from too much attempted touchy-touchy

and talky-talky.

I climb up the smooth gray fountain, but the thing is really a pool in its own right. In the center, there's a statue of Tazreel, buck naked, water shooting out of the tops of his wings and landing in the receptacle below him as he glares austerely. Clearly, my sperm donor is very fond of himself, because when I stand up to my full height and look around, I can see that every fountain and sculpture is made in his likeness. I have to be very vigilant not to look below the face. I do not need to be scarred for life any more than I already am.

Standing on the edge of the slippery fountain is very hard in heels. And even with the added three inches, it's still difficult to see over everyone as they dance and talk and smoke and drink. There are just so many of them. Every time a flash of blue catches my eye, I turn, but it's not Iceman. Dark skin, but not Jerif. Blond hair, not Crux. Tattoos, not Echo.

"Delta! Delta!"

People call my name, holding drinks and hookah-looking pipes up at me, but I just wave them away and try to turn full circle to continue to look. It's so damn loud in here, made worse with the pulsing music, the atmosphere making me slightly dizzy. Or maybe that's all the Stupor smoke people keep blowing toward me.

*Where are they?*

For some reason, I grow more and more frantic. Red's words come back to me, and I can't help the sick feeling that rolls in my stomach like rocks covered in biting acid. What if they are...*imbibing* in the sins like Red said?

Where else could they be? Either the Abdicated are fucking liars and led them away, or the guys are down here somewhere, joining the party. Otherwise, wouldn't they have been waiting for me at the foot of the balcony stairs?

Tightening my hold on the scythe, my eyes scan to the right, snagging on the demons gathered around what look like maypoles. There are eight in total, all arranged in a large circle, and the black poles are at least fifteen feet high. They all have multiple red silken ribbons hanging from the top, and there are beautiful demons below them, all naked, dancing, using the ribbons and the poles and each other.

In the middle of the circle of maypoles, there's a giant orgy. Skin. Movement. Mouths open in ecstasy. Thrusting, curling, bending, arching. They're just a writhing, living piece of erotica. I have a hard time looking

away.

*Could my guys be in there?*

It's definitely possible. It looks like there must be at least a hundred participants, and that's just *this* orgy. I know I saw more of these groupings from the balcony. Some of the participants are winged, some not, and my eyes bounce around from body to body, but when my eyes get caught on a tanned, muscular, wing-free back with shaggy blond hair, I freeze.

*Crux?*

The acidic rocks in my gut soften and curdle like soured milk.

I watch as he thrusts into someone right there on the ground, next to the maypole dancers. It hurts me more than I anticipated, and my eyes burn holes into his head.

I just got them back. They just returned from the dead. After my vocal claiming inside, I thought that Crux would at least be intrigued. He's let me know right from the start that he's interested.

But then I remember Jerif's words back in Hell's Embrace—about how once Crux added my notch to his bedpost, he would drop me faster than a hot potato. Maybe Crux isn't interested now that I blurted out my claiming in front of everyone. Maybe he was just in it for the chase.

That motherfucker.

I spin on my heel, ready to climb down from the fountain and stomp over to him, orgy be damned, and give him a piece of my mind. Except in my anger, I'm not careful, and my heel slips on the wet edge. I try to compensate by stepping forward, but my long lavender dress gets tangled up in my feet, and then I go pitching forward, right for the water.

I squeal, arms spinning, but instead of falling face-first into the fountain, my wings suddenly lash out on either side of me, and I'm lifted off the ground.

“Oh, shit!” A loud girl-scream pops out of my throat, and I can hear people below me cheering, like I'm doing some kind of funny fucking trick.

My wings flap of their own accord, lifting me up higher, making the bystanders cheer louder. I scream again when my body tilts forward, and I do a fucking cartwheel in the air, three times in a row, and then my wings just start doing loops.

At another terrifying loop de loop, my dress gets all tangled up around my waist and I nearly flash everyone. I grab my skirts just in time, much to the disappointment of those below me, and stuff the fabric between my

thighs.

Without warning, I'm forced into a dive-bomb. I'd squeal again, but the sudden g-force I'm experiencing only allows for me to grimace and for my lips to flap in what feels like a supersonic rush of wind. The scythe nearly gets ripped out of my hand, so I stuff the thing between my legs and ride it.

Like a fucking broomstick.

Too late, I realize that I probably look like I'm the boss bitch witch, Winifred, from *Hocus Pocus*. A hysterical, *is this really happening* laugh pops out of me that sounds way too close to a witch's cackle.

But you know what? This walking stick-scythe-broomstick has turned out to be fucking versatile as shit. It's really helping my center of gravity right now too, so I'm not gonna move it, no matter how it may look. Instead, I grip the scythe in my hands, tighten my thighs around the middle, and embrace the fact that I'm Hell's first Nihil demon witch as I lean on it for support while my wings continue their scary fucking joy ride.

I swoop right past the maypoles like a fighter jet, and I realize too late that I'm heading for the orgy, and my wings' missiles are locked right on Crux.

Oh, shit.

"Wings..." I admonish, but they don't listen.

I get closer and closer, and the wind is rushing at my face so fast that it's blowing tears in my eyes. I grip the scythe tighter and try to tilt away, using the scythe like I can steer it, but my wings tilt the opposite way to ruin my efforts.

I body check him, clipping Crux enough to shove him off-balance. As soon as I hit him, my wings swoop me back up, going way too fucking fast, and I'm suddenly soaring up and circling back for round two of this fucked up flyby ride.

Crux gets to his feet in all his naked glory, looking around for whoever unseated him from between the thighs of the demon still on her back and moaning. Clearly, she hasn't realized that no one is still fucking her, and I feel some sort of sick satisfaction in knowing Crux's partner is faking the shit out of her pleasure or just getting off on her own.

I'm heading straight for him again, my wings and my laser beam angry eyes homing in like I've become an asshole-seeking bullet. Just when I'm ten feet away from clipping him again, he looks up, our eyes locking, and I realize that...that's not Crux.

I just dive-bombed a complete stranger. Oopsie.

This dude has three eyes, warthog fangs, and apparently, a very similar back as Crux. Then again, I've only seen Crux's back a couple times, so what the hell do I know? I should've probably made sure it was actually Crux before I went all *Mission Impossible* winged-style on his naked ass.

My wings immediately lift up, stopping our projectile, and I throw an awkward apologetic wave at him as I jolt around in the air. "My bad!" I shout out to him before my wings sweep us quickly away, silently flapping, *retreat!*

*Well, that was fucking embarrassing.*

"Way to go, assholes," I snap at them. They fluff up argumentatively, like they're reminding me that I'm the one who thought it was Crux first. I really hate these things.

They start flying and flipping me around again, and I have to dodge a body out of nowhere, my body practically falling off the side of the scythe as I lean. I realize that some of the other Abdicated have taken to the sky and are doing all kinds of aerial tricks, like I've just started a trend and everyone wants in on the action.

Finally, my wings balance me out, with absolutely no help from me whatsoever, and I hold onto my scythe for dear life, telling them to knock it the fuck off. But like they're answering some kind of unspoken dare, they start *really* flying. They're soaring, flapping, doing fucking laps above the fountain, going as fast as they fucking can, and my stomach lurches into my throat.

With wide, panicked eyes, I slap one hand over my mouth, instantly hit with a violent, crushing wave of horrible motion sickness.

Oh my fuck, I'm gonna puke. Right on Tazreel's buck ass naked statue.



**P**uking my guts up right in the middle of my own damn progeny party is a level of mortifying I'm not ready to face. Puking my guts up because my own wings gave me motion sickness is really just adding insult to injury.

I look over my shoulder, internally begging my wings to stop fucking with me before I projectile vomit that horrible dinner Tazreel forced me to take bites of. I cannot suffer that shit again.

"Unghh!" I yell at my wings, my hand still firmly over my mouth to hold off the hurling.

The wings swoop me around, really showing off to the crowd as they lift me higher and higher, flying over the masses, ignoring me completely.

*Oh God, please stop.*

I try to kick my foot and head butt the top of my wings, but that does absolutely nothing except make me start somersaulting again. I know I must look like a fucking loon, and people are laughing below, but I ignore them. I can die of embarrassment *after* I'm safely on the ground.

"Stop fucking flying!" I scream at my wings, but they just loop around some other Abdicated soaring near us. I don't fucking know how to fly, let alone land, and I need these things to work with me and get me down ASAP.

"I will snap you off my back if you don't fucking stop right now!" I tell them on a growl.

To my surprise, my outstretched, attention-whore wings actually listen to that threat. But instead of them nicely gliding me down to the ground, they

just snap flat against my back, just like that. Fucking purple assholes!

I go plummeting to the ground.

“Come back out, come back out!” I scream at them, but the stubborn feathered pricks don’t listen. Wind whips at my hair and face as I go falling feet-first. The scythe slips out from between my legs, and I hold it in front of me, wishing it would go all Transformers on me again and turn into a fucking parachute, but nope.

I’m going to go splat, right next to the damn orgy.

I squeeze my eyes shut tight and embrace for impact like I’m a pilot crash-landing in the Hudson, but instead of my body splattering all over everyone’s Stupor hookahs, a pair of strong, hot arms catch me.

“Oomph!”

My eyes fly open at the masculine grunt, and I look up at the person who cradled my fall.

“Jerif,” I breathe out in relief.

“That was a terrible landing, Warrior Princess.”

I let out a somewhat hysterical laugh as my nerves leave me shaking. But I only have about a second of comfort before my stomach tilts again, and I wriggle out of his hold. “Oh fuck, I’m gonna puke.”

Jerif lets me go as I hop down onto my feet and plant my legs, bending over to brace my hands on my knees, my scythe still in my grip.

I feel a cool hand on the exposed skin of my upper back, and hear a calm voice. “Just breathe, Maverick.”

I look over at Iceman standing beside Jerif, and then see Echo and Crux right beside them. Fully clothed. At seeing the four of them standing here, I actually am able to take a deep, calming breath. “You weren’t imbibing in the orgy,” I blurt before stealing another few gulps of air until my stomach doesn’t feel like it’s revolting anymore.

Echo shares a smirk with Crux. “Were you worried?”

“Kind of,” I answer honestly.

I straighten up, but even as I do, Iceman keeps his hand on my back, and his touch sends delicious chills down my spine.

I look at the four of them standing around me, and it’s finally sinking in fully that they’re okay. They’re here with me, and we’re all okay.

“I thought you died. All of you,” I say, my bottom lip wobbling.

“We thought we were going to,” Iceman admits.

“That was a close one.”



“Too fucking close,” Echo says, his shadows moving around his pale skin with agitated twitches.

“Now that we know some fucking demon called the Ophidian wants you, we’ll be more prepared,” Jerif tells me. “We knew there was unrest, but we didn’t know they were that organized. We learned a lot from what happened, and there won’t be any repeats of anyone almost taking you.”

My heart swells with the fierce protectiveness that just fell from his mouth. The other three guys look at him with surprise. Hell, even *I’m* looking at him in surprise. But there’s no denying it. Something between us changed down there during the Vestibule battle. It’s like we saw to the core of each other, and somehow there’s no going back to the distant tense relationship we had before.

We both fought with everything we had to get to each other, to protect each other, only to be ripped away. I saw Jerif’s true feelings in his flame-filled eyes that night as he got up and battled over and over again. The anguish. The regret. The heartbreaking sadness. I recognized it all because I felt it too.

I look at all four of them, so damn grateful. I know how close we were to losing everything for good. To losing each other. I’m not going to waste this second chance or get caught up in petty, stubborn arguments.

“So what do you want to do?” Crux says with that heartbreaking surfer-dude smile of his that I adore.

“Yeah, it is your first Nihil party,” Echo points out as he looks around.

“It is,” I agree. “Yours too,” I point out, wondering what they think about everything. Do parties like this happen in their Rings? Are orgies the thing to do in Hell? I suppose that wouldn’t be too far-fetched, but I can’t really tell how they’re feeling about everything going on around us. Do they want to stay, enjoy themselves? Or go like I want to? I study them for a moment longer and then decide just to confess what I want and see what happens.

“This isn’t really my scene,” I tell them on a shout as the music changes over to something even more fast paced. “What I’d really like to do is just get out of here. And I was hoping...you guys would come too?” I declare, going out on a limb. “If you want to stay, you can stay, of course. Not that you need my permission, because you don’t. I’m just saying, if you want to come with me, that would be great, if you don’t, then that’s fine, and—”

“Delta.” Iceman’s voice cuts through my long-winded rambling.

“Yeah?”

“We definitely want to go with you.”

A whoosh leaves my chest, my shoulders losing their tension. “You do?”

“We do,” Jerif replies gruffly, looking around like everything around us is giving him the heebie-jeebies.

“Lead the way, Little Dove,” Echo jokes as he and Crux start pushing the crowd to part for me.

“Ugh,” I groan. “Don’t call me that; you know how I feel about those vile birds,” I shudder. “Representation of peace, my ass! Those things are mean. Besides, I’m still trying to pretend I’m just carrying a purple backpack.”

The guys chuckle. “What was with the air show?” Crux teases, his eyes full of mirth. “You looked like Hermione Granger trying to play Quidditch. It was bad.”

“Thanks,” I say dryly as we start making our slow way across the yard. “It wasn’t my fault. These prick wings just took off on their own with no fucks given about how I might feel about it. And apparently, I get fly-sick, which is just icing on the disgustingly feathered cake. The broomstick scythe was the least of my worries.”

Echo and Crux bust up laughing so hard that I think they might start leaking happy tears.

“Shut it,” I tell them, though my tone isn’t as harsh as I was going for. Their amusement is contagious.

“You’ll get better, and I think your wings are beautiful,” Iceman tells me, a cold finger grazing over the top of them. I nearly jump out of my shoes at the sensation, making him snap his finger back. “Apologies.”

“No, don’t be sorry,” I say quickly. “It just...it was sensitive. I wasn’t expecting it.”

He shares a loaded, full-of-heat look over my head with Jerif, but neither of them say a word. My stomach tightens, but in a good way this time. I suddenly feel nervous, like I’m on a first date and I’m wondering if I’m going to get a first kiss. Will it be good? Will we have chemistry? I mean, in my dreams we definitely do, but that shit’s never real life.

In real life, the salad you ate for dinner so that you wouldn’t look like a pig gives you gas, and then you rip an SBD in the car on the way to the epic doorstep scene you’ve been envisioning in your head all night. He looks at you, you look at him...you both know who tainted the precious air in the car, and screaming, *the one who smelt it dealt it* just isn’t going to cut it in that scenario.

Would the four of them be the kind of guys that laugh? Would it become one of many stories over time that bond you and set the foundation for beautiful intimacy? Or would they crack the windows, hold their breath, and peel away with screeching tires just as soon as you're out of their car, the magic of the night ruined?

We weave through the crowd toward the main house silently. Iceman leads the way, Jerif stays right behind me, while Crux and Echo stay on each side of me. Our movements are in sync, connected by an invisible thread as we part the crowd in search of a peaceful place to just be together.

I'm surrounded by the Gate Guardians' strength again, and I feel right in a way I was too nervous and insecure to admit before. I have so much I want to talk to them about. I want to make sure they're okay, run my hands over them to be sure all of this is real. And at the same time, what is there really to say to each other?

We're all battle forged now, different and tempered, because of what we went through. I feel it. They feel it. No amount of talking can change the charge in the air between us now. We all know what it felt like to think we'd lost it all.

Large demons guard all the entrances that lead into the house. As we get closer, I wonder if they'll let us in or not. Iceman approaches a set of demons guarding a pair of ostentatious French doors. At first, one of the door demons looks like he's about to redirect Iceman and crew, but as soon as they spot me in the middle of the group, they quickly open the doors with a respectful nod, letting us inside.

As soon as the doors shut behind us, the noise drops dramatically. My ears ring like I've been at a concert in front of the large speakers all night long. I shove a finger in one of my ears and wiggle it like that will help, but I should know better from the gong sound in Hell that it doesn't.

"Damn, how is half of Hell not deaf? That noise level is crazy out there," I comment, looking up to find Iceman staring at me intensely.

I open my mouth to ask him what's wrong, but before I can, he closes the distance between us, cups my cheeks in his hands and lowers his full blue lips to mine.

I'm stunned at first.

My eyes fall closed, and I give into the feeling. His mouth is soft against mine, and he threads his fingers into my hair like every girl dreams a man will at some point in their life, his touch loosening the pony tail as he

caresses my scalp. He cradles my jaw like I'm something he finds infinitely precious, and gently tilts my head, encouraging me to open up for him.

I respond immediately, pressing into him, my hands greedily tracing the planes of his abdomen. His mouth claims mine, his kiss asking if I'm okay, his touch reassuring him that I'm here in his arms. I taste him and suck on his lips, teasing his tongue with my own, floored that he needed this as much as I did. With every sweep of his tongue, I can feel that he was just as torn, worried, and relieved to see me as I was to see him.

The need for more begins to build low in my stomach, tingling up into my lips and snaking out into my tongue. But I feel another hand thread through my hair, pulling out the strands until they're hanging loose at my back. The next thing I know, Iceman's cool lips pull away and in their place is the taste of masculine, carefree summer air. I don't need to open my eyes to know it's now Crux's mouth fused to mine, confessing wordless emotion. His forked and pierced tongue is very obvious and fills me with excitement.

I can feel his longing and his relief pour into me with each nip of his teeth and stroke of his pierced tongue against mine. Unspoken promises are exchanged between us as he deepens the kiss and stokes a hunger that's unfurling inside of me like a lotus to the sun.

"Alright already," Echo declares impatiently, and in a breath, Crux is pulled away from me on a chuckle. Echo's shadows caress my jaw, guiding my face and eyes to the right, where he's waiting for me. He doesn't pull me to him and devour me the way the flash of heat in his eyes says he wants to. Instead, he studies me for a moment, his shadows tracing the planes of my face, like he needs to memorize me in this moment.

"We're so sorry we almost lost you," he says quietly.

I shake my head, not liking the blame I can feel he's holding onto. "It wasn't your fault. I'm here. I'm okay," I reassure him.

He nods and steps into me, pressing his forehead against mine, like my words are the balm he's been in desperate need of. He kisses me, and it's flavored with the gaping hole in his chest that he felt when he thought I'd been taken. I feel it with every stroke of his shadows as they move against my skin with reverence.

His tongue meets mine, and I can discern panic and loss and worry in his taste. I savor the peace that comes over him as he moves his hands from my waist up the naked skin of my back and consumes me the way his black eyes always promised me he would.

I'm lost to his pull as he kisses me and molds my body to his. He holds me like we were made to fit together and kisses me with a fervor that makes it clear that he's never going to lose me again.

All at once, Echo pulls away from me and steps to the side, leaving Jerif's heated body in his wake. I look over at Jerif, my lips pink and tingling, and his gaze holds me captive. He steps closer to me, wrapping his warm hands around my waist, and I don't miss the shiver that runs through him as he presses me against him. I see passion in his fiery eyes, but I also see fear and vulnerability.

I wrap my hands around the back of his neck a little shyly, trying to get used to the feel of him in my arms. I'm not sure how to react to his proximity and willingness. There's a momentary stiffness between us, like we're both asking each other with our bodies if this is okay. Was the loss and sadness we felt as we watched each other almost die true? Are we ready to embrace the realizations we felt in those moments that, thankfully, weren't our last?

What happened in the Vestibule changed everything. It opened my eyes and made room for my wants in a staggering way. I can feel Jerif's hand gently rub my lower back, and I know that what happened changed how he sees things too.

Not wanting to waste another second, I wrap my palm around the back of his neck and pull him down to me. I kiss him softly, tentatively. I brush my lips against his, letting our mouths get familiar, giving him time to think about what this means and changes between us. I expect his kisses to slowly grow more confident and for us to find our rhythm together, but instead, he shocks the hell out of me by running his fingers up my sides and tracing the curves of my breasts with his thumbs.

I gasp, and as soon as my lips part, he claims my mouth with such conviction that I can feel the scorching possession of it. There's no going back now. His tongue teases mine, telling me that he's beyond okay with it. It was torture to watch him sacrifice himself for me, but the violent need I taste between us speaks volumes about what we've both survived and what we plan to do with the time together we now have.

I pull away with a smile, and his lips chase mine. "I'm going to have so much fun hate fucking you," I joke, and his lips slowly spread into a grin.

"Not as much fun as I'm going to have purposely pissing you off so that you *will* hate fuck me," he teases against my lips, and I tip my head back and laugh.

I step away from him and look around, noting the guys' hungry gazes as each one of them watches me. Their need permeates the air all around us, and I stare, overwhelmed and suddenly at a loss for words. I knew that claiming them before was a risk. That it would change the dynamic between us for better or worse, but I had to do it. I needed to own the realization that I came to when I thought I had lost them. I just didn't realize that they would all be so willing to claim me right back. It sends a thrill through me.

Behind us, the French doors open suddenly, making me jump. Sound and light spills into the darkened hallway, and the bronze-winged Abdicated from dinner walks inside. His presence interrupts the very intimate moment we were just having, and judging by the smirk on his face, he knows it.

His jewelry jingles as he takes us in, his fingertips stroking over his gold armor before twirling the rings on his fingers. "Ah, we wondered where you lot had gotten off to," he states, taking all of us in and breathing deeply like he's scenting the room. "If you're looking for a bit more privacy, might I suggest the third floor? Eighth room on the right. Or, if you want a more romantic setting, try the eleventh door on the left. I'll tell Taz you all are dancing. Should give you plenty of time."

With that, he turns on his heel and saunters back out into the party, the doors shutting behind him and locking away all the intrusive sounds once again.

I stare at the door for a beat and then turn to the guys, suddenly nervous but so damn excited too. "So...which room?"



Unfortunately, they don't get to answer that question.

Almost as soon as Jewelry dude shuts the doors, Tazreel comes bursting right in. When he sees us, his eyes glower, and he shoots a look at his fellow Abdicated. "I knew you were full of shit, Avarice," he tells Jewelry, whose name I guess is Avarice. Then Taz rounds on me. "What do you think you're doing?" he demands.

Avarice sends me a little shrug. "I tried. He was already hot on my tail and didn't have enough Stupor in him to believe my lie."

Taz shoots him a look. "Yes, you really should know how to lie better," he tells him. "Dancing?" He scoffs in disbelief. "As if I would believe she would be dancing after everyone just saw exactly how graceless she is when attempting to fly."

"Hey," I say with offense. "I've never flown before, and these fuckers did it on their own," I say, blaming it on the purple monstrosities.

He points a finger at me, going right past the flying issue. "I don't want you cavorting with them. We spoke about this earlier, and I was serious."

"So was I," I fire back.

He takes a step forward, so I meet him toe-to-toe. Our wings stretch out once more as we both glare at each other. Avarice looks over at my guys who are watching worriedly. "Don't worry, Luce forbade him from punishing her. He can't do anything."

"Get out!" Tazreel snaps at him.

He tsks but starts backing away with a smirk. "You need to go smoke

some Stupor, my friend. Help loosen up.”

“I can’t,” Taz replies petulantly. “I have to watch this party like a hawk, or they’ll ruin my yard and try to steal my sculptures.”

I make a face. “Why would anyone want to steal those sculptures of you?”

A tic in his jaw pulses, and I know I’ve hit him right in the ego, because his wings try to fluff up, like they’re bolstering his vanity. “Any form of art in my likeness is priceless.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” I mumble.

“What was that?”

“I said—”

For the second time tonight, Echo’s hand slaps over my mouth. “I think Delta had a little too much Stupor blown into her face tonight.”

“Yes, let’s all calm down,” Iceman intervenes, stepping up beside me.

Echo gives me a look that says, *behave*, before dropping his palm away. I take a steadying breath, looking at my wings. “Stand down,” I order, hoping that if I sound like a general, they’ll listen. Luckily, they do.

Avarice slips outside but leaves the doors cracked, letting the ambiance of the party filter in. Tazreel takes a moment to look at each of the guys, still posturing with his wings. Even though he looks ageless, you can tell that he’s ancient. The power and influence he possesses is incomparable to anything other than what was rolling off of Lucifer himself.

“I will not allow this grouping to happen under my roof.” His words clang like metal falling to the floor, sending vibrations through my feet.

“Fine,” I retort. “We were just leaving anyway.”

His eyes snap to me. “Leaving? You cannot leave. You are my newly discovered progeny. You will need training on how to be a Nihil.”

I shake my head, letting my tangled hair shift over my back. “The only training I’ll be doing is how to help stabilize the Hellgate.”

He scoffs and runs a hand through his hair, his wings finally dropping back as he shakes his head. “That job is beneath you.”

“If that’s the way all Nihil think, that’s probably why the Gates are fucking breaking in the first place,” I reply hotly. “You guys are supposedly powerful. Why aren’t you helping to fix the Gates? Isn’t balance and all of that the thing you value most?”

“I’m Pride. I have enough to balance as it is,” he grits out. “And if *they*”—he points a finger at the guys—“are not up to their task, then they can



get another bloodline to help them like they're supposed to."

I snort at his declaration. *No shit, he's prideful.*

"That's exactly what they were trying to do when I stepped into this whole Hellgate mess," I tell him, exasperated. "The issue is that no powerful demons want the job. Outer Ringers don't sustain the gate long enough before they're completely drained and die. And no one else is stepping up. The Hellgate needs a stronger demon to help sustain it. I'm a Nihil, which means I'm more than up to the task," I argue, upset that he just doesn't seem to get it or care. How can Hell's upper echelon of demons not understand the importance in what I'm saying?

"You should be leading armies and preparing for end times, not living in the Mortal Realm, protecting ungrateful humans unworthy to stand in your glorious presence," he declares, completely serious.

My eyes feel like I could shoot lasers out of them and burn his stupid hair right off his head. "Those *ungrateful humans* deserve our protection. If all of you in Luce's little *circle* would get off your pompous asses to help, maybe the Gates wouldn't be in such bad shape, letting unauthorized demons sneak through to the Mortal Realm all the time."

His eyes harden like cement. "Careful, daughter. I may not be able to punish you, but I still outrank you, and you will treat me with respect."

I take a deep, calming breath. "Fine. I'm sorry," I say, trying not to grit my teeth as I say it. "But the Gate is breaking. Maybe I'm not leading an army, but I am helping to prevent one from storming out and fucking with the balance you swore to adhere to. Isn't that good enough? Isn't balance and all this sin and sacrifice supposed to be for the greater good?"

"If things are as bad as you say, then Luce will take care of it," Tazreel says dismissively, and I can practically feel steam shoot out of my ears. I'm so damn frustrated by his blasé attitude. "There is more to the realms and maintaining balance than you know, Delta. Yes, the Hellgate is important, but so are a great many other things that you have yet to learn. Those things are what your bloodline is intended for. Not Gatekeeping."

"Gatekeeping is for the Gatekeepers, right?" I press. "Too bad there aren't any of them left. Guess it's up to us to guard it and help as much as we can."

He stares at me hard, and a disappointed growl leaves my chest at the same time the fight does. I'm not going to get anywhere with him, especially not by slinging retorts back and forth. He's too set in his ways. "Regardless

of what you think I'm worthy of, I gave my word that I would help these Guardians. That trumps any sense of misplaced duty you think I should have," I say evenly, suddenly tired and completely over being here. I want to go home, curl up in the realm I know and love, and work through what all of this means for me and my future.

"Duty is important."

"I agree," I reply. "Which is why we need to leave and check on the Gate. So how do we get out of here?"

He doesn't speak right away. He just watches me, unnervingly. I take a fortifying breath, forcing myself to say nothing. I don't want to go another round with this demon, but he doesn't seem like the type that's down for a little *agree to disagree* truce.

We stare at each other, neither one of us sure what to make of things. I'm sure he's trying to figure out a way to make me come to heel. I'm just trying to figure out why he thinks his vision for my life should trump my own. He doesn't even know me.

Judging by his reaction in the dungeon, he doesn't even want kids. So why can't he just let this go, let me go? His gray-gold eyes flash with frustration, and my heart starts pumping faster, my nerves getting the better of me.

What if he won't let us leave? What if he keeps us here just to spite me? A little loophole in Luce's *no punishing her* rule. He could simply keep us all here, letting the Gate fall, and teaching me a lesson about obedience. My teeth grind together.

Would he do that? Would Lucifer let him?

He finally lets out a sigh and scrubs a hand over his suddenly weary face. "Fine. I'll transport you back. For now," he says firmly. "But I reserve the right to pop in whenever I feel like it, and when I summon you, you will answer and return immediately. Is that understood?"

I repeat his words in my mind, trying to see if there are any obvious tricks or loopholes that I should be concerned with. "I'll answer when summoned, but the Gate is the priority, so if something is going on with the Hellgate, that supersedes your summons. Oh, and you can't keep me in Nihil longer than I want to be," I counter offer.

"Agreed," he tells me a little too quickly. I suddenly wonder if I missed something. I review the wording again, but I'm just not seeing what it could be.

“Agreed,” I finally relent.

“Good.”

He flicks his hand, and then off to the side, a wall that looks similar to the veil of gooey metallic liquid like in the Vestibule appears out of thin air, like a doorway.

I stare at it in open-mouth shock. “You mean, we don’t have to go back to the Vestibule, up the stairs of doom and through the Hellgate to get out?”

“No. Luce’s inner circle can go where they please, when they please,” he states smugly, studying his nails, and implementing a hair flip that only his pompous ass could get away with.

I take in the portal, and relief floods me. I’m not ready to set foot back in the Vestibule. I don’t know if I ever will be.

“Thank you,” I tell Tazreel quietly, beyond grateful that he’s doing this, even though I can tell it’s the exact opposite of what he wants to do. Maybe he’s not as irredeemable as I thought.

Taz gives a curt nod and then casts one more warning glare at the guys before turning on his heel, the doors slamming behind him as he returns to the party.

All of us are quiet for a moment, reeling from the exchange. Crux is the first to break the ice. “So. He seems nice,” he says conversationally, the snark bringing a small smile from my lips. “You think he’ll give us his blessing if we ever want to get hitched?”

A bubbling laugh comes out of me as I turn to him. “Nope. Not in a million years.”

Crux grins. “Good thing we’re immortal, then.”

The smile leaves my face. “Wait...we’re *immortal*? As in, we don’t age?”

“Correct.”

I look at the four of them warily. “How old are you guys?”

“Old enough to know that we shouldn’t answer that question,” Echo teases.

“We should go,” Jerif says. “I can feel the Gate. We’ve been gone too long.”

“Yes,” Iceman agrees, reaching down to take my free hand. “Let’s go home, shall we?”

Those are just about the best words I’ve heard in a long time, and my spirit practically sings. “Hell yeah. Get me out of this asylum before I catch the crazy too.”

---

“I wouldn’t normally object to you taking off your clothes, Maverick, but why exactly are you stripping down in our driveway?” Iceman asks me.

I growl as I contort my body in the weirdest angles so I can reach the zipper and peel myself out of the now soaking fabric of what used to be a beautiful dress. So much for keeping it and wearing it on my bloated PMS days when I need to feel beautiful and eat until the hormonal rage subsides.

“The fucker probably did that on purpose,” I grumble as I step out of the moonstone encrusted purple fabric that was my gown. “Could have portaled us to the front door of the mansion or right into a nice warm bath, but *nooooo.*”

“No shifting within a mile from the Hell portal remember?” Jerif tells me. “We’re probably as close as he wanted us to get.”

I give a huff. “You guys get dropped on the driveway, and I get dropped right into the fucking bog you have hidden at the bottom of your estate’s stupid hill,” I growl. “Not fair.”

I can tell the guys are trying really hard not to laugh at my slimy, muddy state. I can taste the sludge in my mouth, and it’s already saturated my wings.

“I was holding your hand, so you tell me how I ended up down there and you didn’t?” I ask Iceman. But my eyes widen when I see what he’s holding in his hand. “Wait a minute. You managed to catch my *scythe* and save it from the bog, but not *me*?” I ask, fixing my glare on him.

He looks down at the stick a little sheepishly before quickly passing it back to me. “Apologies.”

Shaking my head, I kick off the one shoe that survived my tumble and try to wipe off my legs with the less sludge-covered portions of my dress. “Ugh, why does this shit happen to me?”

The other guys cover their mouths with their hands, but the snickers leak out despite their best efforts. I whirl on them, putting one hand on my hips while I hold the scythe in the other. I’m now only decked out in a skin colored, corseted bodysuit, and the mud that’s slowly dripping down my calves.

“You know Grumpy Lurch is going to cut me in my sleep if I trek in another mess,” I tell them. “He’ll fuck with my food, probably Nair my shampoo, and fill the house with doves because he’s petty like that. So I’m stripping down now before we get there.”

None of them argue my logic. I bend over, trying to get as much filth off of my feet as I can. I should probably be grateful that I'm not entirely covered this time in muck, but I'm tired and hungry and I've just barely survived Hell to end up in a pit of mud that smells like that nasty worm pasta that Satan likes to eat.

"Fine by us. We enjoy the view," Crux says with an appreciative smile as his green eyes skate up my body. Even though I look like a runner-up at a bad mud wrestling competition, I still can't help but blush.

Iceman's amused gaze suddenly veers off in the direction of the graveyard for a moment, and his navy blue brows furrow. "Jerif, you and I are on boost duty tonight," he declares, and both of them look back at me longingly for a moment before Jerif nods.

"We should induct Delta as soon as she's fed and rested," the lava demon states before his eyes land on me. "That is...if you still want that."

I snort. "Did you not just hear me going to bat for this job against my sperm donor?"

Jerif shrugs. "You could have just been digging your heels in for the sake of being stubborn. Doesn't mean you might not have second thoughts about all of this, especially now that you know you're a Nihil."

I study Jerif for a moment, getting the impression that he's asking about more than just my accepting my duty to the Hellgate.

"Nihil or not, I meant everything I said," I tell him evenly, surety ringing in my tone and words. I don't break eye contact. I want him to see exactly how sure I am. About everything.

Jerif's flame-filled gaze fixes on me, and I feel the intensity and weight in it before he nods slowly, his lips slightly curving up. "Okay, then. Get some rest, and we'll settle things tomorrow."

My stomach flips at those words, and greedy anticipation bubbles up in my belly. Mmmm.

"I look forward to it," I tell him, unintentional seduction dripping from the statement.

Jerif's jaw pulses, and his heated gaze rakes down my body and slowly back up again. "Tease," he accuses gruffly before turning on his heel and storming off in the direction of the graveyard.

"You know you like it, asshole," I shout after him with a smile.

Iceman shakes his head and chuckles before kissing me lightly on the lips. He huffs out an icy breath against my mouth and then moves to follow

Jerif reluctantly. I watch his ass as he goes, disappointment fluttering through me that I'm not going to be reenacting any fivesome sex dreams tonight.

For a second, I'm tempted to volunteer that we all hang out near the Gate so we can fuck like rabid bunnies in its needy presence, but I'm not ready to go back into Hell yet, and I'm pretty sure Jerif and Iceman are going into Hell's Embrace, since that's where the actual Gate is located.

Despite the fact that I'm covered in muck, I look gratefully at the mansion in the distance. It sure beats the Center Ring of Hell, and it's damn good to be back.



I sigh and turn to Echo and Crux. “Be honest. How much is Grumpy Lurch going to hate me if I walk in there like this?”

Echo and Crux run amused yet hungry gazes over me. “A lot,” Echo says.

“Yep,” Crux agrees. “I better carry your half-naked, *filthy* body so that you don’t drip all over the mansion.”

My cheeks flame with as much heat as the space between my thighs.

“Yes, we don’t want her to get punished like a bad girl,” Echo adds. “Do we, Crux?”

“Definitely not.”

I can’t reply. My tongue wants to leap down my throat and lick my own clit, that’s how throbbing and desperate it is. How can they affect me so much just by saying a few dirty words?

Looking smug as shit, Crux walks up, but instead of scooping me in his arms all romantic-like, he opts not to, since he doesn’t want to crush my wings.

So instead, he gingerly takes the scythe from my hand and then steps in front of me and kneels down, letting me hop on his back. I wrap my hands around his neck. My fingers dig into his throat, and I give his neck a little squeeze, just to see if he’s into it. Since Taz interrupted us, the low burn in my stomach hasn’t let up, and I know the guys feel it too.

“Oh, Jeter,” Crux rumbles, his voice dropping down an octave as he looks over his shoulder at me. “I knew you were a pro batter, but I didn’t know you

liked to give a good choke up.”

I swallow at the dirty baseball innuendo, and I can practically feel my eyes dilating with desire. He’s mixing my love for sex and baseball all in one, and it’s fucking working for me.

Crux starts walking the rest of the way down the driveway, his long, even strides not even jolting me. I take advantage of my spread legs wrapped around him and slowly grind my center against his back, just to give myself some much needed friction.

“Here, let me help with that.”

I gasp as Echo’s hands come up, pressing against my ass. The bottom of my cheeks are exposed from the bodysuit, and he wastes no time squeezing the bouncy flesh. With his touch, he grinds me harder against Crux’s back, and I instantly bite down on my bottom lip. Wicked heat flutters through me like my tummy butterflies have suddenly caught on fire.

Crux keeps walking, and Echo keeps palming my ass, pressing all my achy parts against Crux like it’s some integral part in getting me to the mansion. It’s all so fucking wrong and dirty, but I don’t want it to stop.

When we get to the front door, Echo sends his shadows ahead, and they turn the handle and push the door open for us. Crux doesn’t even break his stride, he just tromps right in, Echo’s hands still on my ass. He doesn’t even move them when GL appears from a side room in all his stuffy butler glory.

“Good day, sirs.”

“Hey, Strut,” Crux says cheerfully, as if he’s not carrying a half naked and half muddy me on his back.

I give Grumpy a two fingered wave. “They’re carrying me so I don’t get the floors dirty, see?” I brag in a *you can’t be mad at me for this* tone.

“Hmm.” He doesn’t sound impressed, but it’s a lot better than raving mad like my last bog incident.

Echo gives my ass a little shove, hurrying Crux along. “Could you send up some food, Strut? We’re all *famished*.” Echo punctuates that word with a little shadow action, as the dark wisps wrap around my waist and start moving up to tease the edge of my breasts.

“Of course,” Strut answers as Crux starts climbing the stairs.

“Thank you!” I call back to Grumpy. I really want to get on his good side, especially now that he’s delivering our meal. I can’t have another food fiasco so soon after the dinner party.

I’m insanely curious as Crux takes me upstairs and into a part of the



mansion I haven't been to yet. This place is huge, and I've seen very little of it. "What's with the not having electricity in this place?" I ask, looking around as Crux hits the top of the staircase and then walks down a lantern-lit hallway.

"Jerif prefers candles and fireplaces since he can control it," Echo replies.

"Yeah, but what about TVs and internet? Or a working fridge and microwave? He can't control all of that."

"We have imps to cook for us, and we don't have time for the other stuff. We're always dealing with the Gate."

For some reason, that makes me feel sad. "I'm sorry that you guys have had to struggle with this for so long," I tell them. "I hope I can help lighten the load."

Crux's hand gives my leg a little squeeze. "You helped us the minute you agreed to try. Knowing now you're a Nihil means we'll probably be set. You're more powerful than all of us, and I can't see the Hellgate needing more than the five of us to keep it stable for a really long time."

I lean forward and place a kiss on the side of his neck, making him hum in appreciation. "Good. I'm glad."

Once again, Echo's shadows open one of the doors, and Crux strides inside. He doesn't stop in the bedroom though. I barely get a chance to take in the dark wood and forest green bed as he tosses my scythe on it before he heads right for the en suite bathroom.

The whole back of the space is a giant wet room made of dark gray tiles, with just a short glass half-wall separating it from the rest of the bathroom. There's one large rectangular waterfall showerhead on the ceiling that spreads along the span of the wet space, and a few chrome handhelds installed on the wall.

Crux veers toward the gray countertops, backing up so he can set me down. I let go, my ass hitting the cold marble. My wings have to open up to fit, so the backs graze against the large mirror behind me. The guys stand in front of me, taking me in. I cross my legs and lean back on my hands, knowing very well how this position arches my back and juts out my breasts. The perky twins look good in this corseted bodysuit.

"You've got me up here...so what now?" I ask with a teasing, sultry edge to my voice.

Echo bites his lip. "Let's get you cleaned up, and then...we *eat*."

Fuck. I don't think he's talking about the food.

His shadows move out, spiraling over to the faucets in the wet space, making the lengthy showerhead on the ceiling start gushing steaming hot water.

“Come on, dirty girl,” Crux says, quirking a finger at me. “Let us help you wash the bog away.”

With a smile, I hop off the countertop and head for the shower, making sure to sashay my hips a little more than usual as I walk toward the water. I can feel their eyes on me, following every inch of exposed skin, and it makes me feel so sexy to be the center of their attention.

Excitement rushes through me because I know this is going to be good, but it’s more than the promise of amazing sex that has me panting and ready to squeal like a kid who just got a surprise puppy. There’s an ease to the way I am with them that I’ve never had before. I don’t feel shy or nervous or self-conscious. I just feel ready to take everything to the next level.

The thick glass of the half-wall separating the massive shower from the rest of the room supports me as I lean forward against it. I look over my shoulder and fix Echo and Crux with a look.

“I need to be unhooked,” I state in invitation, pointing to the clasps that have me caged into the corset bodysuit.

Neither one of them move, they just watch me hungrily until all of a sudden I feel Echo’s shadows move up my legs slowly, like he’s tracing his fingertips up the back of my calves, behind my knees, up my thighs. They tickle the globes of my ass and then skim up the center of my back. I feel the first hook and eye clasp on the corset come free, and then another, and another.

I look at the two demons over my shoulder, each clasp coming undone and sending a flare of sensation right between my thighs. They watch me, like I’m performing some erotic strip tease, captivated by my every breath. The lust and want wraps around us like a fog thicker than the steam filling up the room. I know that I’m so worked up, all it will take is one barely-there touch to any erogenous zone I possess and I’m sliding right into orgasm home base.

The last of the corset comes free and folds down, and I push the rest of it off my hips while reveling in the full deep breaths I can once again pull into my lungs. I pull the rest of the bodysuit all the way off very slowly. Every lift of my hip and wriggle of my ass purposeful, tailor-made to my audience. I want them as ready as I am.

When I'm completely bare, I walk around the glass partition and step under the water, turning around so that they get a full frontal view of me as water slicks down my body, steam pricking at my pointed nipples, my head falling back so that the water can wet my hair.

"Fucking Hell Rings," Echo groans.

"That's the sexiest thing I've ever seen," Crux puts in.

I open my eyes languidly, my lids hooded as I take them in. "Undress. Slowly," I tell them. I want to get as much of a show as I gave.

Echo smirks, but his shadows come back to wrap around him, and he stands there motionless, once again letting them do the work. I watch them lift his shirt right off, and then I lick my lips as they curl into the waist of his pants, popping off the button and pulling them down.

I don't play demure or shy. There are no games between us. I drink my fill of him unapologetically, enjoying every inch of his pale, corded body, loving the sight of the shadows that cover him, moving and slinking around like they're waiting to reach for me.

He boldly wraps a hand around his proud, rigid cock, giving himself a slow stroke. It's so fucking sexy seeing him hard and ready. When I see more clothes falling to the floor, my eyes move over to Crux, and I let out a satisfied hum. Tanned abs, a thin blond happy trail, and another hard cock jutting out to greet me.

I'm the luckiest fucking demon in all the Rings of Hell.

I study every curve and definition, taking them both in, trying to sear this picture into my memory. "Come play," I invite, ready to touch and be touched.

This moment has been a long time coming, and I feel like I'm going to combust any moment now. This attraction that's been between us since day one is about to detonate, and I can't wait to be caught in the explosion.

Both of them move like predators sizing up the game, picking the best points of attack for maximum damage. Goosebumps spring up on my arms despite the hot water falling on me. Crux reaches me first, and I'm taken by surprise when his lips slam to mine in a searing kiss that tells me there's going to be no soft and slow right now. It's all going to be fevered and hard and feral.

*Fuck yes.*

I kiss him back, my lips and tongue begging for everything he wants to give me.

“I’ll sip you later, Delta, but right now, I need to drown in you,” Crux whispers gruffly in my ear before he nips my lobe, letting his forked tongue come out to play.

In response, I jump up and wrap my legs around his waist, letting out a hiss as he takes three steps and pushes me up against the gray tile of the shower wall.

“I’ve wanted this since the moment you tumbled into the mausoleum, batting away at us and spewing threats. Except now, I don’t just want you, I need you.”

Crux kisses me hard, the piercings on each side of his forked tongue clinking against my teeth as he drags it sensually through my mouth. I moan at the feel of that naughty muscle of his as it flicks against my eager tongue. And then, without any more preamble or wasted time, he reaches down between us and moves himself to my entrance. I arch up, giving him the perfect angle, and he slams into me with one quick thrust.

I cling to his thick neck for leverage, dropping my head back on an indulgent moan. There’s no pause or savoring as Crux pulls out and thrusts into me again. This is hard. Fast. Intense. This is lust and desire ringing out, like he’s desperate to have me right this second, and he’s unable to wait any longer. It’s hot as fuck to know that I made him this way. He’s desperate for *me*.

He sucks on my bottom lip and inhales every moan and pant of pleasure I make as he sets a deliciously fast pace like he’s racing me to an orgasm. His green eyes lock on mine, teasing and flashing me hints of the pleasure he’s feeling, and I eat it up as he fucks me hard against the shower wall.

I’m not sure where Echo is, and that’s fine, because this moment, audience or not, is all about me and Crux.

He hits an especially sweet spot inside of me, and I groan and bite out a *yes*. Crux’s hips slap against my spread thighs. “Ah, so right there, then?” he teases as he swivels inside of me and thrusts up hard, hitting exactly the same delicious spot. “Oh, yeah, I can feel you tightening,” he observes as he hammers himself against the sweet spot over and over again.

I’m unable to speak, or nod. It feels too fucking good, and I want to come so badly, my heels dig into his ass, urging him to keep going. I cling to him, trying to ride him just as hard as he’s moving inside of me. I can’t tell who’s fucking who harder, and that’s just how it should be between me and Crux. No holding back. Nothing to hide. Just him and me, with only laughter and

orgasms between us.

“Oh, fuck!” I call out as the tingles start spreading promisingly from between my thighs out into the rest of my body. They build in flashes, and Crux grunts and starts moving even faster, like he’s jealous I’m ahead in our race and he can’t let me have the win.

“You feel so fucking good. Yes...ahhhh...yes, get nice and tight for me,” he commands, and then the tingles all contract back to my center, just to immediately explode out into me in waves of ecstasy.

I gasp and pant and writhe as he continues to fuck me, riding the massive orgasm that just fractured through my every cell. Waves of heat lull me to become a jellied blob of pleasure, but Crux is still putting in work between my thighs, and I’m here for the show.

My vagina screams, *get it, boy* when he steps back from the shower wall and pulls out of me, flipping me around until I’m now facing away from him into the shower. He runs a hand down my spine between my wings and leans forward, the strong muscles of his chest now tickling my back.

“Let’s let Echo watch me make you come again,” he whispers in my ear, and I look up to find the shadow-touched demon sitting on a bench I hadn’t noticed that takes up the other side of the shower. He’s sitting back, his posture relaxed as he watches with rapt hunger. His smile is salacious, and his eyes are bleeding want.

He strokes himself as I take him in, but not in a *let’s finish together* kind of way. More like he can’t help but touch himself as he watches me get bent over and fucked from behind. I moan as Crux’s hold on my hips becomes bruising, and he makes my body sway as he pushes into me fast and hard, pulling back on my hips at the same time. I have nothing to hold onto so I reach back and cover Crux’s hands with my own to feel steadier.

I fix my stare on Echo, my breasts bouncing and my lips parted in pleasure. My gray eyes invite him to touch me, but his smile tells me, *not yet*.

“You look gorgeous,” he tells me as Crux grunts behind me. I can feel another orgasm building.

Echo’s breaths pick up speed, his desire stoked as the flush collects over my body, and then I slam my eyes shut as another orgasm rips through me, stealing all my focus. Crux presses into me and goes still, groaning his release seconds later.

I don’t even have time to come down from the pleasure coursing through me or to give Crux a good game ass pat before shadows twine all around me

and yank me from Crux's hold. I gasp as I'm tugged forward and yanked against Echo, my body falling on top of his lap.

His mouth is on mine, his tongue claiming me, his shadows swirling around my nipples and dipping between my thighs. They're moving fast and firm, like if they don't touch every part of me right this second they'll shrivel up into nothing. I moan as he tweaks the peaks of my breasts with his hands, expertly coaxing out ecstasy-laced mewls and lapping them up with his lips and tongue.

With one smooth movement, Echo picks me up and lays me on my back on the large shower bench, my wings tucking in neatly behind me and offering me some cushion.

His hands come up to brush away the wet hair from my face as he straddles me. "He got you fast and hard, and that's exactly how I'm going to take you, too."

I bite my lip on a whimper, arching up into him, my body silently begging.

He wastes no time as he parts my thighs and lines up, not pausing before he slides smoothly inside of me.

*"Fuck."*

I clench around him as a shadow starts to flick against my clit, and I'm lost to all the sensations playing my body like it's a familiar treasured instrument.

Echo grinds against me with each deep thrust, and between that and the shadows playing with my clit and breasts, the only reason I'm not diving right into a screaming orgasm is because my body has already had two, and now it's going to make me work for more.

"Echo," I purr as he moves in and out of me at a pussy milking pace.

"Mmm," Echo hums in agreement, dipping his head down and pulling my breast into his experienced mouth. "Better than I imagined," he confesses, trading one sensitive nipple for the other and nipping and sucking until I'm overrun with sensation. When his shadows press down hard over my clit, a lazy orgasm moves through me, and I moan and settle into it like I'm a raft enjoying the lake's soothing ripples.

"Now, now, Delta...I think we can do better than that," Echo challenges, his black eyes pulling me in and promising that we won't be done here until I'm screaming his name and every muscle in my body is jelly.

Fuck yes.

I have no idea why I waited so long to do this. I mean, really, if they had just fucked me into oblivion that first night I met them, I would have signed on for anything, sex cult included.

Echo's thick cock moves in and out of me steadily, but I suddenly feel a sneaky little shadow doing something between my thighs as Echo pulls out and then thrusts back in.

I get the distinct impression it's collecting my and Crux's cum. That guess is confirmed when I feel the shadow slide back and start to spread it around my ass. A thrill of anticipation rushes through me as I realize what Echo's about to do with his shadows.

"Echo..."

"I know how to make you scream, Delta," he tells me, leaning down to lick up the curve of my neck and nip at the spot beneath my ear.

I pant and groan as Echo moves and claims my lips next, just as a slight but welcome pressure starts playing between my ass cheeks. If Peter Pan could do this shit with his shadows, then no wonder Wendy was all up in his jock.

"Yes," I encourage as he starts to fuck me harder and more blatantly explore just how much I like ass play.

I fucking love that he used my and Crux's cum to get me nice and wet. It's so dirty and wrong, and yet so right when it comes to how I know things are going to be between me and my Guardians. It gets me so fucking hot, and there's just no holding back, which is exactly how I want it.

"Fuck me everywhere," I growl into his ear, and he chuckles at the impatient command.

I scream out in pure euphoria as Echo does exactly as instructed. He jerks his hips up, thrusting roughly into me at the same time that his shadows breach my ass, thickening and stretching and feeling so fucking good.

"Oh, fuck!"

"That's better," he says against my ear. "Fucking sing for me, Delta."

I do.

I start moaning to a melody that only he and I can hear. He plays with me in ways that are familiar, but he takes it to a whole other level that has me floating on a high. I had no idea my body could feel like this or experience so much pleasure at once. It feels never ending.

Between Echo and Crux, I'm getting wrung out in all the best ways, and I know I'll never come back from this, which is a good thing, because I don't

have to. If the sex is this good on the first try, I can only imagine what it will be like when we know each other's bodies inside and out.

"Fuuuuuuck me," I exclaim as every nerve ending in my body lights up with impending release. "Keep going."

"Always," Echo growls out, doubling down on everything he's doing to my body.

Shadow-vises clamp tightly around my nipples and clit simultaneously, leaving nothing ignored. He slams into my front and back harder and faster, grinding against me at the same time that he starts whispering about how good I feel. My kiss-swollen lips taste his words and swallow down his promises for so much more to come, and then I'm lost to waves upon waves of the hardest orgasm I've ever had.

Warmth pools between my thighs, and Echo calls my name as he comes inside of me.

"Fuck, Delta. You didn't tell us you were a squirter," Echo groans as leans down above me and sucks on my neck. I'm still riding my release, half incoherent. I feel like I'm boneless. I've never felt so fucking good and relaxed in my life.

"Let's clean up, and then I want to play with my tongue, see if I can't get her to squirt again," Crux announces from somewhere beside us. The thought of any more orgasms is just too much for my mind and body to process right now. I feel drunk on their sex skills, and this was just two of them. My sex dream pales in comparison to what group sex with all four of them would probably really be like. Could I even survive it? I pause my pleasure filled writhing to think on that. *Eh, who cares? What a fucking way to go.*

"Sorry. Delta has been fucked into another universe. Please leave a message at the beep, and she'll get back to you never, because she's not getting up again," I state robotically, tapping into my best answering machine impression.

Echo and Crux both chuckle, and I feel Echo pull out of all the orifices he's currently filling. I'm both lulled into a state of deep relaxation and also bummed because I miss the connection and their mad skill already.

I make a noise of displeasure but then sigh as endorphins settle in my marrow. I already can't wait until the next time we get our fuckfest on. That and a sandwich, and maybe a nap. But fuckfest is definitely getting penciled in right between all my daily tasks from here on out.

Brush teeth...fuckfest.



Eat breakfast...fuckfest.

Go to the post office, and you guessed it...fuckfest.

“Man, I love my life. Being a demon is the best,” I exclaim, only it sounds more like a mumble because none of my parts work right yet.

Best fucking feeling ever.



**C**ruux, Echo, and I are settled on top of the king-sized bed, eating lazily from the trays that Grumpy Lurch has sent up. There's a little bit of everything. A berry pie with flaky crust that melts in my mouth, some white sauce pasta, fresh fruit, steak, mashed potatoes that I moan over every time I taste the buttery garlic delight, and even some salad that none of us touch.

We each eat a little bit of everything, trading off by stealing bites or feeding each other. Cruux is especially fond of scooping up the whipped cream on his finger from the small dessert bowl and putting it into my mouth for me to suck off. I'm pretty fond of it too.

When we've finally eaten our fill, the guys clear off the bed, leaving the trays and plates out in the hall for the imps, and I'm so sated that I'm in a happy, gluttonous daze.

Good food, incredible sex, and now I have two of my guys on either side of me, both of them running their hands over my skin. I didn't bother to get dressed into clothes, but I'm wearing a gray silk robe that was left in the bathroom. I have it on backward so that my wings aren't an issue, but the fabric keeps slipping down my chest so that I have to continually pull it back over my shoulders.

"You mentioned you went to your Rings to heal faster after the Vestibule battle," I say, looking over at them where they're propped up against the headboard on either side of me, my wings tucked tightly against my back.

"Yeah, Echo and I went into Trēs for a bit. Only long enough to fully

heal.”

“Did you see your family?” I ask curiously. I know from the walk to the Vestibule that Crux has family, but Echo doesn’t. I want to know more about these demons, especially now. We’ve crossed a line, not just because of the sex, but because we’ve all seemed to claim each other without the unnecessary fanfare and back and forth. We just...are. And now that we’re connected, I want the rest of the intimacy that goes with it. The physical, the emotional, everything.

“I did,” Crux nods. “I’ve got my folks and a few brothers who live in Trēs.”

“What’s it like there?”

He shrugs. “Hell isn’t so different from the way mortals live here. We have jobs, houses, families, friends. Trēs is just the middle management, so to speak. We keep the day to day demon things running for Hell. The boring stuff, like growing food and making clothes. It’s the more powerful demons, like Nihil or Ūnus and even Duo, who have certain jobs to maintain the balance in the different realms. But for me, being a Trēs is a lot like living in a middle class suburb.”

I take in his words, my mind chewing on them as I try to picture what growing up in his world would’ve been like.

“I’m still trying to come to terms with the fact that my mom and dad weren’t my biological parents,” I admit quietly as I trace the still shadows that have sunken back into Echo’s arm.

Echo hums in thought. “I’m sure you are. That’s a big realization. It’s going to take time.”

“I just...It’s stupid, but it feels like I’m betraying my parents somehow. Like by learning that I’m not really their blood daughter, it...lessens what I had with them. Or maybe it doesn’t, I don’t know. It’s all so confusing. They didn’t tell me I wasn’t theirs, and I just don’t know what to think about that.”

“Maybe they didn’t tell you that because they didn’t think it was true,” Echo tells me, his thumb gently brushing over my hip. “Whether they conceived and birthed you themselves or not, I bet you were theirs the minute they set eyes on you. That love can be more powerful than some genetic connection that isn’t there. They will never stop being your parents, and your relationship with them is unique and untouchable.”

My breath comes out in a puff, because even though I knew he was going to say something like that and try to make me feel better, it still helps. It’s

what I need to hear to reassure myself that it's true. Sometimes when we doubt, we know that those thoughts aren't right or even logical. But we still need to hear that voice of reason to help reinforce the truth.

Ray and Tanya Gates were who I cuddled and looked up to my whole life. They read me my bed time stories, cleaned my owies, taught me to ride a bike and drive a car. My mom showed me how to throw a punch, and my dad screamed his face off when I scored my first goal and ran my first home run. They are who raised me, and they are who I've mourned and missed for the past nine years. Their blood may not run through my veins, but their love sure as fuck does.

"You're right," I say, partly to him and to myself. "They'll always be my parents." I turn my head to the left to look over at him. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but in Hell, Jerif mentioned you don't have family."

Echo doesn't pull away from the personal question or brush me off, and that right there shows me that he wants this emotional intimacy too. "That's right," he says, clearing his throat. "My parents died when I was very young. They had the same power as me, so they were one of the rare Trēs demons to get called to Lucifer's army. They died in battle."

I squeeze his arm in what I hope is a comforting touch. "I'm sorry," I say, and then I scrunch up my face and mentally kick myself in the shin. "Shit, I don't mean that," I confess in a rush. Echo raises an eyebrow, amusement flashing in his black eyes. "I mean, I hate that you had to go through that, and I know it couldn't have been easy. But after my mom and dad died, it drove me nuts when people would casually say, 'I'm sorry.' It always left me bitter. It felt like as soon as someone spoke those words, it was like they were trying to dispel the discomfort my loss and pain caused *them*, not that the words were spoken to really comfort me. Maybe I'm crazy, but I've always just hated it when that's the first thing that pops out of someone's mouth after I mention what I've lost."

I look at him apologetically, knowing I'm doing a horrible job of explaining what I mean. I sound like a brat whining about the way people try to offer sympathy.

"I get it, actually," Echo tells me, and I instantly feel relieved. "In Trēs, the thing to say was "For the balance." Anything bad that happened was *for the balance*. Like that should somehow make it better. I hated when I was told that. Because yes, the fucking balance matters, but that didn't make me

any less sad. It didn't take the pain away from what I lost."

I nod, completely understanding exactly what he means.

"Anyway, it was a long time ago," he tells me.

"We're both orphans," I say with a sad smile on my face. "Were you lonely?"

His black eyes sweep over me with soft affection. "Yes, but then I got called as a Gate Guardian. I didn't dread it like Crux or hate it like Jerif. When the duty was passed down to me from my grandfather, I was fucking relieved. I needed to get out of Trēs and find a new purpose. The guys became my new family."

Crux reaches over me and punches Echo in the arm in what I think is supposed to be a friendly bro-tap, though that hit would have definitely bruised me.

"That's fucking right," Crux tells him with a smile. "And I quickly became your favorite out of those other pricks, so you can finally just admit it," he teases.

Echo rolls his eyes.

I shake my head at them, smiling. "I'd like to meet your family one day, Crux. Jerif's too."

At that, they both snort. "Jerif's mom is the fucking best. How she ended up with a surly fucker for a son, I'll never know," Crux tells me, his green eyes filled with mirth. "She's pretty much adopted all of us. If you asked her, she'd probably say that we're the only reasons the realms haven't fallen, which is just fucking adorable."

"Remember those cookies she made us last time we visited?" Echo muses.

Crux groans at the memory, nearly as loud as he did when he was fucking me earlier. I'm simultaneously intrigued and a little put off by it. Seriously, what's in those cookies?

"So what about Iceman? What's his story?" I ask, redirecting them before they start making me crave cookies and more cock. After all the food I ate, I don't need to stuff my face with anything else.

"He's an Ūnus, the most powerful out of all of us, but Ūnus demons are stricter. He grew up with pretty rigid societal rules. They cart off all the young to be trained for Hell's armies. But Raf got lucky, he took over the Gate from his father and didn't have to go to battle," Echo tells me.

"But I thought Heaven and Hell were working toward the same goal?"

Why all the fighting?” I ask, confused.

“We’re good...for now, but that hasn’t always been the case. Heaven and Hell have fought over how this world should be run, fought to hold the other accountable when things go wrong. Fought for souls to join our legions. Choice and agency are a tricky thing too, because factions with different ideas of how things should be done, and who should have power and control, pop up all the time. Take this Ophidian character for example. They declared war on Hell through their actions and now have to be dealt with. That happens in Heaven, Hell, and the Mortal Realm somewhat regularly.”

I nod and take in everything they’re saying. It makes sense. Humans have a penchant for fighting and power struggles, so I guess the souls of the other realms aren’t any different. All of this newfound knowledge is helping me to paint a picture of the guys’ lives and Hell in general. It’s eye-opening to learn about where they come from and what kind of pasts they’ve had. This is just the tip of the iceberg, but I’m looking forward to gathering more tidbits every day, and just learning more about what makes them, and this world I’m now a part of, tick.

I give a yawn, and Crux pauses his petting on my arm as he glances over at me. “You want to go to sleep, Jeter? You must be tired.”

“Exhausted,” I agree. “Everything happened with the Vestibule, and then I fell straight into Nihil and was promptly thrown into a dungeon. For the record, Hell dungeons are not comfortable. At all. Those metal beds are evil.”

Echo chuckles and kisses my head, smoothing down the bright purple tresses. “You should rest. We all should. It’s been a crazy...who knows how many fucking hours.”

“We should,” I say agreeably. “But...” I trail my finger up his chest at the same time that I start playing footsies with Crux.

“But...?” Crux repeats, waiting for me to elaborate.

“But I always sleep best if I have an orgasm right before.”

Echo tips back his head and laughs, his pale throat bobbing. I want to lean forward and lick the curves of it. “Listen to her. Multiple orgasms in the shower and she still wants more.”

“Well, she *is* a demon. Demons are greedy,” Crux says with a smirk.

I nod in agreement. “Very greedy...oh, and lustful,” I add for good measure, although really, this can’t be a surprise. I did openly claim all four of them for myself with no shame or hesitation.

“That’s right,” he says before sitting up and pinching the top of the silk

robe I'm wearing. He slowly starts to drag it down my chest, until the fabric pools on my lap. Echo grabs it and flings it away.

All they have on are boxers, which do nothing to hide the fact that they're already growing hard.

Echo sits up on his knees, and Crux looks over at him. "No hands?"

The shadow demon nods in agreement. "No hands."

Oh fuck, why did that just make me so damn excited?

Echo's black eyes come up to meet my gaze. "Hands up. I want you to grip the top of the headboard."

Swallowing hard and growing wetter by the second, I do as he says, my fingers curling over the wood.

"Good, just like that," he tells me. A tattoo slithers off his skin and swims up my exposed stomach until it splits off, trailing up each of my arms and then circling around my wrists like handcuffs holding me in place. My stomach fills with heat, sending it right between my thighs with a heady rush.

"That time in your living room, when you were grinding your sweet pussy on my cock and letting my shadows do filthy things to you? I can't stop thinking about that. You were so fucking sexy. I wanted to fuck you right then and there."

"I did too," I admit, my chest rising and falling faster.

"I think you're going to like the no hands play time," he says with a smirk, and I look over just in time to see Crux crawling down my body, his lips leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses against my stomach.

I nearly whimper as he starts going lower and lower until he places a kiss on my inner thighs and then the spot *right* above my clit.

"Please," I say, urging him to go where I want. I have been fantasizing about his tongue ever since I first saw it, and my body is tense and trembling in anticipation.

"Don't worry," Crux tells me. "You'll be screaming our names soon, just lie back and feel everything."

Bracing my arms against the shadowed cuffs, I watch as he leans down and lets his tongue unfurl as he drags it against my thigh. The fork is subtle but made more noticeable by the silver barbells on each side.

"You want to feel this licking your pussy, Delta?" he asks.

I answer quickly. "Yes."

"Good, because I've been dying to taste you."

His blond head lowers, and in the next second, that wicked, otherworldly

tongue of his spreads my lips and skims over my most intimate parts. One long, languid stroke drags over me, and I jolt, my ass lifting off the mattress. Echo's shadows are there a second later, pinning my hips down. "Hold still."

He lets some shadows drift up, and they start to swirl around my breasts, teasing the curves around them. My nipples pucker, my lips part, and I close my eyes as I listen to what Crux said and just *feel*.

His tongue laps at me. Making me wetter, making me hotter. And when that pierced, slick muscle flicks over my budding clit, I start to whine and writhe, straining against the shadowed bindings that are pinning me in place.

"I think she likes that," Echo murmurs, and Crux hums against me, sending a subtle vibration from his mouth to my nerves.

Echo's shadows dip inward, and then they're plucking at my nipples, pinching just to the point of pain. I cry out, unable to hold it back, and then Echo brings it back down to soft caresses, gentle strokes that knead my breasts, before they go right back to their rough handling. Back and forth, forward and back, he has me ride that delicious line of pleasurable pain.

I'm panting, staring at the darkness of my closed lids, feeling everything that they're doing to me without even laying a hand on my body.

Crux moves from my aching clit that's now begging for even more attention, and instead directs his tongue inside of me. He thrusts in hard, without hesitation, and I moan out their names, one after the other.

Holy shit, he can make his tongue fucking *long*.

My wrists pull against the shadows, my breasts jut up for more attention, my clit throbs, my pussy weeps, begging for more. The overwhelming sensation of bliss and ecstasy builds inside of me until Crux is tongue fucking me hard and fast, getting so fucking deep, his face pressed between my thighs as his mouth does wicked, wicked things to me. Those sweet barbells and ambidextrous movements of his forked tip make it so he can somehow curl against that sweet spot inside of me, and he drags against the rippled wall of pleasure as my pussy flutters.

"She's almost there," Echo says, his voice sounding like it's all around the room. "Open your eyes, Delta. Watch us make you come."

My eyes lift open at his direction, heavy with dazed lust. I look down at my flushed and pebbled body as shadows swirl around me, massaging my skin and teasing my breasts. Crux keeps his hands behind his back as he tongues me, and I whimper when I see Echo's shadow massaging my lower abdomen and snaking lower down to my clit.



They caress and tease my skin sinfully slowly, and I practically shout out in celebration when the shadows finally converge on my clit. They swirl around and then start flicking and pressing. The timing aligns like stars in the sky, and when Crux's tongue curls against my G-spot again, I leap off the peak in a breathy shout, my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

My pussy floods and spills as I come, my body jolting against Echo's magical shadow hold. The orgasm is hard and heightened. Like I've jumped off a very high cliff.

When I come down from my high, I'm so spent that I can't even offer to return the favor.

"That was amazing," I slur, my eyes already sliding shut. His tongue was everything I imagined it could be and so much fucking more.

I hear murmured voices, but I don't listen, already caught in the holding place for a heavy sleep. I feel someone clean me up and then gently tuck me in, arranging my wings and limbs comfortably on the bed, and then the next thing I know, I'm lying between both guys beneath the blankets, my head resting on a soft feather pillow as strong, muscled arms are holding me close.

I fall asleep with the sound of their even breathing and the fullest heart I've ever had.

This. This is what happiness is. All that's missing is two more demons.



I come to with lips nipping at my neck and hard-ons pressed into my ass and stomach. There's a set of hands caressing my ribs, while another set is moving lower down my abdomen.

I'm instantly aroused and ready, and I let out a sleepy moan as I stretch and arch my back, shoving my ass into Echo's hard cock behind me and pushing my tits into Crux's chest in front of me.

"Well, good morning to you too," Crux greets with a smile in his voice as he grinds himself against my front.

*Fuck yeah, it's a good morning* I muse as I thread my fingers through Crux's soft locks and spread my thighs, giving Echo's wandering hands permission to play. Echo nips at the back of my neck and presses into me, flattening my wings as he drops his hand lower. With his hot breath against my skin, he uses deft fingers to spread me open, his fingertips brushing gently over my lips.

I start to pant, but then two quick and powerful knocks sound off at the bedroom door, making me jump. Before anyone can scream, "Go away," it swings open.

Crux groans like he was expecting this and rolls onto his back, but Echo apparently is not in the mood to be deterred because he sinks two fingers deep inside of my very wet pussy as Iceman and Jerif stroll casually into the room.

I gasp, frozen, and I can feel the smile that stretches over Echo's full lips as he curls his fingers inside of me while my two other demons close the

distance, looking way too serious and sinfully hot for their own good.

“We let you sleep for as long as we could, but we need to get going on the induction,” Iceman announces, his blue eyes raking over my flushed cheeks and sheet-clad body. His focus settles on my chest for a second before lifting back to my face. He looks almost pained. I glance down, seeing that my very hard nipples are noticeable through the sheet, and it’s not exactly hard to tell where Echo’s hand is.

I can’t even be sorry, though.

My eyes bank with heat as Iceman and I stare at each other, and I send all kinds of vibes out that he should strip and crawl into bed with us too so he can wrap those cool blue lips around my tits and shove a hand down to join Echo’s. I almost let a moan out at that thought.

Iceman takes a deep breath, and his tongue runs over his lips quickly. “As much as I’d love to make today, tomorrow, the next day, and all the days after that about showing Delta exactly what demons are capable of when it comes to her body...we need to secure the Gate first.”

Crux groans in frustration.

“Did something happen last night?” Echo asks, still not moving his hand from my pussy. I keep squirming, though I don’t know if I’m trying to get him deeper or urge him out.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle, but we shouldn’t leave ourselves vulnerable. We can play hide the pitchfork all we want when we’re done, but duty calls,” Jerif growls out, his fiery gaze fixed on the location of Echo’s hand pointedly, a tic in his jaw forming.

*Ohh. Someone’s jealous.*

I’m not stoked about not being able to capitalize on what was just going down in bed, but the sooner we do our jobs, the sooner I can get *all* of them in this bed with me.

Priorities.

I look at Echo, waiting for him to pull out, but he doesn’t. He just lies there, stroking me, eyeing me like he’s throwing down a challenge to see what I’ll do. With a cocked brow, I rise up to the occasion. I’m going to show him and the other three that I’m not ashamed. I’m not going to hide in front of them—any of them. I want this relationship to be open, and I’ll never get that unless I start it off right.

Without any room for shyness, I push back the covers, putting my well sexed and ready body on display. I meet the stares of all three guys as they

look at me before my gaze drags to Echo, who hums in satisfaction, like I passed his test.

He slowly pulls his fingers out of me, making sure to circle my clit once, and then brings his hand up to his mouth that's wearing a salacious smile. My lips part in shock and want as he licks his pointer finger clean and then his middle finger, relishing the taste of me like it's now his favorite thing to eat.

I hear one of the guys make a low, rumbling noise.

"You play dirty," I whisper to Echo.

"Oh, you have no idea just how dirty I like to play," he teases, and I have to close my eyes and breathe through the desire that overpowers my body, because my sex drive wants to shove away all rational thought.

I want to do dirty, dirty things to these demons.

"No, Delta," I mumble-scold myself before I get carried away. "Fix the Hellgate first, then fuck their brains out."

"What was that?" Crux asks with a chipper tone.

"Nothing," I reply sweetly before trying to force myself into a sitting position. Fuck. Getting out of this bed isn't easy. There are way too many things in it that I want to play with.

I shake those thoughts away and stretch my spine, showing off every naked inch of me as my purple wings shift and fluff. I look down at my chest with appreciation. Man, I really love these new perky boobs. I have a feeling the guys love them too, because they won't stop staring.

If Echo can tease, I can too, right?

I rub a hand down my breasts, like feeling myself up is something I do normally right when I get out of bed in the morning, making sure to let a little stretch-moan fall from my lips. Suppressing a smirk, I hop off the end of the bed and stand up. You could hear a pin drop in the silence that overtakes the room.

"Okay, I'll just get dressed and be right out," I call over my shoulder as I saunter into the bathroom. I close the door and hear a distinct, "Fuck, let's make this induction quick," on the other side.

I smile. That was easy.

Heading to the sink, I turn it on and rinse my mouth before splashing water on my face. I expect to see some kind of bed monster in the mirror when I look up as I dry off my face, but my hair is voluminous and smooth, and I look all kinds of glowy and sexy.

Damn. Demon does a body good.

A spark of some of the things Echo and Crux were doing to me yesterday flashes through my mind, and I decide I need a T-shirt that says *demon dick is the new milk*.

I notice a pile of black clothing on the bathroom counter, and I unfold it to find the same leather pants from my first shift in the graveyard, along with my black tank top. I don't even question how these things are here. Either GL is fucking with me or the guys are. Either way, I'm just as amused as I remember the first time I put this uniform on.

In the corner on the floor, I find the black shit-kicker boots by the door, right next to the belt holster, and my scythe is propped up beside them. I pull the leather pants on sans underwear because, of course, there aren't any.

But the tank top? That's gonna be a problem.

I hold it in my hands with a frown, trying to envision how I can get it to fit with my wings. With a thought, my eyes scan over to the scythe, and I walk over and pick it up. "Alright, scythe. I need you to do your thing so I can cut holes into my shirt, got it?"

It sits in my palm in walking stick mode, so I give it a little shake. "Transform. Do the Swiss move. Abracadabra. Open Sesame," I ramble off, hoping one of those will do the trick. They don't.

"Look, I don't have time for this. I need you to activate," I tell it as I start tapping the wood and metal pieces.

Still, nothing happens. A small growl escapes me. "Really? You were all trigger-happy during the demon dinner party when I almost got smote by Lucifer, but now you won't help a girl out?"

It stays completely bladeless, and I grit my teeth. "Fine, you useless fucking scythe," I curse it as I go to set it back down. "I'll go find a pair of scissors instead."

Just as I lean over to set it down on the floor again, the blade pops out, scaring the ever-loving shit out of me. "Ahh!"

I move back just in time, the blade's edge just barely missing my arm. I glare at it where it landed against the wall. "Real fucking mature," I sneer at it before snatching it back up.

Spreading the shirt on the counter, I carefully slice some of the fabric away on the back. I'm by no means a seamstress, so my lines are crooked as hell, but at least the holes look like they'll be big enough.

Once I'm done, I prop the scythe up in the corner again and point at it. "You're gonna stay there in time-out and think about what you've done."

Turning, I grab the cut up tank top and step into it feet-first, before drawing it up my body and then slipping my wings one at a time through the newly cut holes. It takes a lot of effort, since I'm not at all used to having to do this, and by the time I'm finally done, I vow to only wear strapless tops that can fit beneath the base of my wings.

I lace up the boots next, and now that I'm fully dressed, I feel like everything has come full circle. When I look in the mirror again, I look the part of demon Hellgate Guardian. And this could be the amazing sex talking, but it feels right to get inducted. If I hadn't freaked out, been in denial, and taken time to accept fate, this is how it all would have happened in the beginning. I feel like I've aged a decade since everything happened, but in a good way.

Finally done getting ready, I open the bathroom door to find the bed still mussed but the room empty. I walk out and wander down the hall for a couple of minutes until I find stairs that lead down. I make a note to have the guys give me a tour of this place. I have no idea where anything is, and if I'm going to be staying here... *Wait. Am I going to be staying here?*

That thought gives me pause. I study it for a moment as I clomp down the stairs. I'm definitely ready to commit to the Gate and to the demons already guarding it, but I haven't given much thought to what that means for my house. My parents' house has sentimental value. I can't just give it up. Plus, the guys haven't invited me to live here, either.

After hitting the bottom of the stairs, I make my way down a hallway, but it just dead ends at a window. I turn back around and head the other way.

I need a damn map.

I mean, I *could* live here and still work on my house. Fix it up in my spare time and use it to get away. Or I could sell it to someone in need of a dream home and the dreams that come with it. I decide to talk to my parents about it the next time I go to see them at the graveyard. I'll have to mull it over and feel their presence to make a decision one way or another.

When the hallway dead ends yet *again*, I give out a huff and stop in my tracks. "Marco!" I yell out.

"Polo!" I hear the call faintly from somewhere behind me, so I retrace my steps.

"Marco!" I call again.

It only takes five more minutes of that back and forth before I find the guys in a kitchen. It's not the medieval kitchen I wandered into the first night

I worked here, but a slightly more modern looking one, though still sans electricity and a microwave. Regardless of whether or not it works, I might just need to put a microwave in here, because a kitchen without one is just kind of creepy. Fern would also liven this place up, so maybe I could bring her too. I mean, I can't be the only one allowed to live it up in Medieval R Us. I could even get her a potted boyfriend. Or four.

The place has all bamboo counters set off with dark tiles, and a huge stainless steel sink. There's a butler's pantry off to the side, and from my vantage point, I can see the open-cupboards filled with canisters, cans, jars, and bottles of all shapes and sizes.

As soon I make my way inside the open space and grab the open stool at the island, Iceman hands me a cup of coffee and a bagel.

"Took you long enough," Jerif grumps across from me. "Thought we were going to have to send up a search party."

"It would have been helpful," I say around a sip of magical bean life blood. "And why don't *you* try putting on leather pants with no undies and a wet pussy. See how quick that works out for you," I retort, taking a bite of my bagel and watching with glee as Jerif chokes on the coffee he just tried to swallow.

Wracking coughs overtake the lava demon as he tries to clear his airway of java, and Crux snickers and raises his hand for a high five. Jerif shoots me an unamused look as soon as he starts breathing again, but I just smile and stuff my face with more bagel. Before, I would've gotten pissed at his asshole-ness, but right now, when I know that he wants me, I find that I just like fucking with him. I'm looking forward to that hate sex he talked about.

Looking around, I notice that all of the guys are dressed very casually. Even Iceman, which surprises me. He's in jeans and a Henley, which is a little more preppy looking than the sweats and tee that Crux is wearing or the faded black shirt with matching faded black jeans Echo is sporting. Jerif is in some military black cargo pants and tight black shirt getup, but you won't see my vagina complaining about that.

"No ceremonial robes, incense, or sin-laced oil needed for the induction?" I joke as I finish up my breakfast.

Iceman snorts. "No. Demons hate incense."

I smile, but then an unexpected wave of worry suddenly rises up in me as I think about the induction and what it entails. I'm trying not to be a baby about going back into Hell for this whole ceremony, but I'm not going to lie,

I'm nervous. I try a solid pep talk of *you're a demon, Delta. You can't be afraid of Hell. What would the other demons think?* But my chastising words aren't doing the trick like I was hoping they would.

Iceman's eyes search my face, and I can tell he's picking up on the surge of unease that just went barreling through me and apparently swept over the whole kitchen, judging by the way everyone is looking at me now.

*Fuck, is it hot in here?*

I look down, taking in my leather pants, and question why I'm always wearing these fuckers when a panic attack could be coming on at any moment. *Damn you, pants. I blame all of this on you.* I was completely cool not even five minutes ago, and I mean that figuratively *and* literally. I was ready. I was eager, even, to take my place as a Guardian. But now all of a sudden, reality caught up, and I'm getting that itch to pause myself again.

"What just happened?" Iceman asks as he reaches for me and starts gently rubbing my arms, up and down in an incredibly soothing way.

I stare up at him with panic in my eyes and try to breathe. "I'll tell you, but if you make fun of me, I'm going to be pissed for an entire week, or until I reach a hundred orgasms," I tell him between labored breaths.

He smiles, and a chuckle slips out of his gorgeous mouth. "Tell us what's on your mind."

"I'm afraid of Hell," I admit. Shame and worry tinges my cheeks red, like it's not enough to wear them on the inside, but the whole world needs to see the visible scarlet mark of my cowardice too.

Iceman just nods, like he totally understands. "You seemed to be okay in Nihil. Did something happen?" he asks, trying to suss out the root of my alarm.

"Nihil was fine. A little orgy happy, but I get it," I confess, looking quickly at the others before settling my gaze back on Iceman's blue stare. "It's not the Rings themselves so much as the Gate and stairs and the Vestibule. I honestly don't know if I'll ever be ready to go back down there."

Understanding dawns in Iceman's eyes, and he pulls me in for a hug, careful to not crush my wings. "We don't have to go down into Hell for the induction, Maverick. We do it at the portal in the mausoleum. That will tie you to the portal we guard, along with the Gate itself."

"Really?" I squeak, relief suddenly crashing through me in massive waves.

"Yes, and it's okay to not be ready to go back to the Vestibule. We all



experienced something very traumatic there, and it will take time. We'll have to work through it. Once we get you inducted, we can start working on teaching you wards so you can hide yourself in plain sight. I think that will help a lot. You won't feel so vulnerable."

"We should reach out to your Sire and find out what abilities we should be looking out for and training you on, aside from the really necessary flying lessons," Jerif adds.

"It was my first time!" I defend, and all the guys crack up.

I roll my eyes at the levity at my expense before blowing out a breath of relief. I don't have to go back to Hell today. I will at some point, but not today. I can work with that.

"Alright, let's get this show on the road, then. I have a fuckfest scheduled at ten that I do *not* want to miss," I announce before eating the last of my bagel and draining the rest of my coffee. Finished, I hop up and walk over to the sink, setting my mug down after rinsing it.

The guys mimic my moves, all of them depositing their own dishes, and then Crux slings his arm around my shoulders as we walk out of the kitchen and into the warm morning air. Behind us, Jerif grumbles something that I don't even try to interpret. I'll have to get better at speaking asshole in the future, or maybe I'll just make sure his mouth has something to keep it occupied.

Hmmm, yeah, I like that alternative.



**W**e make our way down through the patios and gardens, past the pools and Jacuzzis, skirt the fucking hedge maze, and traverse a crap ton of rolling green grass before the guard shack and graveyard finally pop up in the distance. I take in the bright sun and beautiful day, and start a mental list of all the places I'm going to fuck these demons in the future. I'm already on page fifty, and I haven't even started on the inside of the house yet. So many yummy possibilities.

"So how does this work?" I ask as we get closer to the wrought iron fence bordering the front of the graveyard.

"We form a circle around the Gate, each of us will recite the vow, we sacrifice a little blood to the portal—"

"Wait. Blood?" I interrupt, looking over at Echo, alarmed by his statement. "No one said anything about blood."

"We cut our palms and spill a couple drops of blood on the Gate, Delta. It's not like you're going to lose a limb or anything," Jerif tells me, his tone laced with snark.

"Okay, that doesn't seem so bad," I concede. "Is the vow in English, though? Because if it's in that Demonese language that I've heard you guys slip into a few times, then I'm probably going to butcher it," I admit. "I should practice. Wouldn't want to bind myself to the wrong thing just because I can't say a word right, you know? One vowel slip and I could end up inducted to a gravestone or something," I say on a nervous chuckle.

Echo looks over at me with a confused frown. "What?" I ask. He doesn't

answer, and I look around at the others, noting that the rest of the guys are wearing the same perplexed look.

“Delta...you’re speaking Hellion now,” Iceman finally answers, his tone leaking concern and bewilderment.

My brows lift up. “What? No, I’m not. I’m speaking English,” I argue.

“No, you’ve been speaking pure Hellion since we popped into Nihil,” he counters.

“Hellion? Is that seriously what it’s called? I really thought Demonese was going to be the winner. But no. I’m definitely not speaking it.” I look at Jerif to demonstrate. “I can’t wait to fuck the rude asshole out of you,” I tell him before turning to the others with a triumphant look. “See? That was totally English. I can hear it with my own two ears.”

“Wrong. That was Hellion, and I can’t wait to fuck your asshole for being rude,” Jerif rumbles back, his eyes flickering with some serious heat.

*Yum!*

I shake my head. “Are you guys seriously telling me that I’m speaking another language right now and I can’t even tell?” I demand, anxiety lifting my voice an octave.

They all nod, and that old overheating panic tries to take over, but I shove it down.

“Maybe when your block was removed, you tapped into your ability to speak and understand your origin language?” Iceman guesses. “We’re all born speaking Hellion for demons and Enochian for angels. We also learn mortal languages later if we need to.”

“I’ve heard some Nihil can speak and understand any language in existence. We’ll have to ask Tazreel if you’ll be able to do that too,” Crux adds.

I reel at the thought of being fluent in every language ever. That would make haggling at the flea market a little easier, but holy shit!

I tap my lips in thought. “How ’bout now...English?” I ask hopefully.

“No, still Hellion,” Jerif says with a surly, impatient look on his face.

“Dammit.” I pout.

Crux just laughs at me like I’m adorable and pulls me through the graveyard gate.

“After the bleeding and offering up my social security number and my first born child, what else does the induction include?” I ask, my tone a little more petulant than joking, because I can’t figure out how this whole language

thing is working. What if I'm stuck on Hellion setting? That would sure as fuck make managing in the Mortal Realm tricky.

"Our children will already be tied to the Gate. Offering them up is just redundant," Jerif grouses.

I snort, but then balk when what he said sinks in. "Wait. Our kids will have to Guard the Gate? They won't get any choices in the matter?"

"First of all," Echo starts, "we don't have any kids, so don't waste too much energy getting worked up about this. Second of all, do any of us even want them? I mean, we just fucked for the first time, so the little demon talk feels too soon. Third of all, yes, this position gets passed down to the next eligible member in a bloodline, but we live for—pretty much—ever unless we're killed, so that could mean our kids won't ever have to pick up the mantle, and our great-great-great...fuck ton of greats-grandchildren could be the ones to have to step up."

I snort and don't even try to wrap my mind around the live forever part of that statement.

"The Gate chooses whoever is the most powerful of that bloodline when the Guardian passes. It's not always who you would assume it is," Iceman tells me.

For some reason, the way he says that makes me pause. "Were you..." I trail off, not sure how to voice my question.

"Everyone assumed that the Gate duty was going to pass to my older half brother. He was, by all accounts, better than me. Physically stronger. More powerful. Rigid mental discipline. But then when the time came, the Gate chose me instead. Everyone was shocked. Myself included."

I can hear that there's more to the story. "Did that bother you?"

In a very uncharacteristic gesture, he reaches up and runs a hand over his dark blue hair, his fingers caressing the base of his horns. "That's...a difficult answer."

"Just tell her the truth," Jerif butts in. "You were glad, because it meant you didn't have to take a position in Avarice like all the rest of your family expected. But then you felt fucking guilty, because it meant your brother would be expected to instead, and he had been preparing his whole life to be a Guardian."

Iceman rubs the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable.

I shoot an irritated look at Jerif for his brashness as we head closer to the mausoleum, our feet tromping over the deep green grass as we meander

around the headstones.

“Why was your brother preparing for this job though? If Guardians live so long, wouldn’t you just assume that you’d live a normal life? Whatever constitutes normal for Hell, I mean.”

“Things with the Gate were volatile at the time. There were two Guardians then—Jerif’s and my ancestors—but the Hellgate was calling for a third, so they were waiting for a third to accept the position. Whenever the Gate goes through a transition like that, it seems that dissatisfied demons in unrest somehow get alerted and start causing trouble. So my family selected my brother as the better option between the two of us and started training him, just in case.”

“Ah,” I voice in understanding. “So right now, with the Gate being more volatile...” I trail off, not wanting to finish that curious thought.

“Each of our lines are training several of the demons they think could be called upon in the event we die,” Jerif morbidly finishes in answer to my unspoken question.

“Wow, that sounds intense.”

Everyone nods and falls silent for a moment. I want to toss out some cheerful comment like, *well, don’t worry guys, I’m here now and all is well again*, but I don’t actually know if that’s true, and even if it is, for how long? How long do we have before the Gate wants a sixth or seventh Guardian? Will it just keep demanding more until it eventually breaks? But I banish that thought, because we’ll have to cross that bridge when we come to it, or hope we somehow figure out a way to never come to it.

“So what does your brother do now?” I ask, hoping to change the direction of all of our thoughts to something less ominous.

“He works for an Avarice think tank,” Iceman states casually, but I don’t miss the slight scrunch of his nose as he says that, as if he thinks it would be the worst job ever.

*Avarice...why does that name sound so familiar?*

I get lost in thought as I try to place where I’ve heard that before. “Wait. Avarice... Tazreel called that jewelry-loving dude that name right before we came back home.”

“Yes. My brother works for him,” Iceman confirms.

“So...Avarice is his title? And your brother works for his Hell company or something?”

“I guess you could look at it like that. That male at the party is the

Abdicated responsible for the entire sin of Avarice, which is why Tazreel called him that.”

I blink at him. “Avarice is...”

“The sin of wealth and material greed,” he supplies.

“And your brother works for him? In a *think tank*?” I question, really fucking confused.

They give me a funny look. “Did your dad—I mean Tazreel,” Echo quickly corrects when I give him a glare, “not explain to you that he’s Pride?”

I snort incredulously. “He didn’t have to explain that. I’ve never met a more arrogant, prideful, prick in my life.”

He shakes his head, running a tattooed hand over his shaved head. “No, not like that. I mean, yes, I agree about him being a proud prick, but he didn’t explain to you about how Pride works?”

I stare at Echo for a beat. *How Pride works? Like the parade?*

“Um...does Hell do something different for Pride than we do here?” I ask. “Is it less rainbow-y or something?”

“What?” Jerif cuts in, confused. “What do rainbows have to do with Pride?”

I saw plenty of same sex action in the orgy my wings forced me to fly all over, so either Jerif is oblivious or we’re talking about two different things.

“Pride? Like the Gay Pride celebration? Is that what you’re talking about?” I ask. Jerif runs a hand down his face as if he’s been trying to teach me Shakespeare, only to realize I can’t read Dr. Seuss.

Everyone stops and looks at me, giving me that *how does she not know* look.

“Shit. Did I start speaking another language again?” I ask, bringing my hand to my lips and mumbling against them as though I can feel the words and figure out what language they are. It doesn’t help. It’s like trying to smell your own breath by breathing into a cupped palm...totally useless, and yet, I can’t stop doing it.

I once saw this spelling bee, and the kid that won would hold her hand in front of her mouth and sound out the words. It was a lot of awkwardly heavy breathing, and I remember thinking that even though she won, images of her sex-breathing on her hand would haunt her for life. Right now, at this moment though, I totally get it. Maybe she was also trying to make sure the answer was in English and not Demonish, or whatever it was called.

“For fuck’s sake,” Jerif sighs, shaking his head at me. “Not Pride as in the parade, Pride as in *Pride*. One of the seven deadly sins.”

“Oh.”

Crux starts to crack up, but Iceman and Echo just look at me with shock. “Maverick, the Abdicated that you had dinner with are the Generals of the Seven Sins. Tell me *someone* explained that to you,” Iceman pleads incredulously.

I feel a blush work up my neck as I shake my head. Now I’m even more pissed off at Taz. I attended a dinner party with not only the fucking *Devil*, but also with the embodiment of the Seven Deadly Sins? What the actual fuck?

“Of course they didn’t,” I snap, irritation laced in my tone as I think back to those Abdicated. “Why explain something like that when it’s so much fun to just leave me in the dark and watch shit go down like me threatening to scythe the Prince of Darkness?” I snark.

“Wait. You did what?” Jerif growls, his flaming eyes narrowed on me.

“It was a misunderstanding,” I defend. “But even though he pretended not to like it, I’m pretty sure it tipped me even further into his *favorite* pile.”

Jerif just looks at the others with pure exasperation on his face. “I...I...I don’t even know what to say! You can’t fucking do shit like that, Delta!” he snarls, looking at the others like he’s waiting for them to agree. I cross my arms and glare at him.

Iceman cuts in before Jerif and I can start to argue. “Pride, Avarice, Envy, Wrath, Lust, Gluttony, and Acedia are the seven major sins that mortals struggle with. Those Abdicated have to make sure that those sinful natures are equally spread, so they hire demons to do that in Hell and in the Mortal Realm. The Generals they choose to serve under them are each in charge of a branch from their sin,” Iceman explains.

My head is spinning. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning they control all the ways in which their sin is used. How it’s used against souls or used *for* them. It’s a huge honor and responsibility,” Echo adds.

I fix my gaze to a tall headstone as I try to take everything in. I guess that explains a lot about everyone’s personalities at that dinner, especially red-haired, big-boobed Elle. Which...now that I think about it, probably is actually *L* for Lust. Damn. Lust almost sauntered out of the dinner party with Crux on her arm. That thought pisses me off.

“So when you say that your brother works for an Avarice think tank...”

“His job is to come up with new ways to use Greed to lure, condemn, and punish with it,” Iceman explains. “It’s a rather boring office job and the exact opposite of the physical role he thought he would have fighting and being a Guardian badass or savior of Hell,” he adds, and I nod, comprehending how much that probably sucks for his brother.

“So I’m guessing you’re his favorite person to be around then?” I tease.

Iceman grunts a laugh and rubs at his horns again. “Yeah, let’s just say that Samhain—the only time we all get together anymore—is very awkward.”

I give Iceman an apologetic look.

“You should go back for Equinox this year and show off your new Nihil hottie. I’m sure he won’t hulk out from jealousy at all,” Crux says with a mischievous grin.

“He’d deserve it after the shit he pulled at the last Beltane I went to,” Iceman replies on a sad smile and a sigh.

“If the Gate chooses though, how can he hold all of this against you?” I ask, gesturing to the graveyard and mausoleum in front of us.

“He’s just a sore loser,” Crux states. “He acts like Raf did something to sway it, even though he knows that’s not how it works. And Raf’s family lets him get away with it because they’re embarrassed about backing the wrong kid. It’s stupid, but that’s family for you sometimes.”

My heart breaks a little for Iceman right then and there. I walk over to him and lace my fingers through his cool palm, and he looks over at me in surprise, like he’s never had someone try to comfort him. I give him a sideways look. “You want me to scythe him for you?” I ask, aiming to raise his spirits. “I can cut off his horns or something. Then you can have the *Best horns in the family* title, plus the kickass job. Bet that’ll really piss him off.”

To my relief, Iceman actually lets out a rumbling laugh that nearly curls my toes. “I would like that, actually. I might just take you up on it.”

I give his hand a squeeze. “Good. Just say the when and where, and I’ll take care of it for you, Iceman,” I say with a wink.

He lifts up our joined hands and places a kiss on the back of mine in a sweet gesture. I want to stop and take his face between my hands and kiss him until he forgets all about his asshole brother, but I don’t. I know we need to get this induction thing rolling, so I put it on my to-do list for later, right along with yelling at Taz for not telling me he’s one-seventh of the Deadly



Sins. How's that for a family tree?

When the five of us finally reach the mausoleum, I take a moment to notice the singing birds and shining sun and warm breeze in the air. You'd never know that right here, there's a Gate into Hell. Maybe that's the point.

Jerif swings open the mausoleum door, and our group moves inside, instantly swallowed by darkness when the door shuts behind us. I look around, my eyes adjusting to the dark, but Jerif makes a hanging candle come to life, which helps a little.

"Now what?" I say, wiping my free hand on my leather pants to try to dispel some of the nervous sweaty palm situation I have going on.

"Now, we induct you."

A nervous trill sounds in my eardrums, like my brain is blowing an *oh shit* horn, but I swallow and nod. "Okay."

Crux gently moves me to a particular spot, and I look around as the guys form a circle around me. "Where's the portal? I never got to see it before because I was always on the verge of a panic attack," I tell them, looking around for the liquid mercury-like surface I saw in the Vestibule and on the portal Tazreel called up for us.

"And you aren't right now?" Jerif challenges, cocking an arrogant brow.

"No," I lie with a sassy edge to my tone. "Cool as a motherfucking cucumber."

He snorts but doesn't say anything else, and Echo points down. "You're on it," he tells me, and my eyes move to the floor.

Squinting, I can see symbols carved into the gray stone, but I can't see well enough in this lighting to tell what they are.

Iceman lifts his left hand palm-up, and then an icy white fog appears there. It goes from wispy to solid in a blink, and then I'm staring at a dagger made of pure white-blue ice.

"With this ritual, you'll be bound to protect this portal for the rest of your life. Once it's complete, the Hellgate will recognize you, allowing you to pass through as a Guardian without issue. The Gate will tap into your essence as a demon and pull from it to fortify itself. That can feel a little weird, but the draw on your power will even out, and you'll barely notice the leeching unless the Gate is under attack or being breached by unauthorized beings," he explains.

I nod, somewhat numbly, as the gravity of this hits me.

His blue eyes stay steady on my face. "Are you ready, Maverick?" he

asks, probably using my nickname to help me feel lighter in dealing with the heavy weight of responsibility now settling on my shoulders.

My heart races like it wants me to choose flight instead of fight in this situation. But I'm not going to run or deny or ignore anymore. I'm done with all of that. I'm scared, but I'm ready. I won't let my fellow Guardians down, but more importantly, I'll never let *myself* down again by trying to hide from who I know I can be, regardless of how intimidating that is.

"I'm ready," I say. There's no turning back now. "I want to help. I want to do this," I add, feeling the conviction and excitement that's starting to overpower any nervousness for my newfound purpose.

Iceman blinks, and I see his eyes fill with things I haven't seen in someone's gaze since my parents died.

Respect.

He stares at me with proud respect flowing out of his beautiful blue eyes, and my throat gets tight. I nod at him, silently affirming that I want this. I want this life. I want everything that comes with it. I want him, and I want the others too. I may have accidentally claimed them at the dinner party, but I meant it.

With a warm smile and an answering nod, Iceman slices the ice dagger down his own palm and then holds his hand out, palm-down, letting blood droplets fall onto the floor. I watch it, mesmerized.

His essence drips to the ground, where he and his ancestors have given everything to protect it. The dagger gets passed around from him to Echo, Jerif, and Crux, until all four of them have sliced their palms. Their outstretched arms are all pointing in the center toward my body, and their blood steadily hits the floor, each drip punctuated with an unnatural hiss and a sense of honor.

By the time it's my turn and Crux hands me the blade, my heart is pounding. I take the frozen hilt in my right hand and then hold my left palm up. I hesitate for just a second and then press the sharp tip into my skin with a wince. I drag it quickly across my palm, not letting myself think about it too much. I stare at the line of red as blood beads to the surface and starts to spill over the side of my palm. I follow the silent cue of the others, raise my arm, and tip my hand palm-down.

We all watch breathlessly, tracking as the very first drop of my blood falls.

It hits the stone, and I swear, I can hear it like a slap against skin, and

every drop of blood that lands onto the carved floor of the Hell Portal begins to steam.

The guys start murmuring a few words over and over in a chant, and my mouth starts mimicking them without me even having to think about it.

“By blood, soul, and origin, I tie my essence to this Gate. Never to be broken, by word or marrow. I claim this Rite and bind this access to the threads of who I am. So it is spoken, so it is done.”

Our voices build like a crescendo. Simple words spoken from devoted lips, over and over again, and I’m surprised by the power that swirls robustly around us as we drop our blood and promises onto the ancient ground and warm air. It feels like a breeze picks up our repeated vow and expertly wraps all of us in it, connecting and twining one life to the other in a Celtic knot that cannot be broken or undone from here until forever.

The floor begins to tremble, but I stay frozen on the spot, not daring to move or mess anything up. Our collective voices get even louder as steam rises and grows thicker around us, dancing with the breeze and fortifying the connections I can feel being forged.

My ears start ringing, and my palm aches, and something hooks in the pit of my stomach, like a fish latching onto bait. It’s startling and invigorating, and this must be what Iceman was talking about when he said I’d feel the Gate’s pull.

The guys’ voices start to sound hoarse as though we’ve been talking for days. Then again, I realize that I have no sense of time. It feels like only minutes have passed, but maybe I’m wrong. My own throat suddenly feels raspy, and Hell portal steam is clogging my ears, my nose, my mouth, feeling as heavy and oppressive as the responsibility I can feel weaving through everything that I am. The ground quakes even more threateningly, causing some of the stone ceiling to rain down dusty rocks above us, and just when I think the whole thing is going to crack and cave in, everything stops.

The steam dissipates. Our voices stop. The floor becomes steady and solid beneath our feet once again. With wide gray eyes, I stare down at the symbols etched into the floor, noting that every drop of blood is gone.

I try to take stock of myself, seeing if I can decipher any physical changes or strange feelings. That hooked and knotted sensation has completely dissipated, and I just feel like me again.

I swallow thickly, my eyes dragging up. “Was that it? Did it work?” I ask breathlessly.

Iceman nods, and then his full lips spread into a breathtaking smile. “It’s done. You’re now a Hellgate Guardian.”



Tears spill from my eyes, and I grab my side, trying and failing to calm the ache in it. My cheeks hurt from laughing so hard and for so long, but I can't help it. I can't even stop laughing long enough to eat the amazing Chinese chicken salad sitting in front of me. I took one bite and decided I wanted to crawl into the dish and live there always, but then Iceman started talking about the first Beltane he went to at Jerif's parents' house, and I haven't been able to stop giggling long enough to eat another bite.

"He just stood there with the flat iron to his short and curlies, pissed that he had burnt himself because his mom never knocks. 'MA! I'm in here!'" Iceman yells in the most hilarious impression of what Jerif sounded like when he apparently shouted at his mother.

It's killing me. Every time he yells *Maaa!* I just hear it in this South Boston accent, and the next thing I know, I'm on the verge of pissing myself laughing.

"So he slams the door, cursing up a storm about how he almost burnt his dick off, while his mom is banging on the door telling him that curly pubes are just as good as straight ones and he should be happy with what he has. He, of course, just yelled at her to leave him alone," Iceman continues the story, frosted tears leaking out of the corner of his eyes.

"Why were you straightening your pubes?" I ask Jerif on a laugh, but he just shrugs like *how the hell should I know?* Guffaws crow around the table, and Jerif just sits there with his grumpy face on, eating as though Iceman's not laying all this embarrassing shit out for the rest of us to hear.

“So, of course, she just keeps knocking on the door trying to comfort her *Wee Demon*, which I found out that night was a nickname Jerif got when his powers first developed and he kept burning all his pants off and nearly singeing his dick.”

Crux laughs so hard he almost tips back in his chair, which of course just makes all of us laugh even more. I’m a laugh-crying mess, my body practically cramping against the happy peals squealing out of me, while I half-coherently mumble *Wee Demon* over and over again.

“Maaa, stop talking about my dick! I don’t want a sandwich, go away!” Iceman mimics again, and I’m dead. Deader than dead. Get a doornail, that’s me.

“Did your sisters know you used their hair straightener for that?” I ask, a giggling mess.

Jerif just wipes his mouth and shakes his head like nothing we do is going to get him to shatter his gruff exterior and participate in the laughs being had at his expense. He doesn’t even seem to be bothered by our talking about him and his family, which for some reason, just makes this all the more amusing.

Iceman’s eyes twinkle. “He had to buy them a new one, and his oldest sister, Roul, bedazzled the one he used, calling it the *cabbage patch*. She gave it to him Beltane night in front of the whole family, which of course meant his mom dove right into the story of why the gift was funny for all the relatives who didn’t get it.”

“That she-demon doesn’t know when to quit,” Jerif grumbles evenly, and we all lose it again. This time, Crux *does* tip all the way back in his chair, letting out a squeal that causes me to almost breach the limits of my bladder. I shoot out of my chair and run as fast as I can toward the nearest bathroom or potted plant, whichever I end up finding first.

Laughs trail after me like a cape, but thank fuck the third door I check leads right into a washroom. Things get dicey for about four seconds as I try to untie my crotch laces on the leather pants, but thankfully, I make them my bitch and I’m on the toilet, releasing the flood before I can do something to embarrass myself.

I let out a relieved sigh.

“I’ve got it!” Tazreel declares excitedly as he suddenly pops into the bathroom out of nowhere.

I scream and reel back from shock, falling off the toilet and inadvertently wedging my wings and ass in the corner, between the side of the commode

and the wall, ass out...of course.

“What the fuck?” I yell at my sperm donor, fear and adrenaline slamming through my veins as I try to yank my wing over me like a blanket to hide myself, but damn it’s wedged tightly behind me in a very *oh fuck, I’m stuck* kind of way.

“I found a way to find your mother!” he yells enthusiastically at me, as if that matters more than the fact that I’m jammed into the corner, half-naked, and trying not to finish peeing on myself.

“Get out!” I yell, nearly pulling out some of my feathers as I tug on my wing more.

Tazreel frowns down at me. “What are you doing on the floor? Get up! Aren’t you listening to what I’m telling you? I know how to find out who your mother is.”

Cursing under my breath, it’s clear that Tazreel has absolutely zero personal boundaries, and he’s too damn arrogant to leave.

“Tazreel—” I growl, but before I threaten the Abdicated asshole to get the fuck out, the door bursts open and the guys are all rushing in. “We heard you scream,” Crux explains as his wide green eyes lock on me.

“What...what’s happening in here?” he asks as all four of them stare at Taz.

“He just popped in here while I was mid-stream,” I accuse with irritation. “And now I’m stuck!”

Echo and Crux try not to smile, but they fail miserably.

“That doesn’t matter,” Taz says dismissively. “What matters is your mother.”

I show him my teeth like I’m some kind of rabid animal. “Get. Out.”

“Alright,” Iceman intervenes as he smoothly steps between me and Taz, giving the Abdicated prick a bow of respect. “I have demon spirits if you’d like a drink? You can tell us all about Delta’s mother while you refresh yourself.”

Taz lifts his chin. “I only drink demon spirits that have been aging for five thousand years at least.”

“Then you’re in luck because we have a ten thousand year old bottle waiting in the cellar with your name on it.”

I can tell this throws Taz off-kilter. He was expecting to be able to brush Iceman’s polite offer away, being the proud obnoxious prick that he is. “That would be fine,” he says haughtily before turning on his heel and stomping out

of the bathroom. Iceman gives me a half-amused look before sauntering after him. “It’s the other way, sir.”

“I know that!” Taz snaps, even as he doubles back, going the other direction.

As soon as my inconsiderate sperm donor is gone, I look up at Echo. “Help. I’ve fallen off the toilet and I can’t get up.”

He chuckles as he comes forward, but his shadows beat him. They come off his skin and slither over my wing, helping to unwedge it from being half around, half behind me. Echo grips my arms while his shadows wrap around the other wing, and then he manages to pluck me out like I’m a difficult wine cork, placing me on my feet with my pants around my ankles.

*I would be embarrassed, but I didn’t pee myself, which means I’m counting this as a win.*

“Okay, I need a little privacy, otherwise I’m gonna squirt in a way you guys *don’t* want,” I say, reminding Crux of the delicious things he and Echo taught my body how to do.

Crux and Echo smirk, while Jerif cocks his head. “Wait. She can squirt in a way we *do* want?”

Crux grabs the lava demon by the shoulder and spins him around, pushing him on the back so the three of them can walk out. “Yep. Echo and I will tell you all about it,” Crux says with amusement before shooting me a wink and closing the bathroom door behind them.

I sigh and sit down on the porcelain throne again, quickly finishing my business. I’m able to empty my bladder and wipe this time before any more demons interrupt. I quickly wash my hands but take a minute to look in the mirror and digest Taz’s announcement.

My mother.

He knows a way to find out who my biological mother is.

I’m filled with trepidation, but also with burning curiosity. The other Abdicated made it seem like I’m this strange purple creature with mysterious unexplainable origins. And the scythe...no one seems to know what the scythe is all about other than to toss out the Grim Gatekeeper theory.

But maybe now I’ll finally find out exactly what I am and where I come from. I just hope this truth isn’t going to be a bomb that blows up my new life more than the demon bomb did. I’ve only been living the Hellgate Guardian life for less than a day, but I’m already loving it.

I make my way back to the dining room where the guys are congregated



once more. Tazreel not only has a full glass of demon spirits that Strut poured for him, but the Pride Abdicated is also eating *my* Chinese chicken salad.

My stomach growls angrily at the sight, but Iceman cocks his head to the side, showing me a new place he set aside for me. With a grateful smile, I walk over and take a seat beside him and Echo before quickly shoveling food into my mouth. I know that when Taz tells us what he came here to say, I might not get another chance to eat or might not even want to.

“So...” I say nervously, trying to broach the subject and make it past that humiliating moment in the bathroom. “Are you going to tell me about how you can find my mother?”

He sniffs loftily as he picks at my food with his fork, shoving some of it aside on the plate like it’s not good enough to grace his Abdicated mouth. “I’ll tell you when I’m good and ready,” he says. “You were very rude upstairs. I’m not sure if you deserve to know.”

I’m unable to stop myself from rolling my eyes. Now he’s going to sulk and withhold his discovery because things didn’t go his way. He probably wants me to beg for information now. Fucking Pride.

The guys eat calmly, drinking some demon spirits themselves as we wait out the Abdicated asshole. “Don’t you have any regular old human wine?” I plead to Iceman. Because I could really use some Moscato to help all this *sulking sperm donor* crap just slide right off my back. My nerves are suddenly feeling fucking shot, I wouldn’t even scoff at a red or a cringe-worthy chardonnay at this point.

“Apologies, we don’t stock human liquors here,” Iceman tells me.

“Try the demon spirits again,” Crux offers, leaning his tanned, muscled arm forward to push an empty glass in my direction.

I grimace. “No way. I’ve tried that stuff twice, and it was awful both times.”

“Yeah, but we think your demon side was still a little blocked before you went to Nihil. Try it. We have a bet going about whether you’ll like it now,” he urges with a wink.

I bite my lip, hesitating for a second, eyeing Grumpy Lurch as he comes around and fills my glass *all* the way to the brim, like he’s very excited at the thought of me having to choke down this glass full of ashy ammonia shit.

“Thanks,” I say dryly as he finishes topping me off.

“I aim to serve, mistress Delta.”

Oh, it’s mistress Delta now instead of *the help*, huh? I give him a

knowing smirk, because this bastard is good in front of the others, I'll give him that.

"Thanks, GL," I tell him with a wink.

I slide the cup toward me, noticing that it's so damn full I won't even be able to pick it up, not without spilling it. Which, of course, was Grumpy's MO. He wants to make this as difficult on me as he can so he has another reason to be pissed at my messiness. But he has a huge error in his way of thinking. He thinks because an *Abdicated* is here, I won't slurp this stuff like a toddler learning to eat chicken noodle soup for the first time, and he's wrong. So wrong.

As soon as the cup is at the edge of the table, I lean down, press my lips against the edge, and *sluuuuuuuurp!*

Taz and GL look like they're going to have a heart attack.

Echo smirks, Crux snorts, and Jerif looks at me with his arms crossed in front of his chest like he loves how antagonistic I'm being. Iceman winces a little, but I shoot him a wink, silently reminding him that Taz won't do shit to me.

Distracted, I'm all ready with my fork, poised to shovel chicken salad in my mouth to get the taste of the drink out as fast as possible, but then the taste actually hits me.

"Oh my Hellgate," I groan before leaning forward and slurping more.

It's fucking delicious.

It tastes like butterscotch and fresh bread rolls, and it...tickles as it slides smoothly down my throat. As quickly as I can, I lift it up and down the whole thing like I'm a baseball player downing a bottle of Gatorade.

"Ha!" Crux claps a hand down onto the table. "I knew it!" he says victoriously.

I wipe my lips with the back of my hand and hold my glass up. "Fill 'er up, Grumpy, and keep 'em coming," I say brightly.

With a glower, he refills my glass, and I bask in the taste and hum a little in happiness as warm, soothing spirits hit my system. "Fuck, this is good. I can't believe how *good* this is!" I say excitedly to Echo. "Here, try some!"

His grin stretches wide. "I already have some, remember?"

I look around the table and remember that, yes, they do already have some. "Oh, right. Well, let's make a toast!"

I raise my glass in the air, waiting pointedly until they all do the same. Jerif and Taz don't do it though, because they're stubborn, prideful jerks, and

I expect nothing less. “To demon spirits tasting fucking epic!” I say before clinking my glass against the others as they chuckle, humoring me.

I drink the delicious liquid down and shake my glass in the air for GL. His heavy brow pulls down into a deeper frown as he comes forward, tipping the bottle over and emptying the last of its contents. “That’s all there is,” he tells me, then turns on his heel and leaves the room, probably to prevent me from asking him to open another bottle.

I sip the last of it, trying to savor the taste. “Mmm. I can’t believe how awful this stuff tasted before, but let me tell you, this is good shit,” I say appreciatively. “I wish we’d had this stuff at the bar I worked at. I would’ve made amazing tips, and then that fucker, Sean the Shithole, wouldn’t have closed the place and fired my ass after calling me a bitch.”

“Who called you a bitch?”

My eyes fly up to Jerif’s angry tone, and I blink, his words filtering in like my ears and my brain are on some sort of delay. “Oh, my old boss. He was a douche.”

“He’ll be dealt with,” my lava demon says suddenly, looking perfectly serious and lethal as he leans back in his chair, the fire in his eyes matching the tones of his hair. I notice Taz out of the corner of my eye giving Jerif an approving nod and then catching himself doing it and taking a big gulp of his drink to try and cover it up.

I snicker and give Taz a knowing look when his gray eyes snap to mine. “Ooohhhh,” I announce, suddenly excited. “Can we go full *Paranormal Activity* on Sean the Shithole’s ass?” I ask Jerif. I can’t stop staring at his eyes and hair, like some drunk staring at the campfire as if it has the meaning of life in its flames. Or maybe the meaning of life is just hidden in his pants.

With that thought, I drop my gaze and stare drunkenly at his crotch. “Oh man, I’m drunk!” I slur, my tone both perky and shocked, and for some reason, that makes me laugh. Damn, I’m adorable.

“What does *Paranormal Activity* have to do with your former boss’s ass?” Jerif asks, not joining the others in their chuckles at my *drunk* revelation.

“Ewww, don’t say it like that. I don’t want to touch his ass, I want to make him think that his house—no wait—his *life* is haunted. Like we steal his sheets, and fuck with shit around his house and bar, and make him think scary things live in his attic...or basement. He seems like the kind of creep who’d have a basement,” I mumble, suddenly really interested in the way my

hand moves in front of me.

Damn, that's trippy.

"You know," I announce, fixing Jerif with my best sinister look. But it gets interrupted when I sneeze. Shit, being evil makes my nose feel funny. "You know..." I begin again with a sniff. "We'll launch a campaign of terror on his ass so badly, he'll rue the day he ever fucked with me!" I yell, like I'm a coach on game day giving the pep talk of my career.

*When did I stand up?*

Taz shoots out of his seat too and raises his glass. "Here, here!" he agrees.

I try to high five him, but he's too far away, so I just high five myself, which for some reason, makes Crux crack the fuck up. All *that* reminds me of is what we were laughing about before Peegate, and I throw my head back and yell, "*Maaaa, you gotta knock!*" and then join Crux in laughing my ass off at Jerif's expense.

Trust fall!

I suddenly drop back like I'm about to make the sweetest snow angel on the carpet, but warm arms catch me instead, fucking with my carpet angel plans.

"Spin me!" I demand of whoever is holding me.

"Being that you almost hurled your guts up just from flying around, I'm going to go with no to the spinning," Jerif grumps as he holds me, and I just laugh.

"Jerif, why don't you take Delta upstairs to lie down? She should burn the booze off soon, and we'll show Tazreel around the property and Gate, give him a peek at what we do here," Iceman directs.

Jerif doesn't say a word, but I can tell he complies, as I'm whisked out of the room. I've never been whisked before, and I'm debating how I feel about it, when Jerif adjusts his hold on me and his arms rub against my disgusting, but oddly sensitive, wings.

"Ooohhhh, do that again," I command.

"No."

"Ughhhh, why are you a thief of joy?" I demand. "You know you want to touch me."

"If by touch, you mean tuck your drunk, hot ass mess into bed, then yes, I do want to touch you."

"Knew it," I declare smugly.

Jerif knees a massive door open, and I suddenly find myself in a very

cozy, modern looking room. The walls are black and as smooth looking as Jerif's skin. Above the huge platform bed with all black bedding, there's a massive canvas that looks like a big fluffy ash cloud. At first, I think it's an enormous picture that almost takes up the whole wall, but as I get closer to the bed, I realize it's a painting with thick layers that are so well stroked, they look soft as cotton.

I look down to discover a rich warm wood floor, but it's not a typical hardwood like I've seen in other places in the mansion. It looks like it's made of long flat pieces of tree trunk, inlaid to become what we're stepping on.

"Yassss," I call out as I'm carried deeper into the beautiful and comforting space. It's minimalistic and yet very welcoming, which is nothing like the demon who lives in it. I chuckle at that. Well, maybe he is minimalistic, what do I know?

"Jerif, your lair has tree carcasses," I observe with awe, still staring at the ground.

I also notice a sitting area with black couches and chairs facing a beautiful fireplace that's so big a car could easily park inside of it. If the fireplace weren't glassed off, that is. I point at the fireplace and the pretty tree flooring in front of it and decide that it's calling to my ass. I must say that out loud, because Jerif snorts, and then like a good *Wee Demon*, he redirects us there.

"What's with you and your ass these days?" he asks me, as taciturn as ever.

"What, it's not a good ass?" I ask, trying and failing to look at it. "It's totally a good ass," I decide before he can answer.

Jerif snags a blanket and a pillow from the bed and spreads them onto the floor before setting me down gently on the black comforter. I immediately sink down on it and realize it's a down comforter. I want to marry it and have its soft little feather blanket babies.

"You're so weird," Jerif observes after clearly getting the pleasure of hearing another drunken thought come flying right out of my unfiltered mouth.

I roll my eyes and scan his digs again. "So is this where you bring all the ladies and show 'em your stick-straight pubes?" I tease, immediately trying to get up so I can go raid his bathroom in search of the cabbage patch.

"Get back here," he grunts, pulling me into him as he sits down on the rug.

“No way, man, I want to snoop!” I argue petulantly.

“Isn’t it only snooping if you do it when I’m not sitting right here?”

I shrug. “Close your eyes?”

He shakes his head, but I see the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. Excitement shoots through me like I’m hearing lotto numbers that match what I have on a ticket, and I stare at the little baby smile like it’s the cutest fucking thing ever.

“Omg, you totally almost did it!” I clap.

“Did what?”

“Smiled! Like a person who feels shit other than judgment and the desire to punch things.”

Jerif sighs and then cups my face and pulls my lips to his. I mumble surprise against his soft lips, and he pulls away slightly to let me speak.

“Um, not that I’m complaining at all, but...what are you doing?”

“Kissing you so you’ll stop talking,” he replies evenly.

I pause for a minute and then close my eyes and pucker up.

*Well...okay then.*



**N**othing happens.

I open my eyes and find Jerif just looking at me. So I stare right back, still puckered up like the weirdo he claimed I was. Our lips aren't even an inch apart, and I'm frozen in place, waiting to see what he's going to do.

*Should I start talking again? That seemed to kick-start something.*

I debate the best plan of action to start *getting* some action, but decide I don't want to move. Maybe I spooked him. I quickly decide that maybe I have to treat Jerif like a wild wolf approaching a human for the first time. Any sudden movements or noises and he could run. Just like his baby smile did when I cooed at it.

I really want him to kiss me.

Every time I look at his plush bottom lip, I think about biting down on it. Every time I see the fiery balayage of his hair, I want to sink my fingers through the locks and stroke the flames. We've been building up to this moment, constantly charged with sexual aggression, and I don't want to screw this up. So I stay perfectly still. I don't even think I'm breathing. But who needs to breathe? I'm a motherfucking Nihil! I'm all immortal and shit now. I probably don't even need air. Yeah, that's right. Fuck you, air. I got this.

He tilts his head slightly as he studies me. "What...what's happening? Did you go into that fucking pause mode of yours?"

My brows draw together in a frown. "Me? What? No! You're the one

who paused,” I say, and then I think, *fuck it*. He’s not going in for the kill. Time to alpha up and show this beast how to get it done. It’s up to me. But right as I grab the back of his neck and try to pull his face toward mine, someone knocks on the stupid door.

“Come in!” Jerif barks.

“Don’t come in!” I try to bark just as loudly.

Of course, Strut comes in. Judgmental eyes fall on where I’m sitting on the floor as Grumpy Lurch walks over with a covered tray. “Master Rafferty sent this up to help with her...condition.”

He makes it sound like I’m diseased instead of just a little tipsy.

“Thanks, Strut.”

The butler sets the tray down beside us and bows slightly before shooting a look at the bedding beneath my ass, probably irked beyond measure that it’s on the floor, and then leaves the room.

Jerif reaches over, plucking the lid off the tray. For all that fanciness, there’s just a couple bottles of water and four pieces of toast underneath. The lava demon slides it over. “Here. Eat. Drink,” he orders gruffly.

“I don’t want to eat or drink,” I say, my tone going for seductive but landing on belligerent.

“Don’t care.”

My lips pinch together with unhappiness. “I thought you were going to kiss me,” I say with annoyance as I snatch up a piece of toast and start chomping on it.

“I was,” he says as he braces himself on his hands behind him, leaning back and stretching out his legs so that his calf settles against my own crossed legs. “But then I realized something.”

I roll my eyes because I already know what he’s going to say. I’m too drunk. He doesn’t want to do anything while I have a triple serving of demon spirits in me, yadda, yadda, yadda.

Jerif goes on, despite the silent argument I’m coming up with in my head as I eat the first piece of toast and then chug some of the water. “I realized...” he says slowly, like he’s waiting to make sure he has my full attention, “that I can’t just kiss you right now.”

“Why not?” I say with disappointment as I set the bottle of water down and start nibbling on another piece of toast.

“Because. The second I kiss you, the second I *taste* you, this,” he says, motioning between the two of us. “This is gonna combust. And I’m going to



let it.”

My chewing stops abruptly, and I have to work to swallow down the toast as I stare at him, hearing what he’s saying. “Oh.”

He looks at me with that serious face of his. “Yeah, *oh*. So eat your toast and drink your water and sit here with me while your demon blood burns through the alcohol,” he says in a bossy tone. “Because then *I’m* going to burn through you.”

Oh God.

I swear to fuck, my stomach just heard him, and it’s started barking out orders to all of my internal organs to hurry up and digest everything double-time so that we can get us some of that lava demon lovin’.

Jerif reaches forward and closes my mouth for me, since I guess I went all slack-jawed on him. I immediately start eating again, and the corner of his lips tilts up slightly, pleased.

I eat faster than I ever have before, managing to take down all four pieces of toast and both bottles of water. When I’m done, I get to my feet, noting that I’m not as wobbly. My bladder is full again, so I head into the attached bathroom, which has the same wood inlays that are on the bedroom floor, as countertops. I pee and then quickly wash my hands before taking a look in the mirror. There’s a flushed look to my face, like my cheeks are preheating for him.

Coming back out, I find that the curtains are all drawn, dropping the room into darkness, and the only thing casting off light is the now-lit fireplace. I walk over to it, transfixed by the pretty flames. They swirl and sway in a way that makes them look just a hint abnormal, like they’re dancing instead of just burning the logs stacked behind the glass.

“That’s pretty,” I murmur as I lie back down on the comforter. I let my head rest against the pillow, scrunching it up so that I’m propped up enough to watch the flames dance.

Jerif grunts, but I smile across at him where he’s still resting back against his hands. For a few minutes, I just watch the flames as they turn sensually around each other, moving to the tune of their own crackles and sparks. Jerif watches me.

I sit up and lift up my hand, appreciating the soft glow the fire emits on my skin as I look over at Jerif. “What’s it like having fire power?” I ask curiously.

His eyes briefly go to the flames before settling back on my face. “It can

be addictive,” he admits. “I’ve always had more of an issue tamping it down instead of not having enough power. I have to expel it often, or it gets uncomfortable, like when you eat too much food and you feel like you need to hurl.”

“Nice visual.”

“You asked,” he counters.

Can’t argue that. “Is that why no electric lights?” I wonder.

“Yes,” he replies. “Being able to expel my power for everyday little things helps to take the edge off.”

I nod and scoot over to him, taking his dark hand in mine. He lets me, though his body tenses. I really want to see him lose the tension that radiates off of him. I want to see what Jerif looks like when he stops holding back. Maybe it’s the Gate, his personality, or a combination of the two, but he always seems like he’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. At first, I thought he was just an arrogant prick, but now I think he’s an arrogant prick who carries a lot on that big strong back of his.

I gently hold his palm in mine, and then trace over his lines like a palm reader might. Except, instead of looking to tell his fortune, I just want to feel his presence. I want him to feel me, right now, and not have any doubts.

As the pads of my fingertips softly trace his hand, I smile when I see him shiver. I brush a single finger across his palm again and then start tracing the edges of his fingers and thumb. “I wish I could make fire like you,” I muse. “I’ve been a proper Nihil demon for a full two days now, but I still haven’t done any cool tricks,” I say, slightly put out.

He stops my palm petting by taking my wandering hand and threading our fingers together. I love the feeling of him taking my smaller hand in his, clasping me in his heat. “You don’t need fire power of your own. You have me,” he states matter-of-factly.

I smile shyly at him, and then I turn and swing a leg over his hip, straddling his lap. He pauses and looks down at me as I sit on him, and in the firelight, his eyes look like they’re practically glowing. “Do you know what you’re doing, Warrior Princess?” he challenges me.

“Yep,” I answer without hesitation as I thread my fingers around the back of his neck. “I’m playing with fire.”

His lips notch up an inch before dropping back down, and I shift on his lap, noting that he’s hard as a fucking rock. No half hard-on here. Jerif is like a steel rod beneath my ass.

I'm no longer slaphappy from the demon spirits. Instead, I simply feel uninhibited. I want Jerif. Badly. I want to combust just like he promised. I want to light up what we have and let the ashes of our passion rain down on us as we claim a permanent place in each other's existences. I want to pull him into this moment with me, but he's not there yet. I can feel him holding back, doubting, and there's just no place for that between us anymore.

A flash of Jerif methodically being stabbed and cut as he battled to get to me in the Vestibule flickers through my mind. I play with the hair at the back of his head and release a deep breath.

"I thought I'd lost you," I confess, closing my eyes as I try to chase the rush of images and sounds away. "I hated myself for running, for not being tougher and better. For not being the kind of demon who could stop all of the bad shit from touching each of you."

I open my eyes to find Jerif's flickering flame eyes studying my face, like he's trying to see where I'm going with this. My fingertips skim the back of his neck, but I focus on my words and not the rightness I feel in touching him so intimately.

"When I woke up in Nihil, I thought I had died. All I could think about was the fact that I had failed all of you...and myself. I had spent too much time seeing all the ways being a demon and a Guardian would change who I was and the life I had built. But when I woke up alone that morning after the Vestibule, I realized that I didn't let myself see that I was better with all of you. That each of you, in your own way, helped me find parts of me I'd always wanted to have but didn't know I possessed."

My gray eyes settle on his, and I stare into him, latching onto all of his tension and making sure he's hearing my every word. "I want who you are at the core. I need every gruff, brutal, sharp-tongued, unforgiving, self-sacrificing, honorable part of you. I want *you*, as is."

Jerif's gaze flits back and forth between mine for a moment before he snorts. "So only my soul will do then?" he teases.

My lips curl up. "I mean, I *am* a demon."

"That you are," Jerif confesses piously, bringing one hand forward and threading his fingers through my bright violet locks.

"I hated that I had to tell you to run."

I get lost in the look in his eyes and the intensity of his words as they slip like silk out of his mouth. Time to fix the cracks that the battle caused. Time to reinforce ourselves and come back better and stronger because of what

happened.

I lean forward and kiss him, taking his top lip slowly and then dropping to his bottom lip, sealing our fates and letting him feel what I'm offering him. And then he offers something right back.

Our mouths start out chaste as we taste and tease and learn the curves and edges of each other's lips. His tongue is warm as it flicks out to test mine, and it's like sinking into a perfectly warm bath at the end of a grueling day. Inch by inch, I lose myself to his warmth, and we open up and remove all the doubt and hesitancy between us.

His kiss owns me in all the best ways that a glorious kiss can. Heat pools in lapping waves through me as his soft palm skims under the hem of my shirt and splays across my lower back, pressing me harder into him. His other hand fists in my hair as our kisses get more fevered and need spreads out between us like molten lava.

I move against him, the friction between my thighs the perfect complement to the way my peaked breasts press against the hard planes of his chest, sending strikes of pleasure straight to my clit. With a smooth movement, he rolls me onto my back, and I suck on his tongue and bite back a moan at how good the weight of him feels on top of me.

He nips at my lips and grinds into me, inhaling the breath I release at the contact, as though my sounds of pleasure are his new oxygen. I reach up and tug at the hem of his T-shirt, just as a flash of heat comes over me. I pause and look down, seeing bright red embers move through the fabric of my tank top. My mouth drops open in awe as I watch my shirt quickly burn off of me, like a flame across a gas puddle as it consumes the accelerant.

I feel heat, but no burn. Nothing hurts, and I can't take my eyes off the quickly disintegrating fabric.

A small puff of smoke wafts up into the air between us, and just like that, I'm naked from the waist up, not a singe to mar my skin. My mind is blown over the control he has over his ability. I've never seen anything like it.

"Dude," I tell him, my eyes swinging up to his face in awe. "Ooohh, do yours next," I say excitedly, my eyes dropping to the fabric of his T-shirt, ready and waiting to watch the incredible trick again.

In a whoosh, every stitch of clothing on Jerif vanishes in a flash of flame and poof of smoke. His cock is suddenly pressing unhindered between my thighs, and I lick my lips. "Even better," I confess, completely impressed.

He rumbles out what could be a laugh or just the sound the earth makes

before an impending earthquake, and starts to unlace the crotch strings on my pants.

“Can’t burn these off too?” I ask.

“I think they’d just melt, so better to be safe than sorry.”

“My lower half appreciates your caution,” I tell him. And win-win for me, I now get to revel in the feel of his deft fingers as they undress me.

I chuckle and watch with amusement as Jerif undoes the laces, pulls off my boots, and slides the leather pants off of me slowly, like he’s savoring each inch of skin as it’s revealed to him.

It’s fucking hot.

He kisses back up my leg, painfully slowly, teasing my inner thigh, activating the tickle spots low on my abdomen, and coaxing out a deep moan to break up the panting I’m doing when his hand settles possessively on my pussy. He rubs the base of his palm on my clit and pushes two fingers inside of me as his lips trace the underside of my breast.

He hooks onto my G-spot right away and starts moving in and out of me while his palm applies pressure on my clit. His mouth traverses my peaked breast, and he wraps his sinfully delicious lips around a hard throbbing nipple and heats his mouth and flicks his tongue so I feel like a hot suction cup was just applied.

“Holy shit!” I cry out as he sparks all kinds of sensations through me. His mouth moves and does the hot suction cup to my other nipple, and I start to feel the familiar tingle of an impending orgasm.

“Mmmm, love feeling you grip my fingers like that,” Jerif declares as he drags his lips up the column of my neck and picks up the pace between my thighs.

“Yes,” I encourage as more pleasure starts to coalesce inside of me, and I start grinding up into his palm.

“That’s it, Princess, take what you want. Make me give it to you,” he coaxes, and then his lips consume mine as an orgasm rips through me.

Jerif drinks down my cries and moans, sampling my pleasure with his tongue and savoring it on his lips. I grind on his hand, riding out the waves of bliss as I feel his palm get slick with my release.

I lift up from my back, and Jerif pulls his fingers out of me as I push him back on his ass and climb into his lap again, my wings automatically moving out of the way. I reach down and stroke him twice before aligning him with my entrance. Then I drop down on his thick cock, my eyes fixed on his and

flaring with *my turn to play*.

He groans and unfurls beneath me like my pussy wrapping around his cock was the key to finally getting him to relax. I swivel my hips as I drop down to his base, a puff of breath getting stuck in my chest.

“Fuck,” I grit out as I look down at where we’re joined. He’s big, stretching me wide and making me feel so fucking full. When I don’t move for a moment, he squeezes my ass and lifts his hips, pushing up into me as I’m getting acclimated. “*Oh...*” I lean forward and nip his lips. Jerif isn’t patient. He wants me *now*.

I lift up until only the tip of him is inside of me and then drop back down again. We both look down to watch the erotic sight of him disappearing inside of me as I move. His cock is wet and glistening as I pump up and down on him, and I’m addicted to the sight.

His hands move up from my ass to skim up my ribs and palm my breasts as I roll and grind my hips, taking him exactly how I want. I kiss him, feeding off his groans and pants as I ride him and work out the pent-up sexual frustration between us.

Just when I think I’m going to run this show into another blazing orgasm, Jerif pulls a dick move and pushes forward until I’m tipping back. He grips me tightly, and his hands around my waist are the only reason I don’t teeter-totter off his cock. Next thing I know, I’m lying back on my tucked wings, Jerif is angling my hips right where he wants me, and he’s pumping into me fast and hard.

The angle he has me at sets off electric sparks in all kinds of different nerve endings. I have no time to be annoyed at him for stealing the reins, because I’m too busy moaning out and shouting for him to go harder and faster.

He holds my waist, his large hands almost encasing it entirely, and then waves of heat start licking over my body, almost as if his tongue is suddenly tasting me all over. I watch, mesmerized, as his flames move over my skin, heating me up and leaving me flushed. He’s enveloping me in his heat, consuming me, combusting us, just like he promised.

He thrusts so deeply inside of me, and the kisses of his flame as they dance around my naked skin take everything to an intense, overwhelming level. Before I can even observe it building, an orgasm blasts right through me, and I feel it go off like fireworks on the Fourth of July throughout my body.

“Jerif!” I shout out, and then I hold onto him for the ride as he slams into me repeatedly, triggering more exploding pleasure all through me as my pussy goes vise-like around his cock.

“That’s right, Delta,” he rasps, his teeth gritted above me as he slams into me again and again. “Squeeze down on me. Wring me out until I’m empty. You gotta work for it, you hear me? Let your pussy show me how hard you want it.”

Like his demanding words pressed some internal button inside me, my pussy responds. I don’t get to come down from one high before another orgasm is taking its place, and this time, I tense up so much that my back arches up off the floor. “That’s it. Fuuuck, that’s it, Princess,” he moans.

I groan loudly, and the peak of it all comes slamming into me like a fast moving brush fire. Jerif moves his teasing flames, concentrating all of them on the apex of my thighs. Hot suction cup magic fits right over my clit, and I swear I see fucking stars.

Universes collide, collapse, coalesce, and rebuild in the span of seconds it takes me to scream through the gripping, suffocating orgasm. It consumes me, and I know it consumes him too, because his movements become jerky and rushed, and I feel my pussy pulsating around him, strangling his cock, just like he wanted.

“Fuck yes.” Jerif shoves up inside of me deeply one last time and growls out his release in an aggressively angry, Jerif-like fashion before collapsing on top of me, his flames going out with his harried breaths.

I’m a panting, mewling, begging mess below him, so fucking out of it with blissed-out pleasure that I can’t hold still. I keep stroking his naked skin, moving my hips, and even start mumbling incoherent things about Smokey the Bear and his fire-hating stupid ass. Clearly, that bear did not play with flames and fire in the right ways.

With a rare chuckle, Jerif places a pleased, possessive kiss onto my lips before scooping me up and carrying me into the bathroom, even managing to do it without crushing my wings too much. I’m relishing this surprisingly sweet moment, melting against his chest as I hear him turn on the shower.

I’ve done it—I’ve battled the beast. Just one sex sesh with me, and this wild wolf feels more like a cuddly Husky. I’m smug about that for about two point five seconds...until he puts me down and pushes me back into ice-cold fucking water.



“**A**HH!”  
My post-coital bliss feels like it just got bitch-slapped by the ice queen. I was all warm and cozy and flushed, feeling as relaxed as a cat. But now, freezing cold water is pelting down on me, and all of the delicious heat Jerif gave me is completely gone.

I try to leap out of the shower, but Jerif holds me back with a hand to my chest, not letting me move an inch. “Stay.”

“It’s freezing!” I yell back, spitting water out of my mouth as the spray assaults me.

“Yep,” he says, like the arrogant ass he is. “You were about ten seconds away from curling up in a ball and falling asleep.”

“So?” I demand, shivering. I try to get away from the spray or reach for the shower valves to make the water warmer, but he doesn’t let me budge.

“So Tazreel is waiting. Your obstinate ass got drunk at lunch before you could hear what he has to tell you. I fucked the sober right into you, but this shower is doing the rest. We need to get back out there. I want to make sure you’re alert for what’s to come.”

“I’m alert!” I snap, my harsh tone amplified by my chattering teeth.

I glare daggers at him, my entire body covered in goosebumps, my arms crossed around me like I’m trying to become my own blanket.

“Good,” he says with an arrogant smirk before motioning to the soap in the corner. “Wash up. I want to make sure you’re taking care of my pussy.”

“This is *not* your pussy,” I say, snatching the bar of soap as I begin the



world's quickest clean-up. "In fact, I'm never giving it to you again because you are a rude motherfucker!" I shout, washing between my legs and then rinsing quickly. "There, happy?" I wouldn't be surprised if my lips were blue.

"Yep."

He reaches inside and turns off the shower and then helps me step out. I'm even fucking colder now. "Can I have a damn towel?" I ask, trying really hard not to look at his dick hanging between his legs. *Don't look at it, Delta. He's in trouble. Be strong!*

"You don't need a towel," he says, and I swear to fucking hell, my hand is just *itching* for my scythe.

"I'm awake and alert! Totally sober. And totally regretting riding your dick right about now," I lie, putting my hands on my hips. I'm freezing and my wings are soaking wet, right along with the rest of me.

Jerif just stands there, taking in my anger like he gets off on my fiery words. But he must have some sense of self-preservation, because in the next blink, fire erupts all over my body.

I yelp and jump about two feet in the air, but then I realize that his licking flames are drying and warming me.

I tip my head back on a moan as the frigid chill is instantly devoured. His fire travels everywhere, moving over my pebbled skin to comfort every shivering and tense part of me. His flames even dry my wings and hair, and the sight looks fucking weird and yet fascinating in the mirror. I look like some she-demon fire princess with my wings and body all engulfed in flames like this.

Once I'm dry, his flames die down a bit, but Jerif uses one strip of fire to continue to tease over my body. It leaves a pink blush in its wake everywhere it goes, travelling down the edge of my neck, between my breasts, and around my nipples. I bite my lip, mostly because I need to in order to hold back a moan.

"Say you forgive me."

I narrow my eyes on him. "No, absolutely not. That was a dick move."

He looks pleased.

His fire moves downward and then curves around my waist before slipping between the cheeks of my ass. I hold perfectly still, though it's getting harder and harder to do because my legs are a little bit like jelly right about now. Heat presses against that wicked hole, making me bite down so hard that blood beads against my lip.

“Say it, Warrior Princess.”

I shake my head, loving this push and pull of ours. Maybe it’s wrong, but I love our fight. I love him pissing me off and me pissing him off and then colliding. I think I’m going to quickly become addicted to it.

Heat spreads down from my ass, curving up to my pussy. I’m already throbbing and wet, and the moisture has nothing to do with the shower.

Jerif steps closer to me but doesn’t touch me, and we both look down to see the small flame come up further and heat the surface of my clit.

“*Fuck...*” I fall back against the wall behind me, and my eyes flutter closed as Jerif plays with me. My orgasm comes slowly, warmly, like burning coals that pulsate with heat.

When I open my pleasure-filled eyes again, I’m still slumped against the wall, and Jerif is still standing in front of me, watching. His fire goes out in a wisp of smoke, and a pleased smile curves my mouth. “I forgive you,” I say in a husky voice.

“I know.”

He’s half hard again, but before I can reach out and touch him, he backs away. He quickly washes himself in the sink, and then grabs a hand towel beside him and gets it wet. Instead of handing it to me, he presses the wet washcloth against my pussy, making me jolt a little since I’m so sensitive and also because it’s ice-fucking-cold water again.

“Really?” I say dryly, arching a brow.

He just nips at my neck, swiping me one last time before turning and tossing the towel in the sink and walking out.

“Wait,” I say, forcing my legs to work again as I follow him into the bedroom. “You burned my shirt,” I remind him before picking up my pants and pulling them on.

“You can wear one of mine,” he says as he heads into a closet.

By the time my pants are on and my boots are laced, Jerif comes out fully dressed in black cargo pants and a gray T-shirt that pulls at his muscles. He hands over a black shirt that smells like him. “Wings, remember?” I tell him.

“I burned holes in the back for them already.”

I turn the shirt around and notice that he did, in fact, burn me some holes. “Such a gentleman,” I snicker before turning around and giving him my back.

I pull the shirt on over my head, and Jerif automatically takes the fabric and feeds my wings through the holes. It’s much easier to do with a looser shirt—and with someone else to help. Still, I’m committed to the strapless

top thing. I really need to order some *easy for wings* shirts to make my life easier. I wonder if Hell has Amazon Prime? Or Maybe Tazreel will give me Lousen the dress designer's number. I bet she knows how to fashion shirts that work with bird parts.

Turning around, I loosely tuck some of Jerif's shirt into my pants to help tighten the chest area around my boobs. "Okay," I say, nodding to myself that this is good enough. "I'm ready to deal with Pride."

Jerif snorts before taking my hand and tugging me out of the room. I look back longingly at our little spot on the floor, already missing sitting next to the fire and fucking on the feather down blanket.

"Soon," Jerif promises me, as if he can read my mind, as he pulls me into the hallway.

"I'm going to take you up on that," I tell him.

"I'm going to take you up against a lot of things," he counters.

My pussy flutters at the delicious promise. I'm so game for that.

"Do you know where they are?" I ask as Jerif leads me down a bunch of unfamiliar hallways. "Also what's a girl gotta do to get a tour around here?"

Jerif snorts. "I'll give you a tour, Princess, I just need enough time to do it so I can fuck you in every room as we go."

My vagina clenches greedily, and my ass holds up a sign that says *put me in, Coach*.

"Nothing says home sweet home like *I came all over that*," I agree evenly, completely on board with that plan.

I immediately start thinking of ways to get rid of Tazreel so we can implement the Tour de Sex. I don't even know if I *want* to meet my biological mother. How am I supposed to feel about the person who birthed me, blocked me, and left me to live a lie my whole life?

Jerif leads me into an atrium—or at least, that's what I think rich people call weird rooms full of plants and too much sunlight. I could probably fit eight of my houses in this place. *Actually, make that nine*, I observe, as we exit a row of plants on tables and I discover a whole section of planter beds that seem to be filled with vegetables.

Imps are inside the space, tending to the indoor mini farm. I can hear Tazreel's pompous voice bouncing off the glass ceiling as he recounts some useless story that probably has nothing to do with anything other than him loving the sound of his own voice and talking about himself.

I'm going to owe the guys so hard for keeping him entertained while I

was *sobering up* on Jerif's cock.

"Ahhh, there she is!" Tazreel announces jovially as Jerif and I get closer to the flower covered corner they're all standing in.

I get the impression that Tazreel might need to spend some time sobering up himself, judging by the way he whirls to me and Jerif, spilling half the contents in his glass. He stares at the puddle of spirits he just deposited on the ground and then looks at the massive red blossom next to him and says, "You're welcome," as though the flower should've thanked him personally for the shot of alcohol.

Surprisingly, the guys don't look put out or irritated at all, they look easy and casual like—*gasp*—they might be having a good time. Maybe they're drunk too, because that's the only way to handle my sperm donor in large doses, I've now decided.

"I was just regaling your boys with the time I got a gasping flower stuck around my cock at Luce's house," he tells me, a little too loudly for how close I now am to him.

I make a face. *Who the hell wants to hear a story about the time their father violated a flower?*

I look over at the guys, horrified, but they just chuckle, like, *good ol' Taz and his stories.*

Taz turns back to them. "It was a damn fine suck-off, I have to admit that much, boys, but I didn't know if the toxins were going to melt off my member or if it would release its deadly pollen when I tried to pull it off of me. It was quite the conundrum. Luckily, Gluttony had run into this perverted plant before, so he knew how to help me remove it. But I've never been able to look at a gasping flower the same again. I had all of them removed immediately from my gardens."

I look over at Jerif, like there's no way this is actually happening. My biological father is not drunk and telling a story about fucking a plant. This is even more humiliating than me falling off the toilet mid-piss. Jerif just looks down at me like, *this is your family, good luck with that.*

I sigh. "I'm not saying that story wasn't...umm...traumatizing in ways I hope to never think about again, but are you ready to tell us what's going on, Tazreel?" I ask.

"Sire, Delta. I'm your Sire, and you should address me accordingly."

"Yeah, that's not going to happen."

Tazreel rolls his eyes at me and tips his glass back, emptying it. "I

haven't had this vintage in ages," he gulps appreciatively. "It's a fine stock you demons carry. You make Hell proud," Tazreel declares to the guys. I look at him warily. It's one thing to think that the guys aren't bothered by Tazreel, but has he actually warmed up to them too? Where was all that *they're beneath you* talk? I stare at the group for a moment, trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

Did I get fucked into the twilight zone or something?

"Ow!" Jerif yells and jumps away from me. "What the fuck was that?" he growls.

"Just making sure I'm awake and in the real world," I explain as I pull my fingers away from him.

"You're supposed to pinch *yourself* for that," he snarls, rubbing at his upper arm.

"Oh, please, Firefly. Why would I do that when this is just so much more fun?"

"I'll give you more fun," he mumbles. "I'll light that ass up next time and show you who the firefly really is," he scoffs indignantly.

That makes me smile, and all my naughty bits start clapping with excitement. I should look around the atrium for an aloe vera plant, just in case.

The second there's a lull in conversation, Tazreel shouts out, "Your mother!" making me jump. "That's right! I've been having such a surprisingly pleasant time, I almost forgot," he confesses before chucking his glass away like that's the normal thing to do instead of setting it down or passing it off to someone. I watch it go sailing through the air, and then drop my mouth open in shock when an imp reaches up without looking and catches it like a viper does its prey. They bring the glass down to the ground, all the while never taking their eyes off the tomato plant they're plucking ripe fruit from.

I turn to the guys like, *did you see that?* But when I reach out a hand to pinch Jerif again, he stops me with a glare. "Don't you even think about it."

I adopt a sheepish grin long enough for him to think I won't, and then as soon as his guard is down, I do it anyway. He reaches behind me and pinches my ass in retaliation, but I like it, so it doesn't really pan out for him.

"Where's your scythe?" Tazreel demands, pulling my attention from Jerif's fire-filled gaze that screams retribution.

*Such a baby.*

“It’s in time-out,” I answer casually as I lift my hands and play the world’s smallest violin in sympathy for Jerif’s wounded bicep.

“Wait, what?” Echo asks as Crux snickers and Iceman shakes his head, an amused smile on his face.

“My scythe is in time-out,” I repeat.

“A...time-out,” Crux parrots, trying and failing not to laugh.

“Well, get it *off* time-out,” Taz says impatiently. “We need it.”

“I can’t,” I tell him with irritation. “The fucker never does what I want it to, that’s why it’s in time-out in the first place! It Thors out on me and almost gets me taken out by the Devil himself for no reason, but then it doesn’t heed any of the other times I try to work with it. So it can just sit and think about that for a while,” I finish with a stern tone.

Suddenly, the light in the atrium appears to dim, and a wave of trepidation washes over me. I look to the guys to see what’s going on, but Tazreel’s murderous gaze pulls all of my focus. He steps toward me, violence in his eyes, and I swear to fuck, I see lightning crash across his features and feel the answering thunder in my chest.

“You dare to treat the gifts of Hell so callously?” he asks me, his tone all the more terrifying due to the killer calm I can hear in it.

The guys all go stiff, anger crawling into their eyes at the threatening stance Tazreel is coming at me with. They move to close in around me, but I hold up a hand to stop them. Tazreel isn’t just a Nihil, he’s a major sin, Abdicated inner circle, Pride prickhead. I have no idea what kind of damage he can do to them. He steps even closer to me, invading my space as his enraged menace looms over me like storm clouds. Fear floods my veins, quickly followed by anger.

*Who the fuck does he think he is?*

In a blink, warmth prickles my fisted palm, and then I’m suddenly holding the Hell weapon that set off this whole tantrum that Tazreel is having.

Immediately, the thunderous darkness recedes, and Tazreel’s face lights up. “Ha!” he declares with wide-eyed excitement, elation washing through his features. Confusion whiplashes through me as his rage disappears as quickly as it came.

*What the hell just happened?*

At my incredulous look, he shrugs, lifting a blond wing. “I figured it must have been some instinctive protective reaction that called the scythe to you

during the dinner party when you felt backed into a corner, so I figured I'd try this," he tells me, like threatening me was a perfectly reasonable idea. "Perhaps any kind of intense emotion will work. We will have to test that out," Tazreel observes, gesturing to the guys as he says *we*, as though they're in on the plan.

"What were you feeling the exact moment the scythe appeared?" Taz asks, like a scientist collecting data at the end of an experiment.

"Um, I was concerned that you were a fucking psycho, flipping your switch that fast," I tell him with intense side-eye. "I was also pissed and pretty fucking terrified," I confess, quickly catching on to what Tazreel was trying to accomplish with the show he put on.

My mind knows now that it was all a test, but my body is still shaken up. I try to cover up my racing heart as I set the straight bladed end of the scythe on the ground and look it over like a puzzle I'm trying to find all the pieces to.

"There, now we know," Taz states pompously. "You're welcome. I've solved that problem for you." He turns to the guys. "Next time she needs her scythe and she can't get it to come to her, just threaten her life."

Iceman and Crux look at him like he's lost his mind, but Jerif and Echo seem oddly up to the task. That should scare me, but instead, I'm intrigued.

"Now," Taz says, clapping his hands together once. "Let's get started, shall we?"

I run a hand down my face and look over to Iceman. "Can I have more demon spirits?" I ask, because Taz is much harder to deal with while I'm sober.

Iceman's deep blue lips kick up. "No."

I let out a sigh of disappointment before turning back to Taz. "Okay, so explain why you needed the scythe."

Taz digs into his pocket and pulls out a small glass vial filled with a thick red liquid. "I procured this from the hump of a Vual demon," he says proudly, like this was a great feat. "From Luce's reaction, I know that your scythe has to be a family heirloom, connected to your maternal bloodline. It's the key to it all," he tells me as he pops off the cork of the bottle.

I pick up my scythe, eyeing the bottled liquid warily. "So what is that going to do, exactly?" I ask him.

"I'm going to pour this on your scythe, which will enable it to track down your bloodline. The power should pull us to your mother, or at least someone

in that bloodline.” He turns to my guys. “You might want to hold on to her,” he warns ominously.

My pulse starts to race again, and my mouth opens in surprise. Shit. This is all happening really fucking fast.

“Wait!” I call out at the same time Tazreel asks, “Ready?”

I open my mouth to say, “Fuck no!” but of course, the arrogant ass doesn’t wait for anyone to answer. He just tips the bottle over, dumping the entire contents of it onto the blade of my scythe.

“Are you kidding me?” I demand, but the oozing, molasses-thick liquid is already coating the blade, and there isn’t anything I can do to stop it.

Taz reaches forward and grabs my arm, just as my demons grab onto other various parts of me. I don’t even get time to suck a breath in and reprimand Taz about waiting for permission or lecture him about not pouring demon hump blood on other people’s scythes, because as soon as the red liquid drips off the blade of the scythe and lands on the ground, something yanks on me *hard*.

I go portaling straight downward, like Alice fucking Liddell falling straight into the rabbit hole. Which is just fucking great, because I hate bunnies almost as much as I hate birds. If I come out of this whole thing with a cotton tail, I’m going to be pissed.





**I**t feels like we all get sucked down into demonic quicksand, pulled right to the center of earth. Then, somehow, we flip right-side up again and go barreling skyward in pure darkness. It's the worst fucking rollercoaster ride ever, and my stomach lurches angrily.

Just when I'm sure there will be ralphing in my near future, the pull on me stops and there's once again solid ground beneath our feet.

I blink in shock, feeling like the wind was sucked out of my lungs, and I wheeze as I bend at the waist and try to get my bearings.

"Breathe, Maverick," Iceman tells me as he places a comforting hand over my back. As though my body responds to his suggestion alone, my lungs immediately cooperate and inflate.

I gasp and steady myself for a moment and then straighten up, looking around as everything comes into focus. We're surrounded by flat land, covered in bushy green trees as far as the eye can see. We've landed on top of a lone hill—the only higher elevation around—and from our vantage point, we have an unobstructed view all the way out to the horizon.

I notice gray baleful-looking clouds slowly moving in the distance as if they have nothing better to do than ruin a beautiful day. Anxiety starts to percolate in my stomach. Hopefully, they're moving away and not toward us. I look away from them, not wanting to track potential impending doom.

"Uhh, where are we?" I ask, once again focusing on the funny looking trees in front of me.

Crux steps up next to me, running a hand through his wind-whipped

blond hair as he taps his tongue piercings over his bottom lip, lost in thought. “I think we’re in Minnesota.”

Everyone looks over at him. “Really?” I ask in disbelief. “That’s what you’ve come up with?”

“Yeah,” he says with conviction. “Definitely Minnesota.”

I start to laugh, and he turns faux offended eyes on me. “Have you ever been to Minnesota?” he challenges.

I pause. “I have not,” I confess, and Crux tilts his head, the look on his face cocky. “So then, how would you know?”

“We are not in fucking *Minnesota*,” Jerif tells him.

“I know it’s hard for you not to be a prick,” Crux tells Jerif teasingly, “but I’ve been here before!” he insists. “This is Minnesota! Without a doubt.”

“When were you in Minnesota?” Echo asks dubiously. “And what the fuck for?”

“Uh...” Crux’s green eyes suddenly flicker over to me, and a look of guilt crosses over his face.

“Really?” I laugh. “A demon booty call happened in Minnesota?” I can’t keep the hilarity out of my tone. I don’t know why it’s so funny to me, but it is.

“Crux?” Iceman calls from behind us.

“Hold on, Raf, I’m winning an argument,” my surfer demon says dismissively. “Anyway, as I was saying,” he goes on, drawing a hand out toward the landscape. “This is *definitely* the place.”

Echo rolls his eyes and opens his mouth to continue to argue, but Jerif intercedes by grabbing Crux’s arm and spinning him to face the opposite direction, just like Iceman was trying to get him to do. “There,” Jerif says with a huff. “Still look like fucking Minnesota to you?”

Now that we’ve done a one-eighty, I start laughing. *Hard*. Because this is definitely *not* Minnefuckinsota.

A gleaming, almost glass-like castle is smack dab in the middle of the forest. It’s the kind of thing Disney would dream up. Surrounding it are long, white, shiny buildings. It’s like the castle itself is the sun and the long white buildings are the lines of rays extending out from the sun’s center.

I spot what I think is an obstacle course of some sort in the distance, and the size of it is massive and daunting. Several packed dirt rings are off to the left where trees have obviously been cleared away. I can see people moving around, but when I squint, I realize that there are white wings attached to

their backs.

“Does Minnesota have castles like this?” Echo teases. Crux just narrows his eyes and tries to reach forward and punch him on the shoulder. Before his fist can make contact, Echo’s shadows branch out and shove Crux’s hand away.

“Fucking cheater,” Crux grumbles. Echo snickers.

“I know where we are,” Taz admits as his gray-gold eyes scan the landscape. “But I have no clue why,” he adds, his blond brows hiked up in either surprise or awe. “This is Purgatory. And those,” he says, pointing toward the white-winged beings. “are fucking angels.”

*Well, shit.*

“The scythe took us to a castle full of angels?” I ask with shock. I look down at the Hell weapon with a glare. *Is this thing trying to get me killed?*

“Not just angels. This is the Legion’s headquarters,” he says, though I have no fucking clue what that means.

“Alright, and just for curiosity’s sake, how do angels feel about demons?” I ask, rocking back on my heels. “Is this a *run for our lives* kind of scenario, or are you at *secret handshake, followed by pats on the back* level of friendship with these guys?”

“Well...” Tazreel starts, his tone not exactly bolstering confidence.

He doesn’t get the chance to say another word though, because in less time than it takes to say *holy shit, that’s an angel*, we suddenly find ourselves surrounded by a fuck ton of them. And as if that weren’t scary enough, they have very shiny swords pointed at our necks.

We all freeze.

“What business do Hell Spawn have in these parts?” a stunning angel with ebony skin, dark eyes, and cropped short hair demands. Her eyes fix on Iceman’s horns like they’re personally offending her, and then she moves her flickering gaze over to Jerif and Echo.

Tazreel looks the least worried by our current situation, and I wonder for a moment if he knows something I don’t about angel swords, because they look perfectly stabby to me. Then again, he *is* Pride. Maybe he’s just too damn proud to feel worried about any of this. We could all get our heads cut off, and he’d still be arrogant about it.

He crosses his arms and spreads his legs, giving the head angel an arrogant look as his blond wings lift slightly. “I am Tazreel, Abdicated of Hell, and administrator of Pride. We are here on a Hell-blessed mission that

is none of your fucking business,” he concludes, and I bite back a groan.

*Sure, why not piss off the Heavenly Host currently holding murder sticks to our throats? That sounds like a perfectly logical plan. Why didn't I think of leading with that?*

I throw a glare at Tazreel before stepping in. “I think there’s been some kind of mistake,” I announce, and I feel the weight of all the angelic eyes as they land on me. “We didn’t mean to cause alarm, and we’ll happily fuck off back to where we came from if you’ll just sheathe the weapons.”

One of the angels scoffs, like my request is ridiculous. My brow furrows as I try to come up with plan C.

“We demand to see your ranking officer,” Tazreel orders, like he’s some disgruntled customer at a clothing store asking to talk to a supervisor. I roll my eyes at his *take us to your leader* request, because he is not making our lives any easier. But then my eyes have to widen with surprise, because the swords lift up from our necks, and the angels surrounding us move to form two parallel lines that are clearly prepared to escort us straight to their castle.

*Huh. It worked.*

“This way, demons,” the female says, the word looking like it tastes foul on her tongue.

She turns and starts marching forward first, not at all worried as she gives us her back. If she’s trying to send us an unspoken message, I’ve received it loud and clear. We’re not a threat to her, because she’s probably completely badass, and there are so many angels around that we would be stupid and suicidal to try and pull anything.

My eyes slide to Tazreel. “Don’t get us killed,” I hiss under my breath.

Of course, he just arches an imperious brow before stalking after the dark-skinned angel. I exchange a look with the guys and start following in Taz’s trail.

The guys must have agreed on some pre-approved formation when it comes to hostile walking environments, because they all move fluidly until they’re carefully placed around me. Iceman takes the front, Echo and Crux are on either side of me, and Jerif watches my back by taking the rear. He’s also probably watching said rear, because I can feel prickles of heat on my ass.

I walk, tucking my purple hair behind my ears as we head down the gently sloping hill. Springy grass meets our boots as we go, and the angels on either side of us wall us in, marching in sync, giving us just enough space to

walk. I watch them from the corner of my eyes, taking in their appearance.

They all look somewhat similar. They're wearing the same gleaming silver armor, and their wings are varying shades of white, platinum blond, cream, and some of them freckled with all three. Their skin is all different colors, and I can't tell about their eyes. But they're all tall and muscled, both male and female.

It's clear how disciplined they are by their movements. They aren't rigid or on edge, even though they're escorting demons, one of which is Pride himself. I can just tell that not a single one of them would panic and get blade-happy with the swords strapped to their hips. These angels are seasoned fighters who wouldn't dare break rank.

Tazreel called them Legion, and the name sounds important enough to let me know that they're probably a big fucking deal. We'd be stupid to underestimate them. Which is exactly what worries me. Tazreel *definitely* underestimates them. I can tell by the way his arms swing and he looks around like he doesn't have a care in the world and everyone is beneath him.

Why couldn't I have gotten stuck with Acedia as a father? It would've been less stressful to deal with someone who just wanted to nap all the time and gave no fucks about anything.

When we get to the bottom of the hill, the angels lead us to the long white buildings. There are uniform doorways about every seven feet or so, perfectly spaced out. Several of the packed dirt rings have angels in them sparring against one another. Even the giant obstacle course has angels on it, training and honing their physical prowess.

When our group is noticed, more and more angels stop what they're doing, until all of them have turned to watch us. It's daunting and intimidating, and silence spreads throughout the entire camp, which is somehow louder than the war cry I see in too many watching eyes.

My heart pounds behind my bones, and I grip the scythe in my hand, only to notice that it's gone bladeless again. That's probably for the best, though. The last thing we need is to give these angels any reason to pounce on us.

My nerves ratchet up higher and higher with every step. Our circumstances seem to get gloomier as we go. The tense silence is thundering in my pulse. No...wait. I look up at the sky and see that the looming clouds I noticed from the hill seem to be getting closer. The gloominess is their sinister stretch as they try to block Purgatory's sun, and the thundering I thought was my heartbeat is *actual* thunder.

My steps falter, and anxious sweat quickly gathers on my brow and palms.

“It’s alright,” Echo murmurs, his pitch-black eyes flicking over to look at me.

On my other side, Crux purposely lets his swinging hand skim against mine in the briefest of touches, trying to comfort me without alerting the angels of our relationship.

I shoot both he and Echo a grateful, private look, knowing that we’re under major scrutiny. Behind me, I can feel Jerif walk just a little closer, his comforting warmth at my back.

It helps. A little.

We’re escorted toward the castle entrance, but just when I get curious about what it will look like inside, we’re directed toward a door at the end of one of the long white buildings instead. It’s like they’re teasing us with the castle’s stunning opulence. It’s a very *you can look but not touch* move on their part.

*Well, screw them then, the one at Disneyland is probably better anyway.*

The room we’re led into is clean and nice. It’s not hard to figure out that their decorator had a massive hard-on for all things white. The floors are pristine marble, and the couches and chairs appear to be somewhat comfortable looking leather. There are mirrors on the wall, and I quickly question if they’re two-way mirrors and we’re being spied on already. There are white end tables and coffee tables anchoring the sofas and chairs into two seating areas across from each other.

Taz walks in and chooses a large white chair to park his ass in like he’s the king and has now designated the seat as his throne.

“Any cherub wine available?” he asks, looking as comfortable as ever.

The ebony-skinned angel eyes him for a moment. “The Major will be with you shortly,” she snips, and then just like that, our entire escort marches out, the door shutting behind them.

I listen for a click, assuming they’re going to lock us in here, but one never comes. I round on Tazreel. “What the hell is going on?” I demand. “Did you fuck an angel or something? Why the hell would the scythe bring us *here*?”

Tazreel’s face goes utterly offended when I ask about his angel proclivities, and he looks at the guys like he fully expects them to be offended on his behalf too. “I beg your pardon, but I would never,” he

defends.

I have no idea why he'd be so offended about this. In the short time I've known the guy, I've learned that neither pixies nor flowers are off-limits, so what would be the issue with an angel?

"Like I said before, the elixir would take us to your mother *or* someone in your bloodline who can tell us where she is. That's clearly what happened here. And before you go getting all judgy, the Abdicated were part of Heaven before we made the sacrifice for the greater good and established the realms of consequence—aka Hell. So it's possible that your mother, who I'm sure is a perfectly respectable demon, has relatives on this side of things."

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Turning to my demons. "I thought you guys said that Heaven and Hell got along? That is not the impression I just got. Those white-winged fuckers were staring us down like they were imagining skewering us."

"We do get along, in the sense that we're both working toward the same goal. Both sides want the betterment and growth of all souls so they can claim their divine right if so desired. But keep in mind that both sides have different views on how best to accomplish that," Iceman explains.

"That looked like more than issues with a difference in opinion," I grumble.

"That's because they're all fresh meat," Jerif adds. "Think about the mortal military, for example. Kids join the service and they're all gung-ho, convinced that what they're fighting for is right. They're filled with pride and sure of their convictions. Now take that same kind and fast forward five years. They're more seasoned, more lethal, and most importantly, more experienced. They know that not everything is so black and white. They've seen some shit. They get that both sides of a battle are just fighting for what they believe. They're still proud and honorable, but with time, they're wiser."

He nods his head in the direction of the door.

"Out there are the new recruits, training and getting ready for their first posts. All they see is the light right now, the end goal. They'll of course look at us like we're in their way, like our existence somehow taints what their ultimate purpose is. But see what they're like in a century or two. They'll get it then. They'll realize the need for the dark in order to properly see the light," he finishes, and surprisingly, that makes a ton of sense to me.

"Cocky little shits if you ask me," Tazreel observes, and I just laugh.

"I think that's a solid case for *takes one to know one*," I tell him on a

chuckle that earns me a look that says, *I am not amused*.

Another rumble of thunder sounds off outside, and the noise shoots a spike of adrenaline through me. I flinch, unable to stop myself. The guys all look over at me, and I can't stop the pink that suffuses my cheeks.

"Are you alright?" Iceman asks.

Distractedly, I look out through the window behind Tazreel and see the sky is getting even darker. My grasp flexes against my scythe. Suddenly, this room doesn't feel vast and open. It feels like it's one lightning strike from crashing down around me. Another rumble of thunder makes my shoulders hike up to my ears.

"We should just go. Don't you think?" I ask suddenly, fighting the simmering panic that's pushing up into my chest. "I mean, if they don't want us here and my mother probably isn't here, why just sit around and get glared at?" I ask, my tone rising with each anxious breath I take. I can't tear my eyes away from the rolling, darkening clouds.

Iceman follows my worried gaze out the window, but before he can say anything, the door to the room slams open, and I squeak in surprise. My scythe immediately activates, the massive curved blade springing up, and the straight blade on the other end shooting out.

Immediately, two warrior angels draw their swords and step in front of the handsome middle-aged angel that just stormed in. My demons are by my side in a flash, and everyone in the room tenses.

*Yep. It's official. This scythe is trying to get me killed.*

"I'm not threatening you," I quickly say, looking past the fierce looking soldier angels and into the dark green eyes of the winged man they're protecting. "It just activates on its own," I offer awkwardly, and I work to keep myself from shaking the scythe and demanding it cooperate and stop trying to get me taken out.

After a beat, the kelp-green eyed angel nods, and his bodyguards back off. They step aside, and he walks further into the room, radiating confidence and ability. Or maybe it's his shiny gold armor that's doing all of that, but either way, he doesn't seem like the kind of guy you'd want to mess with.

He scans the room, and when his eyes land on Tazreel, his stern face melts, and in its place is recognition and camaraderie. "Taz?" he asks, surprised. "They didn't tell me it was you here, you old prick!" he announces, and then in three long strides, he and my sperm donor meet in a hug and a whole lot of back patting.



*What the fuck?*

I watch them take a moment to catch up and think about what Jerif said about soldiers getting wiser with time and experience.

“Louquin, when did you make Major?” Tazreel asks, holding him out at arm’s length and looking him over with pride.

“Not long. It’s been about a decade now,” Louquin answers with a beaming smile.

“Well, it was long coming, I’ll tell you that much. Congratulations. As soon as I get home, I’ll send some things to help ring in the good news,” Taz offers, and Louquin looks all kinds of honored and appreciative.

“You’re too kind. I should say no, but we both know I’m not going to,” he confesses on a dazzling grin, and the two angels laugh and hug again.

I share a bewildered look with my guys. Who knew Taz would actually be liked enough to have a friend? And an angel friend, no less.

“What are you doing here? Not that I’m not happy to see you, but when I was given word that we had a party from Hell make a surprise drop-in, I didn’t think it would be you,” Louquin states, curiosity filling his eyes.

“Ah, yes. I’m hoping you can help me, old friend. I would have announced the visit, but you see, I’m just as surprised to be here as you are to see me,” Tazreel starts.

Louquin looks like he’s dying to know what’s going on, and I look over at the guys to see they’re still on guard but as amused and curious by the interaction as I am.

“It’s been brought to my attention recently that I’ve sired a child. The wee thing was dropped right onto my doorstep,” Taz says, motioning toward me like I’m some frail baby in a bassinet just left for him out of the blue.

I tilt my head and release a sigh that says *come the fuck on*, but my incredulous sound goes ignored by them both. Louquin eyes me speculatively, taking in my appearance.

“Unfortunately, I’m not certain of who the mother is,” Taz goes on. “I applied a tincture to track this bundle of joy’s bloodline, and it led me straight here. She must have a maternal relative on base. I’m hoping you can help me track them down so the little whelp’s mother can be located,” Taz finishes.

I snort, not at all amused by the technically accurate, but very misleading tale that my sperm donor just wove into existence, as though he’s reading bedtime stories instead of trying to solve the problem of his whoring ways.

“Well, first let me congratulate you,” Louquin offers with a blinding

smile before his brows lower slightly. “But I don’t know how we’d be able to find the relative. That isn’t very much to go on,” he adds.

“This is true,” Taz nods. “Luckily, my progeny has very unique markings, which I’m certain come from the mother’s side. It might be possible to identify a relative that way,” Taz offers, fluffing his hair and wings, like my unique coloring is an affront to his Abdicated good looks and the neutral color palette that Heaven dipped him in when he was created.

“Hmm, that might be possible. Where’s the little one?” Louquin asks, looking around for what he expects to be a little kid.

Echo and I both snicker under our breaths. I step forward, my scythe still in Swiss Army battle mode, and wait for the Legion Major’s green eyes to settle on me.

When they do, I offer him a wide smile. “Hi, I’m Delta. Oh, and apparently I’m this asshole’s kid,” I add, just to be sure that everything sinks in. I gesture to Tazreel with my scythe and don’t miss the irritated look he shoots my way at my blatant disrespect in front of a friend. I give him a shrug. That should teach him to pop into bathrooms uninvited or describe me as a *whelp*.

“Wait...” Louquin stammers, wide eyes flicking from me to Tazreel. Taz gives a confirming nod.

The angel’s green eyes immediately hook back onto me, taking in my electric purple hair and wings before his disbelieving eyes move to my scythe. He takes in the details slowly, like the facts are puzzle pieces he’s trying to put together.

And then, the strangest thing happens. The last piece snaps into place, and realization comes with his mouth dropping open.

I watch as the blood completely drains from his face as recognition seeps into his dark green eyes.

That can’t be good.



“It can’t be,” Louquin states adamantly, but his new ghost-white pallor and the shocked set of his features tells a different story.

He looks back to Tazreel, but instead of the jovial light in his eyes and the sense of brotherhood that was just in his countenance, all that’s left now is astonishment and disapproval.

He shakes his head and manages to get a hold of himself. I watch a wall of detached professionalism slam down over his features as he steps back from Tazreel and turns to one of the soldier angels that are still in the room. “Private, bring the Colonel here immediately. If questioned, state simply that we have a situation that needs immediate attention, and you are following orders.”

The soldier angel salutes the Legion Major by tapping his fist to his chest twice and then spins on his heel and rushes out.

The Major’s green eyes flit to me and then quickly look away, as though my presence pains him. Unease wafts through me, but I feel a soothing caress run down my arm as one of Echo’s shadows traces the outline of my elbow. I look over to find his black eyes watching me with concern. I try to give him a small smile, but I know it doesn’t reach my eyes because I’m nervous as fuck.

Louquin knows who my relative on base is. And what he experienced when it dawned on him did not look like a welcome revelation. I feel a little bad for the way he just shut Tazreel out, but when I look over at my formerly loquacious father, he doesn’t seem like he has a care in the world.

I'm not sure I'm buying it.

"How old are you, child?" Louquin suddenly asks me.

"I'm twenty-eight."

"In demon years?" he presses.

I let out a small huff. "No, in human years." I turn to Tazreel. "What is a demon year, anyway?" I ask, realizing I still don't know the conversion.

"Human years?" Louquin states as if that confuses him even more than my mere existence.

But before he can ask anything else, the door flies open again, and in swoops the returning soldier angel, completely breathless.

"Out of the way, you dolt," someone barks from behind him. The soldier scrambles to move and make way for the impatient fucker behind him.

I spot her purple hair and gold armor all at once, and then my brain clicks over to slo-mo as all the other details of the Colonel sink in. Royal purple hair. Rich, amethyst-colored wings. Eyes the color of Concord grapes.

All of these facts slap me right across the face, but the look that comes over *her* when she sets sight on Tazreel boxes it all up in a nice little package with a purple fucking bow on it.

"You!" they both snarl in surprise as recognition and anger explode into the room like someone just set off a rage bomb.

"You're *Legion*?" Tazreel demands, outrage surging out of his every pore as he gapes at her.

"What are you doing here?" the Colonel barks out at the same time, and everyone's heads volley back and forth between them like we're watching a tennis match.

"Looks like Taz did fuck an angel after all," I mumble, oddly numb by what's unfolding before my very eyes.

I hear snorts of amusement from all of my demons, and the Colonel's eyes snap over to us, looking lethal as fuck and very unamused. I can tell that she's about to say something rude to who she assumes is the peanut gallery, but then her purple gaze lands on me, and her mouth drops open. I can practically see the biting retort she just loaded on her tongue shrivel up and fall right off.

There's a long, awkward, heavy pause as the two of us just stare at each other. She seems stunned in place, while I'm doing my best not to squirm. I've never been good with attention.

So what do I do? I give her an awkward as fuck wave—and then ratchet

up the uncomfortableness of the situation another thousand degrees by saying, “Hey, angel-mom.”

Her eyebrows shoot so far up into her royal purple hair, I’m surprised I don’t see them go falling out the back of her long locks braided tightly behind her back. Nothing worse than having to pick up your eyebrows off the floor and reaffix them in front of the daughter you abandoned and the demon you fucked. She looks to Tazreel and then back to me, and just like that, the emotion and surprise is gone. In their place is a steely acceptance and a hardened soul.

“What is going on?” the Legion Major demands, stepping forward with judgment and distaste written all over his gorgeous face.

“Really, Louquin, you’re going to pretend it’s not obvious?” she asks, calling him out, her tone mocking and filled with bite.

“Nefta, this is serious,” he chides.

“That’s Colonel to you. Watch yourself,” she rebukes, and he immediately straightens up and adopts a more respectful and stiffer stance.

“Apologies, Colonel,” he offers like a good little soldier, and Nefta—aka the Legion angel who gave birth to me—gives a terse nod and then turns away from him, like he’s no longer worth her attention.

She focuses a hostile stare on Tazreel, who at this point might as well have steam coming out of his nose and ear. He is one pissed off demon.

“How did you find her?” Nefta demands, very matter-of-factly.

I’m a little taken aback by the lack of denial or regret I see in her eyes. Or even a greeting. Maybe I didn’t expect a hug and tears, but I expected *something*. But she hasn’t even spoken a word to me and is now talking about me like I’m not even here.

“How did I find her?” Tazreel repeats, incredulous fury pouring out of every word. “How does she even *exist*?”

“Oh, come on now, Pride. After all these years, even you should have been able to stop looking in the mirror long enough to learn the birds and the bees,” she tells him evenly. “You see, the female, when fertile, produces an egg. She then drinks her weight in booze, picks a couple fights, flirts with anything that has wings, and then decides to take her friend up on her claim that fucking a demon is life-changing,” she says with a roll of her eyes.

Clearly, she doesn’t think the demon-fucking was anything to write home about. I guess I can put that in the *things I don’t have in common with my angel-mom* pile.

“You should have told me what you were,” Tazreel snarls at her.

“Oh, please. You told me your name was Sophocles and you were a Duo,” she tells him. “Let’s not pretend that you weren’t just as cagey as I was that night.”

“Sophocles? Really?” I ask, unable to pass up the opportunity to bust Tazreel’s balls.

“Now is not the time, Delta!” he snaps at me, and Nefta’s eyes widen slightly at my name and then narrow at Tazreel’s censure.

“How did you find her?” she growls out again, like *that* is the most important thing to know in this scenario.

“I shouldn’t have had to find her!” Taz yells back. “If you didn’t want her, then she should have been turned over to me. You left her in the mortal world, for Christ’s sake!”

“Oh, don’t try and bring him into this. I know exactly what I did,” Nefta answers evenly. “As soon as I found out who you really were, I knew the last place she should ever be is in your care,” she spits out. “Now, are you going to tell me how you found her, or am I going to have to make you?”

I watch the two of them, knowing I need to intervene before they come to blows.

“You know...you could just ask me,” I tell her, mostly because I want to force her to acknowledge me and talk to me directly.

Nefta’s eyes snap to mine, and she considers my words like it’s not something she realized was an option. “Did he find you?” she finally asks me, her tone pragmatic and lacking any softness or emotion. She’s all tactical soldier right now, and I’m not sure if that’s just who she is or if she’s purposely keeping me at arm’s length.

“No,” I answer. “I found him.”

My words seem to confuse her for a beat. I can almost see her dissecting them in her mind and putting them back together to make sense of them.

She might be cataloguing my words, but I’m cataloguing her appearance. We have the same nose. My lips are fuller than hers, and I clearly have Tazreel to thank for my gray eyes, but Nefta and I look alike. I trace her gracefully arched eyebrows and long black lashes with my gaze. The slope of her nose is so familiar, and I don’t know what to think about staring at someone who looks so much like me.

She looks like she could be my sister—not in a creepy *that’s what guys tell the mom to get in her good graces* kind of way—but legitimately, she

only looks like she's a handful of years older than me.

"I don't understand," she finally admits after a couple of seconds.

"Oh, sorry, allow me to explain," I say, trying to take on the same detached tone as her. "So it all started with a Help Wanted ad. *That* job led to a Hellgate and me being told that I was a demon by these four Guardians here. Then add in a couple trips to Hell, almost getting killed and/or kidnapped by some Ophidian dude's minions who attacked us, accidentally falling into the Nihil Ring, and meeting this douche and finding out he's my biological father. Then he took some hump blood, and we all followed my magical scythe to find you. That about sums it up," I finish.

She just continues to stare at me.

"Your turn," I chirp. "Go ahead, and if you could start with: why you had me, left me in the Mortal Realm with no intention of ever telling me what I was, and thus leaving me ultimately defenseless when the blocks you put on me failed, that'd be great," I say with a mock-smile. "Oh, and also, what's the deal with this scythe, and how the hell does it work?" I ask, holding the scythe out and noticing that it's once again gone dormant.

Fickle little fucker.

"The Ophidian?" she balks. "How in Hell—"

"Ah, ah, ah," I tell her, cutting her off. "That's not what I asked."

Her eyes flash with authority, clearly not liking my tone or line of questioning. But fuck it. Despite wanting not to care, her immediate brush-off hurts me.

"Don't try to pull that *call me Colonel* shit with me like you did him," I tell her, jutting my chin toward where Louquin is still standing at attention. "I'm not in your fucking Legion, and you owe me some answers," I warn her coldly.

Challenge flashes in her eyes, but for a moment, so does pride. I watch as she takes a minute to decide how she wants to move forward. I clearly inherited some of Taz's arrogance, because I probably shouldn't behave like this to an angel Legion Colonel, but if she's not going to show me even a scrap of respect, why should I show her any?

Thunder suddenly booms so loudly it shakes the walls, and out of nowhere, I hear little plinks of raindrops start to hit the glass of the windows all around us. As soon as I turn my head in distraction, Tazreel starts in on Nefta, and the two of them start bickering, but I don't hear what they're saying.

A violent downpour has started outside, and my eyes become stuck on the dark view out the window. My vision tunnels as fear claws up my throat, and painful memories I can never seem to push out come flooding into my mind.

Half of me is aware of what's going on in this room, but the other half is trapped in my own head—in overwhelming panic and traumatic memories. And that's the half that dominates me.

I whimper, feeling my limbs trying to lock up. My head swivels wildly as I try to find a way to get out—out of this room, out of my head, out of the panic that's now seizing my every muscle. My first instinct is to find something loud enough to drown out the sounds of the storm. That's what I do at home—I blast the rock music and hide behind the drawn curtains, waiting it out.

But there's nothing in here except bitterness, accusation, and the fucking color white.

Terror slams through me as I realize I'm stuck. I'm trapped in here, surrounded by the pelting sound of rain, with flashes of lightning and the brutal sound of thunder that shakes the building.

I immediately bring a hand up to cover my nose so that I don't smell the rain. I can maybe—and this is a tiny maybe—ward off the horrible memories that I associate with the sounds of a thunderstorm. But I can't ward them off if I smell the rain.

Short puffs of breath hit my cupped palm as I breathe against my hand, my eyes bouncing from window to window. I can't do this here. I can't break down in front of these strangers. I don't care if Taz and Nefta are my biological parents—they don't belong in my emotional turmoil.

Dread fits on top of me like a second skin, which only seems to add to the hysteria I can feel floating to the surface of who I am.

A streak of lightning arcs through the sky, the electric tendrils looking like gnarled limbs coming to rip me apart. I slam my eyes closed and grit my teeth, but then another crash of thunder erupts in the air, shaking the very foundation of my soul. A strangled noise slips out of my throat, and memories, horrible memories push and pull and pinch at me, refusing to be ignored.

“Jeter, what's wrong?” I hear Crux say, but I can't focus on his voice or find his face in all the panic. All that exists is thunder and lightning and rain and pain.

“Take a deep breath, Delta,” Echo encourages, but I can hear the rain



falling even harder, and I know that if I breathe deeply, I'll smell it.

A sob slips out of my throat despite my efforts to swallow it back down, but I realize it's too late. I'm too late. I have none of my usual tricks to stave off the panic attack.

The moment another crack of lightning splits in the air, the last of my resolve splinters. Memories slam into me like sledgehammers crushing me to a pulp. All I can do is relive it over and over again.

*Thunder booms all around me, and the lights in the living room flicker. Sitting up on the couch, I lean over the back of it and push down one of the slats in the blinds covering the window and see the torrential downpour that's going on outside.*

*My stomach growls, and I check the time on my watch again. Where are they? It's already six, and dad promised we could grab pizza from Antonio's tonight. I stare at the cordless phone charging on the wall and debate calling them again, but I'm too lazy to get up.*

*A flash of lightning catches my attention outside. I count one Mississippi, two Mississippi, and then the thunder rumbles through the walls of our house. A car turns onto the street, but I quickly realize it's not my parents. It's a cop car.*

*That's weird.*

*I watch the black and white vehicle make its way slowly down the road, like the cops inside are checking addresses. It stops in front of the house across the street, and I narrow the gap in the blinds that I'm looking through so I don't get caught spying like a creep.*

*I chuckle when the cops get out of the car and are immediately soaked through. It's funny because they have these plastic covers on their hats, but it's not doing much good for the rest of them. But my amusement immediately dies away when they don't jog toward the McNeal's house like I'm expecting. Instead, they run across the street and right up the sidewalk to my front door.*

*The blinds snap shut as I lean back on the couch, and my heart trips when the doorbell sounds off. Why would the cops be here? I push up from the sofa and look through the peephole just in case I saw things wrong, just as a firm knock reverberates through the door.*

*I open it, and the smell of rain slams into me along with cool wind as the storm works itself into a fury outside. Lightning crackles, lighting up the tree in the front yard to be an eerie bright white.*

*"Are you Delta Gates?" an older officer with a gray mustache asks me,*

*his blue uniform soaked and dripping.*

*“Yes,” I answer, not sure what to think of this. Am I in trouble for something?*

*Nothing immediately comes to mind, but that doesn’t seem to stop the fear and adrenaline from kicking in. The mustached officer pulls a rain speckled notebook out of his pocket and flips it open. He thumbs to a different page and then squints slightly at whatever is written there.*

*“Are you the daughter of a Ray Gates and a Tanya Gates?” he asks.*

*“Yes...” I confirm, and suddenly the fear and adrenaline pumping through me isn’t for me anymore. “What’s going on? Are they okay?” I ask, worry soaking my tone like the rain did their uniforms.*

*“We’re very sorry to tell you this, miss, but both of your parents perished in a car collision that occurred approximately two hours ago.”*

*The officer keeps talking, but I can’t seem to hear him. All I can hear are the words both of your parents perished over and over again. A flash of lightning streaks across the sky, and a boom of thunder follows quickly on its trail. The other officer ducks slightly like he’s expecting the sky to fall down on top of him.*

*I push out of the door, past the officers and out into the storm. I don’t even know why. It’s like I’m searching for their car to be parked there, even though I know it’s not. I stand in the middle of the driveway, already soaked through. The smell of rain fills my senses, and it pours down, stealing my warmth like the police officer’s words just stole my happiness, stole my breath, stole my...life.*

*Lightning strikes.*

*Very sorry.*

*Thunder booms.*

*Both of your parents.*

*Rain pelts.*

*Perished in a collision.*

*Thunder yells down at me from the sky again as I collapse on my knees.*

*I’m crying, sobbing, my soul leaking out through my eyes, but the rain is battling my tears, the thunder drowning out my wails.*

*Lightning flashes and wind whips past me, stealing my shock away like someone wrenching a blanket off you in the frigid cold.*

*The officer’s words settle into me against my will, and the next thing I know, an agonized keening is leaking out of my mouth like a dying animal*

*baying at the moon.*

*The officers are beside me, and I think one of them is trying to get me to stand up from the puddled ground and help me back into the house, because I feel myself rise up from my knees. More lightning and thunder fills the sky, and I look up at it as the cop once again flinches away at the sound.*

*Fall. I just want it to fall.*

*“Fall!” I beg the sky on a sob as I stare at the furious storm. My mom and dad are gone, and I just need the sky to fall and swallow me whole. I need to go too.*

*I just need it to fall.*

*“Please...”*

In present reality, I feel cool hands wrap around my arms and hear my name being spoken through calm lips, somehow pulling me to the surface of that drowning, devastating memory. Somehow helping me out of that night when my parents died and I wanted to go with them.

I come up for air like I’m breaching the surface of the puddle I knelt in that night, gasping for oxygen. That overwhelming smell of rain is still surrounding me like noxious fumes, and I can practically feel the electric current in the air from the lightning that’s pummeling the world all around me, though it feels like it’s striking directly into my heart.

Devastation wants to pull me under again, and no matter how hard I kick, I can’t quite break free.

*“Delta.” My name comes again.*

I open my eyes—or maybe I’m just able to focus—and see that I’ve somehow ended up on one of the white chairs. The storm is raging, but so are my biological parents. They’re demanding to know what’s wrong with me, standing over me like gods demanding penance for my wrongs and insisting on explanations.

*“Well? What’s wrong with her?” Nefta demands, hands on hips as she stares down at me like a defective soldier.*

Taz scoffs. *“There is nothing wrong with her! She’s my progeny!”* he says, completely insulted at the idea that any child of his could be seen as anything less than perfect. *“Besides, if anything is wrong with her, it would most definitely come from your side.”*

They start yelling at each other, facing off, like their words are being lobbed from slingshots back and forth with rapid-fire hits that Bart Simpson would be proud of.

But their shouting, accusatory words just boom in sync with the thunder, and my brittle nerves feel ready to snap. I shove my hands over my ears, trying to block out the sound, and my wings come out of their own accord, like they're trying to barricade me from the whole world. That would be a nice touch, if they didn't freak me out so fucking much, so that just makes everything even worse.

"Stop!" I choke out as I desperately try to bat them away. But they don't listen. If anything, the next shaking thunder that rattles the windows makes the purple appendages curl around me even tighter. Wracking gasps take over, and in my panicked haste to get them to get the fuck away from me, I rip out some of the feathers, making me cry out from the sharp pain.

More voices are yelling, more of the storm unleashes around me, and black dots enter my vision like my brain is threatening to shut the fuck off.

But then, there's a cool, soft touch.

I shudder when I feel fingers gently petting my wings, which seem so panicked and unsure of what to do. The touch strokes gently on the arches, until my feathered appendages shiver and then finally relax, allowing the gentle but firm hands to fold them back.

And then Iceman is there, taking up the entirety of my waning vision. Chilled hands come up to cup my face, and his icy eyes are level with mine as he kneels down in front of me, blocking everything and everyone else out.

"We've got you, Delta. We're right here."



**T**he arguing is still going on, and even though Taz's and Nefta's voices are obnoxiously loud, somehow, Iceman's tone cuts through the entire room like a dagger.

"Everyone stop talking right this instant and give us a moment."

Composed. Unruffled. Completely dominant. Authoritative, despite the fact that here, he's just a lower male on the totem pole of angelic and demon hierarchy. I don't know how he does it without raising his voice or even looking away from me, but immediately, the voices stop shouting. My shoulders sag in just an inch of relief, but it's something.

"There," he murmurs to me, his frosted thumbs stroking over my fevered cheeks, wiping away the tracks of tears left behind. "Just breathe, Maverick," he tells me, and I latch onto his voice like it's a lifeline, a buoy that will make sure I stay above water.

I feel the rest of my guys standing around me, helping to further shield me away. Someone is running a palm over my back, another is gently threading fingers through my hair, while someone else continues to keep my wings calm and folded back.

"Breathe in," Iceman directs, as if he somehow knows the black dots in my vision are still threatening to spread.

It's difficult, but I manage to take in a short, shaky inhale.

"Good," he praises quietly, his eyes still not leaving mine. "Breathe out and in again for me, slower this time."

I do as he says, this breath slightly less restrictive than the last. We do this

several more times until the last of the black dots recede and I'm no longer in danger of blacking out or worse, raging out.

"Good girl," he tells me as his thumb catches another tear that falls free. "Tell me what happened."

"The storm..." I say, trying to swallow around a thick tongue. "My parents crashed during a storm like this. The road was flooded, and the car that hit them couldn't stop, and they..."

When my breath hitches, he moves one of his hands to circle my neck and lets his thumb caress the length of my strangled throat until the rocks gathered there can be swallowed down. "They died and...I wanted to die too," I say, feeling both shame and relief at the admission. "I hate storms. They trigger me. Like I feel the pain and loss all over again with every raindrop and thunder clash. No matter how hard I try to stop it, the storms bring me right back to that night almost ten years ago," I finish, feeling defeated, hating how I have to relive that over and over again.

I hate how I must look to him at this moment. Weak. A blubbering mess. A pathetic puddle of grief and pain, set off by something as natural as a rainstorm.

"Look at me, Delta," Iceman says, and I immediately lift my eyes to his. I ready myself for the *it's okay* or the *I'm sorry* or even the *pull it together, we're in fucking Purgatory* pep talk.

But Iceman doesn't say any of that.

Ice-blue eyes look at me like he can see right down to my very soul. "We will weather the storm with you. Always."

My eyes fill.

How can this demon, who's only known me for a short time, speak such perfect words?

He leans forward and presses his lips against both cheeks, like he's happy to take on the bitterly brined streaks of my sadness.

I practically fall forward against him, hugging him hard, settling my ear against his chest. "I'm sorry," I whisper, not just to him, but to all four of my guys. "I'm so embarrassed," I admit, keeping my face buried against Iceman, not yet ready to face the rest of the room. I'm utterly humiliated to have had such a personal, acute breakdown in front of all of these people.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Iceman tells me.

"He's right," Echo says, and I lift my head up enough to see that he's kneeling on the ground too, while Crux is sitting beside me on the chair, and

Jerif is standing, arms crossed and face pissed as he looks out at the room, like he's just daring anyone to say anything. I love him for that.

"Yeah, no apologizing, and don't be embarrassed," Crux tells me. I notice that my left wing has curved around him, like it's trying to hug him close. He doesn't even flinch when the feathers wrap all the way around to his front, the tips brushing along his crotch like they're trying to flirt.

I puff out an exasperated breath and try to bat them away. They pull back slightly, like they're sulking, and Crux's green eyes glitter with amusement. "I think they like me."

"Well, at least they like someone. I think they just like to fuck with me," I mumble before sitting up straight and taking a calming breath.

I wish I had some more of that hump blood to pour on my scythe right about now. Escaping through a portal that makes the ground swallow me whole and letting me run away from the embarrassing panic attack I just had would be nice. But that's just not in the cards for me. I'm here for answers, and breakdown aside, I need to get them.

I try to comb down my frazzled hair, and I wipe my cheeks with my hand before swiping beneath both eyes. My face feels tight and shaky, but I give them a little smile. "How do I look?" I ask quietly. "Am I sporting the *I just had a meltdown in Purgatory* look?"

"You look beautiful," Iceman assures me.

"A little splotchy," Echo teases.

I reach forward and bat him away with my hand, but I'm inwardly grateful for his levity to break up the heavy moment. He pulls me into him and pecks me quickly on the lips. I smile against his mouth and shed some of the apprehension and embarrassment still floating around me. I can still hear the rain, but at least the thunder has calmed down, and I try to shake away the chills that want to crawl up my skin.

I pull in a deep breath and focus as I scoot to the end of my seat. Jerif hands me my scythe, and I give him a small smile of thanks for watching over it while I lost my mind. Tazreel has once again taken up residence in the chair directly across the room, and Nefta is leaning against the arm of the sofa as far away from him as she can be.

"When did your parents die?" she asks me calmly, and for a brief moment, I'm grateful that she doesn't do what Taz has been doing, and pretend she's my parent. She's nothing more to me than the person who gave birth to me and then walked away.

“I was nineteen,” I tell her, and she nods solemnly.

The vibe in the room is more sober, and as much fun as having a breakdown in front of everyone is, I’m at least glad that Nefta and Tazreel have stopped bickering. Maybe now I can get some answers.

I stare at Nefta expectantly, and like she knows there’s no getting out of it, she sighs and rubs at the back of her neck. “I am not a warm person,” she begins. “It’s not personal, it’s just who I’ve always been. I was made for battles and strategies...not motherhood,” she explains, and I sit back and give her the space to unfold her story. “Playing with Sin is a rite of passage for us angels. Some will pretend like it’s not, but everyone knows what’s up,” Nefta adds, looking at Louquin like she’s challenging him to say it’s not true. He stays silent, keeping his eyes on the ground, away from her heavy stare.

“I thought I was being careful, that my protections against pregnancy worked for the Fallen just like it worked for other angels, but I discovered that wasn’t the case.”

Tazreel snorts at her use of *Fallen* instead of *Abdicated* like they prefer to be called, but he thankfully stays quiet.

“When I knew for sure I was with child, keeping you was never an option,” she goes on, not shying away from the truth or doing me the disrespect of looking away in shame. “When I discovered who Sophocles *really* was, I also knew that I couldn’t hand you over to Tazreel either. So I did what I thought was best. It sounds as though it didn’t quite work out for you as I had planned, and that’s unfortunate, but I’m not sorry I made the choice that I did. It may not seem like it, but I was protecting you. It was by far what was best for you, and—”

“*Protecting* her?” Tazreel snarls, shooting up to his feet. “What was *best*? No. What would have been best is telling me the truth and affording me my rights as a Sire!”

Nefta snorts incredulously, not at all cowed or affected by Taz’s rage. “You would have used her, bent her to your prideful will. You don’t even know what you’re talking about. You don’t know what she is at her core. You couldn’t have been a good Sire to her any more than I could’ve been a good mother. She’s not some pawn, which you would have made her out to be.”

“Oh, please,” Tazreel scoffs.

“You wouldn’t know what was in anyone’s best interest, aside from your own, if it scythed you across the throat,” Nefta challenges, cutting him off.



“You’re just pissed that I made a decision without you. But what does it really matter? Is this just about your bruised pride? Because we both know you never wanted progeny.”

“You had no right!” Taz bellows, enraged. She obviously pressed the right button for him to be so furious.

“No, *you* had no right,” she snaps, her beautiful face alight with anger. “You were unworthy of her, just like I was. Get over yourself, Pride. I made the right choice.”

“You—”

“Stop! Both of you...just stop!” I shout out, interrupting Taz before they can keep going head-to-head. Surprisingly, they both listen. I grip the scythe in my hand tighter and try to rein in my frustration. “You can fight later about who did what and why it was wrong. It has nothing to do with me right now and honestly doesn’t change a thing.” My eyes swivel to Taz. “Proving that you’ve been wronged doesn’t erase the past or the fact that I am who I am because I was raised the way that I was. With two human parents who I loved.”

I look down at the black wood and metal bands of the weapon in my hands. Pushing through the emotion, I harden my resolve and meet the eyes of the female who birthed me.

“Nefta, can you tell me why the blocks stopped working? Was it because of this?” I ask, holding up the weapon.

She looks at it for a moment with a spark of fondness in her gaze. I try not to feel jealous of the fact that she’s yet to look at me that way. I pause for a moment and examine that thought. Why do I care if she feels anything for me? I keep saying that no matter what I find out, I know who my real parents are, and it’s not the Legion Colonel or the Abdicated Sin in front of me.

Yeah, their blood runs in my veins, but that’s just biology. I don’t know them, and they don’t know me. So why would I expect fondness or emotion?

Still, as logical as I try to be about it, I can’t help but wonder if Nefta ever checked on me or thought about me. Maybe it’s my own emotions projecting, but I struggle to wrap my mind around walking away from a child and just never giving them or their existence a second thought.

“Have you named her yet?” Nefta asks me, a smile picking up at one corner of her mouth.

“Uh...no?” I reply with a little judgment laced in my tone as I give her a concerned side eye. “Should I have? Would that make it listen to me?” I ask.

“*Her*, not *it*,” she corrects. “The scythes have anchored our bloodline since our creation. But no, she didn’t break the blocks I put on you. I’m not sure what did that, but she came to you when you needed her, which is what happens to every female in our line. They come to us because of our blood, and blood bonds us to them.”

With a pop of air, suddenly Nefta holds an identical scythe in her hands. She rubs a reverent palm over the black wood and metal bands of her own scythe, and something about the two weapons in close proximity feels almost...otherworldly. Holy.

“I call her Lark,” Nefta tells me, a hint of a smile in her normally even voice. “She sings as she cuts down the enemy,” she adds, making my eyes widen.

*And here I was thinking, awww, Lark, how pretty. I should have figured the Colonel would have some brutal meaning behind the name.*

“My grandmother had her Rasorium mounted on the wall when I was little. My friends always begged her to tell them stories about it and all they did together,” she explains before glancing over at Tazreel. “I’m surprised Lucifer didn’t tell you about that. I’m assuming he knows about her, doesn’t he?” Nefta asks with a wave in my direction as her tone turns a touch accusatory.

“He was about to tell me everything, but then this *Ophidian* nonsense came up, and he just took off,” Tazreel grumps.

“So what am I then? A Gatekeeper like a Grim?” I ask, but my question comes out at the same time that Nefta says, “The *Ophidian*? What nonsense exactly came up involving the *Ophidian*?”

Tazreel levels her with a look. “You tell us.”

She bristles, her amethyst-colored wings shifting at her back.

I intervene before they can get off-track with arguing again. “The five of us were attacked in the Vestibule by Outer Ringers,” I explain. “They were there to capture me and take me to the *Ophidian*.”

I glance over at my guys, just a physical reaction to reassure my mind that they’re all here with me.

Nefta’s purple eyebrows pull together as she takes in what I’ve told her. “*Ophidian* was the name of the big bad we always fought against when we were playing as children in Heaven. Only four beings would have known that name. Me, Lucifer, Sytry, and Morax. But Sytry and Morax are dead, so either it’s a coincidence or...”

I don't get to hear option two, because all four of my demons suddenly flinch simultaneously. My head whips to the side at the sound of Jerif's grunt at the same time that I hear a sharp intake of air come from Iceman. Echo and Crux are looking at each other, like the blood just drained from their faces.

"What's wrong?" I ask, looking at all four of them with bewilderment and panic. "What's happening?"

"The Gate," Iceman says, and my gaze snaps over to him. "It's being attacked. Our portal is about to be overrun. We have to go."

Dread fills my chest like cigarette smoke. Seeing the panic in their eyes lets me know exactly how serious this is. My head swivels to Taz. "I need you to make us a portal to get back home."

The Pride demon just frowns. "Delta, I am right in the middle of arguing with your birth womb about why all of your issues are her fault, so it's going to have to wait."

I stalk over to him, my boots clipping against the tiled floor until I get right in his face. I look down at him where he sits, because I know this position, more than anything, will piss him off. "I wasn't asking. I'm telling." My shoulders are back and my chin is high, and I stare down at him hard, giving every physical cue I can think of to let him know that this is deadly serious. "Make the portal and get us there. Now. You can argue with Nefta later. Guarding the Hellgate comes first."

The muscle in his jaw jumps as he grinds his teeth together, and just like I knew he would, he quickly gets to his feet so that I can't look down on him anymore. Not physically, anyway.

"I will make you a portal, but only because *I* want to," he says petulantly. "I was growing tired of hearing Nefta, anyway."

The Legion Colonel rolls her Concord grape colored eyes, but I ignore them both. "Get us as close as you can, Taz," I tell him, feeling the need to hurry, solely based on how tense and poised for battle the four demons at my back seem to be.

"Yes, yes," Taz says dismissively before raising his arm, ready to make a portal.

"You may *not* make a portal on Legion territory," Nefta cuts in, one hand still holding her scythe.

Taz scoffs. "I can do whatever I want," he says insolently.

"You absolutely cannot do whatev—"

"Stop!" I shout, cutting them both off. "You two are a fucking nightmare!"

Thank fuck that you gave me away, Nefta, because if I'd had to deal with *this* my whole life, I would have gone bat-shit crazy," I say, shaking my head. "Now, I don't care about your pride or your rules. Stop thinking about yourselves for two seconds and take us where we need to go so we can kick some unauthorized demon Hell Spawn ass!"

They both stare at me. Taz looks put out, offended as usual, but Nefta...I think I see delight in her purple gaze. "I see it now. Your blood sings with battle just as mine does. A family trait," she says before she turns and shoots Taz a look. "What are you waiting for? Get the damned portal up so our progeny can go kick some ass!"

Cursing and grumbling under his breath, he flicks his wrist out to the side, and a seven-foot tall wall of a semi-transparent, metallic veil stretches in front of us.

We don't waste any time. All four of my guys race after me as I sprint straight into it, this time welcoming the feeling of vertigo, because I know it's going to take us where we need to be.

I land hard on the balls of my feet, immediately wrapped in the dark shroud of Sandpiper's night sky, smack dab in the middle of Perdition Estate's long drive. My guys get spit out of the portal right beside me, and we immediately start cutting across the grounds toward the graveyard. My arms pump as I do my best to keep up with the fast pace of the guys, but their strides are much longer than mine, and I have to move twice as fast to keep from lagging behind.

Iceman races ahead of us, his horns glinting in the moonlight, and I focus on him as my personal beacon as we charge into who knows what kind of clusterfuck. Images of Cousin It demons flash through my mind, slowly to be replaced by memories of the different demons at the Vestibule. I have no idea what we're about to run into, but I can't let the uneasiness I feel slow me down.

But with every step I take, apprehension thickens in my veins. True comprehension sinks down into my joints. Fear nudges at my muscles.

I'm heading straight for another demon battle, and the last time I was in one, the guys almost died, and I was almost taken.

Memories of the Vestibule battle plague me as our racing steps crunch on gravel. We skirt around the mansion, heading through a side gate, in the direction of the cemetery.

Time seems to be breathing down the back of my neck, and I'm not sure

if that's just the guys' anxiousness I'm picking up on or if it's something more pushing us to hurry. All I know is, I didn't have the same automatic physical reaction that the guys had. I didn't feel whatever alert they got that let them know the Gate had been breached. But I do feel *something*.

Echo and Crux are both slightly ahead of me now too, and I push to catch back up. Iceman still leads the way, and Jerif is just slightly behind me to my right. I feel like his placement is strategic, and it puts me on edge even more.

I expect my lungs to start burning at any moment in protest, and for my legs to feel overworked with each running step I force them into, but they don't. I'm surprised when my body doesn't seem to have any reaction for my running at all. Yay for my new demon body sans blocks. It's as if I'm on a leisurely Sunday stroll instead of possibly sprinting to my death.

I shove that thought away. No one is dying, not on my side of things anyway. The guys and I will be fine. I'll make sure of it this time. A thrill of anticipation moves through my wings, as though they're agreeing with me. I know I'll need every ounce of physical prowess that I have tonight so that I can protect the Gate, the guys, and myself. The problem is, I haven't exactly test driven this body in battle yet, so I'm not sure what I'm working with.

I clutch my scythe even tighter, hoping it will help guide me and stay glued to me like it did during the battle at the Georgia Hellgate.

"Go faster," Jerif barks at everyone, like we're not running at Mach Cheetah pace as it is.

I shoot him a glare over my shoulder, but he's unfazed as he pushes us on, his flame-colored hair nearly glowing in the moonlight.

"This is as fast as I go," I defend.

"Then dig deeper," he retorts. I want to snap back something smart ass or surly, but instead, I try to do exactly what he says. We all dig in for that extra burst like Jerif's impatience is a whip at our heels.

"Move it," he orders harshly, implying that we're just lollygagging along, making me grit my teeth. Even though his demanding voice suffuses me with anger and frustration, those are emotions I can latch onto. Those things, I can mentally handle—and that's probably why he's doing it. He's making sure I'm focusing on him, on the things I can control, instead of letting my mind come up with all the awful possibilities of what we could be running into.

He's annoying as fuck, but I need the distraction. I hate that I need it, but I do.

I know I signed up for this. I know that this is part of what being a

Hellgate Guardian is all about. Defending the Mortal Realm against unauthorized demons is exactly what my new life entails, but even knowing that, there's still no way to prepare for it. This is happening right now, whether I want it to or not.

"Don't stop," Jerif snarls at me, like he knows the directions of my apprehensive thoughts. If I weren't so focused on not tripping and eating it, I might be able to send him a grateful look for bolstering my confidence in his own special asshole-ish way...or I might have just told him to fuck off. My irritation and appreciation wax and wane when it comes to the scowling lava demon beside me, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

We finally reach the fence line for the cemetery, and all I can think is that whoever created that whole *no portaling within a mile of the Gate* should be punched in the balls. We all stop, silently observing everything around the wrought iron gate, agitation and worry pushing out of us with each exhale.

Everything is quiet.

"What—"

Echo holds a finger up to his lips to signal silence, and at the same time, I see the dark tattoos on his pale skin start to drip down his arms. The dark wisps coalesce around us, shrouding us in shadows, helping to hide us from view.

Everyone's eyes are trained on the eerily quiet graveyard. Alarm and unease crawl across my wings, but I don't see what's setting it off. This is almost worse than just running head-first into a full blown attack.

Iceman glances over at me, shadows clinging to his form, and then reaches up and places his hand over mine where I'm gripping the scythe. He squeezes once, in both a comforting gesture and a touch that reminds me of what I need to do tonight. I give him a nod, though I'm not sure how much he can see while I'm behind a veil of Echo's protection.

Wordlessly, the guys move.

In the same formation as Purgatory, I'm covered from all sides as Iceman pushes open the cemetery gate, and we all walk onto the graveyard's grounds.

We make our way silently, the guys' steps not making a noise as they walk. Echo keeps his shadows around us, but even so, Iceman makes sure to take us on a weaving path from one large tree or crypt to another, hugging the natural pools of black shadows to add to our camouflage.

I have a hard time seeing the guys, but I can feel them on all sides of me,

and that's what I make myself focus on. Heat at my back. Ice at my front. Shadows to my right. Comfort to my left. My scythe in my hand.

My heart pounds in my ears like a battle drum, and I hate that it's all there is to hear.

It seems like it takes ages to walk a very short distance. Iceman leads us meticulously, slowly, purposefully. He doesn't hesitate as he guides our group to pick our way around the jutting headstones, and he doesn't rush us into making a mistake.

The irrational side of my brain can't help but think we're never going to reach the mausoleum. But we do. Just in time for my blood to run cold.

One look at the mausoleum shows me that it's overrun with dark silhouettes of demons. They're just...standing there, gathered around it. I don't know what these demons did to weaken the Hellgate in Hell's Embrace and be able to make it to our portal, but this once peaceful cemetery is now utterly terrifying.

They look more like carved specters in the night than living and breathing Hellish entities. But it becomes very clear right away that something is wrong.

"They're not moving," Iceman whispers, barely loud enough for me to hear.

There have to be at least two hundred of them gathered, and they're not moving or making a single sound. This isn't a balls to the wall, blatant attack like what happened in Georgia at Flint and Alder's portal. These demons aren't simply trying to bust out of Hell and run rampant through the Mortal Realm, gaining power and earthly pleasures. This is something different. It's like...

"They're waiting for something," Echo murmurs, stealing the words right out of my mouth.

And right then and there, I know exactly what that something is.

Me.



**A** million things race through my mind all at once. Who are they? Are they here to kill me or collect me like before? Why? But the one question I can reach out and get a hold of, the one that makes all of this even more alarming is, *how?* How did they come through our portal? I thought my induction was supposed to stabilize the Hellgate and help stop this from happening. I thought that as a Nihil, I'd be just what the Gate needed and we'd be protected.

But as I stand, shrouded in shadows and confusion, staring at demons who look calculated, organized, and determined, it's clear...something has gone terribly wrong.

Iceman looks back, giving each one of us a loaded look. When his icy blue eyes settle on my face, I know what he's saying without him having to speak it. I know what they're *all* saying, as one by one, their gazes lock on me.

Be careful.

Stay alert.

Swing like hell.

And don't you dare fucking stop.

Iceman moves, and we move with him.

In the span of a breath, two long swords made entirely of ice appear in each of his palms as he calls to his power. He tosses one each to Echo and Crux, before making a third for himself and gripping the icy hilt. A flicker of light behind me draws my eye, and I see flames moving over Jerif's hands. I



exhale a deep breath and banish the trepidation in my chest as I face forward, ready as I'll ever be for what's next.

The second we all step onto the path that leads to the mausoleum where Hell's portal awaits, that eerie, unnatural silence finally shatters.

Two hundred demon heads swivel in our direction, and then shrieks rent the air. The noise is so loud and so sudden, I would've involuntarily pissed my pants if anything had been in my bladder.

I cringe as the terrifying noises seem to bounce off every headstone and crypt.

"Get the Scythed One for the Ophidian! Kill the rest!" My head whips up at the shouted order, and I see that the voice came from a demon perched on the roof of the mausoleum, skulking like a gargoyle.

"Stay in formation," Iceman orders, and that's all any of us have time to say, because in the next instant, all two hundred of the demons rush at us.

Flames erupt from Jerif's hands like a volcanic eruption, and Echo's shadows that were once shrouding us from view form into angry tentacles, ready to snatch the attackers in their tendrils and snap some necks. Crux, Iceman, and Echo grip their icy blades, and I'm in the middle of them all, clutching my scythe like my life depends on it, because it absolutely does.

I don't even know at what point my terror activated my scythe's blades to come out, but I stroke the smooth wood, thankful for the wicked, gleaming, demon-ashing weapon. I pray to whatever the fuck I am and the blood flowing through my veins that this will be enough to see us through this. That I won't fail my guys like I did last time.

I don't understand why this is happening, but we'll have to figure it out when this is all over. It's like these demons tracked me here to this portal, and that thought fills me with dread.

We're surrounded in seconds.

The guys try to tighten their formation around me, because I know without a doubt, that their unspoken agreement is to not let these fuckers take me. It's my own unspoken agreement too, just like I'm determined not to let anything happen to them.

I feel more than see the first wave of demons hit. It's like a tsunami of black slamming into us, and all four of the guys stagger into me at the same time. But it seems my guys were waiting for that. Like they've somehow planned this, Crux makes a fist beside his head, and the circle of demons closest to us burst into blood and sinew as their bodies turn inside out. Before

the corpses even finish falling, Jerif makes flames engulf each body, protecting us in a ring of fire.

Iceman lifts a hand in the air, and right outside of the flames, he starts raining down viciously sharp ice. The frosted needles hit the demons' bodies with a sickening noise, slicing through bone and muscle, puncturing organs and taking them down with agonized shrieks and gurgled grunts.

When something dark catches my eye above me, I look up and realize that some of the demons can fly. They have dragonfly wings that look like they're edged in small pointy metal shards with teeth to match, but Iceman is somehow two steps ahead of me. "Echo!"

Immediately, my shadow demon looks up, and his tattoos rush skyward, leaving his skin bare as the shadows converge into a massive, moving sphere above our heads. As soon as every inch of shadow has come together, they split up into several different formations and then snap up, lashing out at our flying assailants. His shadows work quickly. It's not pretty, but it is effective. Necks are snapped and wings are too, making my own press tightly against my back in their own form of a cringe.

One flying demon is able to dodge Echo's shadows, and I track it with my eyes as it heads for Iceman, no doubt to get rid of the threat of the deadly ice shards. Long claws come extending out of its hands as the demon dives for him, but right before it can make contact, I smash my scythe into its shoulder, and he explodes in a puff of ash.

For some damn reason, that first hit of mine seems to take the edge off my nerves. No more dreading what's to come, because the battle is officially here. I'm facing it with renewed purpose, right alongside my guys.

The five of us work in tandem. Crux destroys more demons, turning their bodies into useless lumps of twitching, steaming innards, and then Jerif consumes them with flame, pushing the horde of demons back, making it harder to get to us. Iceman moves his assault out further too, sending more and more blades of ice hailing down in a deadly rain of glazed daggers.

Echo continues to watch the sky, his shadows like phantoms reaching out with spindly hands to send the fliers crashing to the ground where they don't move again. It's hard for me to engage the same way they are, being that they're surrounding me protectively, but I'm not complaining. I'm still able to pick off occasional strays with my scythe's reach, but I have to be very, very careful with where and how I swing so that I don't accidentally hit my guys. But even so, I manage to ash several more demons who break through

the ranks to try to pick one of us off.

But...we're winning.

I try not to feel surprised by that and instead go for a more *fuck yeah* attitude, but there's no denying I didn't expect things to be going *this* well. Despite the fact that there were a good two hundred of them to start with, the guys' powers far outweigh the Outer Ringers' might in numbers.

I know the guys are getting tired. I am too, and I haven't even done very much, but hope surges and we all keep pushing, because we can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The guys are able to spread out a bit more, picking off the last fifty demons with relative ease. By the time the last demon falls, I look around at all the bodies, my torso covered in ash and blood.

"We did it," I pant.

"Wait."

At Iceman's voice, I follow the trail of his gaze until my eyes settle on the rooftop of the mausoleum where that gargoyle-like demon still remains. But now, someone else stands beside him.

He's tall. Broad. With thick, long dreadlocks hanging down from his head and reaching all the way down to his waist, and a pair of mud-colored wings at his back.

He's watching us with glowing eyes, while his gargoyle pet is perched on the edge of the roof, clawed hands scraping into the stone of the wall. Something about the glowing-eyed male screams *Ophidian* in my mind. I don't exactly know why I jump to that conclusion—call it intuition. Maybe it's the feathered wings on his back, indicating that he's different from the rest of our attackers. Maybe it's the predatory gleam in his eyes and the arrogant angles of his too handsome face. But he radiates threat, and I can practically see the doom he wants to mete out, rippling off his well-muscled body.

"Iceman..." I warn breathlessly.

"I see him."

My body tenses as a slow, creepy fucking smile spreads over the Ophidian's face. That's all the warning we get before the gargoyle at his feet tips its head back and roars.

The moment that noise sounds out, a second wave of demons ascends on us.

"Fuck!" Jerif snarls, and that one word confirms my suspicion.

I spot feathered winged beings shooting up into the sky, and other massive demons who seem to have powers and abilities like we do, saunter out of the mausoleum, geared for battle. So far, our attacks have been about weaker demons from the Outer Rings trying to overpower us with sheer numbers. But the demons spilling out of the mausoleum now not only have the numbers, but it's clear they're not all Outer Ringers.

I watch them pour out of the mausoleum like too many clowns out of a tiny clown car. The sight would almost be comical if it weren't so terrifying. All those bodies rush out of the deceptively small space, and I realize what their strategy was—to wear us down, to see how we work together and what powers we use and how.

I thought the last mass of attackers would be it. I was wrong. So wrong.

The gargoyle's roar still reverberates through my chest, the signal for all the other demons to flood out of Hell's Embrace. I thought there were a lot of demons before, but the horde that comes at us now is double what it was, and ice-cold fear and heart-thumping worry floods my body.

“Get back in tight formation!” Iceman barks out, and all four of the guys close in on me again, attempting to prepare for the second wave of attacks, but they're tired, they've expelled a lot of power, and they're scrambling to take up the defensive attacks like before.

Jerif's dying fire gets heightened again, and Crux readies himself to turn more demons inside out. Echo shakes off his tattoos, making them return to the sky, and Iceman waits, wanting to strike at the perfect time for the maximum amount of damage since every strike needs to count.

But all of their careful planning and determination goes to the wayside when the ground shakes and a huge fucking one-eyed demon comes squeezing through the mausoleum doorway, snapping the door right off in the process. At the size of him, I'm surprised he doesn't just knock down the whole damn building altogether.

Like a rat squeezing out of a cage, the giant cyclops crawls out on hands and knees, and then straightens up on bulbous, meaty legs. He looks up at the Ophidian standing on the roof, coming eye-level to him. “Get the Scythed One,” he orders.

The giant doesn't hesitate. It's massive head swivels, though it's a weird sight since the thing doesn't look like it has a neck. As soon as his single eye lands on me, he starts running, not even caring that he mows down some of the smaller demons at his feet.

“Steady!” Iceman shouts as he starts raining down sharp-ended icicles directed right at the giant’s skull. But whatever his rhino skin is made of acts like armor, because the ice just bounces right off of him.

“Jerif!” Iceman calls.

Jerif turns at Iceman’s direction, and the flames on the circle of surrounding bodies get swept away as he launches the fire at the giant that’s still sprinting toward us.

But the fire does nothing. It catches on the giant’s vest and pants, but other than that, it doesn’t affect him at all. Goliath doesn’t even flinch.

The guys don’t have time to plan another way to take him down, because he’s suddenly on us. One great sweep of his arm is all it takes for him to bat Iceman away like a fly.

Another sweep, and he takes out Echo and Jerif before either of them can do a damn thing. Crux moves in front of me and clenches his fist, trying to turn the fucker inside out, but either Crux has exhausted his power or that shit doesn’t work on this rock-faced motherfucker, because nothing happens.

Without the others to help us hold the line, the rest of the demons finally break through. Crux and I get separated, and then it’s just me, facing off with Goliath. I square my shoulders and get ready to swing and ash the shit out of him. If this ugly fucker thinks he’s going to take me, he’s in for a rude awakening.

I hope.

I slash out at him, but he jumps back, clearly on to me and what my scythe can do. I try a couple more times, but just when I think I’m about to nick him, the massive demon manages to dodge my efforts.

Fuck my life, the one-eyed bastard seems smart, which I was not expecting. I personally blame Harry Potter for making me think trolls and giants have little brains. This one has the foresight to realize that if he tries to snatch me up, I’m going to nail him with my scythe. So instead, he kicks me, faster than I can see his foot coming.

I get nailed in the stomach and my body goes flying. My landing is just as painful as the hit. My back collides with a headstone in a crash that would have shattered my body before my trip to Nihil, and I land in a pained heap on the ground.

By the time I can pull in a breath and my head isn’t swimming with stars, there are a dozen demons on top of me, all of them with yellowish skin and jaundiced eyes. They’re only about four feet tall and some of them suffering

from permanently curved spines, but they're strong.

They pin me down, clawed fingers holding me in place, snapping jaws threatening to take pieces out of me if I don't hold still. I can't move my arm or even my fingers around the scythe, and they're all taking extra precautions not to come into contact with the blades.

"Get off, you fuckers!" I yell, trying to buck and force their grips to loosen, but they overpower me, and my mind gets yanked back into the memory of the Vestibule battle when I was pinned down just like this—when similar shrieks and shouts filled my ears, and the smell of blood and fire and ash consumed me.

How did we go from winning to losing so fucking quickly?

I wonder what the hell these demons are waiting for as they continue to hold me still, keeping me pinned to the ground, but then I see it through a gap in their limbs.

The fucking net. The same one they tried to capture me with in the Vestibule.

A new surge of panic pumps adrenaline through my body, and I squirm and writhe for all I'm worth, managing to knock one of the demons off my left arm. It's not my scythe hand, but it's something, and I don't waste it. I lash out, punching my fist out and catching one of the demons over my right shoulder directly in the face. It staggers back, and I opt to let go of the scythe so that I can wrench my right arm free.

I start hammering down my fists left and right, getting bites and scratches in return. By sheer will alone, I throw the demons off and wriggle out from under them, kicking off one of the two demons holding my scythe. As soon as it goes flying back, I dive for the scythe, wrestling it from the second one.

The demon shrieks at me, its tiny, sharp teeth covered in frothy spit as it tries to keep hold of my weapon.

Luckily, I manage to jerk the scythe up, making the straight bottom blade pierce right through his chest, ashing him on contact. I look over my shoulder at my wings. "Let's go!"

The purple feathered appendages immediately spread out, and I am so damn grateful for them in this moment as my feet leave the ground. They flap, and I internally promise them that I will never say another bad thing about them if they can just get me in the air.

I pick up my feet, pressing my knees to my chest, dodging the demons on the ground who are trying to make a grab for me. I get ready to shove my

scythe between my legs and straddle it broomstick style, but before I can really start to soar, a winged demon crashes into me from behind.

I'm barely ten feet off the ground as the demon latches onto my back, and the sudden weight throws me off balance, so I go pitching forward, nearly doing a flip.

"No flying for you," the demon hisses in my ear, and the next thing I know, it's grabbing the top of my right wing in its hands and *snapping*.

I scream as I plummet to the ground, the pain so overwhelming that I can't see or think.

The only good thing is that I land on my back, crushing the skull of the demon still attached to me.

Vomit is at the back of my throat, my stomach lurching from the intense, shocking pain of not only my broken wing, but also my entire body from the fall.

*Get up, Delta*, I tell myself, but the agony is making me see double, so fierce that I can't even draw in a full breath. I know that if I get pinned down again, I won't be getting back up of my own volition.

I clutch the smooth wood of the scythe, force myself to roll over, spitting up bile as I go. My right wing sags crookedly at my back, the other one pulling in tight against my spine, like it wants to bury itself beneath my skin and hide.

I use Jerif's earlier push when we were running to the graveyard to ground me. I push aside the pain and focus on his words to move it, dig deeper, don't stop.

With tears blurring my vision and acid eating away at my bile-coated throat, I spin, letting my body's momentum and the scythe do the work. Puffs of gray dust surround me as the blade cuts through the demons circling me, until they're nothing but a pile of ash.

While I nearly spin myself to the ground, another winged fucker above me attacks, going right for my weak spot. The demon kicks my broken wing, making me scream out in pain.

The demons carrying the net take full advantage of my inertia. Faster than I can even blink, the net is tossed over my body. I get knocked down to my knees with the force of it, but I don't have time to try to get up, because I'm being plucked up by the giant, held upside down by the ends of the net. My body goes rolling, and I feel my arm and cheek get scraped up as my limbs get tangled inside the netting, my wing practically shrieking in torment.

I untangle my scythe enough from the rough, unyielding bindings of the net, gripping it so hard that my fingers ache as I try to breathe through the agony as the giant starts to carry me away. Sweat drips down my face as I try to hack at the material of the netting to cut a hole for myself, every movement jarring more pain to my crippled wing. But the demons obviously planned for this, because my blades do nothing. I don't even make a nick in the hard ropes of whatever this thing is made out of.

I grip one square of the netting, trying with all my might to pull it open or weaken it somehow, but it doesn't budge. Panic pushes me like a bully on the playground, demanding attention. I scream for the guys, but no one can hear me, or if they can, they can't get to me.

When something hits the giant, I go crashing down as it loses its hold on me. The net drops to the ground, jolting me and making me cry out from the force of my landing, my poor wing getting battered, so much hurt radiating from it that I'm not even sure if it's just one break or many.

The giant quickly regains his hold and starts dragging the net through the carnage of the graveyard, heading straight to the mausoleum where I'll no doubt be yanked through the Hell portal to join this fucking Ophidian person and whatever he has planned for me.

But then I hear a strange noise, and when I whip my head around to look through the hole in the net, I see something I never thought I'd see in a million years.

With a battle cry that eerily resembles my own Xena: Warrior Princess call, I see Nefta, in all her Colonel Legion glory, and right there with her is Tazreel, in all his arrogant grandeur.

They're fighting back-to-back, one with a gleaming white sword and scythe, and the other with two stone-black double short swords. They fight fluidly, with a grace and precision that you can only have with a millennia of experience.

It becomes clear that these two aren't just any old angel and demon. They're *more*. It's as if they're the embodiment of Heaven and Hell, and all their might.

One breath, one swing, and they've slaughtered a dozen. Another swing, and demons are flying back, injured and reeling to get out of the trajectory of the two lethal forces. Demons crumble and wither like raisins, without Taz even making contact with them. One raised arm, and blinding light is shooting out of the sword Nefta holds, making demons disintegrate left and



right.

I watch, awed by their power and ability. It's clear from our time in Purgatory together that there's no love lost between these two, and yet, they work so seamlessly together that I might as well be watching some choreographed dance between lovers who have spent a lifetime together.

My attention is forced away when I'm jostled in the net. I refocus back on my predicament, like I'm now looking at it through a new lens. I'm one half of each of those lethal beings. I'm one half Legion of Heaven, and one half Nihil of Hell. I've been punching demon bitches when I should've been figuring out how to crush their fucking souls.

I mean, if that's even a thing.

Either way, I've gotta have some kind of ability other than scythe-wielding in my genetic repertoire...right?

If I do, now's the time to figure it the fuck out.



I focus on the giant demon whose kick rocked my world, while I still try to breathe through the throbbing, sharp wound emanating from the limp wing at my back.

Cyclops holds the net and me tightly in its hands, its eye focused on the mausoleum. I can tell that someone is working to slow the demon carrying me, but I can't focus on who or how, because instead, I'm focusing on the giant's head and mentally taking a pickaxe to it. That doesn't seem to be doing anything though, so I regroup, take a deep breath, and invoke all my energy, willing the dormant power that I hope I have inside of me to come rushing out.

The scythe is still gripped tightly in my hand, but unless I have a demon around to swipe the blade through, it can't help me. I'm getting closer and closer to the mausoleum, and crippling desolation is crawling up my throat, but I shove it aside and instead embrace my rage. For once, I don't try to dispel it. I don't take a calming breath. I welcome it.

I let all the violent fury fill me up, thinking of everything I want to do to these demons attacking us. I call on everything I have inside of me, letting the inky black rage cloud my vision and get me into the zone. I want this giant to hurt like I'm hurt. I want to end it. I want to Jedi mind fuck this bitch into oblivion. I want to...

The massive, one-eyed giant carrying me suddenly freezes. Throwing its head back in a silent scream, black light shoots right out of the giant's mouth. It blinks, and suddenly the dark light is beaming out of its eye too. The

giant's whole body looks oddly phosphorescent, and then out of nowhere, its skin starts to crack. More inky light bleeds through the splits, and then all at once, the giant explodes, and I go hurtling to the ground.

I land on a headstone with an *oomph* and roll off, charred demon bits raining down all around me.

*Holy shit! Did I do that?*

I try to think through the fog of pain wrapping around my mind, but a blinding light-covered sword stabs through the netting still encasing me, and I'm pulled out by Nefta. She's covered in ash and blood just like me, but she has a massive smile on her face, looking radiant and gorgeous as fuck.

"Well done, Delta," she tells me proudly, taking me in with a satisfied nod of her head. Her gold armor gleams in the moonlight, despite the gore and grime covering her. "Shall we give them a show?" she asks, scanning our surroundings, her eyes glimmering with excitement.

I follow her stare and see Inner Ring demons silently surrounding us, like they're either moving into position or getting good seats for a show. When they've all circled around us, they suddenly part, making way for someone. It takes a moment for dark dreads, olive-toned skin, full lips, and mud-colored wings to stride into view.

The Ophidian's eyes glow like a cat's do when light hits them just right. As he moves closer, I realize two things, his eyes are completely white—with the exception of a vertical black slit in the middle for a pupil—and his hair isn't made up of dreads like I thought they were. They're long black snakes attached to his head.

Did Medusa have a hot little brother that the myths forgot to mention or something? Because, damn!

*Shit!*

I look away, suddenly remembering that you're not supposed to look at Medusa or else you risk turning to stone, but when I spot Nefta's purple eyes still affixed on the other demon, I realize that's a stupid thought. I look around in an effort to cover up the panicked eye drop I just did, attempting to adopt the same indomitable mien as Nefta. It's harder to do with the grimace affixed to my face, but I'm in too much pain to make it completely drop away.

"I should have fucking known it'd be you, Morax," Nefta declares calmly as the Ophidian moves cautiously closer and the demons all around us close us off.

I scan all around, looking for the guys or Tazreel, but I don't see anything beyond the Ophidian and the wall of demons watching and waiting. I sweep my eyes over the demon that's been calling for my capture, trying to figure out what the fuck his deal is.

His black snake hair moves slowly around him, like the serpents are coiling together in preparation of a strike. The yellow eyes of the snakes seem to be watching his surroundings as though they're watching the Ophidian's back.

"It's been a long time, Nefta. You look well," the Ophidian, aka Morax, comments, and I'm surprised when his voice isn't a hiss but something more in the realm of James Earl Jones. I fight back the urge to ask him to say, "Luke, I am your Father," and try to get my fucked up head in the game.

Maybe I have a concussion?

I take a deep breath and focus my enraged thoughts on Morax, hoping to test out my new blacklight ability and end whatever this fucker wants once and for all.

She sweeps her purple eyes around the graveyard boredly. "Still feeding into that overwhelming jealousy of Lucifer, I see," she comments evenly, and a tic starts in Morax's jaw.

"Still an arrogant, heartless bitch?" Morax asks Nefta before his white snake eyes land on me.

I'm still trying to blacklight this fucker up, but I'm either not doing it right or it's not working.

"Nice try, little one. I'm immune," he purrs at me, and I have to chase away the goosebumps that want to rise up on my arms like I'm a grumpy old lady armed with a fly swatter. "You know, you could save everyone's life here and cooperate," he adds, and he suddenly doesn't seem so appealing. Nope, there's definitely a creepy stalker, murderer vibe about him now.

"You know, you could just fuck off and then *nobody* dies. There is that," I counter.

He chuckles as if what I'm saying is just too hilarious for him to keep a straight face.

"What are you doing, Morax?" Nefta asks, drawing his attention back onto her. "You're going to try and overturn Lucifer? For what? If you think you're going to change how things are done, you're in for a rude awakening. Heaven will never allow it."

"I guess we'll find out then, won't we?" He strikes out so fast that I can

barely track it. One second, he's ten feet away, and the next, he's right in front of me. "Wait right here. I'll be back for you soon," he tells me, and then out of nowhere, the sound of metal-on-metal starts ringing in my ears as Morax brings a massive sword with a curved blade down to slam against Nefta's light-filled weapon.

The swords hiss as they clash, like the contact hurts them both somehow. They strike and parry, dodge and slash, faster than anything I've ever seen. Nefta and Morax are a whirl of deadly movement, and surprisingly, I hear Nefta laughing as they go, maneuvering around in the demon-made circle. I'm not sure if I respect the badassery of it or if I think she's batshit crazy.

Maybe both.

"You've always been one-sided," Morax growls as he twists back, narrowly avoiding Nefta's Heavenly blade.

I notice that while she has the scythe in her hand, she's not striking out at him with it. I watch them like a double Dutch jumper, just waiting for the right time to sneak in and make my move.

Several of the snakes on Morax's head lash out at Nefta as she steps inside his swing and finally bats at him with her scythe.

"You know you can't reset me," Morax taunts.

"No, but I can end you," she counters with a backhand swing of her sword.

Like a ray of sun breaking through the clouds to light my way, I see my chance. I take three strides forward and swing at Morax's winged back. He whirls around tornado fast until he's facing me. I raise my scythe to swing it toward him, ready to hook around his neck. One quick pull and they can call me the Queen of Hearts, because it will be off with his motherfucking head.

"You don't want to do that, little one," he tells me smoothly, his tone vibrating with an undercurrent of something that makes me pause.

His eyes flash with determination as he takes me in, and I find myself oddly drawn to him. Why am I trying to kill him instead of trying to understand what he needs from me?

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see demons converging on Nefta, but the sounds of the battle that's still raging all around me are muffled. Morax steps closer to me, and I can feel his large hand snake around my waist, making my lips part on a gasp.

"Mmmm, so responsive," he purrs, and he's so close I can feel his breath on my mouth. I lean in, my eyes staring at his face greedily.

My scythe is hanging limply at my side, and something about that pulls me from my thoughts of Morax's full lips and why I don't want to kill him. I stare down at the blades, feeling like there's something really important that I'm supposed to do with them, but I can't for the life of me remember what.

"You're so ripe for the picking, it's almost wrong. Too bad I've never cared much for wrong or right. You're so quick to abandon your will," he says, his hand cupping my cheek and his thumb grazing gently over my lips. "Not even an ounce of fight," he observes, tilting my head back as his white snake eyes study my face and trace the lines of my lips. "You *want* to be owned, don't you?"

Bewilderment sparks somewhere inside of me. I'm not sure exactly where it comes from, just that it's there. Morax leans down like he's going to kiss me, but instead of responding to that like it's a good thing, all I can think is that he's not one of my Guardians. I don't want to be kissing *anyone* but them.

Their images flash through my mind as the Ophidian's chest presses against mine. I can feel my heart steadily beating, and that strikes me as odd too. When my demons touch me, hold me, my heart always picks up the pace with excitement. But now, it's almost like it's anesthetized.

*Will.*

*Fight.*

*Owned.*

The words rise to the surface of my foggy brain, and I clench my hands as I become aware of the scythe again.

This is wrong.

He's not...them.

In a move so quick it rivals the speed of the demon who's somehow fucked with my mind and is closing in on my lips like a predator does prey, I flip my scythe in my hand so the straight blade is leading. Morax tracks the movement, but I'm sinking the blade into his chest before he can so much as try to take a step back from me.

My eyes widen on the spot where my blade pierces his flesh. I expect him to turn to ash, but he doesn't. He doesn't even flinch or gasp in pain. Confused and panicked, I pull the end out of him and step back, flipping the scythe again so I can get him with the curved blade now that there's space between us and room for me to use the other end.

He blocks the second strike like he's swatting away an annoying bug.

Black blood pools onto the fabric of his shirt, but instead of acknowledging it in any way, he reaches down and adjusts himself. I quickly look away from the bulge in his pants.

“You’re stronger than I thought,” he tells me with a lascivious grin, need glimmering in his unusual eyes.

Unease churns inside of me as alarm bells sing in my head. I can feel all the wrongness that’s wrapped around him like a cloak. I don’t know who this dude is or what exactly his power is that he used on me, but fucked up doesn’t even begin to cover it.

“I’m going to have the best time playing with you.”

That creepy smile on his face goes hand in hand with my need to vomit. I feel rattled and violated, and all he’s doing is looking at me. All at once, his snake hair looks at me, and they start writhing around in some kind of weird ass hypnotic dance.

“It’s time to go now, little one. Take my hand.” He reaches out, palm up, and once again, I’m completely discombobulated.

*It’s time to go.*

Frowning, I reach for him, but before I can close the distance between us and slip my palm into his, a winged being slams down between us, and a cloud of dirt and grass goes flying out all around us from the impact.

“That is my daughter you are fucking with, Snake Charmer,” Tazreel growls, his blond wings held out proudly on either side of him.

Taz’s voice yanks me from the confounding venom Morax keeps slipping into my head. *How the fuck is he doing that?*

“Why, Pride, it’s lovely to finally meet you. Any friend of Lucifer’s is an enemy of mine,” he jokes.

Tazreel and Morax go at it.

They clash together like two ocean waves battling for control over the sea. I feel their impact through the ground. They hit hard, and this time, no one is laughing.

I look over to find Nefta practically standing on a hill of bodies as she continues to fight relentlessly against the demons who surrounded us. I abandon my spectator status of Tazreel and Morax’s showdown. I want to get as far from the Ophidian as possible. He scrambles my brain, and I feel like I can’t trust myself with him.

I scan for my demons. I haven’t seen them since I was drop-kicked earlier. I was supposed to look out for them, and instead, I got myself netted

and just almost left willingly with the enemy. I need to find Jerif. Maybe I can convince him to punch me in the face to knock some sense in me, or at least tell me what the fuck my problem is.

Out of nowhere, something wraps around my waist, and I'm yanked to the left, like one of those old time acts who get hooked off the stage if they're bad. Before I can so much as scream, I slam into Echo's chest and his arms wrap around me.

His hold makes me cry out, and he immediately drops his arms. "Shit, are you okay? Where are you hurt?" he asks me, his shadows running over my body like they're checking for injuries.

My teeth are clenched as I try not to hurl, and I suck in a breath to try to mentally separate myself from the pain. "My wing," I manage to say, and Echo moves to look, hissing out an exhale when he sees. "Shit, Delta. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have hugged you until I checked..."

"It's okay," I assure him as I reach down and squeeze his hand.

"Maverick, Echo, over here!" Iceman yells, and our heads snap to the right to find him twenty feet away, shattering frozen demons where they stand. Echo and I head over, trampling over dead bodies in an effort to get to him. There are so many eviscerated, broken pieces of deceased demons everywhere that I start ashing bodies just to make it easier to navigate the battlefield that was once a tranquil graveyard.

A flash of flame shoots in a straight path toward Iceman, and I see Jerif making his way over too, making another surge of relief hit my soul. Neither of them look injured, but they do look exhausted. I search around us for Crux, apprehension bubbling in my stomach.

*Not again, not again,* I keep chanting to myself, trying to push thoughts of the Vestibule away. He's okay. He has to be. If the others are on their feet, he is too somewhere. I won't let myself think otherwise.

Getting to Iceman is slow going. I feel like I'm wading through molasses while also fighting off stray demons here and there, but every swing of my scythe sends another lightning strike of agony down my wing. I can tell Echo tries to take down every attacker so that I don't injure myself more, but his power is exhausted. All he has left are a few semi-transparent wisps to work with and the ice sword in his hand looks about a foot shorter than it used to be.

Eventually, we make it to Iceman. "Broken wing," I blurt before quickly smashing my face against his chest and curling my arms around him. He



barely stops himself in time from wrapping his arms around me and touching my wing. I have to force myself to pull away because the fight's not over yet, and I can't let myself shut down or bask in his hold.

As soon as Iceman's eyes land on the break in my wing that I probably don't want to see, he reaches down, and without warning, sends a sharp rush of cold at the spot. I suck in a surprised breath at the pain, but in the next blink, it's replaced with numbness. "Better?" he asks, and I nod gratefully.

"Yeah."

A warm hand tugs at my arm, and then I'm being spun around and Jerif is pulling me against his hot chest, his hands carefully staying on my hips as he holds me to him. I feel like warm laundry fresh out of the dryer is giving me a hug, only it smells like sulfur and blood. Jerif pulls back after a beat, but then a figure pops up on my left out of nowhere. It smells horrible, and I swing at it, pissed that it's trying to fuck with my reunion.

"Jeter, it's me!" Crux shouts out, and my eyes go wide with surprise, and I stop my scythe from delivering a blow just in time.

Crux is covered head-to-toe in gore. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he just bathed in the blood of his enemies. His green eyes are prevalent, but that's the only thing not tainted by the stamp of demon innards.

"Dude!" I say, shocked at his state.

"I know. It's a messy job, but someone has to do it," he teases.

Relief finally washes through me at the fact that all four of my Gate Guardians are here. Crux opens his arms for a hug, so I pinch my nose and lean in, patting at him on the back with the safe wood part of my scythe.

He chuckles as I pull back. "When this is all over, I'm going to chase you around until you give me a proper battle kiss."

"Cool, just hose yourself off first," I suggest before taking another step back, just in case he tries to tackle-hug me right now. I mean, we're still technically in the middle of a battle, but I wouldn't put it past him.

Nefta's warrior scream fills the night air once again, interrupting our moment, and I look over to see that once again, she's working with Tazreel, and they're both fighting Morax now.

"Let's go kill that fucker," I snarl as I start stomping off toward the fight. Iceman's icy-numbness did wonders to help, and now I no longer feel like vomiting every time I move.

"I love it when you get all ruthless," Echo says as they all move to join me.

“Just don’t let him fuck with my head, okay?” I tell them, but before anyone can reply or ask what I mean, a roar reverberates all around us, and our heads snap in the direction of the mausoleum. The gargoyle is still on the roof like some kind of battle announcer, and it seems like he’s calling any surviving demons back to the Gate, because the horde starts to retreat.

“May I?” Jerif asks, eyeing my scythe and holding his hand out expectantly. I hand it over, and he flips it until the straight blade is facing down. All of a sudden, the curved blade folds down, and in three strides, Jerif chucks my Swiss Army scythe through the air. It moves like a spear through the night and, in a poof, hits its gargoyle target right in the chest, instantly turning him to ash.

“How did you do that?” I ask, shocked and a little jealous that the scythe listened to him and transformed easily into what he wanted it to.

“I just told it what to do in my head,” he answers with a shrug, like it’s as easy as that.

I huff out a sigh and look out at where my scythe-spear is now sticking out of the mausoleum roof. Walking stick, broomstick, spear...that thing is seriously versatile. I just need it to work with me.

“Come,” I call to it, holding my palm up expectantly.

Nothing happens.

“Come on, don’t make me look bad! Heel!” I tell it in my best alpha bitch commanding voice.

Still nothing. It just stands there proudly, straight blade stuck into the pile of ash on the rooftop like it’s claiming territory.

I huff out an exasperated breath.

Nefta’s voice pops up in my mind. “*Have you named her yet?*”

I don’t let myself debate the merits of naming the weapon, I just decide to go with the first thing that pops in my head. It probably won’t work anyway. I think my scythe likes me nice and annoyed.

“Queen of Hearts, get your ass back down here!” I order it.

And what the fuck do you know...the scythe disappears from the roof of the mausoleum and reappears in my hand less than a millisecond later.

*Well, shit.* Looks like this little lady just got a name.

I beam at it, feeling a part of my heritage snapping into place. “Come on,” I tell the guys, and the five of us rush forward, but most of the demons are either dead or running. They heard the gargoyle’s signal, and the mass that was still pushing to surround the Ophidian protectively are now racing

toward the mausoleum to escape through the portal.

“Jerif, with me. We’ll head them off!” Iceman calls, and he and Jerif race toward the mausoleum, ready to cut down the demons who are daring to run away with their tails between their legs. The last thing we want is to let them go to regroup and attack again.

Echo, Crux, and I continue making our way to where Nefta and Taz are fighting Morax. As soon as we get closer, I can make out the three dark silhouettes, made easier by the fact that night is waning.

Nefta has a long, bloody gash in her thigh, making her limp, and Taz is holding one short sword now with his left hand, while his right hangs strangely, like his shoulder has been popped out of joint. The three of them are a blur of movement as they attack, then move away from each other, readying to parry again.

Every time Nefta and Taz try to get Morax stuck between them, the slippery medusa demon moves away or attacks, forcing them to both face him head-on again. With a ruthless swing of his sword, he tries to take off Taz’s head, which Pride barely is able to stop from happening by a quick side step, forcing Nefta to jump out of his way before he bowls her over.

Morax takes advantage of her split-second unsteady stance. He moves in, but instead of him trying to attack her, grabs her by the face and presses his lips to hers.

She’s so stunned for a moment that she doesn’t move, which I’m sure is exactly what he was counting on. As soon as she gets her wits about her, she brings up her sword with fire in her eyes, but the fucker dodges her with a graceful spin that I’m surprised he’s capable of.

Nefta is fit to be tied as she spits at the ground, like his kiss offended and disgusted her. “You’ll pay for that,” she declares, vengeance dripping from her tone.

“Come now, Nefta. You always liked playing Seven Minutes in Hell with me when we were younger,” he says with a wicked grin, his teeth flashing in the lightening sky.

“AHH!” She warrior cries toward him, but it seems he was expecting her to lash out in anger, because he’s ready for it. With a precise, aimed kick at her middle, he sends her shooting back, where she lands against a tree, the force of it cracking the trunk on impact. She crumples to the ground and doesn’t get back up.

Taz tries to rush him, but once again Morax deflects the sword and

renews his defense and attack. Without another moment of hesitation, I skirt around the edges of their mock-fighting ring, careful to keep my steps even and quiet. I'm going to scythe this bastard, once and for all.

"We've got your back," Crux says quietly as he and Echo follow behind me.

The moment Morax's back is turned, I close the distance.

*Let's try this again!*

I lift my scythe and swing like it's a Louisville Slugger. Morax spins, catching the wood in his grip, and my momentum is suddenly cut off as he presses his own blade against my chest, aimed right at my heart. I freeze as do the guys behind me...but so does Morax.

Because Taz is holding a blade to his throat.

"Drop it," Taz snarls, and to my surprise, Morax actually does.

The blade falls to the ground with a thud, and Echo immediately kicks it away, out of reach.

The snakes hiss and snap at Taz, but one growl from Morax and they instantly calm. Morax clearly doesn't want them provoking Taz into slicing his head off his neck.

"Hands on your head and drop to your knees," Taz orders.

The Ophidian does that too, though he has a manic grin on his face that makes me uneasy. "Not the first time you've said that, huh, Pride?" he mocks.

Luckily, Taz doesn't rise to the bait, and he's careful to keep his blade pressed tightly against Morax's throat. "Tell me why you want Delta."

Freaky white eyes snap up to me from the ground. "Because of her bloodline, of course."

Taz nods. "Because she's half Abdicated Pride and half Angelic Legion?"

The Ophidian lets out a laugh that sounds more like a hiss. "You don't know, do you?" He looks to me next, and when he sees the confusion on my face, it makes more of that unnerving laugh fall from his lips. "Oh, this is even *better*."

Taz doesn't enjoy being out of the loop, and I have to admit, I'm with him on this one. He leans down, wrenching Morax's head back with a vicious yank of his snakes, making the creatures hiss and shriek. "Tell me!" he demands, the blade cutting into his skin and sending a dark trickle of blood down his throat.

"Yes, she's half Heaven, half Hell," Morax tells him, his voice slightly

strained from the angle Taz is holding him. “But she’s so much more than that.”

Iceman and Jerif slip in beside me, just in time for me to send my guys an uneasy look.

Morax settles his eyes on me again. “Funny how your mother hasn’t told you. But then, she always did like to keep family secrets.”

I don’t know what to make of that, and it’s obvious that Taz doesn’t either.

“What were you going to do with Delta?” he asks again.

“Use her, of course,” Morax says with a slight lift of his shoulder. “Heaven, Hell, the Mortal Realm...it’s all wrong. Untapped. Wasted. I’m going to change that. My new realm is ready to take over, and she’s going to help me do it. You all will be kneeling to me very, very soon. Now, hold still.”

Morax’s voice has that eerie edge to it again, and in the next breath, I can’t move.

No one can.

Terror slams through me as Morax climbs to his feet and dusts himself off. He takes a step toward me, and I know I’m beyond fucked. I thought that Taz was immune, but it looks like I was wrong.

“You dare to fuck with free will...*Ophidian*?” Tazreel snarls, only it’s not Tazreel’s voice that shreds out of his throat. It’s Lucifer’s.

I blink, and Tazreel’s body somehow unfreezes while the rest of us are still completely stuck.

Morax’s focus snaps to the Prince of Darkness who seems to be wearing my sperm donor’s body at the moment. “Late to the party, as usual,” Morax snarks evenly, but I notice his body is stiff and his snakes writhe like they’re agitated...or nervous.

“I know what you’re doing,” Lucifer says with a head shake and disappointment in his eyes. “I thought you were smarter than that. But then again, I also thought you were dead, so go figure.”

“Oh, Bearer of Light, you’ve gotten complacent in your old age. I think it’s time for new management,” Morax declares as he steps back, careful not to let the Tazreel-wearing-Lucifer get too close.

Lucifer smiles and tsks his tongue, casually and very subtly, moving closer to me and pushing Morax further away. “I may not be able to physically set foot in the Mortal Realm to teach you the proper lesson that

you deserve, but then again, I don't have to." The Devil himself pauses for dramatic effect. "The realm you created against the Accords—the one you thought you'd hidden and have been exiling demons to without permission—is being purged by the Angelic Legion and Hell's army as we speak," Lucifer explains casually.

Morax's face goes from calm and unaffected to furious in a single millisecond. He takes a threatening step toward Satan, but then seems to think better of it. His milky-white snake eyes flash to me, and I see the realization dawn on him that Lucifer has expertly herded him too far away from me for him to make a grab and run.

Thankfully, I can sense movement returning to my limbs too, so whatever Morax did is wearing off.

"Off you go now, Ophidian. This is once again a game you simply cannot win. Run while you can, because you're officially being hunted by the wings of Heaven *and* Hell...and now you have no army," Lucifer coos at him like it's just the saddest thing he's ever heard. Meanwhile, his eyes scream *when I find you again, you're going to wish I never had.*

"I'll see you soon, Little One," Morax aims at me, the look in his eyes making my blood run cold. "The Adversary isn't always watching like you think."

With that, Morax's mud-colored wings rocket him up into the sky, and he quickly disappears. I can't track where he goes, and I'm surprised that he doesn't aim for the mausoleum portal and what remains of the demons who retreated from the fight.

"Niece!" Lucifer commands, pulling my focus back to him. "Taz is going to pass out when I give him back his shell. As soon as he wakes, tell him I need him in Nihil. And tell Nefta to stop fucking around and explain what you are," he orders. "I'll see you soon. Hopefully with good news."

Lucifer winks at me, using Tazreel's eye, and then a shudder goes through him. Just like that, Lucifer leaves Tazreel's body, and he collapses to the ground, out cold. I stare at him on the blood-soaked ground, and then my eyes track over to Nefta who's still lying at the base of the cracked tree. I see my Guardians making small, jerky movements, trying to fight off the last of the power that Morax used on us.

Everything around me is silent, like even the crickets and wind are reeling too much to dare make a sound. My body regains control, but I remain frozen, just standing there as I try to make sense of it all.

I can't.

I have no idea what in the name of Hell just happened.



**J**erif lays Tazreel's body gently on the fainting couch, while Iceman places Nefta on a larger sofa that's been angled toward the lit fireplace. I recognize the room we're in from my first night in the mansion. I woke up on the very same fainting couch after Iceman paused me against my will. Yeah, maybe I was having a slight freak out about the whole demon thing, but still, it was uncouth as fuck.

I study Taz's oddly serene face, hoping he'll be waking up from his slumber very soon. I suspect when he does, he won't be any happier about the whole fainting couch thing than I was.

I look around the room, and my eyes land on the shadow-shrouded corner that I remember Echo walking out of before I had accepted what I was. It's a strange full circle moment, and I'm not sure exactly how I feel about it.

Really, that shouldn't come as any surprise though, because I have no fucking clue how I feel about *any* of this.

Grumpy Lurch is being surprisingly not-hostile about the amount of demon gore that's being tracked into the house, but he is quick to tell us that Nefta and Taz will wake in time when they're healed, and that he'll keep a close eye on them while the rest of us clean up.

I'm in a bathroom in a blink with no recollection of how I got there, because my body is just moving on autopilot. I strip out of my clothes and step into the warm spray of a shower, like I've activated zombie mode. I couldn't tell you if I scrub myself or if someone else does it for me, because I can't seem to focus on anything other than replaying tonight's cluster fuck of



events over and over again and the answers I received—answers that just form more questions.

*The Ophidian.*

*The realm he created.*

*What I am.*

It all just plays on a loop right alongside every second of the battle, and I can't seem to escape from it all.

Is Morax a God? How else could he have created another realm? I thought only Gods could do that. But if he is, then why would he need me? Shit, am *I* God? I snort at that, because now I'm just sounding like Tazreel in all his arrogant glory.

I replay his confessions in my mind. No, this isn't about existing Gods. This is about Morax wanting to become one. Dude has a serious God complex.

So now what?

I try to answer that question repeatedly, but nothing I put together feels right or safe. There's too much that I'm missing, and I need Nefta to wake the fuck up and fill in the missing pieces.

Still lost in the recesses of my mind, I'm lurched back into the present when pain suddenly ricochets through me. Shock wrenches from my lips as I surface from my deep pool of thought with a screech. I come to with Iceman's hands on my broken wing, soothing the now straight line where he reset the bone. I Lamaze-breathe through the rebounding pain, tears dripping freely down my cheeks.

Fuck, that hurt.

"Warn a girl next time!" I growl at him between clenched teeth.

"We did. It's not our fault you went all unresponsive on us. We couldn't just leave it to heal fucked up like it was," Jerif barks back.

I realize that all the guys are freshly showered and donning various lounge worthy clothing. I'm sitting on the edge of a silvery bed, wrapped in a silk robe with the back cut out for my wings. I don't even remember getting out of the shower.

The shakes are setting in, either because Iceman's touch is cold, or maybe the shock and adrenaline are finally wearing off. I suspect it's the latter.

"I'm sorry," I say as I bring my hand down my face, wiping away the tears and catatonic frustration.

"You don't have to be sorry, Jeter," Crux tells me as he sits down on the

bed beside me. “We just want you to talk to us.”

“And to stop shaking,” Jerif says with a scowl, as if my shivers are personally offending him. I give him a wry look as he makes the flames in the fireplace roar three times bigger and start putting off some major heat. Iceman sidesteps away from the flame.

“Thanks,” I tell him, grateful for his surly ass. “How long will it take my wing to fully heal?” I ask the room.

“Not long. A few hours, I think. You could be healed instantly if you stepped into Nihil, but I suspect you don’t want to go to Hell right about now,” Iceman tells me.

“You’re right about that,” I mutter. The only demons I want to see are these four and Taz.

I look over my shoulders and give my wing a soft stroke. It seems to sigh against my back at the touch. The pain is still there, but it’s cold and throbbing, slightly numbed again from Iceman’s handiwork.

When I look back at the guys, they’re all giving me strange looks. “What?” I ask.

“I thought you hated your wings,” Echo muses, giving my hand that’s still petting my feathers a pointed look.

I narrow my eyes and drop my hand. “We’ve seen some shit together now,” I reply. “They tried to get me away and got broken in the process. That’s some ride or die shit.”

Echo and Crux chuckle while I scoot back on the bed, feeling suddenly exhausted. “How long do you think until Taz or Nefta wake up?”

Iceman shrugs. “Could be hours, could be days. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Fuck, I’m tired,” I admit. “Is that normal?”

“We haven’t seen or fought against anything of this magnitude before. We’re all completely wiped,” Iceman confesses.

I look over at each of them and notice the exhaustion etched in their features. Their eyes are hollow and their bodies in desperate need of sleep. It feels weird to want to crash after all the insanity that just happened, but I feel so run down that I can’t even process anything properly. I’m sluggish and overwhelmed, but there’s so much to do. We have to figure out how to protect ourselves and pinpoint what went wrong.

I just don’t know how.

“Sleep, Maverick,” Iceman offers, as though he knows I need

encouragement. “Strut will come get us as soon as Nefta or Tazreel are awake. We’ve all been through a lot, and we can’t solve it right now at this moment, especially if we’re dead on our feet.”

I nod in agreement, but I still feel weird about the need to just shut down and deal with everything later.

“Our problems aren’t going anywhere,” Echo assures me, and with that, I finally let loose the yawn that’s been building in my throat.

I don’t think I’ve ever been so exhausted in my life. I crawl into the bed and almost moan at how warm and inviting it feels. I want to worship the shit out of it, sing its praises with the snores of deep sleep, and give it drool offerings in trade for good dreams where all the snakes in the world die.

I look over at the guys and notice they’re kind of awkward and fidgety in a sloth-like *I’m about to fall asleep on my feet* kind of way.

“What?” I ask with budding apprehension.

“We should rest, too,” Iceman says carefully.

“Okay...”

Crux scratches the back of his blond head. “Ah...do you want to sleep in here alone, or...”

Brow furrowed, I look at the four of them with confusion until realization dawns on me. They all want to stay with me, but they aren’t sure how *I* feel about that. I think they expect me to pick one of them and kick three of them out. Fuck that.

I know we haven’t discussed this, or really *any* part of our unique relationship, but the last thing I want is to be separated from any of them right now.

I settle, becoming one with the mattress, and then pat either side of me. “Will you guys stay with me?” I ask.

Echo and Crux are already in the bed before I can finish my sentence. I laugh as they both aim for the same spot on my left, running into each other in the process. They shove and elbow at each other, trying to get the upper hand as giggles rent through me, my spirits feeling instantly lighter.

“Easy with her wing. Don’t jostle her,” Iceman says as he comes around on my right side.

Echo and Crux immediately stop shoving each other. Echo uses Crux’s pause to his advantage and slips onto the bed at my left, blocking Crux with a cocky grin.

Crux rolls his green eyes and then stretches out on the bottom of the bed

on his back, picking up my feet and laying them on his muscled stomach. He starts to massage the arches, making me groan. “Oh man, that feels so good.”

Crux snorts, giving my arch another squeeze. “Hmm, I think you said that to me before...”

I kick him playfully, earning a little, “Oomph.”

Iceman settles on my right, moving his leg beneath mine to tangle together comfortably, while Echo’s arm gets slung over my middle. I trace his pale skin, noting that all of his tattoos are gone. It looks strange to see him without them—I’ve gotten used to them constantly shifting and sitting around his skin. “When will your shadows come back?” I ask, feeling a pang of anxiety at the fact that he’s so depleted because he overworked his power so much that all his shadows are gone.

“Just a few hours, don’t worry,” he assures me before flinging his other arm over his eyes, his feet half hanging off the bed.

Iceman tosses a pillow down to Crux, who catches it with one hand and stuffs it under his head. My eyes skate over to my lava demon, who’s still standing at the foot of the bed, dark arms crossed over his chest, his flame-colored hair completely dry from the shower, just like my own hair and wings. I have a feeling he fire-dried me without me even realizing it.

He looks at me in challenge, and I give him a sigh. “Can you not be difficult right now?” I tell him. He just stares at me, of course, because Difficult is his middle name. “Get your hot ass in bed so I can get some sleep, or else I’m going to turn as cranky as you.”

“Looks like the bed is pretty fucking full,” he gripes.

“Oh, come on, there’s plenty of room. Unless you’re scared of a little cuddling?” I tease.

He rolls his fiery eyes, but he steps around the bed, just like I knew he would. Jerif can’t back down from a challenge.

“Move,” he snaps at Echo, but my shadow demon just gives him the finger without removing the arm that’s slung over his eyes.

Jerif places a knee on the bed and then maneuvers himself until he’s lying parallel to the padded headboard behind us, forcing Echo and Iceman to scoot down a bit, which makes Crux grumble about having their feet in his space. I laugh again as the four of them get situated. It’s a bit like a picky kid not wanting any of their different foods to touch on their plate.

Finally, after way too many minutes of them fucking with one other and being purposely obnoxious by shoving feet and elbows into each other, they

settle down. Jerif plops a feather pillow in his lap for me to lay my head on, and I curl up on my non-injured wing side, basking in the feel of the four of them boxing me in. We each drop off into sleep within minutes, our steady, even breaths a soundtrack to my heart, reminding me that even though the Ophidian got away, we made it out alive, and that's what matters most.

---

“Maverick, wake up.”

I get shaken awake by a gentle, cool hand, and my gray eyes blearily lift open.

I realize that I'm the last one still sleeping in the bed, and I rub my eyes as I sit up, noting immediately that my wing no longer hurts, not even with a dull throb. I glance at the arched top of it, and the feathered appendages spread out like they're stretching after a long sleep. “It's healed,” I say with a bit of awe.

“Yes, it healed well,” Iceman tells me, and I notice that he's fully dressed in a gray button up and black slacks. “Sleep did you good.”

I look at the ticking clock hanging up on the powdery blue wall and see that it's late afternoon. I must've slept for a good nine hours or so.

“Where are the others?”

“They went to get dressed. Nefta just woke up,” he tells me.

I immediately throw my legs over the side of the bed and stand. I'm still in the silk robe I fell asleep in, and I'm not sure where my clothes ended up, but I doubt Grumpy Lurch had the time to clean them already. “What can I wear?” I ask.

Of course, Iceman is always one step ahead. He nods over to a white wood table near the curtained window, and I walk over to it, finding a dark blue sleeveless crop top and a pair of soft jeans. There's even underwear this time. No bra, but I don't even know what size I am anymore or how I'd snap one on with my wings, anyway.

“Where'd you get these?” I ask with surprise as I start pulling my underwear and jeans on beneath the robe.

“We had Strut go pick some things up, just to hold you over until we can go to your house and get your things.”

I pause right before I undo the belt holding the robe closed and look over

at him. “My things?”

His icy eyes are latched on where I’m holding the tie in my hands, like he’s just *waiting* for me to finish undoing it. I’m suddenly all too aware that only fabric separates my naked body from his. The sexual tension in the air thickens, and my vagina makes it known how uncool it is that Iceman and I haven’t had a chance to be together yet. I ache for him, not just physically, but in my soul. I want to connect with him on that intimate level. I just need life to stop trying to fuck with me so I can fuck with Rafferty in all the ways I want to.

I’ve had an automatic easy friendship with him ever since we first talked on the graveyard radio. We connected in this seamless way that just felt as easy as breathing. The more I got to know him and observe him, the more my respect and appreciation grew. He’s one of the best people I know, and he takes on the heavy responsibility of leadership with grace and patience.

I think I fell in love with him the moment he found me in my wrecked kitchen with my wrecked heart, and then he took care of them both with such care and gentleness. There was no judgment or need to fix my broken pieces. He simply accepted me, jagged bits and all.

Iceman finally seems to remember that I asked him a question, and his gaze comes back up to my face. “Yes, your things. I thought...I mean, we thought that you’d like to move in here with us?”

Worry etches the lines of his blue face, but my smile quickly eases it. “I would love to,” I say quietly before stepping over to him and wrapping him up in a hug. I let myself close my eyes and just breathe him in for an indulgent moment, relishing in the feel of his cool chest against my cheek as his arms wrap around me.

“I want to keep my house though,” I tell him. “It’s my parents’ house, the last thing I have left of them, and I can’t let it go.”

“We would never want you to,” he tells me, drawing me away so he can tip my head up to look at my face. “Which is why we already paid off the first and second mortgages. It’s yours. Free and clear, and no one can ever take it away from you.”

My mouth drops open, and my brain can’t seem to decide if it wants to dive into *holy shit* mode, feel incredulous, or pretend it doesn’t comprehend what’s going on. I shake my head, propriety demanding that I reject this gesture because it’s too much. I’m not the kind of girl who can let people do something like that for me. But then I realize that I’m not just some kind of

girl, I'm a demon, and I'm in love with these Guardians. I'm not going to question the why or how of it, or taint their beautiful gesture by being anything but completely grateful.

Tears immediately fill my eyes, and I stand on the tips of my toes to press my lips against his. My kiss is reverent and filled with pure gratitude and appreciation. I don't know what I'd do without him...without any of my demons.

His hands come up to cup my cheeks, and his lips just as gently press against mine. The kiss starts out like a soft cool breeze on a warm spring day, but it doesn't take much for me to want to dive all the way into his cool lips. I thread his long beautiful blue hair through my fingers, gently grazing his horns as I wordlessly ask for more. He responds without hesitation and kisses me deeper, sweeping a cold tongue against mine and making me gasp.

The ache I feel for him blazes into a full blown blizzard of need, and all I can think about right now is how much I want us to explore each other with our mouths and hands. I want to feel his naked cool skin against mine and stare into his deep-ocean eyes as he fucks me. I want to discover which positions we like, what his skin sounds like slapping against mine, and what he looks like as he comes.

I have so many questions that can only be answered by his body being in mine and us finally being together in all the ways that we want, but life...is a prick.

Iceman pulls away and leans his cool forehead against mine. We both pant, and I can't help but run my palms up his well-muscled torso. He cradles my head and smiles, like he can read my mind, and then places a kiss on my nose before stepping back. "Soon," he promises, and the dark rumble of his voice makes me have to press my legs together.

"Just a quickie?" I ask, unable to pull away from his too tempting body.

Iceman chuckles. "I want to take my time with you, Maverick. Spend hours learning your body, making you come. I need time to wring the level of pleasure from your body that I want to. I will soon. You can count on it."

I'm pretty sure if he just keeps talking like that, I'll come, but I don't press my luck. We have answers that we need, and who knows how long we can keep Nefta here to get them.

I sigh forlornly and Iceman chuckles at the sound.

I walk back to grab the shirt as I quickly drop the robe. I step into the crop top, pulling it all the way up and over my chest. It fits snugly against my

perky girls, showing off my peaked nipples that seem intent on trying to get Iceman to play with them. I try to pep talk my lady bits that if all goes well, we can have Iceman strip us out of these clothes later.

“Ready?” he asks, his voice huskier than normal.

“Yes,” I reply as I turn around to face him, and my hooded eyes let him know that I’m not talking about Nefta.

He smiles again, looking so damn handsome that I know my nipples aren’t going to go down any time soon. “Patience,” he chides teasingly before reaching down and grasping my hand to pull me out of the room and into the hall.

“Whose room was that, by the way?” I ask curiously as I walk beside him.

“Yours, if you want it. But you can pick any of the available rooms. That one is the largest...though I think we’ll need to get a bigger bed.”

I laugh. “Yeah, I think so too.”

I picture four King mattresses pushed together and me, just lifted and rotated to each demon throughout the night for snuggles. It’s a life I’m down for, and I’m excited to start building it with them. I thought maybe I’d feel sadder or more unsure about leaving my parents’ house, but I think I’ve realized that, as much as I treasure that house and have every intention of fixing it up and making it the best house it can possibly be, I’ve been stuck living someone else’s dream.

I’m ready for my own now.





I walk into the sitting room hand in hand with Iceman. We walk over to where my other demons are sitting or standing, watching Nefta sip coffee from a delicate china cup while holding the matching saucer.

The sight is somewhat comical, since she's still slightly gory and wearing armor that's looking a bit better than the last time I saw it. I'd guess Grumpy Lurch or someone did their best to clean the demon carnage off of her, but it's still in the nooks and crannies, so I try not to focus on it too much.

I check on Taz on the couch, but he's still out like a light. I wonder why Strut didn't move them into beds, but then again, knowing him, he's probably counting this room as a lost cause and wasn't going to sully anything else with the battle grime the Nihil and Legion Angel are currently sporting.

"Your mates were just informing me of how the battle ended. I'm glad to see you on your feet and recovered," Nefta tells me primly.

Iceman and I take a seat across from her. "How are you feeling?" I ask, unsure of where else to start.

"I'm fully recovered, thank you."

Awkward silence fills the air for a beat, and then Nefta and I both start at the same time. "What the fuck am I?" I ask bluntly as she says, "We should just get to the point. No beating around the bush."

We both pause, and I can't help the chuckle that sneaks out of my lips. She smiles, only one side of her mouth lifting up, but it's something, and I notice her visibly relax. I guess it's safe to say that this is weird for both of us.

Nefta releases a deep breath, and I can almost feel the bone-deep weariness in it. She looks over at Tazreel to make sure he's still out, and then her rich purple eyes land back on me. "Do you trust your mates?" she asks carefully.

"Implicitly," I answer without hesitation.

She pauses for a moment, as if she wants to make sure I really mean it, and then she nods. "I wish this legacy wasn't yours now too, but as much as I tried to keep all of this from you, it seems fate simply has other plans," she starts, and I'm taken aback by the depth of regret and sorrow I see in her gaze. I feel like Nefta just let a wall down, and I'm all at once not sure if I'm ready to see what's on the other side.

"I was supposed to be the last of our line. That's what I intended anyway, before..." She gestures over to Tazreel. "Every member of my family is dead, and not from lack of trying to stay alive, but because once others become aware of what we are, they kill us. I was hoping to save you from that."

My heart pounds in my chest as her words settle around me like an ominous fog, nerves making my body tense up. Nefta shakes her head as she looks at her cup, and I can still see that she's battling within herself about telling me.

"I think we're past the point of safely keeping me out of it," I interject, willing to share the burden I can see her struggling with. I suspect I know where this is going, and although I don't relish the thought of it, there's nothing that can really be done about it. This is my life, and my time as a human is long over. "Morax knows, and in order for me to try and protect myself, I need to know more than he does."

Nefta nods hollowly, as if she's shoring up her resolve, and her eyes flick back to mine as she pushes away her thick braid of purple hair over her shoulder.

"We're Annuli, Delta," she tells me bluntly, and I can see that the word is some sort of curse to her.

I go still, waiting for the truth of what I am to come over me like a warm wave, or maybe it would be a cool shock, but nothing happens. Nothing in me recognizes what she just said. I look to the guys, but they appear to be just as confused as I am.

"Okay... Is that a fancy word for Gatekeeper? Am I a Grim somehow? I mean, I'm not ferrying dead people around, so I figured that would be a solid no, but what do I know, right?" I ask on an awkward chuckle, leaning in

conspiratorially, because I don't get what's going on.

"No, you're definitely not a Grim or one of the long dead Gatekeepers. An Annulus is very different. We are far rarer and more powerful. It doesn't surprise me that your mates have never even heard the term. That's how well the secret of our existence has been protected."

"But what about the scythes?" I ask, perplexed and maybe a little in denial. I thought for sure all of this was building up to *you are a Gatekeeper*.

"Not only Gatekeepers use them, Delta," she tells me, and I have to stop myself from arguing that I was told otherwise.

*Shut up, Delta, and listen! So this isn't going exactly where you thought it was, move on already.* I take a deep breath and get my head back in the game. "Okay, an Annulus...what does that mean exactly?"

"Well, the easiest way to explain it is that you can reset souls. Among other things."

"Reset?" Iceman asks, and I instantly feel better that I'm not the only one struggling to get it.

"When you scythe someone, you aren't killing them in the mortal sense and moving them on to the next stage of their existence. You are either resetting their spirit back to its genesis—as though they've just been created—or you are completely erasing a soul and wiping it from all the realms, never to return again. Though that is much harder to do. It takes several Annuli to execute it, but nevertheless, these abilities were what Annuli were created for."

I stare at her and simply blink for a moment.

"We were created to be neutral, to be a safety net that could ensure that no matter what, balance between both sides would always exist. If Heaven gained too much power, it was the responsibility of Angelic Annuli to deal with it. The same was true for Hell and the Demonic Annuli. Balance is key."

"So all of the demons I've been killing..." I begin, trying to tamp down the worry filling up my voice.

"You've been resetting them," Nefta finishes, in a tone that indicates she blames herself too for what's been happening. "Sending their souls back to where they were created."

"Well, shit," Crux comments, leaning back into the couch and running his hands through his blond hair as the magnitude of all of this sinks in.

"Lucifer needs to bless you with a different Hell weapon to use, and you'll need to learn to fight with both, as I do. The scythe will tell you when

and how a soul needs to be dealt with. You and I will start working on that right away,” Nefta starts in, like aligning our schedules and working on training is suddenly the most important thing.

“Wait,” I say, completely overwhelmed. “So if I’m not a Gatekeeper, why would Morax...the Ophidian...whatever he goes by, want me?”

“Because he figured out something I didn’t know was possible,” she says, her purple eyes hardening. “You see, in the realms, we all have our duties. We go about doing what needs to be done, and we serve our purpose. But Morax was never okay with it. As kids, he loved to play God and ruler of all, but everyone just thought it was play. Morax “died” before he had to choose Heaven or Hell, and although it was sad, I never thought his passing was suspicious. It seems his play was so much more than we ever thought, and if he figured out how to create a new realm, then he’s been corrupting abilities for a long time.”

“Is that how he can override my brain like he does?” I ask, bewildered. “I thought we all had free will and choice, and that could never be messed with, but I don’t think he got the memo,” I point out.

“Morax has definitely corrupted something to enhance and alter what his bloodline was created to do. His ancestors were Impels, which were beings tasked with spreading the word of the Gods. They relayed important information about realm events, Job openings, Choices that were available to us, and so much more.

“They were blessed with the ability to amplify their voices, to be heard by a large crowd for instance, as well as to coax people into paying attention to the messages they were required to deliver. It was their responsibility to ensure all citizens of Heaven and Hell were aware of the right information, hence their gift to help citizens *want* to listen.

“Morax has altered it somehow. Distorted the gifts he was blessed with and tainted them in a way that’s allowing him to violate our most sacred rules. He shouldn’t be able to control, and yet, that’s exactly what he did.”

Nefta sets her cup and saucer down and rubs at her face. If we had a different relationship, a different past, I might have gone over and hugged her. But we’re strangers, even if we look so much alike and I have her blood flowing in my veins.

“I should have seen it coming. I don’t know how I missed it...” she says, more to herself than to me.

“Missed what?”

“The Demonic Annulus line was wiped out. We didn’t know how or why, and then the Angelic line came under attack. We hid and did everything we could to survive, but our line was purged too. I’m the last one left. The same happened with the Gatekeepers. Until now, I thought they were separate, unrelated issues. But I think Morax figured out a way to use us. He could, in theory, make a realm by taking several Annuli to create a neutral ground for himself, as well as resetting demons, mortals, or angels to populate it. Combining that with the skill of the Gatekeepers, he would’ve been able to make a portal to that plane and come and go as he pleased.”

“Fuck,” Jerif declares, and Nefta nods at him.

“Delta, I suspect that you are more than just the average Annulus. You were born with both Heaven and Hell blood, and if Morax has been experimenting with Annuli and Gatekeepers on both sides all this time, then he knows more than us at this point about what he needs to possibly destroy the balance or even the realms as we know them. If he successfully started his own realm to rule, it’s only a matter of time before he wages war on Heaven and Hell and very possibly could take over. Maybe even the Mortal Realm as well.”

I can barely breathe after all the horrible truths she’s laying down at my feet.

“I wouldn’t have thought creating a new realm was even possible, but it’s clear I was wrong. Based on what your mates have told me, Lucifer’s army and the Legion tracked it down and destroyed it, thankfully, but the fact that it even existed in the first place violates so much of what Heaven and Hell hold dear. Who knows what the Ophidian is capable of at this point?”

Goosebumps rise up on my arms at her declaration. How could one being become so powerful and no one saw it coming?

*Our line has been purged. I’m the only one left.*

I hear those words a couple of times more in my mind, connecting that this is the reason that Nefta hid me. She kept telling Tazreel that it was for my protection, but wouldn’t say why. I thought she meant that it was because she was protecting me from Taz’s ego, but she was being hunted, and she didn’t know who was hunting her.

“So I can reset demons because Tazreel is my father, and angels because you are my mother. I’m a two for one special,” I mumble, not liking the way that truth feels in my mouth.

“What’s he going to do when he finds out?” I ask, looking over at Tazreel

still on the fainting couch.

“Nothing, because you’re not going to tell him,” Nefta states matter-of-factly. “Delta, you are a strong ally or a dangerous enemy to the realms of this world as it is. But take what Morax now knows plus the ways he’s learned to corrupt our gifts, and everything about what you can do is infinitely more terrifying—or tempting—to the realm’s citizens, depending on which lens they view you and your abilities through,” she tells me seriously, her gaze intense, like she needs to hammer this part home the most.

“I worried before that Tazreel could use your ability for his own devices, and that, of course, would have been bad for the balance. That’s why I kept all knowledge about you secret. But now, if Morax is right, and your dual light and dark sides make you even more than we thought...” she trails off, letting the possibilities and realizations sink in.

*Everyone could want to use me...or kill me so that I can't be used. I could reset both Heaven and Hell and let everything in existence fall into Morax's hands. Fuck my life.*

“But Luce knows,” I say with worry.

“Yes, Lucifer knows what you are because he figured out what I was a long time ago. He played in my grandmother’s house and connected pieces of information back then when we weren’t careful enough in hiding it. Morax did too, I now realize, but he obviously took the knowledge to a whole other level that none of us thought possible.”

“But wouldn’t God have known?” I ask.

“Of course. They know everything, but they can’t—”

“Affect free will,” I interrupt and finish for her, piecing things together. I let air fill my cheeks before blowing it out. “Okay...just hypothetically here, say he takes me. Since I’m half Heaven and half Hell, he could use me to reset angels and demons both, right?”

“Correct.”

“And the souls I’ve already ashed—I mean, reset...he’s taking them into this new realm of his? A realm that he was able to make by picking off our family and using their power.”

“I believe so, yes.”

Fuck. So every time I thought I was killing one of those demons that I ashed, I was really just putting them right back in Morax’s hands as they reset, wiped clean for him to control all over again.

I let my head drop in my hands, my elbows braced on my knees where I

sit as I try to digest all of this. “Are they alive? Our...family?” I ask, the word feeling strange on my tongue.

Nefta’s eyes grow solemn, and she bows her head. “I don’t know. I suppose there’s a chance, but all I can think is that if they *were* still alive and in his grasp, then why would he be so desperate for you?”

“Yeah, that’s a good point,” I agree thickly, wishing there was something else I could say to make the possible truth of that hurt less for Nefta. I can tell just by her voice that she’s struggling with this—to know that her family was probably being kept captive by Morax while he used them until they died or he killed them.

“So what the fuck am I supposed to do?” I ask after a moment, lifting my head up again to look at her.

“You’ll learn how to properly use your Annulus powers, including wielding the scythe. We’ll prepare for Morax in case he tries to create another realm and build another army.”

I shake my head, partly in denial at this huge burden she’s putting on me. “How does all of this affect the Hell portal here? I’ve already been inducted to be a Gate Guardian. I can’t just walk away from that,” I tell her. “I have a responsibility to this portal, and it’s clearly fucking broken, since my induction didn’t seem to do a damn thing against letting Morax’s army through.”

Nefta cocks her head. “You can’t be a Gate Guardian. Your blood wouldn’t allow it. You’re not meant to be tied to a single portal, or that could compromise your nature of neutrality.”

Well...fuck.

“So the induction didn’t work?” I confirm. I feel like shit now. I thought my presence helped, but I left the Gate and the guys even more vulnerable. On the other hand, I feel some level of relief too, because at least the Gate isn’t actually worse off than we suspected. It just never got stabilized like we thought it did.

I look over at the guys, feeling like I just failed them. “I’m so sorry. I thought I would’ve been able to help.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” Echo tells me, as I feel a shadow brush against my shoulder in a gesture of comfort. “We’ll figure it out.”

“How?” I ask incredulously, feeling more and more shit piling onto my shoulders. I’m a possible world-ruiner, and their Gate is still fucked. We’re just throwing good news around like glitter today.

“I said you can’t be a Gate Guardian,” Nefta interrupts. “I didn’t say you couldn’t help fix the Hellgate.”

Her words pull me up short. “What?”

“Go down to Hell’s Embrace. You’ll need to go to the literal Hellgate to do this. Demonic Gatekeepers created the Hellgate, but it was demonic Annuli who made it work. You can go down and help to reset it to its former glory, like the way it was when it was first made. It’s one of your true duties, after all.”

I sit up straighter, finally glad to hear some good fucking news. “I can? How do I do that?”

She opens her mouth to explain, but Tazreel groans just then and sits up, scratching away the unconsciousness from his eyes as he looks around. “What happened?” he asks, his voice scratchy from sleep.

Nefta takes this opportunity to get up, abandoning her teacup as she walks over to me, so I rise to my feet too. “I need to go now. I’ll be back, but there’s something I must check on before I can return to the Legion and report everything that happened. If you need me, call,” she says in a hurry.

“But—”

“Your scythe is the key, Delta,” Nefta says with one arched eyebrow, indicating a heavy double meaning.

She sends a look over her shoulder at Taz. “Good to see you aren’t completely useless on the battlefield, Pride,” she says, turning and sweeping out of the room before he can say a word back to her.

Taz scowls at the empty space she just was occupying. “That angel is a pain in my ass.” He looks over at me, like he’s just now noticing I’m here. “Ah, Delta. Glad to see you didn’t die. Must be my Abdicated blood that kept you quick on your feet.”

“Must be,” I say dryly.

His wings poof up behind him. “Did you see I had the Ophidian in my grasp? Even held a knife to his throat.”

“Fuck, we’re never going to hear the end of his bragging about that,” I mumble under my breath. Crux snorts.

“I believe I killed the most on the battlefield, too. Certainly more than your mother. One hundred sixty-seven demons, I culled,” he adds proudly as he rocks back on his heels. “I counted.”

“Of course you did,” I reply, barely suppressing the urge to roll my eyes. But then I remember Lucifer, and a grin spreads across my face.



The sight of it makes Taz stop preening long enough to narrow his eyes on me. “What?” he asks warily.

“Lucifer wants to talk to you. *Immediately*,” I say, adding some flair to my tone as I wag my brows.

That takes the wind out of his wings. “Why?”

I lift a shoulder. “Don’t know. He said it while he was wearing your body like a coat. It was pretty fucking creepy, actually.”

Taz sighs, looking up at the ceiling. “Fuck, I hate when he does that.”

“I bet,” I say cheerfully. “So you better go back to Hell quick and see what he wants. I think you’re in trouble.”

He snaps his eyes onto me. “I most certainly am not in *trouble*.”

“Are you sure about that?” I ask, working to keep my face perfectly serious.

Doubt and worry flash over his features for just a split second, and I nearly lose it right then and there. I think the corners of my lips twitch, because his expression turns pissed. “You’re a little shit, you know that?”

I chuckle. “You don’t wanna be late, Taz. You better hurry.”

“You’re just trying to get rid of me.”

I place a hand over my heart in mock offense. “Me? I would never.”

I hear a couple of the guys snicker, and Taz’s teeth clench. “This is why I never wanted progeny!” he complains before turning on his heel and stomping out of the room. “I will summon you at a later date!” he snaps before disappearing down the hallway.

“Can’t wait!” I call like a smart ass.

Iceman gives me a wry look. “You really love to push his buttons, don’t you?”

“Yep,” I say with a grin. “But I have to enjoy every little piece of happiness I can get, since it seems like my life isn’t going to be getting easier any time soon.”

The guys all surround me, like they’re silently offering me their support. “We’ve got your back. Every step of the way,” Iceman promises.

“I know,” I reply with a smile as I look at each of them and wonder how the hell I got so lucky to find them. I take a deep breath. “I guess we should go down to Hell’s Embrace? See if we can figure out whatever vague talk Nefta hinted at with the Hellgate?”

“Are you sure you’re ready?” Echo asks me.

“I have to be,” I answer honestly. “Our portal is fucked, and apparently, I

can't be a Gate Guardian, so I'm no help to you that way. My induction apparently did jack shit, but I'm not going to just leave the Gate and all of you vulnerable," I say, shaking my head. No wonder I didn't feel the attack the way they did. "I have to do something, or we could just get overrun again as soon as Morax regroups and starts building up his army again. We can't waste any time."

"Then let's go," Jerif says as he nods at me. "Call your scythe."

I raise a brow at his bossy tone. "Aren't you going to say *please*?" I say teasingly.

"No, but I'm sure *you'll* be saying that later when you beg," he replies, and fuck, his banter wins over mine. My cheeks go pink at the wicked promise, and the other guys all seem to be on board with Jerif's plan, which reminds me of that group sex dream I had in what seems like forever ago.

*Fix the Hell Gate.*

*Fuck the shit out of my demons.*

*Try not to get caught and used as a pawn in realm domination.*

Sweet, looks like a pretty solid to-do list to me.

I exhale a steady breath and shake out my hands. I loosen up, dispelling the arousal that Jerif stirred in my belly, and focus on calling my scythe. Holding my right palm up, I get ready for her. "Come on, Red Queen! Let's do this shit."

My hand prickles, and then my scythe appears in all her bladed glory. I let out a shriek that takes the guys by surprise as I jump in the air with a huge victorious smile on my face. "Yes! I fucking did it! Did you see that? I called and she appeared, just like that!"

"We saw," Jerif says dryly, rolling his fiery eyes. "Now let's go."

I follow him and the others out of the room, tsking at his surliness. "Don't worry, Queen," I say, petting her wood slightly. "Jerif is very impressed with us, he just isn't good at showing his feelings."

Iceman snorts beside me, while Echo and Crux snicker.

"Keep it up, Warrior Princess, and I won't just have you begging later. I'll be painting that ass of yours red, too."

Dammit, now I'm horny again. This is gonna be a long walk to the Hellgate.



**I** exit the massive mausoleum that is Hell's Embrace, and step out onto the path that leads to the actual Hellgate.

Luckily, the weird gong noise doesn't go off like it did the first time I walked this path, so there's no loud ass noise that rings out to deafen me. Which is a really good thing, because we're on edge enough as it is. I think we were all half expecting for Morax to be here waiting to ambush us, but the long cavernous space is completely empty and quiet—thank fuck.

I don't dare entertain an ounce of relief though; I've learned my lesson in thinking, *oh good, this is going well.*

We walk in alert silence, but nothing is hiding out in the shadows or leaps out to attack us. Echo disappears a few times, his body seeming to evaporate in the blackness around us, like he's double-checking nothing is lurking around, but with a few sweeps in the shadows, he soon confirms that we're alone.

We make quick time to the Hellgate, and I'm once again awed by its presence. Even more so now that I know beings like me helped to make this thing work.

I look up at the massive double doors made of blood-red flames, my eyes sweeping over their spiked tops. Instead of a sense of foreboding like I had the first time I saw it, I'm just filled with curiosity.

Now that I'm looking, and I mean *really* looking at it, I can see that it seems...tired. I know that's a fucking weird thing to say about the doors of Hell, but some of the flames don't look as thick or as strong as they should.

There's supposed to be a solidness to them—the flames should be so thick it should be just a conglomerate of layered red, barring any sight past them.

But instead, the Hellgate's fire is completely out in some spots, and I know that's where Morax's army was able to break through.

"As Gate Guardians, you're not only tied to protecting your portal, but your powers are also feeding into this Hellgate to strengthen it, right?" I ask.

"Yes," Iceman answers.

I turn to him. "This looks bad, Iceman."

He grimaces at the sight. "It does."

"It's pulling a lot of fucking power from us too," Echo says, and I look at him with concern. We just got done with a huge energy-depleting battle. It's not good that the Hellgate is draining their already compromised reserves.

"So...now what?" I ask. I really wish Tazreel could've kept sleeping for two more minutes so Nefta could've spelled things out for me, but it seems nothing in my life is meant to be easy.

"No fucking clue," Crux says as he and the others stare at the beat-up looking Hellgate.

"I guess I'll just...look around," I say with uncertainty. I move to approach the Gate, but a warm hand closes around my arm, and I look back in surprise to see Jerif.

"Just in case you touch the Gate," he grumbles. "I don't know if it'll do anything to you since you're not a Guardian."

"Aww, look at you, riding in on your noble steed and shit," I tease.

He pokes my wing, making me shriek in an obnoxiously loud giggle as I flinch away from the ticklish touch. He smirks at my reaction, but keeps hold of my arm. "Jumpy much?"

"Shut up. They're sensitive," I say as I try to bat him away, but my wings have other ideas. It seems that just by touching them, they're now greedy for more. It's like a puppy that you stop petting, so it comes over and moves your hand and won't stop giving you the puppy dog eyes until you pet it again.

My wings come out, and the one Jerif touched stretches until it's around his back and curling inward, as if it's giving him a hug. My other wing is getting frisky too, and is trying to flirt with Echo as it reaches out to stroke his ass. "Not now," I scold as I give them both a light tap with my elbows. "We have to focus."

My wings slouch in disappointment, but they settle back against me like good pets, and I give them a stroke. "Good girls," I coo. They perk up a little

at that. My wings and I have come a long way.

“Okay...” I say, shoring myself up with a little breath. “Nefta said that my scythe was the key...”

I step back a little and hold the scythe out. The Gate doesn’t react at all.

“I am here to save you,” I declare, my voice dropping in pitch for some reason, and I hear Crux and Jerif snicker behind me. “You guys are going to feel so dumb if that works,” I tell them imperiously. I turn back to the flaming Gate. Nothing.

*Well, crap, they’re never going to let me live that down.*

I try waving my hands, and I’m almost ready to do a little ditty in case the Hellgate is a fan of a good song and dance, but I decide to save that for when I get really desperate.

I look from the Gate to my scythe, studying them both.

“Ah ha!” I exclaim.

My scythe is dormant right now, so maybe I need to activate it. “Queen of Hearts,” I command, “...do your thing!” I hold it out and watch my Swiss Army scythe reveal its sharp blades. I hold it up to the Gate again, but the doors still refuse to acknowledge my existence.

“Do you think Nefta meant *key* literally?” I ask.

Crux looks up at the doors and scratches the short blond scruff on his jaw. “I don’t see a keyhole...”

I bite my lip in thought as I run my gaze over the flickering red flames.

*Ahh, fuck it.*

I take a few strides back, and then in my best Olympic javelin thrower impression, aim to chuck my scythe at the door, straight blade first. I get all medieval and spear throwy, but maybe this bitch wants it a little rough. I mean, I certainly wouldn’t be one to judge.

The guys all call out their protest as I release my hold on my scythe and subsequently throw it at the Hellgate, but it’s entirely too late by then. I watch in the way you do after you’ve bowled a ball to see how many pins get knocked over. I’m surprised when my aim is true, because the straight blade of the scythe sinks into the flames, and then a loud thunk fills the cavernous space all around us.

We all hold our breath to see if the flames are going to incinerate the weapon, but it seems to be okay... Until the flames blink out on the Gate all together. One moment, it’s burning Hellishly, and the next, it’s out like a light, as if I just went at the thing with a Hell Flame extinguisher.

*Well, double fuck!*

“Shit, shit, shit,” I curse, panic widening my eyes and making my heart flip over and faceplant against my chest.

We all rush forward like the Gate’s an injured animal, and I’m surprised to see that under all the flames, there is an *actual* door. I’m not stoked to realize that it’s made of bones of some sort, but we all make decorating mistakes in life. Just look at what happened with wall paper borders.

My scythe sticks out of the front of the massive bone doors, wobbling a little, as if I put too much heat behind the throw and it’s still trying to recover from the force of impact.

Iceman runs his eyes over the massive doors like he doesn’t know what to do. “Maverick, you need to fix this *now*. It’s almost as if you somehow turned it off completely. Anyone can get through right now,” Iceman warns me, and the fact that it’s him sounding really concerned makes my panic spike up.

“I don’t know how!” I exclaim, searching the door for some kind of clue, as if a bony hand is going to reach out and slap me across the face and be like, *it’s right there, lady!*

“Why would you fucking *spear* it?” Jerif snaps.

“I don’t know!” I shout back, sinking my hands into my hair and pulling at the strands. “It just seemed like a good idea at the time!”

“The Gate is weakened, Delta. It’s sick. You don’t stab sick things,” he retorts.

My whole face feels hot and flushed with both panic and anger. “Well, *you* did the *chucking the spear* thing earlier and gave me the idea, so it’s partially your fault!”

He tosses his arms up in exasperation. “How the hell is this my fault?”

Echo’s hand presses against my mouth as I try to argue some more, my words instantly getting muffled by his palm. His chest presses up against my side, and he gives me a nip to my ear. “Ignore Jerif. He gets mean when he’s scared.”

The lava demon shoots him a withering glare. “I am *not* scared.”

I feel Echo’s mouth curve against my temple before he drops his hand. “Breathe, Delta. This is your legacy. We have full faith that you can fix this.”

Feeling only slightly bolstered, I nod and try to figure this the fuck out.

*Come on, ancient demon Annulus bloodline, help a dumb newbie out!*

As though my silent plea was actually heard, my eyes rest upon skulls

scattered in several places throughout the doors. On each one, there appears to be some kind of writing along the foreheads. Stepping closer, I discover that the writing is more hieroglyphic looking than words, but something about it feels familiar.

I can feel tension from the guys at my back, but I also feel their support and faith that I can figure this out. When I'm right in front of one of the skulls, I reach out and brush my finger across its marking that resembles my scythe. The moment the pad of my finger comes in contact with it, a rush of images bombards me.

Instantly, it's as though I'm watching a movie that only I can see. I watch as Abdicated fill the caverns of this realm and start to build. They establish Hell rock by rock, laying down everything it would be responsible for. I witness battles occurring over time, while winners rise and the losers get set upon by Annuli just like me to reset the balance.

I get a front row seat to the work that Nefta mentioned we were created to do, and then I get a front row seat at the Hellgate being built. An Annulus with stunning blood-red hair and wings to match stands before the completed bone gate and slashes her hand. She presses it to the skulls—the same marked skulls I saw in the doors. She goes to each one, and every time, she closes her eyes as though she's praying or doing some sort of ritual. After she's touched the last one with her bloodied palm, she steps back, and in a whoosh of heat and fire, flames suddenly crawl up the bones as the Gate comes alive.

As I watch, the red-haired Annulus turns around, and it's like she's looking right at me. She's so close that if this were real and not just a vision, I'd be able to reach out and touch her. She offers a knowing smile at me that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. And then, just like that, it's all over, and I'm once again just staring at the gate, all the memories of the past gone, my palm still pressed to the skull.

A smile takes over my face, and a thank you comes from my soul, both directed at the bones for showing me the way.

I turn to the guys with a wide grin. "I know what to do."

Their answering smiles anchor my soul and fill me with heat, and I turn back around to face the Gate with newfound confidence. This is my legacy. This is what I was created for. I got this.

I walk over to the curved blade of my scythe and run the palm of my hand against the sharp concave line of it, making one of the guys suck in a breath behind me. But I focus on my task, watching as blood immediately pools in

my palm. I move to the skull all the way to the left and quickly press my palm against it. Thank fuck the Annulus who did this before wasn't too tall, or that would've sucked to need a step stool. Luckily, these skulls were arranged where I'm able to reach them easily.

I close my eyes just like the other Annulus did, and gratitude washes through me. *Thank you for your sacrifice and for showing me the way*, I tell the skull, in what I can only explain as pure instinct. When warmth kisses my hand, I pull it back and move on to the next skull in the sequence. I share my blood and thanks to each one on this door before heading to the other one on the opposite side and working through those as well.

With the remaining drops of blood leaking out, I place my hand on the last skull and thank it for the purpose it's serving and the protections it offers. When I feel the warmth greet me for a final time, I open my eyes and step away. A sense of peace and rightness moves through me, and I reach up and yank my scythe out of the bones of the door before stepping back as the guys return to my side, and we all watch the Gate with bated breath.

"Do you feel that?" Jerif asks the others, his voice bleeding awe, and I smile serenely because I do.

It feels like healing.

We watch as my blood soaks into the bones, and just as the last drop disappears on the last skull, the Hellgate ignites anew, and it's better than before. Stronger.

Happiness washes over me as my face splits into a grin, and my eyes take on a wet sheen. I can practically feel the pride of the Annuli who came before me, as the Gate once again springs to life.

And look, it's my favorite color...purple.

A breeze flits past me, playing with my wings and lifting my hair like it's a teasing little minx. I spin on a laugh, and then my mouth drops in complete awe. The Gate isn't the only thing that's different.

"Whoa..."

One third of the long cavern that runs from the mausoleum to the Hellgate is now covered in grass, trees, flowers, and other plants. The whole left stretch of it seems to have just come alive. The once vast, empty, and sinister space is now bursting with greenery and life on that side, and butterflies flit happily from one bloom to another.

"What the hell?" I ask, completely dumbfounded. "Why did Hell's Embrace just get its own Garden of Eden?"



“No idea,” Crux says, just as surprised as I am.

“Of course you’d put flowers all over Hell’s otherwise ominous entrance,” Jerif snarks. “You’re such a girl.”

I roll my eyes at him. “I’m totally telling Alder you said that,” I tease, and he narrows his eyes at me.

“You better not,” he mumbles, and I laugh, knowing he doesn’t want that demon blowing any scary ass flower pollen on him.

Echo disappears into the shadows again while we all stare around in wonder at the Hell garden. When he abruptly reappears in front of me again, I try to play off the jump by turning it into a weird little bounce, like I’m too excited about Hell’s new greenery not to move around, but Echo’s smile tells me he’s not falling for it.

“About a third of the Hell side mausoleum looks like this enchanted forest now,” he reveals, and we all look at the entrance located at the opposite end of the new electric-violet Hellgate.

“I wonder why only part of the space went green and not all of it?” Iceman observes curiously, and I look around at the black rock and dirt packed entryway that’s still free and clear.

“Maybe I didn’t do something right?” I declare, making a note to ask Nefta the next time I see her.

“No, the Gate definitely feels better than it ever has before. You got that right. We can feel it,” Iceman reassures me, and the other Guardians all nod in agreement.

I throw him a happy smile and move to wrap my arms around him. “Well, hopefully the gate will be better now, because I think we’re all due for some rest and relaxation,” I declare as Iceman wraps an arm around my shoulders.

“What do you say we get you packed up and moved into our place? Then we can rest and relax *all* you want,” Iceman suggests, and I don’t miss the hint of other kinds of suggestion in his tone.

Heat immediately shoots right through me and settles deliciously low in my stomach.

He gives me a knowing look. “You up for this one, Maverick?” he asks, quoting a line from the movie I picked our nicknames from.

I laugh.

“Just a walk in the park, Kazansky,” I reply, finishing the *Top Gun* line. “Let’s turn and burn!”



“Ugh, this is the worst.”

I’m sitting cross-legged in my bedroom, surrounded by plastic trash bags and a couple of cardboard boxes.

Echo shoots me an amused look. “It’s not that bad,” he says. “It’s not like you have to pack up the whole house. You’re leaving all the furniture and kitchen things. You just have to get your clothes and toiletries.” He toes one of the dozens of trash bags that are littering my bedroom floor with a slight frown on his face. “Although...I didn’t realize you had so many damn clothes. You’re always wearing the same three outfits.”

I grab a pile of the clothes I’m going through in my dresser and chuck them at his face, but he manages to catch them all before they hit him. “It’s not my fault life has been so crazy that I couldn’t change my clothes every day. And now I have these, which makes picking out an outfit even harder,” I say, pointing at my wings. We had to shift inside my house and close all the curtains so that none of the neighbors would see my new feathered accessories.

*I need to get working on how to ward myself, like yesterday.*

Echo snorts and then looks at the clothes I threw at him. Stuck to one of my knit sweaters, he finds a purple lacy thong that comes away with a crackle of static electricity. His brow arches as he drops the rest of the clothes and balances the thong on his finger. “These are definitely going in the pack pile.”

“What is?” Crux asks, appearing next to him in a blink. He just finished

bringing my must-have snacks from the kitchen over to the mansion.

Echo holds up my panties to him. "These," he says helpfully.

Crux's blond brows raise up. "Sexy," he says, grabbing them from Echo's hands so he can hold them up at a better angle. "How come you haven't worn this stuff for us before?"

"Because all of my clothes have been here," I say with exasperation as I jump to my feet. "Hand them over," I tell him, doing grabby hands.

Crux grins. "I think *I'd* rather hold on to them."

I reach up and snatch them from his hands, my cheeks slightly pink. "Aren't you supposed to be popping these bags out for me?" I ask pointedly.

Crux and Echo share a look. "Mmm, she gets bossy when she's embarrassed," Crux muses.

Rolling my eyes, I stop Crux before he picks up the bags next to Echo's feet. "Not those ones. Can you take the ones across the room? Those are all for Goodwill."

Crux sighs. "Why do I have to drop them off and be forced to walk amongst the mortals?" he says with a petulant tone that makes me giggle.

"You have to *walk amongst the mortals* because you look the most human out of all of us," I remind him. "And the other guys need to recharge a bit more before they can ward and handle possible trouble."

"Echo looks human," he argues.

We both look over at Echo, whose shadow tattoos are moving all around his skin like they're head banging to some music we can't hear. Crux frowns. "Fine, maybe not him. But Jerif could pass as a human."

"Jerif has orange eyes and hair that looks like it caught on fire. Plus, he's grumpy. He'll probably make the people at Goodwill cry for no reason other than looking at them with that glare he has."

Crux tilts his head. "Yeah, that's probably true."

"Time to face facts, Crux," Echo tells him with a smirk. "You're the most basic out of all of us. Even Delta, now that she has those pretty wings."

At hearing him call them pretty, my wings immediately flare out and start to shimmy a little. I shake my head at them. They have no concept of subtle.

"I don't look *that* human," Crux insists before sticking out his long forked tongue and showing off his piercings as if to prove a point. "Thsee?" he lisps.

"I do like that tongue," I tell him with a coy smile as I remember all the things it can do to me. I walk over to him and place a kiss on his cheek. I

know he's sensitive about how human he looks. If I had to guess, he probably got teased about it a lot when he was growing up.

"Damn right you do," he says.

"Yep," I nod. "I like your tongue as much as I like the rest of the way you look," I tell him before giving him another kiss, this time on the other cheek.

He narrows his green eyes. "You're buttering me up."

I smile. "Is it working?"

He sighs. "Yeah."

"Thanks, Crux," I tell him, patting him on the back.

"Yeah, thanks, Crux," Echo says with a shit-eating grin.

Crux punches him in the arm before turning and grabbing the bags and the box of shoes I'm also donating and piles them into his arm. He gives me a pointed look. "I get to lick you later."

I hold up my hands in surrender, because I'm a martyr like that. "Okay, okay, you win," I say with a cheeky grin.

He nods tersely like he just came out victorious in this round, but we all know I'm the real winner here.

In a blink, he disappears, leaving Echo to grab the bags of clothes I'm keeping. He looks down at them with a frown as he balances eight full bags. "Damn, we might need to build you a bigger closet."

I walk back over to the dresser and grab the last drawer, dumping the entire thing into a bag. I was going through each one and deciding what to give away and what to keep, but I lost my mojo and now I just want to be finished. "Don't be silly, I'll just infiltrate all of *your* closets. It's more relationshipy that way."

"Relationshipy?" he teases as he picks up the last bag for me.

"Yep."

"That sounds like an excellent plan."

His tone makes me pause, and I look over at my shadow demon. "You're going to keep all my underwear in your room, aren't you?"

His teeth flash in a devilish grin. "Yep."

He disappears in a blink, and I snort and shake my head.

"What's funny?"

I look up to find Iceman in the doorway. "Hey you," I smile as I walk over to him. I don't even have to step and weave anymore, since the guys cleared out all the last of the bags and boxes. "What were you doing?"

"I went back to the mansion to drop off Fern and to give Strut your list of

things you like to eat. And Jerif and I are working on something, so I had to help him real quick.”

“Oh, what are you working on?” I press, curious.

“Secret things,” he teases before leaning down and kissing the top of my head. I tilt my head back to look up at him. “I also called your next-door neighbor, Maria. We worked out an agreement. For a monthly stipend, she’s going to watch the house while you’re not here, to make sure nothing happens to it while you’re away.”

“You missed a spot,” I tell him, puckering my lips.

He chuckles and plants a tender peck on my mouth this time, and I get all swoony and grateful for his thoughtfulness. Out of all the guys, I think Iceman really gets it—how important this house is to me. How it’s not just a house, but an extension of my parents. “Thank you, Rafferty,” I say quietly.

He smiles. “Rafferty, huh? I thought you only called me that when you’re mad at me.”

“Mad at you or really, really happy at you. It’s an opposite spectrum name usage.”

He smiles and rubs my back in soothing circles. “So Jerif’s off doing secret things?” I ask.

“Yep. I also had him take all of your toiletries earlier.”

“Do you think of everything?”

“Yes,” he answers without hesitation.

I grin and poke his back, where his trail of short spine spikes reside. He immediately flinches, and I have to bite my lip from laughing. “Sensitive, huh?”

He clears his throat, but I don’t miss the heat that’s banked in his icy eyes. “Ah, a bit, yes.”

I look around the room, and even though it’s still technically full of furniture, it feels emptier. All of my personal knickknacks are gone from the surfaces, my clothes are cleared out, and everything I use all the time has already been moved to the mansion.

“I know this is hard for you,” Iceman says, and I look up at him again.

“It is...but it’s good too. It feels like a new beginning. And you’ve made it so I don’t have to say goodbye to this place. So I’m getting the best of both worlds.” I let my lips curl up in a mischievous grin. “Besides, I figure this can be my pissed pad.”

That pulls him up short. “Your *pissed pad*?”

I nod. “Yeah, when you guys piss me off, I can come here to stew.”

He chuckles, shaking his head at me. “Jerif will love that.”

“I know, it’s gonna be great.”

“Did you want to go through the house one more time and check to make sure we got everything you want right now?”

I bite my lip and give the room a cursory glance. “Actually, I need help with something,” I confess. “Can you reach those nails in the wall and pull them out? I can’t get them.”

“Of course.”

Iceman gives me his back and gets right to work, so I quickly do the same. I unzip my pants and push them off, taking my underwear with them. My crop top is the next thing to slip down my hips, and I quickly kick the pile of clothes away. Iceman is talking about something, but I don’t focus on what as I try to pick a pose that says *please fuck me now, I’ve been waiting for too damn long*.

Iceman says something about needing some spackle, and I mm-hmm as I put one hand behind my head, and the other on my hip. No, that’s weird. I try both hands on my hips, but I just look like I’m pissed off or doing a really bad Superman impression. I rest my palms on the front of my thighs, elbows partially bent, and kind of stick out my chest.

*Gah!* I look like I have to fart.

Iceman turns around mid speech, and I freeze mid pose, because it’s too late to try anything else.

“Putty knife,” Iceman blurts before his eyes widen and then move slowly down my body. He pauses for a minute, like he’s suffering from brain freeze, before his blue eyes snap back up to mine.

“Thank fuck,” he declares, setting the nails on the top of the dresser. He rips his shirt off and shucks his pants in record time before he closes the distance between us in two strides.

I shriek in excitement as he picks me up. I’m so damn glad that worked. I immediately wrap my legs around his waist and weave my arms around his neck. I don’t really get time to think about how good his cool skin feels against my pussy before he’s threading the fingers of one hand through my purple locks and bending my neck to kiss me, like I’m a cool cup of water and he’s been crawling through the desert desperate for a drink.

I arch into him and drink my fill too. His lips are cool and soothing, his tongue teasing and masterful. Our pace is frenzied at first, but even with the

need slamming through us, I also want to revel in him. Take my time and savor this.

This is Rafferty, my Iceman, and everything about who and what he is has made my entire existence better.

I slow our kiss, sipping at his mouth now, relishing his taste and feel. I pour all my love and appreciation into my movements and the way I claim him. He meets me stroke for stroke with his tongue and lips, nipping and sucking and showing me that this, us, is just the beginning.

I feel emotion bloom in my chest as I taste his love, his devotion, his claim on my soul.

I run a palm down the spikes on his back, and a shiver runs through Iceman so fast that I can't help but laugh. I do it again, and he responds exactly the same way.

"Ohh, this is fun," I tease as his eyes blaze with desire. He gives me a devious smile, and then the next thing I know, he brings a cool hand to the underside of my wing, and I feel the caress as though his hand is on my vagina and not playing with the wings on my back.

I gasp and let out a small moan, unable to help myself as he rubs the other wing too, a knowing smile on his face. Instead of accepting the *game, set, match* in his eyes, I look to up the ante. If he's going to make me come all over his chilled, rock hard abs just from fondling my wings, then I can make him blow his load with a little spike petting and... I look up and spot his horns.

*Oh, hell yeah, I bet there's a sensitive spot on those bad boys.*

I smile, but then I recall the fantasy I've been harboring about his horns, and it's like my brain freezes as I let it play out in my mind nice and slow.

"What just happened?" Iceman asks, pulling back slightly as his voice yanks me from my lascivious thoughts.

I feel my face go instantly red. "What? Nothing."

"Are you blushing?" he asks with amusement and intrigue in his voice.

"No," I lie.

"Oh, you *have* to tell me what was just running through that mind of yours now."

I shouldn't be embarrassed. This is Iceman. I'm completely comfortable with him. But I've been craving the intimacy between us for so long now that I think my brain might have thought up just about every possible sex position the two of us could do. But how the hell do you say, "Oh hey, can I ride your

face and play with your horns?” There’s no precedent for this kind of thing, and as much as I want to be like, *the worst that can happen is he says no*, I’m too nervous all of a sudden to find out. I mean, he *did* seem to like my quickly-strip-down-naked idea, but I don’t want to push him too much.

I bite my lip as I mentally debate.

“Fine,” he relents. “I’ll just have to make you come over and over again just by petting your wings. No sex for you until you spill it.”

My eyes widen as he immediately starts stroking my purple feathery appendages. His fingers seem to know right where to go as he pets them firmly and languidly, and it makes me gasp and jolt against him. I try to get away, but he keeps me firmly pinned around his torso, and holy shit, I really *am* about to come...hard.

“Okay, okay!” I scream in concession, panting as Iceman smiles at me victoriously and stops his seductive touch. My wings shiver a little at the almost orgasm. I nip at Iceman’s bottom lip, and he recaptures my mouth for a moment to deepen the kiss, his hand holding my ass firmly against him. “Confess,” he demands against my lips.

I flick his top lip with my tongue defiantly before letting out a huff. “How strong are your horns?” I ask in an effort to deduce whether or not my fantasy could actually work. I mean, if we’re dealing with popsicle stick level strength, then there’s no need to embarrass myself.

My question seems to catch him off guard. “Pretty strong... Why?”

I make a petulant whining noise and then ovary up. “Because...I kind of want to ride your face while holding your horns for leverage.”

We both go quiet for a beat.

Shit, it was too soon!





**W**hen Iceman just continues to look at me with bewilderment at my blurted confession, I know I need to do some damage control stat.

“I know, I know,” I say quickly. “It was just this thing that popped up in my fucked up mind when I first saw you, and now I can’t stop thinking about it. It’s completely crazy to even ask, especially when we haven’t even had sex yet, and we were just getting started... And not everyone likes a good face fuck like I do. I shouldn’t just assume you would even *want* to have me do that. But it was a fantasy, so I can’t really do much about that kink, and—you know what, let’s just pretend I never asked and get back to kissing,” I say, forcing myself to stop this humiliating rambled spiel.

But before I can latch onto his mouth to stop him from replying, he pulls back. “Hold on, let me get this straight. Since you first met me, you’ve been fantasizing about holding my horns and fucking my face?” he asks carefully.

I cringe a little and nod, unable to read his expression and gauge how he feels about this. “I blame my demon nature,” I tell him sheepishly.

“Wow,” he admits, looking shocked. “I guess all there is to say is...it’s time to buzz the tower!”

The *Top Gun* quote he just threw out takes a second to register, but Iceman is already lifting me up and placing my thighs on his shoulders. I squeal, completely surprised and my head nearly hitting the ceiling, and then heat rushes through me as he suddenly buries his face in my pussy without hesitation.

*Holy fucking shit!*

His cool lips and tongue start lapping up my desire, immediately coaxing out a moan from me. I'm too stunned to do anything else.

"Get your head in the game, Maverick," he orders between my thighs, and I snap to attention and grab onto his horns. They're hard and ridged and surprisingly warm against my palms. I get a firm grip just as Iceman wraps his lips around my clit. I feel his mouth grow colder until it feels like he's pressing an ice cube against my favorite bundle of nerves. I cry out as that ice cube starts sucking and flicking and circling.

Iceman's hands grip my ass as he holds me firmly to his face, and I grip his horns even harder and start grinding against his mouth. He groans as I start moving and writhing, and he drops his mouth from my clit to lick at my entrance as I grind on his tongue.

His hard blue horns are the perfect leverage, and I banish any reservations still floating around in my mind and just let go. Not literally, because I'm not trying to fall, and this position might be my new favorite thing ever. It's possible that horns are my new favorite appendage next to cocks...and arms...and definitely hands and tongues. Okay, who am I kidding? I want it all, every demon inch of my guys, all the time.

Without warning, Iceman's cold tongue sweeps back and then spears me. I grind against him and fuck his face, all nerves and previous shyness gone. This is so much better than the fantasy version, and I'm coming in no time. The orgasm makes me tip my head back and shout, and I feel myself gushing with moisture as my thighs squeeze his head. I should probably worry about whether or not he can breathe, but it all just feels so fucking good.

As soon as my orgasm begins to ebb, my head comes up with panted breath. "I just thought of something else!" I shout. "Can you flip me upside down facing you?"

Iceman pauses his licking and looks up at me. The whole bottom of his face is covered in Eau de Delta. It's funny...and hot. I can see him realize what it is that I'm wanting, and a heat laced smile spreads across his juicy face. He doesn't say anything, because instead, he does exactly like I ask and flips me upside down like I'm a weightless demon pinwheel. With an excited laugh, I grab onto his hip and hook my thighs on Iceman's shoulders so he still has pussy access too.

I lick my lips as I stare at the thick hard cock in front of my upside down face, and hum my excitement.

*Come to mama!*

I wrap my palm around his base and quickly lower my warm mouth around his cool tip. Iceman hisses and jerks into my mouth involuntarily, and I love that the feel of me messes with his control. He's always so composed and dominant. It's a heady feeling to know my mouth can strip him of those things so quickly.

The blood rushes to my head as I hang, and I realize I need to pick up the pace before my brain and body start to reject this position. I take him deeply into my throat, swallowing him down to calm the gag that it starts to trigger. He groans and renews his attention on my pussy, sucking on my clit to bring me to the brink again as I bob back and forth on his cock. I take him deeper and deeper until I've almost taken him whole, and then reach to cup his balls, massaging as I work him with my mouth.

I feel him drop his head back, too lost to the pleasure I'm sucking out of him to multitask with my pussy. I love it, and work him harder in my mouth, squeezing his balls more firmly in my hand.

"I'm going to come, Maverick," he moans, warning me, but I'm not deterred. His balls get tighter, and he starts to thrust into my mouth faster, so I hold on to his hips and revel in it.

*Face fucking is the best!*

I take him down as deep as I can go. His muscles clench against my body, and then he calls out my name as he orgasms, his cum dripping down my throat. I drink him down, milking his cock with my hand and mouth. As soon as he's recovered enough, he buries his face in my pussy while I lick him clean, his cock still hard like it's ready for round two.

*Don't mind if I do.*

I push off Iceman's hips and lift my head, hoping the new position will help encourage the blood to rush right back out of it, as Iceman somehow coaxes another orgasm out of me, and I moan and practically twerk on his face.

*Fuck!*

He flips me right side up and sets me gently on my feet, both of us with hunger still in our eyes and blissed out smiles, and me slightly lightheaded but in the best way.

"Take me to bed or lose me forever," I quote breathlessly, and then I start singing "Take My Breath Away." My serenade abruptly ends when Iceman picks me up and throws me onto the bed with a laugh. I squeal and giggle as I

bounce onto the mattress, but the frame gives a thunk, and the mattress slightly sags.

“Oh, shit!” I giggle. “Way to break my bed!”

“Psh, it’s not broken,” he rebuffs—and then gingerly crawls across the mattress like he’s waiting for us to plummet to the ground at any moment. When it seems to hold our combined weight, he looks up at me with a smile. “See, it’s just bruised a little.”

I laugh even harder and spread my legs, inviting him in as he crawls up my body, kissing as he goes. He hits an especially ticklish spot with his cold tongue, and I explode into a fit of laughter. I grab onto his horns, trying to divert his chin from my stomach, but he just attacks me with his hands, making me laugh even harder. I retaliate and start rubbing down his back spines in delicious defense. He shivers and groans, my own ticklish spots abandoned as he instead brings his cool mouth down to my nipple.

“Yes!” I encourage, rolling my hips against him, practically begging to be filled. But he just pops off one nipple and moves to the other, teasingly slow.

“You’re pure evil,” I accuse on another moan as his mouth sends all kinds of delectable sensations right to my vagina.

“Mmm,” he hums as he kisses up my throat. “And don’t you forget it.”

His tongue continues to play.

The cold temperature of his mouth as he licks and slurps and sucks makes me start writhing and whining, talking incomprehensibly.

Finally, Iceman comes up for air, searing my mouth with a kiss that somehow melts me despite how cold he is. “Are you ready for me, Maverick?” he asks, his tone husky.

I nod vigorously, somehow shaking my whole body with the movement so that even my breasts bounce in the affirmative. He chuckles, capturing the heavy, aching, sensitive mounds and kneading them gently before he reaches down between us to grip his turgid cock. The head is slightly darker blue than the rest of it, and even though he just came down my mouth, there’s already precum dampening the tip.

He slicks himself up by rubbing himself over my lips, letting my juices coat him. Even that feels so good, and another needy whine crawls from my throat.

Looking into my eyes, Iceman positions himself and starts pushing in. Slowly.

My breath hitches, and I go still as I feel him feed himself into my body

inch by delicious inch. He firmly and steadily makes sure I feel *every* part of him as he fills me up more and more.

His smooth, unhurried thrust finishes as he buries himself to the hilt, but the moment he does, he doesn't sit there for me to acclimate like I thought he would. Instead, he catches me by surprise and immediately pulls back out before feeding himself into me all over again. But this time, he's colder. Noticeably so.

He does this again.

And again.

And again.

Every single stroke is as unfaltering as the last, no slower, no faster. The control this must take him to not pound into me must be difficult—I can tell how much he's restraining himself by the grit of his teeth. Knowing that he has that sort of dominance not just over me, but over himself, thrills me for some reason.

“Oh, God...”

With a firm hand on my hips, he angles me up and keeps on with his maddening pace, while I squirm and pant, my hips trying to jerk down to take him faster.

He's going to make me go crazy. I'm a frozen puddle of want, his icy cock melting my hot, aching pussy and leaving me caught on the cusp of spiking pleasure.

“*Raf*,” I finally snap, because I just can't take it anymore.

His eyes drag up from my pussy to my face. “Was that a mad *Raf* or a very, very happy *Raf*?” he teases.

“Come on,” I mewl, not even recognizing my own voice.

“I've got you,” he says, and then he starts fucking me.

*Really* fucking me.

My head thrashes from side to side, because his dick is hitting the perfect angle, and I'm so wet that I'm squelching around him. And somehow, going from slow to fast, his cock turning colder and colder with every thrust, it's made me impossibly hot, like my cunt is trying to implement some climate control and make itself hotter for him to enjoy. I feel like I could look down and see steam coming off my pussy, every time he pushes his frozen cock in deeper.

“Fuck, Delta,” he hisses, and I want to say, *I know, right?* But I'm too lost in the feel of him.

“Don’t stop...” I tell him because I’m so fucking close...

“Ah, shit, you guys started without us?”

The sound of Crux’s voice makes my eyes pop open and widen as Iceman and I both freeze at the sight of him and Echo, who both just appeared in the bedroom.

When Iceman sees it’s just them, he simply turns back around and keeps fucking me. “Shit!” I curse, gripping the sheets in my fists.

“Mind if we join in there, Raf? It looks like her hands need something to hold onto.”

Iceman thrusts into me so hard that my head nearly knocks into the headboard before he looks down at me, slowing down slightly. “You want to have your hands occupied, Maverick?” he asks.

“Fuck, it’s happening...” I say in answer, as I immediately reach out my hands like I’m waiting impatiently for a hand job handout.

“What’s happening?” Echo asks as he shrugs sexily out of his shirt at the same time that Crux drops his pants.

“I think it’s another one of her fantasies,” Iceman correctly guesses.

Echo’s and Crux’s eyes glitter with curious hunger. “You been fantasizing about group sex, Delta?” Crux asks.

“Dreamt it,” I half say, half moan as Iceman fucks me harder, while Crux pulls off his shirt, not at all shy to bare his tanned, naked body in front of the others.

“Oh, you dirty, dirty demon,” Echo says with a click of his tongue and a wicked grin that makes my stomach tighten.

Crux walks around the bed to the other side, his knees coming up on the mattress. The bed gives a groan of protest that makes him pause.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” I say breathlessly, reaching out and gripping his already hardening dick.

“*Damn*, Jeter,” he hisses in surprise at my impatience to get him in my grip. I fist him hard, stealing another breath from his chiseled chest.

Echo sinks into bed beside me without me even realizing he’d finished undressing. I look over with a gasp as his hand comes down to squeeze my breast, his shadow slipping off his arm to start playing with my nipples. “You have the most gorgeous tits, Delta,” he rumbles before moving up so that I can reach his cock too.

His hand closes around mine, showing me exactly how tight he wants me to clench around him. I start stroking them both up and down in tandem,

moving at the same pace that Iceman is fucking me.

“I want to come together,” I say breathlessly.

Echo smirks. “Did you hear that, Jerif? Delta wants us all to come together.”

A sharp breath gets caught in my throat as my eyes fly up to see my lava demon standing propped up in the doorway to my bedroom, one ankle crossed over the other as he watches us.

His fiery eyes move from my bouncing breasts to my face, and what I see in his gaze is the most intense arousal. It makes my pussy clamp down around Iceman, a curse flying out of his blue lips.

“You want all of us to come together, Warrior Princess?” he says, his hard cock visible beneath his pants.

“Yes, please...”

“Already begging,” he says with a cocky smirk.

I don’t care that he’s right. From Iceman’s slow icicle dick fucking to now being surrounded by Crux and Echo also, I’m so worked up that I’m on the brink of ecstasy—but I meant what I said. I desperately want us all to come. Together.

I let go of Crux and Echo for a moment and then let my ankles drop from where I had them wrapped around Iceman’s ass. I pull away and flip onto my hands and knees, and then wait, my bottom lip caught between my teeth.

“I think that’s your cue to get the fuck over here,” Echo tells Jerif.

My fiery-haired demon pushes away from the doorway, undressing as he goes. It’s a sexy fucking striptease that he somehow manages to do without tripping up or slowing down. By the time he makes it to the bed, he’s gloriously naked, showing off every inch of his smooth black skin.

He moves to the top of the bed, kneeling in front of me so that his jutting cock is right in front of my face. He takes my shoulders in his hot hands, pulling my torso up slightly and taking the weight off my upper half of my arms so that my hands don’t have to hold myself up in this position.

“If you want us all to come at the same time, then I suggest you get to work,” he says, the thrill of his growly, bossy voice nearly making me pant.

I reach over for Crux and Echo once more, stroking them firmly, and I feel Iceman’s hand come down to smooth over my ass, making my cheeks jiggle before he spreads them apart and starts to rub his dick over my back hole.

I freeze in surprise when his second hand comes down and his wet, cold

finger presses into my ass. My head whips to look over my shoulder, and Iceman watches me, but he doesn't stop. "I want you here, Delta," he tells me, and I swear to fuck I nearly come just from him saying that to me.

"Then take me there," I tell him, but I jolt when he presses a second damp finger inside of me, stretching me out, at the same time that he lets his cock sweep up the juices leaking from my pussy.

But I don't get to watch Iceman as he lifts his dick to start pressing his head into my ass, because Jerif gets impatient. A firm hand threads through my hair, and my face is jerked forward again.

"I want that mouth. Now, Delta."

I practically start drooling at the sight of his cock that juts up in front of me like a proud statue. But that provoking side of me that loves to play fight with Jerif comes rearing its head. "Maybe I won't give it to you," I tease. "Maybe I'll just lick you," I say, my voice raspy. "I'll lick you all over, inch by inch, and suck on your balls too until they're drawing up...but I won't suck your cock. Not until you say *please*."

Flames erupt over my clit at my taunt. My mouth drops open in surprise, which is exactly what he was counting on. Jerif tightens his hold on my scalp and shoves his dick into my mouth, my jaw open as wide as it can go to take his length.

I hear Crux chuckle as his hand comes down to flick my nipple. "I don't think she was expecting that."

"No, but she likes it, because her pussy is gushing right now," Iceman says as he scoops up some of that moisture, coating more of it over his dick before pushing himself all the way into my ass.

A muffled moan and curse sound out around Jerif's cock as I suck and swirl my tongue around him, moving as much as I can while he pistons his hips into my mouth.

"You like Jerif's flames on your clit, don't you?" Echo asks. "You like all that heat, but maybe you need a little more...pressure."

*Oh fuck.*

Echo's shadows come down, adding his element to Jerif's burning, tingling heat. With the shadows working alongside Jerif's power, the flames now feel more solid, like a hot thumb is circling that button of pleasure.

Iceman bottoms out in my ass, and then all four of them are thrusting into me—into my ass, my mouth, my hands, touching my breasts, plucking my nipples, teasing my clit. Crux leans down and licks up my neck, nipping at



the most sensitive parts of my skin at the same time that I feel Iceman shove a finger up my pussy, thrusting it into me behind the thin barrier where his cock is.

I'm mindless. Breathless. All that exists is them moving in me, and giving in to the pleasure. I'm a collection of tongue, touch, heat, ice, and shadow.

And then I shatter.

I feel my throat screaming itself hoarse around Jerif before his hot cum shoots down my throat. I explode in the most intense fucking otherworldly orgasmic experience that I didn't even know a body was capable of—and I take all four guys with me.

I feel like I'm high, completely blissed out, the orgasm taking me again and again like fireworks shooting off in the sky. When my body finally finishes exploding, I collapse on all of the guys, knocking them down in the process, and the bed breaks with a massive crack. We all go tumbling down like Humpty fucking Dumpty, surprised whoops taking over our wrung out bodies until we're just a tangle of limbs, laughter, and love.



“It’s insane! Iceman’s given me a tour now *three* times, and I still got lost this morning,” I declare on an exasperated chuckle. “Jerif says I’m hopeless, but he enjoys finding me,” I add with a secret smile. “I swear, the house moves. Hear me out—” I go on, as though my parents’ headstones just rolled their eyes and made an incredulous huff. “It’s completely possible! The mansion isn’t normal by any means. It could totally be a creepy rearranging house. Echo just laughed at me when I suggested that it was possessed, but he didn’t *deny* it, and that’s as good as an admission in the demon world.”

A big fluffy white cloud trots away from the sun, and warmth surrounds me as I lean against the side of my mother’s headstone and rest my ankles on top of my dad’s marker as I sit nestled between the two.

“I’m getting better with wards,” I announce. “I even did my own today. Can you believe it?” I ask, sitting up and spreading out my hands so they can take my wingless form in. “I still can’t make my hair any other color aside from purple, but the way the world is these days, nobody cares about my purple hair. I get asked about what salon I use, but I just tell people I do it myself and then bask in their envy.” I flick my hair over my shoulder dramatically and chuckle.

“Ooh, Dad, I finally got a new electrical box sorted at the house! Crux helped me. He only electrocuted himself a couple times. I know, you’d be so proud of him figuring it out on his own. Turns out my washer and dryer issues were because of the connections. Of course, I had already bought new

ones before we figured that out, hence the new box and wiring, but hey, I'm looking at it like we killed two birds with one stone."

I check my watch and realize I have about five minutes before the guys get here.

I brush off my dad's headstone and then my mom's. "I really miss you guys. I keep thinking it will get easier, but I'm learning that it never does," I say on a sad little sigh. "I have so much now in my life, though. The guys are amazing. Training is, well, it's happening, so I guess there's that. Tazreel is still an entity in his own right, but he's really been making an effort, which I appreciate. I wish you could meet everyone," I admit not for the first time.

"I mean, yeah, you know the guys, but I just wish you could be taking in the craziness of this world right alongside me. Dad, I know you'd be laughing your ass off, and Mom, you'd be getting recipes from the kitchen and putting people in their places. You'd definitely be better at training with Nefta than I'll ever be. I think you two would actually like each other."

I smile wistfully and sigh.

"I asked her to look you two up in Heaven, but she said it didn't work like that. Crux and I tried to sneak in once, but we got busted in Purgatory and sent packing. Guess Heaven can only be earned or portaled into for select angels, but don't worry, I'm not giving up."

I laugh because I can just see my mom shaking her head and trying to hide her smile. She'd disapprove, but she'd be amused nonetheless. My dad would just high five me behind her back.

"Anyway, the guys will be here soon. We're trying out date night again. We're starting it already out of the house this time, since the last five times we tried, we never made it out of the mansion. You won't hear me complaining, but still." I cringe and look at my dad's headstone. "Crap. Sorry, Dad, I forgot to tell you to put earmuffs on."

*Oopsie.*

"I'll be back next week though. No word about *the Ophidian*. We're trying to take that as a good sign. The Gates have been doing awesome, though. The guys say they can't even feel a pull anymore, which is a really good sign. The Eden garden is still alive and well on that one part of Hell's Embrace, and a family of pixies moved in and have been taking care of it, so that's been cute."

A cool breeze reaches out to me, followed by a lick of heat, and I smile, knowing the guys are letting me know they're about to pop in.

At the next blink, my four demons appear, and I look up at them from the ground. Jerif reaches down and grasps my outstretched hand, helping me to my feet.

“Ready to go?” Iceman asks, looking me over with a soft smile.

I nod, but a car pulling up snags my attention. I watch the Cadillac park, and then Mrs. Lee gets out, demon antlers and all. “Hi, Mrs. Lee!” I call as soon as she’s within hearing distance. She lifts an arm covered in her signature mink fur coat before heading to the gravestone of her late husband...mate...demon...human...who knows?

“Like clockwork,” Echo muses as he also sends a wave her way. The only thing his ward does to make him look human is to make it appear like he has immobile tattoos rather than constantly moving shadows on his skin. Jerif’s ward just makes his hair and eyes a deep brown. Iceman has to work the wards the most to appear not to be blue...or have horns, but although I can see the haze of those wards, I’m able to see past them to how they really look. Nihil perk.

“Okay, Mom and Dad, I gotta go. Date night,” I remind them before kissing the tips of my fingers and pressing my hand against both headstones one after the other.

“Yep, go date night!” Crux says enthusiastically before he mimics my gesture, kissing his fingers and tapping the gravestones.

“She’s gonna have a blast,” Echo adds before he sends them a wave. His warded shadows do this cute hug thing that only we can see, the black tendrils wrapping around the stones before slipping back onto his skin.

“We’ll get her home at a respectable time,” Iceman assures them, making a huge grin spread across my face.

I reach up and plop a kiss on his cheek. “My dad likes that you’re so respectful.”

“I’m aiming to be their favorite,” he says with a wink.

Crux and Echo start talking shit about how *they’re* definitely the favorites, and the three of them start walking off so that we can head to the road and act like we’re driving away, for Mrs. Lee’s sake and anyone else who might’ve seen us visiting.

Jerif hangs back, and I look at him curiously. Out of all the guys, he’s the most reticent, and he’s always been a bit awkward here at my parents’ resting place, like he doesn’t know how to act.

I watch as he sends the guys a quick look, noting their retreating backs.

When he's sure they're not paying attention, he turns back to the headstones, and then he rattles off the stats to last night's baseball game for my dad. I bite my lip, my heart immediately swelling in my chest.

As if that wasn't enough to make me melt, then he really surprises me by reaching in his pocket and plucking out a single green stem. It's in the shape of a cane, the green leaves drooping down to hold a yellow flower that hangs like a lantern. Gently, he places it on the top of my mom's gravestone.

I'm so stunned that all I can do is stare at it.

Jerif looks up at me, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck. "It's a Disporum," he grumbles.

My eyes slowly lift to his. "What?"

"Disporum," he says again, gesturing to the flower. "Your mom's name is Tanya. That means fairy queen. A Disporum flower is called a fairy bell. I thought it fit."

Did I say my heart was swelling? No. It has completely fucking burst now. My eyes grow wet, and I have to fight to not start sobbing at this heartbreakingly sweet gesture my grumpy demon just did. "I didn't know," I say with a hard swallow, looking away so that he doesn't see my tears. I know that if I go all weepy on him, he'll retreat, because Jerif and emotional talks don't really mix. He's a male that's all about action. And he just showed me through his actions how much he loves me, by doing the sweetest fucking gesture I could've ever imagined.

When I've gotten myself under control, no longer in danger of flinging myself at him and wailing against his chest, I walk over and grab his face in one hand and press my lips against his. It's a sweet, firm peck, and when I pull back, I reach down and thread our fingers together. "Thank you," I say quietly as the two of us start walking to catch up with the others.

Jerif just lets out a gruff, "Welcome."

Smiling to myself, we walk hand in hand, listening to the others as they continue to argue about who's the favorite. I won't tell them that Jerif just scored major points behind their backs. Wouldn't want to ruin their fun.

We stop at the end of the road, where it forks off to another part of the cemetery. We're blocked enough by the large trees that we can safely shift, away from prying eyes.

"Okay, date night," I say with a single clap as we reach the others. "I'm thinking pasta and a movie?"

Crux frowns. "How about tacos?"

Jerif rolls his eyes. “You always want fucking tacos.”

Crux wags his brows at me. “Damn right, I do.”

I snort. “Okay, so tacos and a movie?”

“I’d rather have steak,” Jerif says.

“Fuck steak. And what kind of movie are we talking?” Echo asks. “Because I can’t fucking handle watching a chick flick.”

“We could go bowling,” Crux offers.

Iceman looks at him aghast. I guess it would look kind of funny to see him in bowling shoes paired with his full suit. “Not bowling,” he says with a shake of his blue head.

I huff out in exasperation. “This always happens! We can never fucking decide on what food to eat or where to go!”

“Good point,” Crux says, pointing at me. “So we should just go back to the mansion and let us shower you in orgasms instead.”

The words *shower* and *orgasms* make my eyes glaze over for a second, but then I bitch-slap that glaze away and tell it to go settle on a donut where it belongs. “No,” I say, eyeing them all with *the look*. “We are going on this fucking date. Come on,” I say, clapping again, as if that does anything to pump them up. “We can do this. Let’s just agree on something to eat first. We can handle that.”

“We can’t handle that,” Jerif says like the Negative Nancy he is.

“Yes, we can,” I say confidently. “And this is how it’s gonna work, ready? I’m gonna say a place to eat, and you all are just gonna nod and say, ‘Okay, Delta.’”

The guys send out a mix of snorts and chuckles.

“We’re gonna have...pasta and a movie!” I repeat, just like my earlier suggestion.

The guys groan.

“Okay, great. Good stuff. Let’s go,” I say, holding out my hand.

Echo smirks and comes forward, taking it so he can shift me since I still haven’t learned how to do that myself.

“Fine, but can we find a place that serves pasta *and* steak?” Jerif asks gruffly.

“Ohh, and tacos,” Crux once again throws out there.

I roll my eyes and then laugh because these demons are fucking incorrigible. Good thing I love it.

“If everyone gets on board with pasta and a movie right now, we’ll all

fool around in the theater and see how long we can play before we get caught,” I offer, loving the win-win scenario I just set myself up for.

“I fucking love pasta, personally,” Echo declares vehemently, giving me a cheeky smile and a hand squeeze.

“I guess a good seafood alfredo doesn’t sound like complete shit,” Jerif grumps.

Iceman and Crux just stay quiet, their heated looks saying plenty. They’re probably already mentally coming up with ways of how to enact their sexy sneak mode for the theater.

I’ll take it. And every other date night to come. Because these four demons changed my life, helped me find who I really am, and no matter what, I know they’ve got my back.

And my heart.

## EPILOGUE



“**Y**es! Omg, yes, right there!” I cry out, leaning back into Jerif and the wicked things he’s doing to me. His hot hands are so perfect for this.

*Fuck it hurts, but it feels so good at the same time.*

“Harder,” I grit out.

“You’re fucking bossy.”

“Harder, Jerif!” I demand, because he’s *right* at the perfect spot.

“What in the Rings of Hell is going on?” Tazreel demands.

I scream and jump off the couch, grabbing my shirt to cover my chest. “What the fuck are you doing in here?” I yell at the Abdicated Sin of my nightmares. “I told you no more popping into the bedrooms!”

“It’s three in the afternoon. Not even *I’m* this randy, Delta,” Tazreel states, like somehow it excuses his violating our rules...again.

“I was getting a massage, thank you very much!” I snap, while Jerif smirks and sets aside the massage oil, getting to his feet. “Get the fuck out!” I yell at Taz’s back, because thankfully, he at least turned to stare at the wall.

He throws his hands up like I’m the exasperating one. “Fine, I’ll go get Nefta and be back in ten minutes. Be downstairs with your mates so I can update everyone at once. I have a gathering to go to later, and I don’t want to be held up.”

Tazreel disappears just as suddenly as he came, and I release a furious groan. “I’m getting bear traps, I don’t care what anyone says. That’s the fifth time he’s done that!” I whine.

Jerif chuckles but doesn’t say anything. They never do, no matter how



annoying my relatives are. Maybe if Lucifer declares they can't be punished either, they'll finally give Tazreel a piece of their mind. Or maybe they really just don't give a fuck.

Jerif takes my shirt and pulls it down over my head. I give him my back, and he helps me thread my wings through the holes that have been sewn into every top I own now. He rubs over my ass—probably because my leggings make it look so good—and gives it an appreciative squeeze.

“How's your back?” he asks.

“Better,” I answer, my wings stretching out as I rub at the spot where he worked my knot. Now that I've been training, my muscles have been giving me hell. But luckily, I have a strong demon with fire-hot hands to rub them for me. Jerif's massages have quickly become one of my favorite things ever.

“You know, if we really wanted to show him what's up, we'd be late to his so-called meeting because we were fucking,” I tell Jerif over my shoulder.

“You really are shameless in your pursuits to avoid training, aren't you?” Jerif scolds. “I was just warming you up for flying practice, and you know it.”

“Yes, but you could be warming up my vagina with your cock right now, and isn't that just a better use of our time all around?”

He snorts. “Better get to it, Warrior Princess, or I'll withhold my warm cock from that pussy and make sure the others withhold theirs too until after you've practiced properly.”

I huff. “Oh look at the time, we have a meeting to get to,” I chirp.

*Yeah, right. As if he'd actually get the other guys not to slip me the D. Shit.*

*He better not.*

Jerif slaps my ass hard.

“Mmmmm,” I purr. “You know just how I like it,” I tease before skipping away from him. I know that if I don't, he'll just grab me, get me all kinds of needy, and then leave me hanging, because he's a prick like that.

But dammit if I don't love it.

“I forgot to ask you where you and Iceman ran off to last night,” I say, stalling. “You guys keep saying you're 'working on something secret,' but you never tell me what it is. I tried to get Echo and Crux to tell me, but their lips were sealed.”

Jerif looks at me smugly. “It's a secret,” he deadpans.

“Oh, come the fuck on!” I huff. “Just tell me already.”

“Fine,” he relents, which surprises the shit out of me. “We’ve been fucking with your old boss.”

My brows pull together. “Sean the Shithole?” I ask, floored. This is definitely not one of the scenarios I imagined when they kept saying they were working on something. I thought it was a sex room.

“Yes,” he says simply, like that’s enough info.

“Fucking with him how?”

He lifts a shoulder. “I melted all his tires on his car. Rafferty keeps freezing his pipes. Echo freaks him the fuck out with moving shadows all the time, so he’s gotten really fucking jumpy. Crux snuck a sex-obsessed imp over once, warded her for the night to look fuckable, but purposely made the ward wear off so he woke up to the demonic version of coyote ugly.”

My hand flies to my mouth as a shocked laugh escapes me. “Oh shit,” I say, unable to stop the laughter that ripples through me.

Jerif watches me, his lips tipping up in a satisfied smirk. “Thought you’d like that. The other guys were worried you’d be all high and mighty about it.” He leans in to brush his lips against my ear. “But I know you. You got that demon side that likes to come out and play.”

“Yep,” I nod, not at all feeling sorry for Sean. “And I’m definitely going to be *coming out to play* with you four later as a reward,” I say with a sultry wink.

His eyes bank with even more heat than his fiery depths already have in them. Before he can grab me, I race out of the room and down the stairs, heading for the weird sitting room. I want to make sure the fainting couch is left open for Tazreel. He just *loves* it when that’s the only seat left in the room. I make him meet us in this room every time.

One by one, the other guys drift in, kiss me, and plop down in their favorite spots. We’ve done this quite a bit in the last two months, as the Armies of Hell and the Angelic Legion hunt Morax.

After his unsanctioned realm was destroyed, Lucifer discovered a home base of sorts in Nihil and another recruiting center in Duo Ring. Both places were razed to the ground. But the safe house they found in Purgatory is the one that surprises the shit out of me still.

Nefta said that, because he didn’t choose a side, he can still go back and forth between Hell and parts of Heaven without permission. I realized after she dropped that bomb, that I could do the same thing too, hence my little Heaven break-in attempt with Crux. Turns out that Purgatory doesn’t take

that shit lightly, though. Nefta chewed me out for a week.

Lucifer suspects that his old buddy the Ophidian is hiding in the Mortal Realm somewhere, which is the last place I heard they were looking for him. Judging by Tazreel's lack of smug excitement, I'm going to assume they still haven't found him, but I'm hoping it's only a matter of time.

Exactly ten minutes later, Nefta and Tazreel pop into the room, and I try not to laugh as Nefta immediately springs for the last armchair available. Tazreel takes one look around, and I swear his eye twitches. He takes a deep breath, as if he's trying to center himself, and I look over and see Echo trying not to laugh. He walks over to the fainting couch stiffly, but then like he thinks better of it, he chooses to keep standing instead.

"Lucifer and the Armies of Hell have found Morax," he announces, like it's an everyday thing and not at all worthy of throwing a fucking Hell orgy for.

"They got him?" I ask with rapt excitement, hope surging in my chest.

"Where?" Iceman asks at the same time that Nefta declares, "Where is he? I want to purge him myself!"

Tazreel holds up a finger, and we all take a breath and wait. "He got away."

Groans and outrage fill the room immediately. How slippery is this fucker? Do snakes have nine lives too? Because I swear, he gets out of the most impossible situations.

"I know it's not the win we were hoping for, but it has proven very fruitful. We recovered a lot of tech and journals that will help us figure out what his next move might be, and then we can catch him once and for all. Aside from Delta's name popping up in various places, we also recovered another name," Taz tells us. "Medley. At least, we think it's a name. It could possibly be something else, some other kind of clue. We're looking into all possibilities right now, but it seems his focus moved from hunting Delta to whatever this 'Medley' is. Probably because he's realized Delta is too well protected now."

I can't help but feel a whoosh of relief at that. The guys are constantly taking shifts to watch the portal and the mansion, all of us on edge that Morax would try something again. I'd love to believe that he's going to leave me alone for now, but I can't help but wonder what it is he's moved on to, and if it's something worse.

I try to think if the name Medley rings any kind of bell, but I've got

nothing. I look to the guys, who seem to be doing the same thing as me, but they seem just as clueless. And then over to Nefta. She's gone white as a ghost.

"What's wrong?" I demand, panic pushing through me at the look on her face.

She swallows, and every eye in the room is suddenly on her. Nefta looks from me to Taz and then slightly shakes her head. She pushes out of her seat and runs her fingers through her purple hair, pulling at the strands in frustration.

"Fuck!" she screams out suddenly, making me jump. The rage I hear in her tone shocks me.

"Nefta...what's going on?" I ask with growing dread that's creeping through my gut like a vine.

"How the fuck did he find her?" she demands, but it's clear the question isn't posed to anyone but herself.

My brows pull together. "Find who?"

"He must have followed me..." she mumbles as she starts to pace around the room, all of our gazes locked on her. "That has to be it."

"Who's *her*? Medley? So it *is* a name? It's a person?" I demand, not liking whatever it is that's upsetting Nefta so much.

She stops her pacing and turns to me, sorrow, anger, and something akin to regret shining in her Concord colored eyes.

"Yes," she admits, swallowing hard as her wings flare out behind her. "Medley...is your sister. And my guess is that Morax is going to go after her just like he did with you."

I stare at Nefta blankly as the word *sister* sinks in.

*Well, fuck.*

End of Book Two

## HELLGATE GUARDIAN SERIES

### Rapid-Release Schedule

**Book 1: June 8th**

GRAVE MISTAKES

**Book 2: June 22nd**

GRAVE CONSEQUENCES

**Book 3: July 6th**

GRAVE DECISIONS

**Book 4: July 20th**

GRAVE SIGNS

**ALSO BY IVY ASHER & RAVEN KENNEDY**

**Shifter Romantic Comedy Standalone**

Conveniently Convicted

**Dystopian Romantic Comedy Standalone**

April's Fools

**ALSO BY IVY ASHER**



**The Sentinel World**

**THE LOST SENTINEL**

The Lost and the Chosen

Awakened and Betrayed

The Marked and the Broken

Found and Forged

**SHADOWED WINGS**

The Hidden

The Avowed

The Reclamation

**MORE IN THE SENTINEL WORLD COMING SOON.**

**Romantic Comedy Standalone**

Conveniently Convicted

April's Fools

**ALSO BY RAVEN KENNEDY**



Paranormal Shifter Romance:

[Addie: Pack of Misfits Book 1](#)

[Reese: Pack of Misfits Book 2](#)

[Jetta: Pack of Misfits Book 3](#)

Fantasy Reverse Harem Romantic Comedy:

[Signs of Cupidity: Book 1](#)

[Bonds of Cupidity: Book 2](#)

[Crimes of Cupidity: Book 3](#)

[For the Love of Cupidity: Book 4](#)

[Cupidity Box Set](#)

Romantic Comedy Stand-Alone:

[Can't Fix Cupid](#)

[April's Fools](#)

[Conveniently Convicted](#)

Dark Contemporary Romance:

[The Girl Who Cries Colors](#)

[Cruel: Savannah Heirs Book 1](#)

[Tame: Savannah Heirs Book 2](#)

[Wild: Savannah Heirs Book 3](#)

Dark Paranormal Romance:

[Void](#)



## Wicked Webs

## IVY ASHER



Ivy Asher is addicted to chai, swearing, and laughing a lot—but not in a creepy, laughing alone kind of way. She loves the snow, books, and her family of two humans, and three fur-babies. She has worlds and characters just floating around in her head, and she's lucky enough to be surrounded by amazing people who support that kind of crazy.

Join [Ivy Asher's Reader Group](#) and follow her on [Instagram](#) and [BookBub](#) for updates on your favorite series and upcoming releases!!!



## RAVEN KENNEDY



Raven Kennedy lives in California with her family. She is most known for her international bestselling Heart Hassle series about a quirky cupid who wants to find love for herself. RK writes in a range of genres, including romantic comedies, fantasy, dark romances, contemporary, and paranormal. Whether she makes you laugh or cry, she hopes to connect with readers and create characters you can root for.

You can connect one-on-one with RK on Facebook in [Raven Kennedy's Reader Group](#) and on her Instagram. Click the icons below!

