

A REVERSE HAREM SERIES



THREE TRIALS

THE

DARK SIDE

BOOK II

KRISTY CUNNING

Three Trials

**The Dark Side (book II)**

by

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Thank you for reading! Welcome to the dark side...

Sorry. Couldn't help myself.

You knew I was going to say it eventually.

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## Chapter 1

Just a suggestion: When the Devil says, “*Let the games begin,*” see if you can run in the opposite direction. If not, put on your big girl panties. Someone might die.

“First ten across the line will ascend,” Cain, the Devil’s son, says as he takes over. “Even if everyone else dies, if no one crosses the finish line, then no one wins.”

“The Devil wants to see what will happen to us if we die,” Jude growls. “Has to be what’s going on. All that shit about not knowing our situation was bullshit.”

“I’m not really sure what we were thinking by trusting the Devil to begin with,” Ezekiel mutters just loud enough for me to hear it.

I turn again, finding the Devil practically excited as he grins so broadly and continues to stare at them.

“Even if we manage to survive a land no one outside of hell’s belly residents or royals have ever survived, we have to remember Lucifer built this course. It’ll be full of illusions that could send us in circles. We’ll never get out of here if he doesn’t want us to,” Gage states quietly.

It reminds me of that palace and how I kept going in circles even when I passed through walls. I couldn’t get out until I focused on them and zapped myself to them.

I’m not sure what happens. Between them talking about the fact they’ll never get out of hell’s belly and the Devil laughing like he’s enjoying every minute of this, I snap.

A haze comes over me, and I move away from the guys as they continue to talk to each other. Slipping by people and *through* people, I make my way toward Lucifer as the acidic power burns at my fingertips, demanding to be set free as the dull echo of my heartbeat pulses in my veins.

Lucifer's eyes are still gazing toward the left, watching the guys as they talk about their impending doom. Every single ounce of fear and dread rolls through me, becoming a force that has to be released.

My hand flies out without another thought, and Lucifer's eyes widen seconds before he's launched across the room.

He slams through a crowd people before crashing against a wall, dropping to the ground with a heavy clap. But when he starts laughing instead of screaming in pain, my hand wavers then lowers slowly.

A sick feeling slithers up me as a bit of hopelessness joins alongside it. Lucifer just dusts himself off, still grinning, completely unaffected.

The rest of the party has gone silent, all eyes on the Devil as they worry about what happens next.

"Somebody is *really* not happy about this course," Lucifer says loudly, then laughs along with a few other psychopaths.

His eyes narrow even as a smile stays on his lips, and he looks around like he's searching for me.

Feeling a hollowness at the proof I can't take the Devil down, I turn and walk swiftly back to the guys, nervous the Devil will beat me to them. As soon as I'm to them, Jude gives me smirk and an arched eyebrow.

"Any particular reason you just threw the Devil across the room in front of everyone? Or are you just suicidal? He'll know that was you," he points out.

I look back just as Lucifer predictably starts making his way over here.

"You know that acid power I have that eats people from the inside out?" I ask them.

"Yes," Ezekiel says hesitantly.

"I didn't throw the Devil across the room," I say as Lucifer draws closer, his smile scarily widening with each step he

takes. "I used the acid power on him."

Jude mutters a curse under his breath, and he passes through me, standing in front of me as the Devil nears.

"Seems like someone is a little riled up. Tell me what *she* is saying," Lucifer tells them.

I thought Lamar was my friend, but apparently his main priority is to the Devil, to hell with everyone else. Even though I never thought the Devil would be more intrigued with me upon discovering I have a gender, I'm sure Lamar knew.

"She's saying she will find a way to kill this evil son of a bitch if anything happens to you guys in there," I bite out, stepping closer to Jude's back.

Kai chokes back some sound, and Jude smirks. "She says she's sorry," Jude lies. "She knows she was terribly out of line, but she has no true gauge of right from wrong, as she's not an actual being."

I glare at the back of his head.

"That's not at all what I said, and a touchable vagina makes me very much an actual being. My independent thoughts and emotions make me a *being* too, but mostly the vagina. And it's a good vagina, by the way. Not an evil one, despite the house vote."

I ramble when I'm stressed out, it appears.

Gage mutters something under his breath that I don't catch.

"I have a feeling that's not entirely true," Lucifer says, that deceptive mask of amusement on his face. "However, the next time she wants to strike me, tell her to make sure I can strike her back. There should always be a balance."

He turns and walks away, and I flip him off to his back.

"Balance my ass. If that didn't even leave a mark on him, then he has a much bigger upper hand than I do," I snap, feeling way too frustrated and struggling to get my temper under control.

I want this entire place to burn to the ground with the Devil in it. Or maybe ice would be the counter to kill the man who can withstand fiery acid.

“You need to calm down. You didn’t get this upset when you thought Manella was trying to kill us,” Kai says from too close behind me.

“My power wouldn’t work on him, yet it flowed through me to hit the Devil. It only works to protect you, so what does that tell you?” I growl, eyes still on Lucifer as he takes a seat in his throne and lazily lounges like he has all the time in the world to watch them die.

My fists ball at my side, and I struggle not to go whole. I almost think he knows what I am and is trying to lure me into some sort of trap.

“You already tried to kill him, and it didn’t work. Maybe your power is trying to tell you something still. You forget you’re stronger than you were when you attempted to kill Manella,” Gage says from my side, moving closer.

They’re surrounding me and trying to get me to calm down?

“Why are you defending him?” I ask incredulously, feeling an understandable pang of betrayal.

Gage actually looks a little surprised, then his eyes narrow as anger settles into his features. “I’m not trying to defend him. I’m trying to defuse you before you turn whole and he kills you in front of us.”

If he hadn’t just admitted they’ve only kept me around for a power boost, I’d almost think he sounds and looks like he gives a damn right about now.

For whatever reason, the imitation of concern is enough to ice out some of the burning fury, and a weird little contented burn settles in my chest. Without letting them see their effect on me, I turn around and face the course again.



“Competitors, get ready!” Cain shouts, standing in front of everyone.

I have no idea why I do it, but I think of how I burned Lilith, and mimic the same stirring emotions until his pants... burst into flames.

He curses, reaching down to dust the flames away, but then his pants drop like the fire broke the hem. He grabs his pants, jerking them back up, then glares at the Gemini twins before pointing a finger.

“You fucking assholes,” he growls.

Their eyes widen, and they vanish from the room when he starts stalking after them. Apparently no one in this room would have a death wish besides the two of them. He vanishes too, and I smirk.

Well, I just caused at least a little sibling drama among their *royal* realm. Sure, it's minor and petty, but at least there's some satisfaction in it.

Hera steps up and takes over where Cain left off, using a tone that makes it sound like she's terribly bored with the entire ordeal.

“Ready, set, go, and blah blah,” she says with a dismissive wave of her hand.

A light flashes and momentarily blinds me.

## Chapter 2

We're suddenly alone in the middle of what looks like a fiery canyon. The fire travels *up* in streams, wrapping over the mountains in front of us. On the other side, we have woods full of black, ashy trees and zero light.

The right and left of us fades into both as they touch. We're standing in the only clearing between the two options.

"Do we die in the forest or on the mountaintop?" Gage asks, looking back and forth between both.

"At least we can see death coming if we climb the mountain," Jude answers.

I zap to the top of the mountain, looking around, then zap back down to them. "He didn't say anything about not siphoning. No rules other than to finish the course," I tell them. "Which way is the end? We'll just—"

"Either direction we choose will take us toward the end or in a circle, depending on Lucifer's agenda at this point," Gage butts in. "And I've been trying to siphon since we got in here. He's blocked that ability somehow. Maybe because we're in the belly of hell it doesn't work. Who knows at this point?"

"And I can only do it in this form—the form where I can't touch anything or anyone so that I can siphon them with me, because for whatever reason, each new gift has a downside. Yet I'm not supposed to be a gift from Lilith because that's impossible," I state-matter-of-factly, rambling again.

Gage starts climbing the side of the mountain with Ezekiel right behind him.

Jude and Kai move as well, and I grin when I hear Ezekiel yell down at Jude. "Really glad I got that good night of sleep now."

Jude mutters something as he climbs a little more angrily now. I just hang out, watching them near the ledge, making sure nothing comes at them while they're distracted. As soon as they reach the ledge, I zap up there, and start looking around, inspecting it for dangers that might catch them off guard.

"I wonder if I can create weapons the same way I create clothes," I say to them, moving from spot to spot on the barren mountainside ledge in front of them as they start hiking up behind me.

"Don't risk it," Kai says to me absently. "Lucifer is likely watching our every move. Besides, we need certain weapons to actually be able to do any damage in hell. I don't think you'll be able to materialize those."

"Can the Devil hear you?" I ask him.

"No," Jude answers. "Not unless he comes down here."

I look around, but don't see an obvious hole in the air where the doorway once was.

As we continue to hike up, avoiding the side with the lava spilling upward, I conversationally say, "So they focus on quads, and they're desperate to know of your powers. Even accuse you of being too strong to be topside. Yet he seemed surprise you had a balance."

"I noticed that too," Ezekiel tells me.

"Just curious, but do you think they're searching for the Four Horsemen?" I ask.

Jude snorts.

"We thought of that first. The Four Horsemen were killed centuries ago during a collision of the two kingdoms, before we were even born," Kai answers me. "We thought we'd access more information on it, but even if that's what we were, they'd be trying to get us in hell; not keep us out."

Huffing out a breath of frustration, I start to say something else, when a huge half-bird, half-snake creature, breaks

through the mountain side, passing right through me with its wide, fanged mouth open for food.

A shudder ripples through me as the scaly tail finishes passing through me, and power pulses from me without me even summoning it, sending the bird-snake squawking in pain as its wings stumble their flight and it starts spiraling downward. It catches itself right before the bottom and shoots off in the opposite direction of us.

“That was so not cool,” I grumble, shuddering again, feeling like I need a shower. “Did you see its tail?”

Gage chuckles, but we all start warily listening to the mountainside now that we know there are beasts that can shoot out of it.

“I don’t know if that thing could see me, but I am curious why the hell some monsters have seen me, even though people—not even the Devil—can do so,” I state idly, glancing around.

No one volunteers any possible answers, so I prattle on, adding, “Maybe because they’re deader? Mushed up in that soul chamber called hell’s throat until they’re the abominations they are now?”

“Maybe because the monsters see differently than our kind. The monsters don’t see things three-dimensionally. It’s another level of vision that has evolved in their state,” Kai says through strain as he starts shoving at a boulder.

Gage helps, and they topple two boulders into the lava, using all their strength to interrupt its path. It’s safe to assume it’s hellfire lava. Quickly, they all jump over those boulders before they sink.

“I wonder if they see me like an ink blob. Psychology would make so much more sense to me if so,” I observe thoughtfully, changing my entire attitude about ink blobs prints on movies now.

“Or maybe they see things in ones and zeroes. Could be the origin of code if one of these was humanoid and got loose

topside.”

Apparently they think I’m ridiculous since no one is dignifying my very creative musings as conversation starters.

I keep talking, mostly to myself since they’ve stopped responding. Talking seems to calm me down, and I’m still a little nuclear-level furious from the Devil’s betrayal that we really should have seen coming.

There’s a reason people tell you to never make a deal with the Devil.

“Why not just get one girl and keep her for those fun times? Is it really because you’re too selfish to spend any amount of time on a woman? Do you not find her worth your time between bouts of dirty four-way sex?” I ask, not expecting an answer as I try to distract my mind.

As I open my mouth to keep talking, Kai answers. “Relationships are different than a one-night experience. Attention gets divided when emotions get involved. We’ve tried. There are always favorites, and none of us enjoy it when there are favorites, not even the favorites.”

“It creates jealousy among us, and we always suffer a power loss,” Jude says, staring a little accusingly at me.

“Well, favorites change. For instance, you were my favorite in the beginning. Now you’re a peg below Mr. Selfish,” I dutifully point out.

“You had us numbered, so I’m assuming four was the best?” Gage muses. “Making me your least favorite, despite your animosity toward Kai and his selfish ways.”

“Actually, you were numbered based on the order I saw you in,” I tell him as I step across a bleeding rock.

Yes. The rock is bleeding. I’m not sure if it’s dangerous, but if it’s bleeding, I’m gonna say it’s not a good rock.

Certainly not sanitary.

Or maybe it's on its period, so I assume stepping on it would really piss it off more than usual.

“When I first started drifting in and out, fading out of existence then back in again, I saw you,” I tell Gage. “I realized quickly that the longer I could see you, the longer it took for me to fade. I followed you everywhere for a few days, but I could never see anything around you or hear anything at all. It was just silence and one gorgeously tattooed anchor.”

He clears his throat and looks away, and I shrug a shoulder.

“My vision soon started expanding, and I saw Ezekiel next. He was the one with you when it first expanded. Then Kai came into frame moments later. At last, I could see the whole room, and Jude was the final piece. Just one helped my state-of-being grow slowly. All four sped up the progress exponentially.”

They exchange a look, but I pretend not to notice. They're likely trying to detect a lie or spot the manipulative web the evil vagina is weaving.

“Then I watched you moderately. Every time you'd take a woman back, I'd fade out because I refused to watch that. It got harder and harder to come back, so I finally started watching. Then berated myself for not watching sooner.”

Kai snorts out a laugh.

I continue on with my story, since I never told them the details of my beginning. “Finally, sound came. It was overwhelming at first. Smells were just behind it. Sight. Sound. Smell. Touch took the longest to appear. The last was *taste* that followed quickly,” I say, adding the last part a little quietly.

Ezekiel steps a little closer, then makes a conscious effort to put immediate space between us. He was my first taste.

“You got all pissy about us keeping you around just to boost our powers, yet you admit you stuck around with us to power yourself. Double standard much?” Jude drawls, being his typical asshole self.

My usual response would be witty and catty with equal parts menace and humor. Today, it's honest. Might as well be brutally honest and rip the veins open. Death could come by nightfall for all of them, then me by proxy.

“You four were there for every step of my growth, even seemed to aide in it. I grew attached to all of you—infallibly loyal, viciously protective, savagely lustful, and tragically devoted. I genuinely believed I'd seamlessly slide into your lives and fulfill your need for a woman to share. Pathetic and short-sighted as it may sound to you, it was that fantasy that kept me coming back. And because the four of you unknowingly saved me for years, I became indebted to you on a scale that I can never repay. *That* is why I stick around. I could give in and just fade out—could go back when life would have been so much easier and less lonely. I finally get to be the one saving you, giving back to you all you gave to me, despite your rather extreme protests, so I stay.”

No one says anything for a while. It's not the first time I've attempted to bare my heart and soul, then have the pieces of it get thrown in my face directly after by them.

It's odd that I'm thankful for the next bird-snake that emerges to break up the awkward tension surrounding us. It shoots out, passing through me again, just like the last one.

“Why do they keep shooting out at me?” I snap as that sickly tail slashes through me, the bird-snake soaring out and away from us.

I think that other one must have somehow warned him I'd kick his scaly ass.

“I'm a badass,” I state primly as I walk a little taller in my sexy phantom heels.

“You could at least give us something pretty to look at while we're off to face death,” Ezekiel states flatly.

“My outfit is badass *and* hot.”

“It's...not our thing, really,” Kai drawls.

A sexy little red Devil Halloween costume appears on me, along with red fishnet stockings hooked to the garter belts. The cliché pitchfork, red horns, and little red heels complete the look for hell's belly's deadly excursion.

At first there's silence, then suddenly there's boisterous laughter, and I grin to myself while swishing my ass that is clad with red lace panties.

"May be just a little too distracting," Gage groans.

"You wanted pretty. My ass in lace is as pretty as it can get."

"I think it's her vanity that always catches me off guard the most," Ezekiel says on a rumble of laughter.

"I prefer to hear it called *confidence*," I once again point out.

"I think it's her greed that surprises me. Wanting all the jewelry and fancy dinners we bought the other women," Kai muses.

"Not greed. I'm not really all that greedy, to be honest. I spent five years coveting the gifts you gave these women as tokens of your brief but passionate affection. They didn't even know you, yet you showered them with such things. I still want all that," I go on. "Even if you do deny me the rest of the fantasy, I still want all the sweet stuff. You might have saved my life, but you did it without effort. I've certainly had to exert effort to return the favor. I feel like the tokens of affection could be accepted as tokens of gratitude, and then there could be balance in the debts."

It grows immediately silent, and I turn to look behind me to see they've also stilled.

"It's not like you don't have the money," I say on an exasperated sigh.

"It's just the choice of words you used," Jude says, not giving anything away with his tone or expression.



A screech from below sounds before the earth starts shaking hard, and Kai is pitched to the side. The others shout for him as he falls toward a lava stream below us.

I zap down, landing on the last ledge before the cliff, and I turn whole just in time to grab his hand as he falls by me. His hand immediately clasps mine as my hair falls around my face.

Light beams around me, almost blinding the both of us, and I jerk him onto the ledge before the light disappears and I tumble to the ground in my phantom form, my heart racing so fiercely that I almost can't stand, even without gravity hindering me.

Kai is panting heavily as he drops beside me, and he says, "You're a lot stronger than you look."

I laugh humorlessly, staring up but not able to see anything.

"What the fuck happened?! All we saw was a blast of light!" Gage shouts.

"I'm alive," Kai calls out. "The rest can wait," he adds, though it sounds as though he's just talking to me as he pushes up to his feet.

He groans as he stares at all the lost progress.

"I'll meet you at the top. Don't linger. I don't want to know what just shook the earth that hard," he calls out.

He studies me for a minute, but I turn away and start hiking again, electing to stay with him so that he's not left down here alone.

"Will you be able to make it three days without giving in to the urge to solidify?" Kai asks me.

"No. My level-up has its own form of balance, it seems," I answer on a sigh. "How much can Lucifer see?"

"Not really sure, but I doubt he can see in caves. You can turn whole in those to rest and gain strength," he says to me.

“We’ll have to break for rest anyway. This place will drain our energy.”

“But you’re at your most vulnerable when you sleep. I’ll just rest an hour at a time. It’ll be enough.”

“It’s obvious Lucifer has an interest in you, possibly even knows what you are. If you go whole, you’re at *your* most vulnerable, and you’re not a participant in the trials. He can haul you out and execute you. You know he’s stronger, and he might know of a way to stop you from escaping.”

“Careful. You’re starting to sound like you care, and that conflicts with your selfish image,” I say, lightening the mood.

The more they act like they care, the more attached my stupid little heart tries to get to them. Like it’s starving for all the scraps of attention.

“It gets old,” he finally says with a shrug.

“What?” I ask as we move up higher on the mountain, our pace brisk to make up for lost ground.

“It gets old,” he says again. “The game. It’s always the same. The only time we shook things up was when we tried to tackle relationships. Once we even tried to have a relationship with four women, and they were game for it. Sex was together, one woman at a time. They didn’t find out about each other, but when they did, things got bad. It’s the only time favorites didn’t matter, because we were all someone’s favorite. Yet...”

“They didn’t like sharing their favorite,” I decide to say.

“Yeah. They didn’t mind sharing the rest of us, but the favorite was off limits. Even that proved to weaken us. Our bond is the only thing that steadies us. We’re a volatile explosion waiting to happen, and the bond is the glue that holds us together both individually and as a unit. Anything that threatens the bond is the worst threat to us.”

“What about being all together in the same room with different women?” I muse.

“Tried that too. It’s not...I don’t expect you to understand, but we bonded when sharing, and sharing only strengthens the bond. We don’t feel whole when we’re *not* sharing.”

I bet the bleeding hell rocks have synced up their mensies

“I think I know why you’re all so moody,” I say as though it’s just dawned on me. “You all have your man-periods at the same time.”

“I’m not even sure how to respond to you when you abruptly shift directions and say shit like that, and half the time you take silence as a sign of being moody,” he murmurs distractedly.

“Episodes of homicidal rage. Uncontrollable lust. Middle-of-the-night pizza cravings...Yep. You’re all totally synced up like these menstruating rocks,” I go on.

I get the usual groan.

“I mean, it’s right there in the word. *Menstruating*. It’d make more sense to define moody men.”

“Feel free to talk about *anything* else,” he grumbles. “Unless you want to keep hearing silence.”

“You’re just grunting and groaning, not really staying all that silent,” I inform him.

He gives me an impatient look.

Oh, yeah. I need back on the original topic. “For the record, I totally didn’t want *any of you* touching anyone else, and that made me feel selfish. If it wasn’t for the evil vagina that got you all individual hard-ons, what would the answer have been to my proposal?” I ask mildly, glancing at another bleeding rock.

Kai weirdly walks into a cave, and I follow, warily looking around. He spins once we’re deep inside. “Turn whole,” he demands.

I do, and the light is absent this time. I guess the adrenaline must have been playing a part on the cliff.

“What’s going—”

My words are cut off when he’s suddenly on me, kissing me hard as he lifts the flimsy little skirt that doesn’t even cover all of my ass and presses me against the cave wall.

He reaches between us and rips away the scrap of lace, and my breath catches, forcing me to break the kiss, when his fingers find my clit. My eyes almost cross, and I clutch his shoulder, amazed by how much better it feels when someone else touches me than when I touch myself.

Ignoring the terribly inappropriate timing, my lips hungrily find his, and I moan into his mouth as he starts working a finger inside me, his thumb still working those incredible circles at the exact right speed and perfect pressure.

I can’t even think.

He kisses his way down my throat, and my nails dig into his tux jacket as he drives me insane with very little effort. The orgasm hits me so much faster than it has under my own manipulations.

My entire body shudders and comes alive with sensation, and I kiss him even harder, needing more of him as I clench around his fingers, not feeling that hollow sensation quite as much.

He manages to break the kiss, pulling back as he pants heavily and stares into my eyes. He brings his finger up and sucks it like he’s tasting the most intimate part of my body from the one piece of his body that has touched it.

My eyes grow hooded, and that uncontrollable desire spikes even more like I’m caught in a haze.

He closes his eyes like he’s savoring the taste, and my hands mindlessly go to his belt, undoing it like now he’s mine to have. His hands clasp around my wrists, halting me, and I look up to see his taunting smirk.

“*If* we could have you, I wouldn’t be so selfish. I’d make sure you were well sated before taking mine, and I’d make you

crave me as often as possible. The fact that I'm not your favorite kills me. But because of that aching need to be your favorite, I know you'd be the end of us."

He pushes away and starts walking, while I try to gather my senses. I shift back to my phantom form, still feeling the aftershocks of my first orgasm that wasn't self-induced.

Who knew there were varying degrees of pleasure like that? Just a taste and I'm addicted.

"Truthfully, you're totally my favorite right now," I tell him honestly as we exit the cave.

He half groans, half laughs, a tortured sound that fills me with a weird sense of accomplishment.

He stares up at the cliff that bypasses the hiking trail.

"I'm the fastest climber of the four of us," he says, excluding me from that grouping.

Obviously, he knows I'm faster.

"It'll be quicker to go up," he goes on, sounding like he's talking himself into that conclusion more than explaining his logic to me.

He starts climbing, and I ask a reasonable question. "What if one of those bird-snakes shoots out and knocks you off? I might have set the bar too high with that fabulous first catch, but I'm not so sure we want to see if I'm a one-hit-wonder or not."

He curses and laughs at the same time, straining his muscles as he heaves himself up quicker and quicker.

"Climb behind me several feet down. They seem to be attracted to your presence the most," he says.

"Did you forget my fear of clinging to a mountainside? I was just going to zap up when you got closer."

The ground rumbles, and I start climbing immediately. The rumbling shifts, and as if cued, the bird-snake shoots through me instead of taking Kai down.

Kai blows out a shaky breath as that scaly tail—*the tails are the absolute worst*—finishes slithering through me.

“Since you’re my favorite and gave me my first two-person orgasm, I’ll tough it out,” I grumble, closing my eyes as I start climbing slowly, not really needing to actually worry about falling so long as I don’t look down.

His masculine, reluctant chuckle accompanies his usual groan.

“I’m going to need you to stop talking about that, because I’m hard as stone, and you have no idea the temptation I’m battling.”

“My evil vagina is impressed with her powers of temptation,” I deadpan.

Two more bird-snakes pass through me before we reach the top. I zap the rest of the way there once Kai tells me he’s over the edge.

The other three men stand from their seats on the ground, and Ezekiel grimly gestures to the next leg of the trial.

A hellfire tundra awaits us, stretching as wide and far as the eye can see.

And there’s no way across.

### Chapter 3

“We can go back down and into the forest, but it’s going to exhaust us, and who’s to say we won’t find the same thing on the other end of it?” Ezekiel asks, frustrated.

I look out, only seeing the black forest behind us and nothing beyond it. I’m assuming that’s the Devil’s trick.

“So we wait for a gift from one of the children, in other words,” Jude says on an annoyed breath.

I move to the edge of the fiery lake, bending low. My hand merely passes through the flames, and I try to think of the power I envied so immensely that Lilith wielded.

It crashed through me with such an overwhelming presence before it temporarily dried up the lake of lava then.

“I’m not volunteering to step in it this time,” Kai says bitterly. “I was the last sacrifice.”

Jude curses, moving toward the edge like he’s going to do the same stupid thing Kai did at the last trial.

“Stop!” I shout, and he does, but just barely.

“What if I can duplicate what Lilith did? I remember the power. I recorded the feeling.”

“Recorded the feeling?” Gage asks.

I nod. “It’s how I’ve learned to do things. I record the processes in my mind—like the clothing issue that started in the beginning. I pick apart the powers later. I even drew out acid on command today because I’ve been getting better and better since my last level-up.”

“Lilith has a lot more power than you,” Kai decides to point out.

A wave of envy washes over me again. I’m assuming she did something to me when that power rushed through me,

because I've really hated her ever since.

"Just for that, you're no longer my favorite. It goes back to Ezekiel by default."

Ezekiel's eyebrows raise, at the same time Gage asks, "How did Kai become your favorite when he was your least favorite?"

Since I already replaced the ripped panties with an exact replica pre-barbarian Kai, there's no evidence of our detour.

"The most important part of that you should concern yourself with is the fact you're the only one who *hasn't* been my favorite," I tell him flippantly, studying the fire lake a little more intensely.

My eyes close as I recall that day, making it clear. I separate each intricate part of the power, trying my damndest to see if I can duplicate it.

"Anything you care to explain?" Jude drawls, distracting me only briefly when my eyes open to see him staring expectantly at Kai.

"Kai showed gratitude. The rest of you could really take a lesson," I inform them absently.

Ezekiel just laughs and walks away. Gage rolls his eyes. Jude is the only one acting like he's upset right now.

The ground around us starts to shake, and the guys go silent as it shakes harder and harder.

"Please fucking tell me you're doing that," Gage says on a quiet breath.

Something is pouring out of me, but I sure as hell am not shaking the ground.

"Not me," I groan.

Just as they start to take cover, a massive beetle spews from the lake, spanning at least twenty yards as it floats atop the fiery surface. It spits and foams at the mouth, and it gnashes its crooked, spiky teeth close to Gage.



A beetle that likes hellfire instead of burning? No thank you.

Gage flips back, and in the next instant his hand shoots out. The beetle freezes, and Gage lunges, connecting with the beetle's leg that he grips with both hands.

A scream tears through the air as the beetle's massive body starts to shrivel, the fight slowly leaving the beast.

"Stop!" I shout, and Gage does, looking at me like I'm crazy.

"We can ride it across. It's subdued with whatever you just did that is making it wilt like a rotten piece of fruit, but it's still floating."

The guys all exchange a look, and then they quickly start climbing it. Kai is the only one left on land, and he kicks his foot out hard, knocking the beetle off the land what little bit it was beached.

Then he runs and leaps. Jude catches his hand, pulling him up the rest of the way. I zap myself up there with them, and we slowly float down the fire. The center of the beetle escapes the licking flames, and they stay there, away from harm.

There's just enough of a current to slowly drag us in the right direction.

"How do you pass an impassible lake without a consequential gift from the Devil's children?" Ezekiel asks as he lies down.

"You wound a hell's belly monster just enough to ride it on the premeditated current," Jude answers, looking over at Gage as he clenches and unclenches his fists, still wired from whatever he just did.

"Riddles," Kai states flatly.

"The riddles are subtle?" I ask on a sigh. "I expected a super creepy echoing voice to pop in and ask us questions that we had to get right before we could pass on to the next phase."

Ezekiel snorts as he tosses his tux jacket off the side of the beetle. It turns to ash instantly when it hits the flames, and he adds the tie to the flames next.

“Why must they overcomplicate these things? How do we know when there’s a riddle or just an obstacle?” I ask. “Lamar said the riddles would be the most important.”

“They will be. They’ll be the trick to life or death, clearly,” Jude says, gesturing at the beetle under us, and looking at me like I’m an idiot.

“In that case, I really hope you’re all old enough to be wise and not just paranoid, so we can see the riddles before it’s too late next time,” I tell him, a fuck-you grin on my face.

Ezekiel laughs as he lies down, putting his side against mine as he untucks his dress shirt. Fortunately, I feel no overwhelming urge to go whole.

I’m getting better at this.

Gage loses the same unnecessary items, but he also strips off his dress shirt as well, leaving the white tank underneath to outline his very hard and distracting body.

“What’s Hera’s way of delivering gifts?” I ask them, since there’s nothing else to do but chat.

“She takes something from you before she gives you something in return,” Kai answers from somewhere. “You have no say in what she takes.”

“Lovely. Let’s hope she doesn’t help out, because I don’t think I’d like what she’d want from you.”

“That’s more Cain’s style. It’s why he doesn’t help us. He prefers to be given something in exchange for his help, and it’s usually on the sexual favor side. Have you ever seen us with men?” Gage points out.

“The twins?” I muse.

“A fucked up version of yin and yang with their own twist,” Ezekiel answers. “They could hurt you or allow you to

fuck them. It depends on what course of action they used the last time. You're always gambling with agonizing pain or possible pleasure when you deal with them."

"They have no sexual preference, but again, we do," Kai points out. "Which is why Lilith and Hera are the ones to approach us."

"So Hera has approached you?" I ask, trying not to sound as worried as I feel for whatever reason.

"She tried at the beginning of the first trial. Lilith intercepted her," Jude states, staring in front of us like he's searching for an end to come into sight.

"What about Manella?" I ask when it grows quiet.

"No clue. I've never heard anyone speak about him ever aiding anyone before," Gage says with a shrug.

"I know you're all probably not tired, but now would be a good time to take a nap. This lake is big, and at the speed we're going, we're going to be riding for a while. I'll take guard duty," I tell them.

Kai loses the shirts completely, going bare chest as he flops down. I idly wonder how all four decided combat boots were acceptable footwear for a tux.

"Must you touch her every time you sleep? You have a tendency to form habits, Mr. Nipples," Jude says dryly, his eyes on Ezekiel.

"I only get any actual rest next to her, so if I'm going to nap when I'm not really tired, then it's going to be one hell of a power nap to last me," Ezekiel answers unapologetically.

"Point one for the evil pussy," I say tauntingly to Jude, holding up my index finger on one hand and an O with the other to signify the score.

Jude looks like he's trying not to smile, which pisses him off even more, apparently, since he mimes the motion of strangling me before turning around and calling me a few uncharitable, yet very creative, names.

I give him the bird. It's not creative, but it *is* my favorite sign.

“He's only mad because he hates me as much as he likes me, and since he doesn't want to like me, he tries to hate me a little more,” I say as Kai stretches out beside me, his body brushing through mine.

Gage and Jude sit across from me like it's a standoff, and they eye Kai like he's a new traitor to their cause.

I hold up two fingers while mouthing the new score.

They both glare at me.

It's adorable, really. At least in this form. I'd find it less adorable and more terrifying if I could physically feel the true power of a racing heartbeat.

Kai just smirks, even as he keeps his eyes closed. Like he knows the silent exchange going on without seeing it. Ezekiel is already asleep, breathing evenly as his face remains relaxed.

Gage stares a little longingly, as though he's jealous of the obvious peace on Ezekiel's usually tortured sleep-face.

He blinks and looks away, his jaw set as he stares out over the lake. Jude continues to burn a hole through me with his glare.

“I'm all of your types, really, minus the preference in hair color. I had no control over that. It was there when I got here. But all your wants, desires, needs, debaucheries of choice... everything. I'm molded to your specifications, because the only thing in the world I knew was all of you. I learned what you liked, and it became a part of me. It shaped me as the person I am now, because I was learning who the hell I was then. Blame yourselves for all the things you don't like.”

A sleepy rumble of laughter slides out of Kai as his body begins to relax.

“Kai loves the chase and is always desperate to make someone who hates him suddenly crave him,” I say with a

shoulder shrug. “He wants to infect them with his heady spell that he can weave when he really wants to.”

Another sleepy laugh is the response to that.

“Ezekiel is the most desperate for peace, as though his nightmares are twice as stained as all of yours. Not sure how I did that. I expected his favorite part to be the fact I really want my nipples adored.”

Jude arches an eyebrow at me.

“It’s true,” I go on unapologetically. “Gage wants a puzzle he can’t unravel so easily. He wants to be surprised, and he’s tired of all the predictable variables. He’s starving for a challenge. He’ll admit it if you ask him how much he’s actually enjoying the fact he doesn’t know if he’ll die or live at the end of these trials.”

Gage’s jaw grinds, but he smirks even as he radiates anger.

Jude looks over at him then at me. “This is why you’re so dangerous, *comoara trădătoare*. Giving us exactly what we’ve all always dreamed of, along with a chance to strengthen ourselves? When something feels too good, there’s always a really fucking nasty tail you don’t see coming until it’s too late.”

He turns around, putting his back to me before lying down. His eyes are closed and he is purposely staying inches away from me, not touching me.

“I’ve already told you my *tail* in lace is the prettiest thing you’ll ever see,” I deadpan.

He makes a sound of frustration, but I’m apparently going to get the last word.

I’m a little curious just how beautiful Hera must have been as Helen of Troy to have inspired a war between two nations, when I couldn’t even get one man to crumble before me.

It, of course, makes me envious. Sigh. I’m still blaming Lilith for that.

“Ezekiel was my first kiss,” I decide to say, looking down to see Kai sleeping peacefully. “Kai was my first orgasm giver,” I go on.

Jude’s jaw tics, as Gage grunts and curses. I grin.

“Don’t worry, he just used his fingers. He didn’t give it up to the nefarious vagina. My point is, it seems I’m going to be running low on firsts pretty soon, at the rate I’m going. You boys better not come crying to me when you missed all the firsts for being completely unreasonable pricks.”

Gage does the same petty thing, refusing good sleep offered by the evil vagina holder for no cost of admission.

They both ignore me, because they don’t really like arguing as much as I do. I could quite literally point logic out to them all day.

Surrounded by the four guys who easily close their eyes in my presence, willing to put their life in my hands, yet completely unwilling to stubbornly admit they trust me, I stare out over the fiery lake.

It’s actually sort of pretty once you get over the dangerous part of it. Also, as long as you don’t mind the occasional bird-snake carcass floating by you, or the living ones casting their ominous shadow over you from the red sky.

I take it back. It’s not pretty. I’m really just trying too hard to make this not as doom-and-gloom as we know it is.

With all of them quiet, not bickering or bantering with me as a distraction, the reality of our situation sinks in, and it grows heavy pretty quickly.

I can’t see land on any side now. The crackle of the lake and spitting fire that hisses when it shoots too high don’t exactly give off a comforting melody.

I’m so alert that it’s a good thing they can’t feel me jostling around to inspect each sound or smell.

Gage suddenly moves into my knee with just the very tips of his fingers, not making a sound or looking at me.

Jude's eyes are open, staring at me before dropping his gaze to the fingers Gage leaves there, his body relaxing as the tingles soothe him. At least I assume it's the tingles.

Jude's eyes narrow in challenge, as though we're in a war and this is a pivotal battle.

Obviously, I mouth the word, "*Three*," before holding up just as many fingers and wagging my eyebrows at him.

It's clearly the most mature course of action.

He doesn't find it quite as amusing as I do.

"That's twice you've called me *comoara trădătoare*. What does it mean?" I ask him.

He holds my gaze for so long that I think he's not going to answer.

Just as he closes his eyes, I hear the words that are almost whispered.

*"Treacherous treasure."*

## Chapter 4

“I swear, I never want to see another fucking beetle for as long as I live,” I mutter under my breath.

Which might be as long as an hour from now for all I know.

We’ve been stuck on top of this foul-smelling thing for over ten hours now. At least. Possibly even longer. Just floating on the fire. If my ass was capable of feeling anything in this form, it’d still be numb.

Bright side, three out of four guys just got a lot of proactive rest before day two starts out the same way day one ended.

Jude is the only one awake. He never really slept as deeply as the other three, and I’m fairly sure he resents the hell out of all of them for sleeping as well as they have. And he resents me for my wicked vagina voodoo.

*My milkshake brings all the boys to naptime...* Yeah, that’s not how that song goes. The song is a lot sexier, but beggars can’t be choosers.

They’re a tough crowd, so I take the small wins that come along.

“Fucking finally,” Jude says, causing my attention to lift.

I spot gray land with nothing but a shadow behind it, almost as though there’s a second picture out of frame, and for a second I’m relieved, until I see a girl and guy lifting bows and launching arrows.

“Get the hell up!” Jude shouts as I leap to my feet.

Before I can even react, he flips into the air, snatching both speeding arrows, and lands in a crouch back on the beetle.



He casually tosses an arrow to Ezekiel as he lands at his side, and the two of them throw the arrows so hard they zip through the air in a blur of speed.

Both archers drop to the ground, the arrows sticking out of their throats as their bodies convulse.

“They could have just went on instead of mistaking you to be vulnerable on the back of a beetle, and they’d have survived,” I state, as though they need a reminder of the obvious.

“Depending on their ability to heal, they may still survive if we leave them,” Jude tells me.

They’d better stay dead.

“Does that mean you’re going to do your five-finger-death-punch to ensure they don’t chase us down and try to kill you again?” I muse.

He gives me an annoyed look.

“Did you really just do that?” he asks incredulously.

“What? Use your favorite band to name your Hulk Smash and Decay power? Yes, yes I did,” I say very seriously, holding his gaze like there’s a challenge to see who holds it the longest.

He breaks our stare-down first, and Kai smirks, even though he seems distracted.

“Well. That’s certainly problematic,” I announce in a huff when I see what has their attention.

The closer we get, the louder the telltale sign is, making us view the optical illusion differently. It’s not one stretch of lake we’re seeing anymore. There’s a massive drop below before it levels out, and we’re actually seeing two levels of fire now.

The newest issue is a massive, fiery waterfall that we’re fast approaching, and there’s roughly a hundred foot gap from the start of the *firefall* to the land across from us.

Hell really sucks.

“How far can you guys jump? Because that’s a little difficult for me even in this form,” I say warily, my heart starting to hammer now.

Gage looks around like he’s searching for something, as Ezekiel answers me.

“We can’t make that jump.”

No land is on either side of us, not giving us any other option, since we’re surrounded by hellfire lava. And this firefall? It’s five times the size of Niagara Falls in width.

The fall isn’t that steep—maybe fifty feet—but there’s no way the beetle won’t submerge with all that weight, even if they manage to all stay on it during the fall. They’ll never survive the hellfire burns.

And the Devil wins.

“Now would be a good time to figure out the riddle early,” I tell them, frantically waving my arms as though that will spur them into brilliance.

“How do you cross an uncrossable passage layered with flames of fucking death without falling or jumping into the fire, when there’s no obvious escape around you?” Jude asks on an annoyed breath.

“I hate that riddle,” I point out, not coming up with my own genius idea this time.

“Jude and I can throw the farthest,” Gage says, cracking his neck to the side. “And we can jump farther as well.”

“Obviously that’s Plan Z. What’s Plan A through Y?” I reasonably ask, knowing he can’t possibly be suggesting that as anything other than a last resort.

They ignore me, and I ignore the *firefall*’s edge that we’re getting closer and closer to. Okay, so maybe I don’t really ignore it at all. It actually has most of my attention.

This is so not the time for this bug to be speeding up. In fact, this is the worst possible time for it to finally feel like it’s

motoring along.

When they continue to stare at each other like they're calculating the probability for survival and considering this ridiculous plan as their true course of action, I throw my hands up.

"That can't possibly be the right answer to the riddle," I shout at them.

Remember what I said about the drop being fifty feet? I was very much off on that calculation.

The closer we draw, the more I realize my depth perception has been masterfully deceived.

That drop now seems endless before it levels back out again.

Damn that Devil and his illusions.

I don't find myself any fonder of plummeting from a firefall than plummeting from a mountainside. And I close my eyes, because if I can't see it, then it doesn't exist.

I can also ignore the roar of the falls that only seems to add to the drama of the dire situation.

"I don't see any other option," Kai says like he's frustrated and furious. "You'd better damn throw me harder than anything you've ever thrown in your life," he tells someone. "Because I'm up first."

My eyes fly open as I gape at them, but I don't yell anything because I sure as shit don't want to distract them when Gage is already winding Kai up, spinning him out like a father would a daredevil child for giggles.

I'm not seeing why those masochist children find this amusing right now, because my stomach is in my throat, terrified a hand is going to slip and Kai will be skipped across the deadly surface.

Just the image and fear of this has me convinced children are sociopaths. It's always the ones you least suspect.

About ten feet from the edge, he launches Kai, and Kai sails over the massive divide.

I watch with my mouth hanging open, even as Jude starts winding up Ezekiel, preparing him for the same thing. My heart is divided in halves, watching as Kai sails and Ezekiel is being wound up to do the same.

Kai lands with a crash on the other side, bouncing so hard and rolling out of sight.

Before I can shout for him, my words are stolen as I stand frozen and watch Ezekiel sailing faster across the same distance.

My eyes are bouncing everywhere when Jude and Gage dart to the back of the beetle and get into a launch position as they stare straight ahead.

I glance over as Ezekiel lands just as harshly, rolling into the shadowed land hidden from us amongst the fiery lake that is coming to an abrupt end.

Just as the tip of the beetle starts over the edge of the firefall, I turn in time to see Gage and Jude rushing by me, grit and determination shading their eyes as they pass through me in a blur.

I whirl around with them as they pass, watching as it all seems to happen in slow motion. They run to the last tip of the beetle they can reach before they leap as hard as they possibly can.

For an agonizing *tenish* seconds, I have repetitive heart attacks.

Jude barely makes it across, and he immediately rolls back up to his feet so he can turn in time to see Gage's fingertips just barely graze the ledge a fraction of a second too late and centimeters too short.

Gage's eyes widen as he falls to his back, reaching for the hands that make it another fraction of a second too late to grab onto him. Resignation is painfully immediate in his eyes, and

his hard gaze turns cold as he falls helplessly toward the lake. My heart lurches as I leap over the edge, diving for him, zapping myself closer to make up ground.

Our fingertips just barely touch, and I turn whole, grabbing onto him as that light bursts from me again.

No magnificent strength saves us as I scream as loud as I can, begging for a miracle of some sort to stop this from happening. I stay whole, knowing those flames won't simply pass right through me like this.

But I don't care. I refuse to let him die alone, even as I scream and feel the tears rushing up the sides of my eyes.

A vine slaps against us, and I try to snatch it, having no idea where it came from. Seconds later, a body barrels by me, and Ezekiel turns upside down, reaching out with one hand and grabbing Gage by the wrist.

Our hands are violently yanked apart when I keep falling and he comes to an abrupt halt.

Gage dangles above me, holding on to Ezekiel, and Ezekiel holds onto the vine with his other hand as they swing over the lake.

"Fucking go phantom!" Gage shouts at me as that light continues to beam from overhead.

I immediately lose my flesh, and I zap myself back to the very top of the cliff's ledge where the other two are peering over.

Then I collapse as that weird light vanishes from the sky.

Even though I can't feel my legs in this form, they still give out. I can't possibly stand. I feel like every emotion I have was just put through the wringer then boiled in a sadistic witch's brew. I'd wager said sadistic witch made a deal with the Devil for her power, because I'm blaming him for everything right now.

I look down the length of my body as Kai turns around and relaxes at the sight of me. Jude has a flicker of relief in his

eyes before he turns away and stares over the edge again.

“Nobody gets to die. I’ve decided I can’t possibly survive it,” I say almost breathlessly, though I have no actual breaths in this form.

Ezekiel hauls himself over the edge, smiling at me like he’s amused.

“You solved the riddle,” he tells me. “And just in time.”

“What? How?” I ask, sitting up slowly as Gage heaves himself over and collapses to his back, breathing heavily as he scrubs his face with both hands.

“Screaming vines,” Jude states flatly, gesturing around us.

For the first time, I take notice of the fact there are a lot of black, wide vines all around us, dangling from those ashy trees we saw at the beginning. Most of the vines vary in thickness from one to ten inches. The overachieving thick vines are definitely the creepiest.

“What’s a screaming vine?” I ask, wondering how the hell I didn’t see a forest full of vines that drape over that edge and hang down the length of the firefall.

You think I’d have noticed an entire freaking black-treed forest.

“The vines grow the largest the closest to a fire source,” Kai says as he lifts one of the medium-girthed vines and gives it a shake. “And if you scream loud enough, it forces them to react. You answered the riddle when you screamed like a banshee, and the forest appeared.”

“The answer is to scream for the only vines long enough to span the depth of the Devil’s bowels,” Ezekiel finishes.

“The bowels? We’re out of the belly?” I ask hopefully.

“Just being cycled back up,” Kai tells me. “We’re going in a loop it seems. We’re at the top again, just on the opposite side of the forest we originally decided to skip.”

Of course we are. Why would we get to skip at least one death option?

“That’s a terribly sneaky riddle, because if we can’t see the forest before we answer the riddle, then how do we know the forest is part of the answer without prior knowledge of the course?” I ask incredulously. “What we saw through that wall after it opened was a flat, fiery tundra. That turned out to be the small gulley we started in, and not even a big part of the course. It was all an illusion to think we knew the course.”

“We saw the forest in the beginning. That was the clue to our answer, because to finish the course, you have to complete every obstacle,” Kai says with a shrug.

Ezekiel randomly lets out a loud yell, startling my already traumatized heart, and the vine in his hand slaps forth like an exposed wire full of untethered electricity. He dodges a few slashes it makes.

“The vine closest to you always reacts the wildest,” Jude says quietly.

“You sent the entire horde of vines near edge of the forest over the cliff because your screams were so loud and echoed around. It was almost like you knew the answer without realizing it,” Kai adds.

“No,” I confess, holding up a finger for a correction. “That terrified the living shit out of me. That’s why I was screaming. Apparently I’m a panicky screamer when plummeting to a fiery death.”

Gage laughs under his breath, still staring up at the sky and lying flat on his back.

“For the record, that was a horrible plan. You’re certainly no closer to being my favorite now,” I prattle on nervously to Gage.

A little bit of reluctant laughter follows that as we all turn to face the forest. The high we’re on from the survival of something that seemed impossible is now eclipsed by the dark

forest that grows so pitch black we can't see any deeper than ten feet.

My eyes glance over to the forgotten archers who are now covered in vines and being treated like they're officially part of the forest.

"At least now I know why they were trying to kill us instead of just running along. They needed a beetle to cross a fiery stream. They could have shot an arrow with rope. But how they planned to paddle the thing upstream is a mystery," I say as I look back to the guys.

I think Ezekiel gives me a pity laugh, but the others just start walking into the forest.

"I'm almost positive this was their starting point," Gage says, gesturing over to the two fallen archers. "The forest ran over them like it considered them collateral instead of passengers."

"I guess they're not too good at riddles then," I state absently.

I'm the only one who can see, apparently, once we get into the thick of it.

My night vision isn't grand topside, but I can see in shades of gray down here, while they stumble their way around. The one person who can't trip is the only one who can see.

Ironic twist, huh?

Jude follows close behind me, as though he can see my outline and is using me for guidance. I pass through a tree, and I hear a loud grunt when he runs right into it.

I grin as he curses me.

He's apparently glutton for punishment because he gets behind me again.

"You can turn whole for a while in here. He can't see you," Gage says as he comes up on my side, stumbling a little.



Instantly turning whole, my hand darts out and grabs his like I'm stopping him from falling, though he doesn't need my help. The physical contact feels so good after watching him almost die the last time I was touching him.

He clutches my hand for a second a little too roughly, almost a desperate sort of cling, then drops it and walks ahead, feeling his way around as he manages to pull away from me.

At least I can see with my own eyes that he's okay. And even in flesh, I still have gray vision. I can't see too far ahead, but it appears to be more visibility than they have.

"We need some light," Ezekiel gripes.

Feeling out the energy stirring in me, I test out my powers in whole form. I haven't been able to do that yet, since I only just started being able to reach for it. Maybe it's all the adrenaline these damn trials are pumping through me after my level-up.

With one hard push, the acidic power bursts into the vine I grab. It sizzles and sparks, then lights up, slowly climbing up the rest of the vine. If these things like fire, then I'll consider this their "watering."

Yes, I contain my laughter for my own joke since they likely won't find it as funny.

The small flames don't put off much light, but I do it every ten feet or so, offering them some visibility.

"That's called a *burn*," I say jokingly.

I get groans instead of laughter. See? It's like someone cut out their ability to find humor.

"That's not even close to what that nineties line is referring to," Jude, the all-knowing prick, says.

"If I'm using nineties lines, does that mean I'm from the nineties?" I ask.

"If you're using nineties terms wrong and causing those around you to cringe, it's likely you're from a few generations

earlier than that. It was always the parents that screwed up the best phrases when they got in on the fun,” Jude goes on.

“Says the guy who is centuries old. You could be my great grandparents’ great grandparent.” I grin as I add, “*Burn.*”

More groans. Damn it, I thought that one was awesome.

“It’s a good thing we don’t need your help insulting people,” Ezekiel says, patting my shoulder a little patronizingly.

“Careful not to hit the base of the trees. If they catch fire, it’s like tossing a match on gasoline. The entire forest will go up in flames and burn until the screaming vines drink all of it in,” Gage cautions.

“Well, I’m glad you decide to share that *after* I’ve been lighting these thirsty bitches up for a while,” I point out.

“You just used *thirsty bitches* wrong as well,” Kai states from in front of me.

“I don’t think I want to know your definition of that phrase,” I grumble, causing all of the chauvinist dicks to chuckle.

The deeper we go, the more suspicious I get. It’s been terribly quiet. Nothing has tried to eat us, roast us, or drop us into a fiery pit in quite a few hours. Granted, the beetle ride took a while, and aside from a few bird-snakes flying overhead rather ominously, it was rather uneventful.

I’m sure this is just like that. Something long and dull to break down your guard so you aren’t on as high alert when a three headed hellhound comes after you.

“Are there such things as three-headed hellhounds?” I decide to ask aloud.

Gage and Kai shake their heads, and Ezekiel smiles to himself, walking easier under the small bit of illumination.

“Sometimes I wonder how your thought process works, and what all happens from the last time you speak until the

next time,” Gage grumbles. “That’s what I find most surprising.”

“Glad my entertainment stock is going up, but I’m actually expecting an answer to that.”

“The Devil invited us to a party last minute, ambushed us with an early final round of the trials, set everyone up for failure on a three-day, impossible quest, and then sent us in here unarmed, while allowing all our competitors to carry their weapons of choice. During all that calculated and obvious plotting, he decided to kindly hand over a list of all the possible creatures we may or may not encounter,” Jude states, each word dripping with sarcasm as though he’s really trying to drive home his point.

Just because I’m feeling petty, I scream loudly, startling all the rest of them.

Three vines whip through me as I go back to phantom mode, and they crash into Jude hard enough to send him flying backwards into a tree. I smile over my shoulder at him as he pushes to his feet, glaring at me the entire time.

“*Burn*,” I say with a saccharine sweet smile.

Third time’s a charm, apparently.

Kai bursts out laughing, and the vines stay dormant. They truly do only like a good scream. Not just any noise will do. Makes sense, since it’s hell. Screams are probably a part of its diet.

“We’re going to have to stop for the night, or we’re going to—”

Gage’s words are cut off when the light disappears and a cool chill creeps in. I hear thunder, and I worry what it’s warning us is to come. Somehow I don’t think rain and a little lightning are what’s in store for us.

“Black ice,” I hear Kai say on a short breath. “Run!”

“Find shelter!” Gage shouts, dashing through the forest as it lights up in neon blue pulses.

Thousands of flying spiders go crazy when the light starts glowing brighter, slithering like an oozing, neon, live entity over the black trees.

I can hear the sound of rain gaining on us, and I'm too scared to ask why it's called black ice. I'm also scared why the forest is turning a creepy, glowing blue, but I'm positive the two are related.

Kai shouts, tumbling sideways with Gage as they roll with the shifting ground of the forest that seems to be breaking apart to drink in the rain.

Jude curses as he gets stuck out in a newly made opening, and he dives for the coverage provided by the thickly vined trees.

But the rain catches up too quick, passing through me as I shout a warning to them.

Ezekiel dives to the same broken hole Kai and Gage fell to, but Jude is swallowed up by the earth much farther away. I zap myself to him, landing beside him as he roars in pain, his back arching as agony steals every feature and twists him in knots while the merciless rain pelts him.

I turn whole, not feeling whatever excruciatingly painful thing he is feeling. The rain slaps against me, pounding relentlessly, and I grab his arms, dragging him over to a small cave. The forest has been full of them, but I don't actually think we're in the forest right now. It's more like we're under it with massive openings over us, exposing us to the surface.

Roots are sticking down all over in this underground world with thousands of large cave holes that I hope aren't occupied with monsters the same size.

The rain pours through the openings that lead back up the large drop to where the forest is, but at least I have Jude sheltered from it now.

Jude is shivering violently, and I hate to leave him, but I have to make sure the others are alive and okay before I focus on what's going on.

“Are you okay? Can I go check on them?” I ask in a panic, even though I can sense all three nearby when I go phantom.

“Go,” he bites out. “Check on them.”

I vanish, feeling sick about it as I zap myself to the others.

Ezekiel is staring down at his arm, cursing as he makes a frustrated and pained sound. I dive to him, looking around for the other two, wondering why Ezekiel is just in his boxers.

“What happened?” I ask on a gasp when I see his arm.

It looks and smells like decay, and it’s visibly spreading through the veins.

Kai and Gage jog over, both of them also down to their boxers, and Kai answers.

“Black ice. If it penetrates the skin, it starts freezing you with certain death from the inside out. It spreads fucking fast too,” Kai growls.

Gage starts looking around him. “We need something to cut away the arm.”

My hands reach for Ezekiel’s arm on instinct, and I turn whole when phantom hands don’t seem to be doing much.

“Don’t!” they all shout at once.

Immediately, I flinch at the burning cold on his skin, but the pain is brief, and his relief is instant as his eyes flake gold again, his arm warming under my touch.

Then my stomach roils when I think of how violently Jude was shaking.

“I have to go,” I gasp, zapping back to Jude.

My stomach completely drops when I get back to see him practically convulsing as he wheezes in pain. His neck has an icy, veiny black coloring, as he continues to shake violently on the ground.

I turn whole and dive to him, ripping open his shirt to reveal his entire torso. The decay is spreading quickly, and it’s

so much worse than Ezekiel's was.

With panicked, shaky hands, I fumble with his belt before getting it off, then grab his pants and boxers, jerking them both down to his ankles.

The decaying process goes all the way down to his knees, and it's spreading lower.

He starts choking when it reaches the top of his throat, and I strip out of my Devil dress, whipping it over my head before I drop to him. Putting as much of my skin against his as I can, I press my cheek to his, hoping this works as fast on an area five times the size of what Ezekiel had.

The burning cold is so much harsher than it was with E, but I grit through it, telling myself in mantra that it's working. That it has to be working. I'm too terrified to look and see, though.

I don't speak, unable to find any words that sound soothing enough for this situation. It isn't until I feel his shaking start to slow down, that I finally look up, finding his eyes already on me.

His teeth chatter, even as his jaw tics.

"If it's not infecting you, don't move. It's working," he manages to say through a great deal of strain.

I tuck my head back under his chin, sliding my hands over his shoulders that still feel cool, even though the darker color seems to have faded.

After a few more minutes, the shaking stops completely, and he releases a breath that sounds as though it's been held for ages.

His arms slide around me, almost hugging me, while the rain ceases as abruptly as it began. The neon blue light flickers, losing some of its energy, but still lingering enough to offer us light from the roots above.

Lazily, his fingers toy with the garter straps holding up my red fishnet stockings. At this particular moment, they seem

very inappropriate.

I lift up, my eyes meeting his as I cup his face in my hands, studying him to make sure he's not still in pain. His hands tighten on my ass when my gaze flicks to his lips.

“Ghost Girl! Jude!” We hear Ezekiel shouting.

“Over here,” I say, going phantom and zapping myself up to the forest entry nearest to us.

I see Ezekiel running toward me, still illuminated by the lingering neon blue ooze.

Kai is right behind him.

Both of them stumble to a halt and rake their eyes over my barely dressed appearance. I'm only wearing the lacy panties, the fishnets hooked to the garter belt, and the matching red heels.

It's definitely inappropriate now.

“Jude is down below, but I think he's healed. Just a little tired from almost dying and all. Again. Seems to happen a lot with you four,” I say, reminding them this is a time for action as I fashion a more appropriate outfit.

They blink once my bare breasts are covered.

“Only since you came around,” Ezekiel tells me before he winks. “Care to go heal Gage's leg? A leak sprung above us just before the black ice stopped, and it landed on him before he could get away. We can't touch it, or it'll infect us.”

“I'll go.”

“We're going to cover as much ground as possible while the black ice residue is glowing. It won't last long.”

“Go on without us. We'll catch up. I can find you,” I say before zapping to where I sense Gage.

The second I see the man of the hour, he gives me a tight, pained smile infused with frustration.

“Struggling to catch a break, it seems. Day two is not your day,” I tell him as I kneel down and try not to pay attention to the fact his boxers are now gone.

The gray icy pattern is spreading from his knee, and is high on his thigh. Trying to cover as much as possible all at once, I lose my new pants before becoming whole.

Gage’s eyes widen marginally, and his nostrils flare as I sit down on him in nothing but a corset. Because while I’m healing him, I’m going to be as sexy as possible just to be an ass.

I almost died for him, and still didn’t receive gratitude. Kai set the bar for showing gratitude a little high.

I straddle his lap, sitting back enough to where the bottom of my thigh covers the top of his. The sting of burning ice is once again enough to make me flinch, but it’s dulled almost immediately.

Gage’s hands go to my hips as we sit here, waiting on him to completely heal. His gaze dips to where he grows harder between us, his very aroused cock teasing me with its proximity.

Slowly, his hands travel up my back and back down to my hips.

“I think you’re healed,” I say a little too quietly.

When I start to get up, he tightens his grip on my hips and jerks me forward until my chest smashes against his, and his cock rubs against my slit in the most tormenting tease in history.

I shiver embarrassingly dramatic, and he smirks as I press even closer.

“You were going to go into that lake with me, weren’t you?” he asks seriously, his eyes searching mine.

I shrug and roll my eyes as though it wasn’t quite the big deal he’s making it. I wanted gratitude, but now I think it



might make me uncomfortable if he actually gives it to me in such an intense manner.

“You were whole. It would have probably killed you too,” he goes on, still studying me like he’s expecting to see something.

“I thought it’d be a terrible way to die. It’d be even worse to have to do it alone. I just didn’t want you to be alone. Can we go now? We’re already going to have to run to catch up.”

I don’t even try to get up, because his fingers dig in harder on my sides. When his gaze dips to my lips, I decide not to delay the inevitable and lose the moment like I did with Jude. He meets me halfway, and our lips clash almost violently.

He groans into my mouth like he’s never done before, and he flips me to my back so fast that I’m left a little dizzy from the abrupt swap.

He settles himself between my legs, only teasing me more as he kisses me harder and the tip of his cock toys with the entrance of my evil vagina.

But I know he’s not going to have sex with me. None of them will cross that line until they’re sure my vagina isn’t going to destroy them.

Really, they’re so dramatic. I’m apparently just as dramatic, because I’ve started fretting about it as well.

That glorious tongue ring of his wreaks havoc on my fantasies, spicing them up as I imagine how good it would feel lower. The way I’ve witnessed him do for other women.

“I hate to point out the obvious,” I say when he breaks the kiss and pulls his hips away, kissing a heated path down my throat, “but your timing is positively terrible.”

He smiles against my collarbone as he kisses his way down.

“If I don’t do it now, it’s very likely I’ll talk myself out of it once my head clears and I’m thinking logically again.” He kisses a path through the space between my breasts, and my

back arches, trying to push more of my body against his mouth.

“Do what?” I ask on autopilot, not capable of actually thinking.

This is my favorite feeling.

The intimate contact with one of them. It always reminds me that I’m finally alive instead of just surviving. Especially in the middle of a game of survival.

He kisses a lazy trail at the bottom of my stomach, teasing me with how close he is to where I want him.

“I know I’ll regret not taking this first for myself if I do talk myself out of it,” he whispers against my skin before he jerks my legs open wider and his head dips between my thighs.

I’m already making ridiculous sounds and squirming uncontrollably the second his tongue swipes across my clit. It’s way more intense with a mouth than with a finger.

Especially when he sucks it into his mouth and uses his tongue to add that much more stimulation. When that metal bar in his tongue only adds to the already overwhelming sensations, my fingers tangle in his hair and I make some garbled noise of praise and curses.

I’m pushing him away, and drawing him closer at the same time, and then doing some shameless grinding, as though my body is confused by the pleasure that is so intense it’s almost painful. His fingers dig into my legs, dragging me impossibly closer to his face as he grows more aggressive, driving me wilder with each new flick of his tongue.

It’s too much.

Erotic sensation crackles over me with so much force that it turns me hot and cold at the same time, and I cry out so loudly a vine slaps the wall near us.

My entire body goes lax after being so tense just seconds ago, as the ripples of pleasure skate over me in ebbing waves

of awareness, the orgasm coming so hard and fast that it's just too sensitive when his mouth doesn't immediately relent.

He finally tears his mouth away, then his mouth finds mine again, his hand roughly grabbing my hair as he slides over me. Too far gone to think clearly, I'm convinced we're going to break the rules and finally get answers about that virgin question, when he breaks the kiss abruptly, breathing heavily as his forehead drops to mine.

"We should run so we can catch up," he says instead, pushing away from me as he leaves the abandoned boxers behind.

I'm glad he can abruptly shift gears after something like that, but I'm not built that way.

"I'm going to need just another minute," I say as my legs tremble to punctuate the point.

Damn man is still naked, and my mind is a little feral at the moment.

He smirks over his shoulder, looking really damn proud of himself, as I stare at his incredibly firm ass. He gives me thirty seconds to recover before he reaches his hand down for mine.

I take it, and he easily tugs me up without me even helping him. Since I don't need to be running around in hell's belly naked, I go phantom and redress myself.

The sensations are watered down in this form, and I almost feel robbed of the post-orgasmic bliss once again.

"When we get out of here alive, you're going to do that again to me on a bed," I tell him as we walk out.

"Who's your favorite now?" he drawls as he turns and starts backing away, a knowing grin on his face.

"Definitely you," I say with one hundred percent honesty.

## Chapter 5

“How much farther?” Gage whispers as we stop for a second for him to take a few breaths.

A massive spider bat flies through me, and I screech before I can help myself. It’s happened a lot since the lights fully went out about an hour ago.

Two screaming vines lash out, passing through me, and slap Gage right on the ass.

He curses, bolting upright as he casts a glare in my general direction. I can only see with the gray night vision back in place. I doubt he can see at all.

“For the last fucking time, they can’t touch you in that form, so stop screaming. I have welts all over my body because these trees *really* like your little shrieks.”

“Oops,” I say, very little contrition in my tone.

Closing my eyes, I focus on the guys, reaching out and feeling them nearby.

“Just this way,” I tell him, turning and moving toward their direction. “They must have stopped for the night.”

“With the light down, it’s too dangerous to keep going. We’re getting toward the other side of the forest, and it’ll likely be another battle of survival.”

“You’re not allowed to jump, fall, or stand in the rain. Understood?” I ask him, trying to make light of the situation even as I feel the retroactive fear spike through me like it’s happening all over again.

Exhausted from denying my other form so much, I’m forced to go whole. I grab his hand and guide him easier, hoping we don’t stir another spider-bat.

He releases my hand and slides an arm around my waist, drawing me closer and making walking a tad awkward. I don't complain, though. I'm not sure why he's being affectionate, but I certainly have no qualms about it.

His lips brush the top of my head, and I melt a little, leaning into him. Our steps are slow and deliberate, like he's drawing our bubble-time for a little bit longer.

He'll probably shove me away in front of the others, and that will suck. But at least I'll have this memory. It's a damn good memory. The location of the memory sucks, but the rest is awesome.

“Will more black ice be coming?” I ask warily.

“Yeah. It'll get more and more frequent the farther away from the fiery lake we get. The screaming vines will continue to get smaller away from their main fire source, which aides in giving us direction.”

“How did you learn all this stuff if this is your first trip to hell's belly?” I ask him, wondering which books I need to start reading.

“Harold. He's a balance elder, which means he has very little physical power, but an exceptional amount of knowledge, even though he's only been around for about a century longer than us. We call him powerful because he's endured death and came out perfectly balanced—neither good nor evil. He's the reason we have any books at all, because such things are denied simple surface guardians.”

“Will any of those books give me insight on why you four seem a little moody?” I ask seriously.

He snorts out a laugh as I guide us through a thick grouping of trees.

Just as we get around them, Gage spins me and pins me against one of the ashy trees. My eyes search his face even as my chest rises and falls rapidly.

Fear and excitement always accompanies their mood swings, but right now, it's just pure unadulterated desire, thanks to his incredible mouth.

The back of his hand ghosts down the side of my face.

“Humans have more balance,” he tells me, pressing closer. “Their emotions are watered down and tempered by that balance. Every emotion we experience is too extreme. We fight feeling anything because it can consume us easily.”

His gaze dips to my mouth, even though I know he can't really see it. The pad of his thumb brushes over my bottom lip, and his breathing grows heavier.

“And since you came around, we've been forced to *feel* more than we have in a very long time before we leashed those emotions and learned to channel them with Harold's help and guidance.”

I swallow thickly, even as he continues to touch my mouth and hold me in place.

“How'd he find you?” I ask.

“The summons,” he says as his hand falls away.

He drags me back against his side, and we start walking again, his point now proven. Emotions are definitely more overwhelming when I'm in this form.

They override rational thought and create sort of a primal haze around me. Maybe Harold needs to teach me how to leash my emotions too.

“He was in attendance when we were first called to the graveyard on the day we bonded. We went, even though we were leery. We were so desperate for answers, and we assumed this was going to be that, even if it killed us. Instead, we were given a task. Harold supplied us with weapons and booze, and I guess he felt sorry for us since we had no idea what was going on, so he took us under his wing. In truth, I think he worried someone would kill us if he didn't help.”

“Just curious, how would one leash their emotions?” I ask, thinking of how easily I’ve been distracted from our predicament just because they have awesome body parts.

It’s rather inconvenient.

He laughs under his breath, but doesn’t answer me. I try to go back phantom to sense the others, but nothing happens.

“I can’t sense the guys like this, but I’m too drained to shift back to my other form,” I say, trying to remember the appropriate direction. “But I think we’re going the right way.”

He keeps me against his side, and we continue to walk.

“I smell a fire now, so I can get us to them,” he murmurs.

“How do you know it’s them? I’ve seen a lot of fire in hell.”

A small bit of laughter spills from his lips. “Hellfire and eternal flames have no scent. This is a handmade, regular, nothing special or harmful about it, fire,” he assures me.

“Let’s just hope it’s not other competitors.”

“I can kill them easily enough,” he says with a shrug.

A yawn escapes me as I start leaning on him a little. Talking about killing apparently bores me. Maybe I’m the psychopath after all.

His hold tightens, and once again he kisses the top of my head.

I’m going to have to get some sleep to have enough strength to go phantom for the last day. I need to be my strongest. We’ve already survived longer than any of them anticipated.

“It’s not mood swings,” he tells me randomly, drawing me out of my tired reverie. Clearing his throat when I peer up at him curiously, he adds, “When we get angry and pull back, it’s us reining in emotions we haven’t been forced to feel in such extremes in quite some time. You aren’t seeing a shift in moods; you’re seeing us force ourselves to take a step back

and search for rational answers as to why you're penetrating our shields so effortlessly."

"Because I'm awesome and my ass looks good in lace?" I guess.

He bursts out laughing, and I hear three groans from the distance. I stiffen, but Gage drags me in the direction the groans came from.

"Always the vanity," I hear Ezekiel say.

My eyes scan the area, but I don't see them immediately. Finally, I catch sight of a flickering flame inside a cave, and the closer we get, the more distinctly I can make out three figures sitting or lying near it.

"About damn time you two found us," Kai drawls, his eyes drifting over the way Gage is still holding me to him as we near. "I'm guessing you're her favorite now?"

Jude glares at me like I've tarnished yet another one of them, as Gage smirks. "It'll be hard to take my place right now," Gage boasts.

Kai laughs under his breath. Ezekiel grins and shakes his head before stretching out and lying down. Jude looks away from me.

"What are you wearing?" Ezekiel groans.

I shrug a bare shoulder in my strapless black corset, idly glancing down at my really slinky attire. I'm also in a black top hat, and since we're still in hell, I'm also wearing phantom-made body paint that makes me look like the walking dead.

"Admit it. This is the sexiest I've been yet."

I swear, it's like pulling teeth to get a compliment. All I get are more groans.

Here they are bitching about my attire, and they're all still in boxers or naked—like Jude. I'm trying *not* to be distracted,



because I have no idea how to leash my emotions like they do, and yet I'm surrounded by a lot of bare skin.

"The clothes haven't dried?" I ask, even though I distinctly remember Gage leaving his own clothes behind.

"Black ice on clothes is a bad idea. It's the reason it has time to penetrate the skin before our natural body heat can melt it back. The fabric gives it time to be absorbed instead of instantly evaporating. It's actually safer to go naked," Ezekiel says as he winks at me.

"So you're all going to be naked or mostly naked for the remainder of this trial?" I muse, my lips curling into a grin, eliciting more groans. "This is going to be interesting." It makes it sound less genuine when I yawn directly after saying it'd be interesting.

"She needs rest. She's strained herself too much these past two days. Her new form is a lot more demanding," Gage says, pushing me toward Ezekiel.

I stumble sleepily toward him, and Ezekiel snatches my hand, tugging me down on top of him. My breath catches when I'm mid-fall, but he quickly grabs my waist and easily—and gently—pulls me against his side.

I practically moan at how comfortable it is to be pressed down the side of his body without worrying he might kill me.

My head settles on his bare chest as my eyelids start fluttering shut.

"I'll take first watch for two hours. I'm still a little wired," Gage says. "The three of you should sleep. Near her. Get the best rest you can, because tomorrow we do the impossible and beat these fucking trials or get lost in here forever."

"Wired from what exactly?" Kai asks with a taunting smirk.

Gage winks at me, flips Kai off, and walks out as Ezekiel and Kai laugh lightly.

“I’m sure none of you will regret those decisions,” Jude states dryly, ever the Scrooge.

He lies down and closes his eyes, staying far away from me.

“Just remember you would have died if that black ice had spread all over you,” Ezekiel tells him like he’s defending me.

I pat his chest even as I yawn again, and his arms tighten around me as I snuggle closer.

Another body slithers up to my other side, and a set of lips graze over my shoulder.

“Sleep, little spirit. We find out our fate tomorrow, and it seems you’ll be stuck with whatever decision is made,” Kai says against my ear.

“As long as you four are still safe,” I say in a sleepy rumble, not really stringing together the sentence I mean to.

Just before I fall asleep, I feel a gentle, almost ghost of a touch at my ankle, but I can’t open my eyes to see who it is.

For the first time, I allow them be the ones to look over me while I sleep.

“Goodnight,” someone whispers close to my ear.

## Chapter 6

The loud pattering of rain is what wakes me up, and I lift my head, peering over at the cave entrance where Ezekiel is staring out at the black rain pummeling way harder than it was the last time I saw it.

I'm not sure how long I've been asleep, but Gage is where Kai was, and Kai is now where Ezekiel was, his arms wrapped loosely around me as he sleeps peacefully.

I'm assuming that means I've slept six hours, which would be three guard-duty rotations, but I'm not certain if Jude has taken a shift. I'm currently smirking at him as he lies at my feet, his arm draped loosely over my ankles as he sleeps *hard*.

That small touch on my ankle before I drifted off must have been him, and he subconsciously got even closer in his sleep.

He's going to be so mad that I saw it.

A huge grin splits my face, and I carefully go phantom, letting all their touches pass through me as I stand without disturbing them and go whole on my way to Ezekiel.

I blame the extreme circumstances for my questionable comfort level with Ezekiel when my hand travels over his shoulder, and I step into his side.

He looks down at me, a heavy expression on his face.

"Sorry," I say, withdrawing my hand.

His lips twitch, and his arm goes around my shoulders, drawing me against his side. Happily, my arms slide around his waist, all domestic-like. We could be mistaken for a couple instead of just a creepy stalker girl chasing after a crush.

"There's someone watching us," he says quietly when his lips touch the top of my head. "Don't change forms yet."

“Why?” I whisper.

“Because they’ve seen you already, and they don’t know you can vanish. It could be a very important weapon when they finally make their move. Just act casual and calm.”

Did they see me vanish to get out of the sleep pile?

My breath comes out shakily, because what if it’s the Devil watching us? What if he’s studying us the way I used to study my quad?

“It’s not Lucifer,” he tells me like he’s in my head.

“How do you know?” I ask, confused.

“Because there’s no light shrouding you.”

“That makes no sense.”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think it’s the blind tribe. They’re rumored to stalk these woods for food. And we might just be on the menu,” he says instead of explaining the light.

“Lovely,” I state dryly. “At least they’re blind. I’m assuming they can hear every word we’re saying, though.”

“They actually see things in signatures. Hell’s belly, as you’ve noticed, is very fucking hot. They see cooler signatures instead of heat signatures,” he goes on. “And they don’t exactly speak English. They speak the language of the damned.”

“Is *comoara trădătoare* a damned language phrase?” I ask idly, looking out on the very neon blue forest, and wondering where this blind tribe is hiding.

“No, that’s Romanian,” Ezekiel states as though it should be obvious.

“Why do you think it’s them?” I ask quietly. “The blind tribe, I mean.”

“Because I’ve seen glimpse of a couple of humanoid figures since the lights came on, and the only humanoid figures down here would be competitors or tribesmen. We’ve

managed to avoid the other tribes. They prefer to feed on the monsters and stray from any interlopers. But the blind tribe—”

“Are savage, hungry, fearless, cannibalistic barbarians in the mood for some flesh. Got it. I take it they’re immune to black ice?” I interject.

He nods, his eyes still on the land in front of him. “Another reason I’m certain it’s not the other competitors. They’ve been in the storm for the past hour at least.”

“Just fucking great,” Kai says around a yawn, drawing my attention back to him.

Gage and Jude are already awake, and Gage is stretching, looking well-rested.

Jude avoids my eyes.

“How’d you sleep, Death Punch?” I drawl, grinning like the cat who ate the canary.

He doesn’t even look at me before speaking directly to Ezekiel. “If the blind tribe is waiting on us to leave this cave, we’re going to have to fight our way out of this.”

I start to move to the doorway, but Ezekiel tugs me back.

“Save your strength. You have to be able to hold your invisible form. I think shielding yourself from Lucifer in the open is draining you faster. There’s no telling how much power that requires.”

I look at him like he’s crazy.

“I’m not shielding myself. I don’t even know how to do that.”

“Most of your power runs on survival instincts. You’re only starting to gain some control,” Gage says, moving closer as he props up and peers out as well.

“In other words, if Lucifer seeing you makes you feel threatened,” Jude says, moving just to the rim where the black rain misses his foot by mere centimeters. “The light surrounds

you every time you feel his eyes on you when you turn whole. The light never shines under coverage from his watch.”

Good to know. I guess.

“So if you’re naked, the rain won’t hurt you, right?” I ask, suddenly very intrigued by how distracting this fight will be with a lot of swinging equipment.

A small grin curves at my lips, and Kai arches an unimpressed eyebrow at me as he moves around to be diagonal from me.

Clearing my throat and wiping away the juvenile grin, I *pretend* to have some class.

“That’s the theory,” Ezekiel says absently.

“The theory? You spouted facts about it.”

“We knew it would freeze us to the core if it penetrated the skin,” he goes on conversationally. “It’s liquid when it connects, and if the surface is not hot enough to keep it liquid, it immediately freezes everything, spreading outward. It evaporates immediately into the ground, and turns into glowing blue residue on the plant life. Your temperature has to continuously rise to battle it, but it cools you if it’s able to attach. Double-edged sword.”

“The clothing provided a cooler layer that it attached to and grew strength, chilling the surface of our skin enough for the ice to find a weak spot to attach to,” Gage adds.

“We *assumed* our skin would run too hot for the temperatures, and Kai was shirtless. His pants got wet, but didn’t touch skin before he stripped out of them. However, the black ice ran off his body, never freezing on contact. Unlike it did when Jude was drenched and it attached to his middle in numerous spots. Or when my arm was infected under my drenched sleeve,” Ezekiel goes on.

“My boxers fucked me,” Gage says. “The theory is that none of our skin can get infected if there’s no barrier to help chill it before it penetrates the skin.”

“Not an agony I’m in any sort of hurry to revisit,” Jude inserts dryly, taking a wary step back. “Someone else can play guinea pig.”

They keep talking about how hot hell’s belly is, but the heat isn’t quite so intrusive to me. I suppose that would just sound like obnoxious bragging right now, so I keep it to myself.

“I’m going to go out there and see if I can determine how many we’re dealing with,” I tell them, stepping behind Jude.

He covers as much of me as possible, understanding what I’m doing without me having to explain.

“What am I looking for?” I ask as I change forms, hoping the phantom version of me is hidden from their cooler-temp seeking eyes.

“I have no idea. I only saw humanoid shadows just as the forest started illuminating. Since then, I haven’t been able to spot them. The books we read had no description of them other than what I’ve already told you,” Ezekiel tells me.

“We might have learned more about hell’s belly if we had ever foreseen a visit here,” Kai drawls.

“Save your energy. We can fight this time,” Jude says quietly to me.

“Well, don’t any of you go trying to die, and I’ll let you be men. But the second I see you not pulling your own, I’ll totally emasculate you. Again,” I state as I pass through him and start stalking into the woods.

“Her fearlessly wicked tongue is what surprises me the most,” I hear Jude huff under his breath.

“You have no idea how wicked my tongue can be,” I assure him, putting my sassy Devil costume back on as I strut a little in my red heels.

A few snorts follow that.

“Guess her hearing is better than we realized,” Ezekiel muses.

“Finding out new things about me is what gives me all those bonus mystery points,” I call out as I move farther and farther into the neon woods, even as the rain continues to pour through me.

I’m not worried about being too loud, considering these blind guys can’t actually hear me so long as I’m in this form.

I’m expecting to find ten or so tribesmen as I continue to move on.

Yet I’m starting to wonder if Ezekiel is just being paranoid, because I can’t even see the cave anymore, despite the heavily illuminated forest.

Sighing, I turn around, and halt.

I finally spot one guy slinking through, and an eerie sensation slithers over me.

He’s blending in with the streaks of neon blue and the black background of the tree. As he moves, the shades and colors on his skin adjust, changing as well, making him the perfect chameleon.

The dread that’s gathering over me scatters into a thousand fragments and creates a sickly insect-crawling sensation across my nerves when I see what I couldn’t see before.

Back before my mind knew to look harder, because these guys can blend in with their surroundings. And they’re much better at it than those assassins who camouflaged themselves in the last trial, because these very naked guys have skin that actually changes with the landscape.

With the newly educated eye, I can see them almost too clearly.

I can see too many.

Hundreds.



They're on every tree. They're crawling over the ground, moving slowly but deliberately, the shades effortlessly shifting over them to confuse the eye with yet another illusion.

Every surface of the forest that I can see has men stuck to it, and I've been walking right through them.

"They look like the forest!" I shout as I zap myself back in front of the cave entrance, wishing those books had warned us about this. "They blend!"

My eyes widen, seeing all the camouflaged bodies stuck all over the side of the cave's entrance that I remain just outside of, looking in.

"Watch out!" I shout as Jude's eyes finally spot the first one who has crept just inside of the cave.

The man lunges, his skin flaring several bright colors before Jude narrowly dodges him. Ezekiel's hand slams on his shoulder as those bright colors suddenly light up the entire forest, and a wild, throaty set of animal calls ring loudly through the air.

"I really hope that's not a war cry!" I shout, just as the one Ezekiel releases takes off charging toward his own people, a spear appearing in his hand as he launches it through several men.

Well then. That was unexpected.

Another spear slices through me, thrown by a different tribesman from my side, and I watch as it catches the traitor in the gut, sending him to the ground.

"Now would be a good time to prove you can handle this. Momma's not holding back much longer," I caution as Ezekiel grabs two more guys and slings them.

Those two guys charge their men, but the sheer volume of them is not going to be deterred by a couple of new traitors.

The forest is thundering with all of them racing this way.

The guys are fighting, doing whatever they can to hold their place and not retreat.

Power launches out of me, taking down at least twenty of them, but they heal quickly and bounce back to their feet.

Shit! That's not supposed to happen!

"The spears are all that will kill them!" Gage shouts.

I zap between Jude and Ezekiel, grabbing their shoulders as I turn whole. There's no way we can kill them all with some spears.

"If you're all going, then so am I, I guess. I knew you'd all be the death of me," I say, a grim smile on my face.

I turn just as another brightly lit man flies through the cave entrance, his spear raised and poised in our general direction. I shove Ezekiel back, moving in front of the spear and closing my eyes. I'd rather go first than last, because I'm not capable of simply watching them die.

"No!" Jude shouts as he collides with my hand that I'm holding out to keep him away.

I feel a spray of dust against me, and my eyes flicker open as Jude's eyes glow gold. His hand is out in front of him, and I realize that spray of dust is actually ashes as they funnel through the entryway, infecting anyone daring to pass.

My hand clutches his arm that is already touching me, and I hear a few sharp intakes of air as the others startle.

Ezekiel's hand is suddenly gripping my side, and he throws his own hand out.

I feel something dark and daunting slip over me, almost matching the decay and menace I feel pouring through me from Jude.

I hear the sounds of fighting going on at large just outside of the cave, and Jude staggers away from me like he's a little exhausted or on a high—not sure which.

Ezekiel staggers just as quickly, and we look out over the battlefield that is insane. Those racing colors of war rush over their skin as they kill each other, fighting to the death, as though a civil war has just erupted for no apparent reason.

“What’s going on?”

“Chaos,” Ezekiel says, swallowing thickly. “I’ve never created it on this scale before, and not without physical contact.”

That’s not chaos at all. This is two sides at war with the intent to kill each other.

“And Jude just killed beings who can’t be killed without a certain damning weapon, and he never touched them. The decay hit harder and more fiercely than ever,” Kai states as though to himself.

He touches me, beginning to lift his hand like he’s about to use me as a conduit as well, just as the rain ceases to fall.

“Don’t. We don’t know what it does to take from her just to amplify our powers,” Gage says, causing Kai to blink and release me as we remain forgotten to the fierce battle just outside.

“We can study all that later. With their attention fractured, we should be able to fight our way out now,” Jude says without looking at me as he grabs two spears from the ground.

The others spring into action, collecting more abandoned spears. We race out of the cave, rushing out right into the thick of the madness.

Ezekiel slams the spear into one man’s throat, as Kai breaks off a hunk of the wood from the spear, and just uses the onyx point as a blade. He slices through ten men without even slowing down.

I’m in phantom form again for obvious reasons. I have no idea how to work a spear, and I decide the learning curve is just too large to deal with right at this particularly fatal moment.

I'm racing behind Jude as he uses his two spears like dual bo staffs, spinning them before slamming them into the hordes of men fighting a battle they don't even understand.

Most of them are still warring with each other, leaving only the stragglers we run into as an issue.

Just as a spear very nearly slams into Jude's back, I launch myself in front of it, turning whole.

My hands slam together on each side of the angular blade, stopping it inches from my stomach.

"I'm totally a badass," I say on a shaky breath, questioning the bladder issue in whole form at this very terrifying second.

Looking up, I see the tribesmen up close as one bumps into me, acting like he doesn't *see me* at all. Ha! I'll tell them my new pun when we're not in peril—should that day ever come.

I quickly spin and jab the spear into his back in one fluid motion like I'm a battle overlord or some shit.

"I really am a badass!" I shout louder.

He drops like a pile of rubble, and I smirk while dusting my hands off. Then end up squealing like a lunatic girl when I'm knocked to the ground.

Another one of the eyeless men trips over me.

I know I just made the tacky blind tribesmen pun about them not being able to see me, but it's like they don't realize I'm here at all, yet have no problem targeting the guys.

"It's wearing off, I think," Jude gripes, slamming his hand into one's chest.

It decays rapidly, proving they certainly can die by means other than the spear.

I grab a spear and stab the one that is wallowing around beside me, still tangled up on my legs.

"How do you beat an army who need cool signatures to single you out amongst the heat of hell?" I shout.

No answer comes until I'm about to unleash the biggest spark of that mysterious acid I've ever felt.

"You set the forest on fire to block out your cold signatures," Kai says on a breath, then turns and adds. "Run!"

Just as the tribesmen all seem to snap out of their disorientation and turn to face the retreating backs of the guys, I smirk.

My fingers snap together, and a spark of that burning acid slams to the very base of the tree beside me.

That's all it takes.

A *whoosh* of fire ignites, spreading like a wall of flame, and the blind tribesmen scream when they try to leap through it. I've already seen them heal before, so I know it doesn't kill them. But it becomes obvious they can't see beyond the quickly growing wall of heat the guys are racing in front of.

"Burn!" I shout, fist-pumping the air.

I'm not sure why my guys insist on groaning at my jokes so much. It's sad they have no appreciation for obvious humor.

I snap back to phantom and zap myself to the guys, gauging the distance between them and my fire.

They're a lot faster than I remember, and I actually have to strain a little to keep up, even in my weightless form.

The fire starts getting swallowed up by the forest, and the tribesmen are nowhere to be seen. We don't slow down enough to be certain.

After a few hours of solid running, they start losing a little steam, and I decide to voice a question that's been bothering me, now that the immediate threat of death is over—at the moment.

"Why do these trials have so many physical elements? Climbing is unnecessary when you can siphon," I tell them.

"Physical and mental endurance is one of the overall studies in the trials," Jude answers, panting for air as he bends

over and rests for a second.

“They need to know how strong you are—body and mind—before they decide what to do with you,” Gage goes on, straightening from his doubled over position as he seems to catch his breath.

“And you can’t siphon all the time. You have to be discreet when you’re topside. You can’t disrupt the balance by giving too many humans a visual to their unsolved mysteries of the universe,” Kai goes on.

“Plus, it’s not as much fun to watch people siphon around a course, and these trials are also for entertainment value,” Ezekiel adds as we start walking briskly, no longer running as they conserve precious energy.

“Our senses are stronger down here the longer we stay,” Gage says. “Hers too.”

“My senses only work with you guys,” I point out. “The blind dudes almost got one over on me.”

“You sense when the Devil can see you. You’re also quick to learn and figure out the next step, even though you have no prior knowledge of the trials or the location,” Jude states like a mild accusation.

I open my mouth to start our usual banter, but Gage sucks in a breath.

“There! We’re at the end!” Ezekiel shouts, and everyone starts running again.

We burst out of the forest, illuminated by the bright red sky that actually has them shielding their eyes. It makes me grateful to be phantom, since my eyes aren’t so sensitive in this form. It seemed like such a dull sky before the blacked-out forest.

My heart sinks when I *hear* the ground vibrating.

Then I’m back to dealing with cardiac arrest when I *see* why.

That gulley we started in is now on either side of us. No longer is the forest nor the mountain we faced earlier, in view. All we can see for miles and miles is one huge canyon full of monsters who are all charging toward us like a stampede.

There are so many—no three-headed hellhounds, though. At least none in my immediate viewpoint.

Some make my stomach roil, skin peeling off them as they shed one form for a much more grotesque one. Apparently they need a different form to devour four very tasty looking men.

“Death trap,” Jude growls. “We weren’t meant to survive all this time just to face this. There’s no fucking way to survive it. Even if we all touched her and used her as a conduit, we’d barely make a dent before we were forced to disconnect like I had to earlier...before it consumed me.”

I step closer, staring in disbelief. It’s like one giant mass of encroaching death creatures, and I whirl around, seeing the same fate coming at us from the other end of the gulley as well.

“Everyone gather around me,” I shout, then glance down at my ruby red slippers as they appear.

Everyone does as I say, putting their hands on/through me as just only my feet turn whole and start clicking together.

“There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home. There’s no place like—”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Jude barks in interruption, causing my eyes to peel open as I grimace.

“Worth a shot,” I tell them, furious with all the false hope movies have given me over these past few years.

Beasts still rapidly approaching, and the tops of the canyon being layered with hellfire lava that is starting to drip down, I take a long, resolved breath.

“How do you defeat a never-ending army of hell’s most vicious predators, cast to the belly straight from the throat,

when there's not enough power to kill them all?" Ezekiel asks quietly from beside me.

Anger simmers inside me as everything dark and tainted swirls within my soul. The Devil doesn't play fair. Every time we turn around, there's one more impossible task.

A storm crackles overhead as dark clouds form ominously just barely above us.

"Now what?" Gage groans, looking up.

"Not like it matters. There's no answer to this fucking riddle," Jude says through a snarl.

"Yeah. There is," I say as the skies dim, now completely covered by the dark storm clouds as lightning flickers inside them. "You make the never-ending army of predators believe you're a much worse predator. Think of the mouse chasing the cat."

"That makes zero sense, and it's not really an answer," Jude argues.

"I know," I say as that very seductive power rolls around through me with such vigor like I've never felt before. "It was a hint."

"Running low on time," Ezekiel growls as the first line of vicious, spitting, snapping-jawed monsters get within thirty feet of us on either side. "We don't have time for hints and guesses. If you know the fucking answer just spit it out."

A smirk emerges on my lips as I turn whole, and the lightning crackles louder.

"You be fearless," I say under my breath as I start charging toward the beasts, ignoring the quad's loud shouts of protests and swearing.

Gritting my teeth, I pump my arms and legs, racing headlong into the fray.

The monsters split, scattering and scrambling to get out of my way when fear and apprehension hits them. They



practically trample each other to get as far away from me as possible.

A lot more unsavory words are flung at me from the guys, but I look back to see them following my lead. Though they don't look happy about it. In fact, I'd say they're looking a little murderous. Maybe they're role-playing to add some drama to our game of mouse-chasing-cat.

I put my mega-bitch face on just in case it makes it work better.

The throngs of beasts continue to split, as the guys follow me in a single-file line.

It's parting the monster sea with one crazy girl leading the charge. The monsters don't even bump into me, because they're so desperate to flee the fearless predator I'm pretending to be.

Just as the last set of monsters rush by us, I turn phantom, exhausted and needing a break from my very unfit, gravity-suffering body.

The storm dissipates as though it's finished with us now that the monsters are gone. Honestly, I'm sort of wondering if that storm was mine. It gave me coverage from the Devil's prying eyes just as I decided to turn whole.

The monsters keep running down the gulley, colliding with the others. I look away when they're barely a distant echo.

Gage holds out a finger, shaking it at me, but he's panting too heavily to use his words, which appears rather frustrating if his expression is any indication.

He settles for miming the motions of wringing my neck right in front of *my neck*, then turns and stalks off.

That's two of them who have used the same charade-version of that threat against me now.

Ezekiel just glares at me, also not using his words. He takes a step toward me, then back again, then stops and

squeezes his fists together. He finally turns and stalks off as though he's forcing himself to do it.

Jude runs a frustrated hand through his hair, collapsing to a rock as the gulley fades from view, the latest obstacle passed and riddle answered. He looks like he wants to five-finger-death-punch me.

Kai slams his fist into a rock wall, looking back at me over his shoulder as he takes a few hesitant breaths, before deciding to advance on me like a naked Gladiator.

He opens his mouth like he's about to yell at me, then instead releases a series of very loud and random sounds to relay his apparent frustration, shaking his head a little worrisomely, before he turns and starts stalking toward the black rocks now in our path.

"You're welcome," I say to their backs as they all walk away from me.

Another chorus of frustrated sounds is my answer to that as they start walking faster in their angry gait, forcing me to zap myself to them instead of all that walking.

"It worked, didn't it?" I point out from directly behind them.

As if they planned it, all four flip me off without ever glancing back.

"Rude," I sigh, stopping for a second to give them an unimpressed stare they don't even see.

I jog and catch back up. "I bet that was easier than dealing with your swinging dicks during the blind dude battle, am I right?"

I pass through them and hold my hand up for a ghost girl high-five...that gets left hanging as they pass back through me.

"You guys totally don't appreciate my amazing personality."

Just as my hand falls on Ezekiel's shoulder to try and get him to loosen up first, a blinding light blasts in front of us.

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## Chapter 7

When we land in the graveyard, apparently ejected from hell without warning, Ezekiel's hand passes through me. I feel the tugs of him siphoning, and suddenly we're home.

The other three follow us immediately, all of us inside the living room, eyes moving between each other like we're a little speechless. Which is a feat for me, if I'm being candid.

I take notice of the fact I'm still in the slinky Devil's costume, and they're all incredibly naked. Immediately, I go whole, just in case they want to physically thank me for my awesome survival skills like Kai and Gage did during that exhausting trial.

Can't be too prepared in these rare situations.

I inch a little closer to Gage, my arm brushing his. His arm absently goes around me, tugging me closer as though it's a reflex, as he looks at Jude.

"He let us out," Gage says.

"So now what?" Kai asks. "We were certain our death was guaranteed when we were dropped in the belly."

"How could he have expected us to pass that course and survive? Even knowing we have her lingering around?" Jude asks, gesturing toward me like *her* needs clarification.

"Was it all an actual test if it wasn't a death sentence? And what does the Devil gain with the knowledge he's now gathered since having a chance to study you?" I ask.

They all give me an incredulous look.

"Sorry," I tell them, not really sorry at all. "Looking at everything like it's a riddle is a hard habit to break once you've gotten the hang of it."

My hand subtly moves to Gage's chest, tracing one of the weird tattoos I happen to like quite a lot. He's still my current favorite, after all.

When I look back over, I see Jude glaring at Gage, and Gage smirking at Jude.

"Maybe we should discuss this with clothes on, since she's easily very distracted," Jude bites out.

I peer around at four very distracting erections that would say their minds have all gone to the same place as mine. They just like to pretend they're not quite so base as I am.

"Life-threatening situations and survival sex go hand-in-hand," I dutifully inform them, looking around at all the variously pierced cocks jutting out.

Gage's cock jumps against my hip, and my eyes almost close, because I'm still getting used to all the really great sensations and experiencing a lot of firsts.

"Not until we all agree," Gage says, still smirking at Jude.

"I'm the only one who clearly isn't infected by her," Jude tells him, then gives me a fuck-you grin that he stole from me.

"I'm positive I'm a virgin, even though I have no scientific evidence. I'd rather not go to a doctor to have him check. I'm not quite certain I want just anyone rooting around in such an intimate place. The point is, I highly doubt I have anything to infect you with."

"How can I argue with her when she makes no damn sense ninety percent of the time?" Jude snaps, gesturing a little wildly at me like I've finally pushed him over that edge.

It's fascinatingly intriguing, and I go to the kitchen as they continue talking.

"You're the only one still convinced she's a threat to our bond. It's felt stronger over the past three days," Gage tells him. "*We've* felt stronger."

“Everything comes at a price,” Jude states as though he’s the reasonable one. “There’s always a balance. We know this. It’s why we agreed *not* to touch her, and now you’re all giving her orgasms and sleeping with her wrapped around you. She’s in your fucking heads like no one else has ever done before, clambering to be her damn momentary favorite, and none of you are even questioning it!”

Finished with step one of my current task, I press a few buttons on the microwave and go to grab a bowl.

“I’m seriously convinced she’s done something to the three of you. I’m the only one who hasn’t had my mouth on her, and I’m the only one who remembers how it feels when envy starts to rip us apart,” Jude growls.

“Is she making popcorn?” Ezekiel asks incredulously as the telltale *pop pop pop* starts its rapid-fire phase.

“*She* is insane. And very fucking distracting for all of us. Tell me you don’t see the fact we’ve just survived the worst third trial in hell’s long history, and instead of discussing the Devil’s true agenda, we’re discussing *her*,” Jude goes on as I pull the popcorn out and start pouring it into my bowl.

I quickly wash my hands, even though I can’t actually get dirty if I swap from transparent to whole. I’m just magically clean. Lovely little perk.

I don’t mind the guys being dirty. They still smell just as tempting, and now they’re a little battle dirty, which is actually very hot, since I’m *insane* like that.

“All we can do is speculate where Lucifer is concerned. He’s been called the ‘Mad King’ for quite some time,” Ezekiel drawls. “But we can start processing all we learned about *her* right now, while the memories are fresh. It’s clear she’s something we’ve been missing. You’re the only one not seeing that.”

Jude looks like he’s about ready for that death punch again when I come walking around, hugging my bowl of popcorn in

one arm, while using my other hand to shovel it into my mouth.

I'm so hungry. And this is definitely one of those popcorn moments I finally get to enjoy *with* popcorn.

They all turn to look at me, not saying a word, blank expressions donning their faces.

"What?" I ask around a mouthful, before packing it full once again.

Ezekiel's lips twitch.

"See?" Jude asks, gesturing to all of me as though I've just proven a very valid point. "Insane!"

He does his usual glare-at-me routine, and I swallow my popcorn while rolling my eyes.

"I'm going to my room. I'll leave the door open—metaphorically—to anyone who wants to help me figure out my virginal status. I'm still too good for all of you, but now I like you a little more. Well, not you," I say, directing that last part at Jude.

"You can't touch me until you stop trying so hard to hate me," I add.

I deliberately bump into his side on my way by, and shake my ass much more than necessary as I strut up the stairs, still wearing my ruby red slippers that have no tall heel. No, I don't wear heels in this form. It's not quite as graceful when gravity is a bitch.

"Don't even think about it," I hear Jude saying to someone. "Not until we all agree. Don't let her strip us of that last bit of power."

This time, I'm the one to flip him off without looking back. Then I eat more popcorn, because I really am hungry. Ravenous, actually.

"We need a way to settle this, or we'll stay at an impasse," Kai tells him.

“Then we’ll find a way to settle it,” Jude says with a chilling calmness that finally provokes me to look back and down at them from the top of the stairs.

He’s smirking at me in a way that makes him look even more dangerous than the Devil himself.

Sometimes I forget he really might kill me one day when he tires of trying to figure me out.

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## Chapter 8

After devouring *two* bowls of popcorn, I get naked and decide to enjoy the perks of a body when it meets an incredible shower.

The water racing down me in hurried rivulets is one of the many welcome sensations.

I don't think about the guys, or hell, or the Devil, or the fact the Devil is still possibly playing a game of death with their lives. In this moment, I'm just a girl enjoying the luxury of sensation I've watched so many others take for granted over the years.

"The sounds you make for the smallest, simplest pleasures is what drives me the craziest," Ezekiel says, startling my eyes open just in time to see him dig his fingers into my hair and roughly tug my head back so his lips can collide with mine.

When the actual hell did he invade my shower?

That draws a few more sounds of pleasure from me, as my arms wind around his neck and I kiss him back. His hand slides down my wet body, eliciting an entire new set of sensations, and he draws my leg up, lifting me with just that hold as he presses me into the back wall.

He's practically devouring me, and that steady warmth travels through me on a tangent. The head of his cock teases the inside of my thigh with how close he is.

"What brought this on?" I ask, grinning up at the air when he starts kissing his way down my throat.

"I asked him to handle that part, since I knew you'd have no objections," Jude says, causing me to choke on air as I dart my head to the side to see he's joined us in the shower.

Gloriously naked and exceptionally hard, he stands just out of reach, his eyes on mine as Ezekiel lifts me effortlessly, and

his incredible mouth moves to my right nipple.

I fight to keep my eyes open, as Ezekiel does things to my nipples I didn't know were possible. It's like there's a direct line from them to my clit, as he moves from one to another, showing them both attention.

"You said I couldn't touch you until I wasn't trying to hate you so much," Jude goes on, his hand lowering to his cock as he strokes himself once. "And since you're so desperate for touch, maybe it's the way to freeing up some answers."

My eyes flutter shut on their own, and I grip Ezekiel's shoulders when his hand wraps around me and starts toying with my clit while he's still doing indescribably sinful things to my nipples.

Jude strokes himself harder as Ezekiel pushes me toward that edge, the sting of Jude's glare the only thing holding me back.

Ezekiel groans against my breasts, sounding as though he feels as tortured as I do.

"Something as tempting as you can only be forbidden," Jude says, releasing his cock as he starts walking toward us.

His face gets right in front of mine as Ezekiel works me harder, adding just an edge of pain as he thrusts against me like he wants me as bad as I want him in this moment.

"Tell us the consequences, *comoara trădătoare*," he says in a seductive lull, his lips centimeters from mine as Ezekiel pushes a finger inside me, only adding to the overwhelming stimulation.

I'm half dazed, as I answer, "I don't know."

In the next instant, my left hand flies to Jude's shoulder, gripping tightly as the most powerful orgasm I've had yet crashes over me with so much force that I cry out, my nails digging into both of them as I cling to them.

My entire body shudders in Ezekiel's hold as he pants against my neck. He releases me and steps back, running a

hand through his hair.

“Not going to get answers that way,” Jude says on an exasperated breath.

Legs wobbly, I cast a glare at Ezekiel, who is still a little feral as he stares at me like he’s straining to hold himself back. It pisses Jude off that this has been a pointless experiment, and that makes me really damn happy.

Ezekiel siphons away, and Jude remains alone with me in the shower. We just have our usual stare-off before he finally siphons away as well.

“Joke’s on you!” I shout to the vacant air. “I’m the only one who just got an orgasm!”

A hint of laughter carries to me from the hallway, and I roll my eyes before turning off the shower. Instead of drying off, I go phantom, style my hair, and select an oversized T-shirt with nothing else to walk out of my room in.

I pause and back up again when I see a blue box with a white ribbon resting on my dresser.

My grin grows as I hurriedly open it to discover...a petrified beetle pendant on a diamond necklace.

“Assholes,” I grumble, tossing it down as I go phantom and pick a nicer pendant on a silver chain attached to my neck.

None of those women saved their lives, and they got pretty charms and fancy shit.

After turning whole and swapping the new pendant out with the beetle to go on my new diamond necklace, I put it on and strut out in my T-shirt.

They’re all in the living room when I find them, minus Gage. Their eyes dip to my shirt that says *Team Comoara Trădătoare*.

What’s weird is the fact I have no idea how I knew how to spell it, but I did. Or maybe I should have used a phone to

double check. I hope I'm not walking around in a shirt that says *watery soup* in Romanian.

Kai grins as his gaze lingers.

"This is the pendant I prefer," I say, gesturing to the replaced one.

Jude, the bastard, is smirking at me. I'll give him points for creativity. Now I'll have to think of something as equally annoying to do to him.

"You can make your own jewelry?" Ezekiel asks. "Why are you asking us to get you some if so?"

I point a finger at him. "You're not even my second favorite right now. I want tokens of affection. Not tokens of sarcasm."

Kai's lips twitch, and he stands as he comes toward me.

"Does that make me your second favorite?" he muses.

"Are you going to give me more orgasms just because I like them?" I ask seriously.

His grin grows, but the cock-blocker Jude says, "All of us have to agree."

"We can't fuck her. Doesn't mean the rest is off limits," Ezekiel states dismissively.

"Name one time in history we've done well with temptation," Jude groans. "You're all making this impossible."

Kai winks at me, then tugs me close, bending to nip at my lips. "I'll be by later."

I pat his chest. Good enough.

I zap myself up to the top of the stairs, hearing the necklace drop to the floor under the place where Kai is holding vacant air where I was moments ago.

"She's getting faster at changing from one form to the other and siphoning away," he says with a small smile.

I stare down at them. “Give me at least a couple of days, Jude,” I state with all seriousness.

The amusement is drained with that one comment, as the three of them stare at me blankly.

“Just a couple of days to recover. All jokes aside, I need a mental break after all that. I was in hell’s belly shortly after learning hell is an actual place,” I remind them all. “Give me a few days to be thankful I’m alive, to be thankful I somehow managed to see you all home safely, and give my heart a break, before you remind me how very little you care.”

Kai clears his throat and looks away guiltily, while Jude holds my gaze for a moment longer. Finally, he gives me a subtle nod, a silent confirmation of a temporary ceasefire.

It’s more than he’s ever given me before.

I start to go in Gage’s room, but change my mind. Instead, I end up back in the kitchen and swiping a jar of the special alcohol they buy.

It sucks that I can’t zap back with something tangible that I didn’t create with my limited skills. Which means I have to *walk* it up to my room.

It’s a little awkward to walk into the room they’re all still in after such a dramatic prior exit.

“Don’t drink too much of that,” Kai calls to my back. “I want you to feel everything I’m going to do to you tonight.”

He grunts like he was just hit, and I smirk. Kai’s my new favorite.

## Chapter 9

Gage pokes his head into my room a few hours later, as I drink more of the foulest tasting concoction I've ever tasted in my entire life. But I love how truly stupid I feel in this moment. As though my world isn't a cosmic ball of madness.

His eyes dip to the jar in my hand, as I say, "If you're going to try to seduce me to steal confessions I can't possibly make—" I clear my throat when I start to slur the 's' words. "—please wait. You have no idea how long or hard it was for me to get to this point of inebriation. And don't you dare make a dirty joke about 'long' and 'hard' being in the same sentence."

His eyes flick to the three empty jars on my bedside table, then back to the mostly empty jar swaying in my hand.

"How in the hell did you drink four of those and manage to stay conscious?" he asks incredulously.

"Fun fact," I say, smiling humorlessly. "Since the last time I drank this and ended up miserable on the bathroom floor, I've leveled-up a lot. Now I'm a hard one to get drunk. One of these gets me a little drunk. Two of these get me happy drunk. Well, it took three tries to make this happen."

I gesture to the table behind him to show him a few more jars he didn't notice.

"You guys need to replenish your stash, by the way," I go on, getting sidetracked.

He looks to be battling a grin, but I continue as though it's imperative he hear this evening's monumental struggle. Total spirit girl problems.

"So when I got hungry after the first two-and-a-half bottles, I realized walking was really hard to do. So I went phantom and zapped myself to the kitchen to get food, too

stupid to realize I'd still have to *walk* up the stairs with the food. By the way, I can't make food magically appear the way I do clothing and jewelry. I tried. I was that desperate to keep from going downstairs."

He opens his mouth to speak, and I wave him off.

"Anyway, so I realized I was instantly sober when I went ghost. I still zapped myself to the kitchen. My phantom state apparently resets my inebriation levels."

"That's actually pretty useful information to hold onto," he says, appearing genuinely intrigued. Both of him.

I wish the two of him would quit spinning. It's terribly distracting.

"The second time, I had food readily available, more bottles of that heinous tasting drink, and a bathrobe." I point to the bathrobe I'm luxuriating in. "Comfort was a priority."

He just grins broader, as though he's thoroughly entertained. The carefree grin is so rare that it transforms his whole face. And I realize I really want to see him look at me more like that.

He pushes off from the wall, coming to lower himself onto the bed beside me, taking the drink from my hand and raising it to his lips.

"It's like skunk and dead rodents festered in that thing, and I had to choke it down multiple times because of sober-phantom-me. The second time was brought on by my first ever hiccup. It startled me so much I went phantom on accident, and...I have the cure for hiccups now. Phantom girl fixed that too."

He grins behind the glass as he takes another drink, not making a single expression of disgust.

"Just how? How did you grow a tolerance to that? Because I gotta tell you, this might be my only night to wallow in alcohol."

The bed jostles when he moves closer and hands it back to me, and I take it a little roughly. “Taste it now,” he says, leaning over.

Rolling my eyes, I turn it up, brace for the inevitable rancid taste, and...moan in pleasure as the taste of cinnamon invades my mouth. My eyelids flutter shut as I turn it up and down the remaining liquid like I can’t possibly get enough.

Gage’s lips slowly stroke the column of my throat, and I’m so warm and tamed by the liquor that I don’t even question his motives.

“How?” I ask, now wanting more and wondering what I did with that last bottle.

“You choose the flavor,” he says against my neck.

“And no one found this to be crucial information to share when they saw me carrying that jar back to my room? I’ve been choking that stuff down for hours and having to start all over again.”

“I didn’t see you carrying it to your room, or I would have been in here much, *much* sooner,” he murmurs against the base of my neck, slowly kissing lower.

I stiffen and narrow my eyes. “Are you in here because of Jude’s weird interrogation tactics? Did Kai stand me up as a part of this game?”

He lifts his head, eyebrow arched as he peers down at me.

“I’m in here because you stared into my eyes and clung to my hand, willing to go into the flames with me so I wouldn’t have to die alone,” he says with no humor or sarcasm. “I’m in a much different place than the rest of them right now, because there’s no reason you did that other than what you said. He’s still worried about what price is to come. I’m to the point where I say to hell with the consequences.”

Confused, I run my finger up his arm.

His lips ghost over mine as he continues. “Jude is playing his game. He secretly needs you to be a worthy adversary, but



the more you prove you are, the more he truly believes no good can come from it. We've been burned in the past many times. And you've already penetrated farther than any woman before you," he says, his eyes never leaving mine.

I wasn't expecting so much honesty or candor.

"Okay then," I say on a breath.

"Okay then?" he asks, one corner of his mouth lifting.

"But in all fairness, there hasn't been any *penetration*. Aside from some fingers, and I can do that myself, so I'm not sure how I've penetrated farther than any woman," I add, simply because I don't do well with serious situations, it seems.

His grin only grows.

I shrug a shoulder. "Anyway, the only way I'm ever going to get close enough for him to truly trust me, is to stop trying so hard to get him to trust me. Three to one odds that I can make it happen by the end of the week."

I really shouldn't be gambling. I'm not a betting woman.

That smile stretches even wider than the last one as his eyes flake with gold.

"You're going to play a game to counter his game?" he asks.

"Jude *needs* control. You saw how crazy he got earlier when he felt all that slipping. I'm going to tip him over the edge, and he'll be so mad he won't know whether to kill me or kiss me. He'll choose the kiss. And it'll be brutal," I tell him, holding out my hand like I'm ready to shake on a deal.

Instead of shaking my hand, his lips come down on mine, and the empty jar tumbles from my hand as I reach up to grab the back of his head. He groans in my mouth, a tortured sound, and I realize he's not going to be breaking the bond tonight.

The kiss cuts off, and he snuggles up against my side, his arm going around me, making me feel a little safe.

“There’s a question that’s been driving me out of my mind, and I need to know the answer before I go find him and kill him,” he says as though this is entirely too exasperating for him to deal with.

Kill who?

“Okay...”

“Why did you think Neal—the weasel from the club—would be your one true love or whatever it is you kept saying?” he asks, causing my smile to spread so much it hurts.

“Are you jealous? Please say you are.”

“Just answer the question,” he tells me pointedly.

Rolling my eyes, I shrug. “All of you seem to forget that I’m still a novice to so many experiences. I was unseen then unwanted for the first conscious years of my existence. He was the first man in my short existence to be nice to me. The first man who wanted to spend time with me. The first guy who smiled at all my jokes. Nothing else seemed to really matter when I felt how good it could feel to just be wanted.”

Gage groans, and before I can say anything more, his lips are on mine again, kissing me as he starts pushing my legs apart and sliding up my shirt as my robe falls apart. His grip on me tightens when he realizes there is no underwear under the shirt.

Just as he starts shoving down his track pants, his intentions clear, I push him back, shaking my head.

“I didn’t tell you that to make you feel so sorry for me that you’d piss off everyone and give me what I want,” I grumble. “And I really don’t want to remember losing my virginity to a pity fuck.”

“You want me to see if you’re really a virgin?” he muses.

“Kai and Ezekiel have already been there with their fingers. I’ll just ask them,” I state with a shrug, expecting him to show some more jealousy.

Instead, he smirks. “Then I guess I’ll find something else to do with you. No need in giving you all the same experiences over and over when there’s a whole lot more out there to show you.”

Before I can say more, Kai walks in, taking in our intimate cuddle session, and slides in on my other side. My bed is large, but three is going to be the limit.

“You stood me up,” I tell him.

“I realized I couldn’t be alone in here with you, or I’d end up betraying everyone—”

“—Just Jude,” I interrupt.

“I knew it was just a matter of time before someone else came in, and we could be cock-block buddies,” he goes on.

He reaches over and fist bumps Gage with laughing eyes.

“You were my favorite earlier. Gage has now replaced you once again,” I tell him idly as he passes me the last jar of alcohol.

I’m stunned a little to taste a rich cocoa flavor instead of cinnamon like last time. I guess Kai prefers a different taste, and it’s something new I get to learn about them.

“Is she a virgin?” Gage asks Kai as he grabs my abandoned popcorn and starts snacking.

“To be honest, I have no clue,” Kai says, reaching over me and grabbing his own handful. “We’ve never had a virgin before. They tend to freak out over the four-at-once notion when they’re that innocent.”

“I would think it’d still be obvious,” Gage says with a frown.

Ezekiel walks in, and grins at me when I flip him off.

“Don’t be mad. I wasn’t going to pass up the opportunity to get my hands on you without him guilt-tripping me for once. The tradeoff was that he no longer says anything about my sleeping arrangements,” he says, coming closer.

“The bird was for not telling me I could flavor the alcohol. I drank skunk for hours for no damn reason,” I tell him before drinking more of the chocolatey nectar.

Both he and Kai burst out laughing, and Ezekiel drops to the end of the long bed, stretching out as he lies on his back and snags some popcorn for himself.

“And I got you a gift to apologize,” he says, pulling a gift box out.

“If this has a beetle in it, you’ll never be my favorite again,” I tell him, leaning down to snatch the box up.

He just grins as I open it up, expecting a more acceptable necklace, given the slender, rectangular box.

Instead, I find a row of nail polishes. All of them have “diamond” sparkles.

“I was hoping for more real diamonds. I don’t remember those women getting nail polishes,” I state absently, even as I admire the pretty colors and decide to start painting my toenails.

I have no idea what to do, so I put a pin in it until I can Google a tutorial. I’m not sure how I know how to work Google to its fullest extent just yet, but I’m really grateful for that knowledge. Makes life easier.

“I figured we’d start with the basics, since you don’t really own anything yet,” Ezekiel says with a shrug. “Besides, every real girl needs nail polish.”

I’m not sure why it makes me grin, but it does.

“Thank you,” I finally tell him, and he rolls his eyes before turning over.

“We don’t really like gratitude around here,” Kai tells me. “It just makes shit awkward.”

“You’d prefer for me to be ungrateful like the lot of you?” I muse.

“Exactly,” they all three say with a smile, not looking at me as they stare at the TV.

Just as my smile spreads wider, Jude pokes his head in the doorway, leaning against the frame as he rakes his eyes over the three traitors.

I subtly adjust, closing my robe, trying not to make it obvious I’m wearing my Team Comoara Trădătoare shirt a little prouder now.

“Harold called and said there’s no word on the trial results yet. I didn’t give him the details of the new angle we’re working on, just in case,” Jude says.

I say nothing. I’m determined to make it look like I’m not interested in his attention.

My leg is draped over Ezekiel’s waist, and the other two are pressed up against my sides as I grab some popcorn from Gage’s lap.

“Lake wants to meet with us in the morning. She says she might be able to sneak us into hell to get a look at what’s going on,” Jude continues.

“That’s a hell of a risk,” Gage says on a low whistle.

I swallow my really curious and irrational jealousy down and refuse to ask Jude who Lake is.

“I can do this on my own,” Jude tells them. “With just one of us, it’d be less likely for us to get caught once she gets me down there.”

“How about I just go and all of you stay safe and sound up here?” I ask them, hoping that is going to be the new plan of action.

“You can’t siphon there on your own, and Lake would never take you whole,” Ezekiel tells me absently as he starts massaging my foot with one hand.

My eyes almost roll back in my head because it feels incredible. I might even like it almost as much as an orgasm. I

didn't even know to ask for this, because I've never seen them do it to the other girls over the past few years.

"Then I'll follow her around until she siphons below, and I'll hitch a ride without her knowing. I'm positive I could siphon *out* of hell," I prattle on, suppressing a moan while Ezekiel makes the rest of my body envious of my foot.

"Too risky. Lake knows how to navigate Lucifer's illusion in the royal wing. Her father has served directly under him for years. He'll sense her if she goes snooping, but he won't know I'm there because I'm not yet pledged," Jude says dismissively.

He glances around at the three of them, a hint of something flashing in his eyes too fast for me to discern what, before he schools his expressions.

"Then I'm coming with you. You're not going alone," I tell him.

"He'll be with Lake," Gage says, grinning at me like he sees me already failing at my attempt to pretend not to care.

"Lake can't snoop, which means he'll be on his own," I say carefully, not admitting to the outrageous jealousy he's weirdly trying to provoke. "I'm going."

Jude doesn't even argue, much to my surprise.

Why do I feel like I'm being played all of the sudden?

"Then be ready by lunch tomorrow," Jude tells me before backing up.

Just to pretend it's no big deal he's leaving instead of joining us, which I know we'd all really like, I lean over and tap Ezekiel's shoulder.

"Mr. Magic Fingers, am I a virgin?"

Confusion crosses his features as he seems to think about that. "I'm not really sure. We've never had a virgin before, so I'm not entirely certain what to look for."

"See? It's not as easy as it sounds," Kai tells Gage.

The entire room dissolves into laughter, and the conversation changes. The dynamic shifts before my eyes as Kai's arm drops around my shoulders, and Gage's fingers twine with mine.

Ezekiel continues to gently hold onto my foot, as the three of them talk and laugh about things I'm not completely understanding.

I glance up, noticing Jude at the very end of the long hallway that I can see, since he left my door open.

He stands in front of an empty room that has no purpose, just propped against the frame like it's his room, as he simply stares at us like he's studying the image and trying to place it somewhere.

I'm distracted when Kai draws my attention.

"Tell us something memorable about the days you were watching us before we knew you were watching," he says casually.

"You don't have to make it sound so creepy. It's really not."

He just grins.

"I always sat at the end of the table. One of you on my left, and one of you on my right. But it always changed, because you never all stayed in the same seats every time. It often felt like you were rotating so you could take turns being the closest to me during our table-dinner nights," I say distractedly, my attention snagged on the weird cat on TV as he tries super hard to get some lasagna.

Why have I not seen this cartoon sooner?

I don't realize they've gone silent until I look around to see them all studying me with indecipherable looks on their faces.

"What?" I ask, worried I've just taken steps back again.

Ezekiel's smile starts slowly spreading.

“We used to always sit in the same spots. For centuries,” Kai says, almost as though he’s thinking aloud.

“Until about five or so years ago,” Gage adds quietly.

There are totally butterflies right now, because it almost sounds like they’re saying they sensed me without ever realizing it and gravitated toward me the way I always have them.

Gage sighs as he drops to his back. “Jude better come around soon. I’m not sure how much more I can take. I’m only so fucking strong,” he tells the other two.

“Why did you wear combat boots with your tuxes?” I ask, as though this is the perfect time for that forgotten question.

Laughter follows that, though I’m not sure what’s so funny about it. No one even bothers to answer me. They tend to laugh when I’m actually being serious, and stay serious when I’m trying to be funny.

When I remember Jude watching, my eyes dart up to see the vacant spot where he was. My heart squeezes a little bit, because even when he’s an ass, I still can’t stand the thought of him feeling left out.

With a sigh, I curl up closest to Kai’s side, since I haven’t had nearly as much close time with him, and let his arm drape around me. He doesn’t kiss my head, but his hand stays fixed to my ass.

We stay up late, watching cartoons, laughing at stupid jokes, and drinking more alcohol.

The entire time, I can’t even enjoy it as much as I should, and they all feel it too. After all, Jude’s a much bigger piece of their lives than mine.

One person is missing.



## Chapter 10

A smear of red polish goes along the side of my toe, and I curse as I wiggle on top of the bar. Apparently, the skill to paint one's toenails is not in my arsenal of hidden talents.

“Damn it, that girl made it look so easy on the tutorial. I’m tempted to find her address and go slap her across the face for misleading me,” I growl, streaking the side of my toe again.

“The kitchen bar is usually used for something other than painting one’s toes,” Kai says idly from beside me as he drinks his coffee and sharpens his sai.

It’s almost noon, and I’m supposed to be ready by the time Jude returns from soul collecting with the other three. Kai overslept.

Kai. Overslept.

It was a first for him. So he stayed in bed with me all morning and into noon. I was beat.

“Can you keep a secret?” I ask on a sigh.

He mimes the motion of zipping his lips, never glancing at me, and I go phantom, imagine my toenails painted the exact same shade of red, and all colored inside the lines. Then I turn whole and wiggle my toes in a pair of snazzy sandals that showcases them best.

Kai glances over at my feet and smirks.

“It was actually a very thoughtful gift, but I’m apparently terrible at such girly things when I have to actually *do* them physically.”

“You’re saying you’re spoiled,” he suggests.

“Just don’t tell Ezekiel,” I say on a sigh as I screw the lid back on the nail polish.

The guys appear in the kitchen, and Ezekiel flashes me a grin when he sees me holding the red polish, while showcasing my pretty new red toenails.

However, he looks a little unimpressed when he sees my toenails, and looks over his shoulder as Jude jogs up the stairs.

I expect Kai to sell me out and tell him I'm a cheater, but he just keeps sharpening his sai.

“How bad was it?” Kai asks absently.

Ezekiel shrugs as he props up beside me. Gage goes to pull out sandwich stuff.

“More than usual but not too many for us to handle, even the day after the third trials. It almost feels like today's task was just to test us and see us after the trials—energy levels and all.”

Kai flicks his gaze over at me. “I bet Jude didn't look as well rested as the two of you,” he quips, smirking when he hears Jude stomping back down the stairs much harder than necessary.

I'm too busy preening and trying to get Ezekiel to tell me how awesome I did at painting my toenails for my very first time. He doesn't know I cheated, after all.

“You ready?” Jude asks me, his gaze not meeting mine as he pulls a black masquerade mask from behind his back.

“Are we going to a party?” I ask, edging my foot over the counter, pushing it closer to Ezekiel.

“I'd rather no one see my face, and a masquerade mask isn't too uncommon in the royal part of hell,” he tells me without ever glancing my way.

Ezekiel is paying him more attention than my freaking feet.

“For fuck's sake, so what if she cheated? She spent an hour trying to paint the damn things just because you bought her the fucking polish. Give her a compliment already,” Kai says,

confusing me, until I realize he's angrily directing that toward Ezekiel.

"It's that obvious I cheated?" I ask dryly, as Ezekiel's grin grows to take up his entire face.

"First timers make a mess," Ezekiel says with a shrug. "But yours look perfect."

I beam. "Thank you. That's the closest to a compliment any of you have really paid me. I'll take it," I say as I slide off the bar and go phantom, fashioning myself a long, understated sexy dress.

Silver high heels offer the black gown a pretty contrast, along with a silvery mask that makes it look like we're ready for the ball. Even if he is wearing tactical gear with his mask instead of a tux.

I'm actually sick of seeing them in tuxes since the trials. Bad memories are involved with tuxes.

Jude arches an eyebrow as he sweeps his gaze over me. "I can't even right now," he says, batting a hand in my direction before reaching through me and siphoning us before I can tell the others goodbye.

However, I don't complain as we land in a parking lot outside of a condemned shopping mart.

"This is a creepy meeting place," I tell him, twirling around in my phantom form. "And I think I'm entirely overdressed."

"Remember this is a very important contact to all of us, and don't do anything to ruin that relationship," he says quietly, as though he's worried someone may be listening.

"Why would I do anything to ruin it?" I ask suspiciously.

He gives me a look.

"Fine," I grumble, rolling my eyes and deciding not to argue, since I'm supposed to be pretending I don't care so much. "I promise."

We stay quiet after that, for a very boringly long time.

No Lake shows up.

A sizzling sound has me zapping myself across the lot to a wall, and Jude is right behind me, both of us staring at the burning words as they appear.

It's an address in New Orleans. Why is that—

A tingle passes through me when Jude's hand touches my phantom hip, and suddenly we're inside a hotel.

My breath catches, and I race behind him, still in phantom form as he walks to the front desk. The guy behind the counter looks up with a bored expression on his face, despite the numerous weapons strapped to Jude's body like he's going to war.

The guy never speaks to Jude, and Jude never says a word. A key card is passed over without any other exchange, and Jude walks over to press the elevator buttons.

As soon as the doors open, he boards, and I join him.

“What's going on?” I ask him warily when we're all alone on the elevator.

His eyes flick up to the tiny red dot on a panel, and the plaque under it informs us there is indeed a camera watching the elevator. Right. He can't talk to me in here.

When the doors open, he steps off first, but I'm right behind him, scanning the hallway. I really don't like this cloak-and-dagger stuff. It's making me paranoid.

Honest people don't have their friends sneak around like criminals to meet them, right? Clearly, Lake is not as awesome as I am.

“I don't think bringing in new people at this point is the best idea. I know my opinion doesn't matter, but we learned a lot about the Devil's intentions through the trials,” I state, knowing he can't argue with me in the hallway.

He holds the key card up to a door, and he pushes through it.

Pulling out a compass-looking contraption that looks oddly familiar, Jude moves to the desk in the room. He opens it, does something to it, and then leaves it open.

As he draws all the curtains completely shut, he pulls off his mask, and I lose mine as well.

“We can speak and not be heard, even if the room is bugged now,” he tells me.

“What if someone is pressed to the wall with a glass to their ear?” I point out.

I love it when he looks exasperated with me. It means I have at least some effect on him. The *wrong* effect, but I’ll take it.

“That device makes it so that only silence can be heard in this room, unless you’re physically in this room.”

“I’m not *physically* in this room, but—”

“Just stop talking,” he says, his hands up like he ‘just can’t with me’ right now.

“Why did she send you to this place?” I ask him as he pulls out his phone, but doesn’t do anything. “Shouldn’t you tell the guys where we are?”

He shakes his head. “We never text locations. Phones are too easily traced. My GPS is off, but anyone could be reading our messages. They know Lake is paranoid and would send me to another location to meet,” he tells me.

I poke my head through the outside wall, looking down and noting we’re on Bourbon Street. I know this because the guys come here on occasion when they’re taking a much-needed break from all the reaping.

Pulling back in, I face him as he pours himself a glass of the drink I got shit-faced on last night. I’ll pass today. I need to be level-headed.

“How do you know Lake?” I ask him, sitting down on the bed.

“Are you going to talk the entire time we have to wait?” he groans.

“Does she always keep you waiting so long?” I muse.

He rolls his eyes as he throws back some of the drink and starts removing his straps of weapons with his free hand.

“She’s paranoid. She’ll watch the outside of the hotel for a while. She’ll watch the lobby. Then she’ll gradually move up to her own room and watch the door. Then, when she’s certain I haven’t been followed, she’ll come in.”

“That’s a lot of paranoia,” I agree, as though that’s what he’s saying.

He studies me over the rim of his glass when he sits down—weapon free—and stares at me.

“We met Lake over a century ago. She went into the trials a few decades back, and because of her, we were able to get a lot of information about the process of selection.”

Alarm bells go off inside my head.

“Wait, you thought Manella was in charge,” I remind him. “And he wasn’t. Sounds like she’s feeding you bad information.”

“Or the Devil lied. Which is far more likely, since he made it sound like he had our backs right before he shoved us into the third trial to die,” he points out. “Lucifer is playing with us, and Lake is hesitant to meet with me because she’s worried she’s next. There was a culling in the underworld shortly before the third trial.”

My eyebrows lift.

“He eliminated all his guards—both hell’s throat and royal guards. Lake is an escort, and half of her kind have been replaced because the others were already recycled,” he goes

on. “She thinks it has something to do with everything going on with us. Something big is happening, Keyla.”

I wave my hand dismissively. “I’ve decided that name no longer fits me. While I have some sentimental attachment to it, and might keep it as a middle name, I need a new name to define me now. Something badass.”

He blinks at me before muttering something under his breath that I probably wouldn’t like, so I don’t ask him to repeat it.

“Why’d you agree to let me come with you so easily?”

“Because if you’re here, I don’t have to worry about the three of them doing something stupid while I’m not there to reel them back,” he fires back without even having to think about it.

I knew it seemed too easy.

“Why do you think I’ll cause problems for you and this contact?” I ask him, reminding him of what he said in the parking lot.

His lips twitch, but he doesn’t respond immediately. “You gave your word you wouldn’t, so the reason doesn’t matter,” he says evasively.

“Why the culling?” I ask him, going back to the matter at hand.

He shrugs a shoulder. “I have no idea. Unless he felt he couldn’t trust any of them, given the Lamar deal. Which would mean he had no part in what happened to Lamar.”

“Which conflicts with our theory that the Devil has been behind *all* of it. What if he’s just behind *part* of it?” I ask him, my eyes not moving from his.

He raps his fingers on the edge of the chair, smirking like he’s already figured that part out and I’m slow to the game.

“This is what you were all discussing last night, isn’t it?”

“When you stormed through for an alcohol run? Yes. Yes, it is,” he states with a bored drawl.

Frowning, I look down at my pretty toenails in my elegant, high-heeled sandals.

“Why didn’t the others tell me?” I ask quietly. They spent the night in my room, after all.

“Don’t look so devastated,” he says bitterly. “They’re too busy trying for the impossible to think straight right now. Your fault, really. The evil pussy is just backfiring a little, it seems.”

This is what we do. Line our insults with snark, never being real with each other. Jude is quite literally never going to stop wanting to hate me, because he sees me as...impossible.

“Despite what you think, there is no jealousy between the three of them. It is possible,” I say on a sigh.

“A few nights does not make the impossible possible, *comoara trădătoare*. It takes longer for such resentments to fester, and they always do. Just like there will always be a price. Just like there will always be a favorite.”

That last part makes my eyes roll. “My favorite changes based on who has made me happiest at the moment. I’m rather capricious that way.”

He snorts derisively. “Those are superficial favorites. Eventually you’ll become attached to mostly one, seek that one out more and more. And it’s never been more dangerous before than you, because we can have you individually.”

He adjusts himself in his pants like he’s proving a point, and I realize for the first time he’s actually hard. And we’re alone.

“None of us seem immune, and whoever you end up becoming most attached to...I don’t know if they could do as we’ve done in the past when it reached that point and simply walk away,” he says seriously. No bite to his tone. No snark infused to turn it into banter.

Just real, honest disclosure.



“Then the bond would likely sever, and three of us will roam with a missing piece and the inability to ever experience that one pleasure ever again. *That* is your treacherous step, even though you won’t admit it aloud. All I want you to do is really think about that. Think about what you’ll be destroying.”

I admit I wanted *real* talk, but now he’s just being boringly obtuse, and I can’t suffer another moment of it.

“If I wanted just one of you, I wouldn’t be here with you right now, worrying to death you’re being tricked or trapped by this girl you trust far more than me. My own jealousy stems to you at the moment, even though you’re certainly not my current favorite and haven’t been since that first night when you opened your mouth to speak and ruined the illusion of the bad boy who might make an exception for me.”

His lips twitch before he takes a sip of the alcohol again.

I’m a little curious what his chosen taste is.

“I don’t even particularly like you at the moment, yet I’d still stop my heart from beating if it meant saving yours from such a fate,” I add, daring him to argue.

I’ve done nothing but prove that time and time again.

“The ability to persuade a man to question everything he knows is by far the most devious trait about you, *comoara trădătoare*. And you have quite a few devious traits we overlook just to keep you around. Myself included. As I said, I’m not immune. It’s because of my fear of you dying that I—”

“Leveled up and turned the blind tribe to ash?” I ask, grinning. “That was really cool. But I still stand by my theory of the Four Horsemen. Clearly, you’re Death.”

He groans, draining the last of his drink before standing to pour more.

“This is why you’re infuriating. The fact you can’t even get your feelings hurt long enough to hate me back is—”

“Endearing?” I supply.

“Exhausting,” he counters, not sounding one bit happy.

“My feelings were only getting hurt in the beginning. When it was all of you against me. Ezekiel is my special boy because he was the first to gift me with hope. Kai is like a willful drug, because I truly enjoy the attention he pays me, even when he’s so surly he couldn’t possibly have a gentle bone in his body. Gage is my current favorite because I know without a doubt he finally sees me as what I am.”

He turns to me, his brow furrowing.

“And what is that?”

“All of yours,” I state as though it should be obvious.

His eyes heat for a second as he swallows harder than necessary, as though I just said some really magical words that he’s struggling not to believe.

“It’s clear I was designed just for the four of you. Whether or not I’m a Trojan Horse is beyond my knowledge. But even if I am such, I’ll destroy whoever wants to use me against you. My loyalties are sealed and undivided. The four of you are my only charge. If Lamar had been truly trying to hurt you, I would have burned his heart in his chest without blinking an eye. And I happen to like Lamar.”

We stare at each other, not speaking, just gauging the other like we’re back in our usual opposing spots on the chessboard.

Finally, he takes a seat again, his gaze flicking over me like it’s the first time he’s letting himself appreciate the sexy black gown I’ve chosen.

“If we’re stuck here, you could at least wear red for me. Kai is the one who prefers black,” he says as though it’s no big deal.

Instead of making my dress red, I change it to blue.

“That’s Gage’s favorite color,” he points out.

“Yes, and Gage is my current favorite. If you want to make requests, you need to at least try to be my favorite first,” I state

absently, as though I can't be bothered to think about the fact he *doesn't* want to be my favorite.

He fights a grin even as he shakes his head and looks away from me. I think we work best when we're not trying to be too real. Our banter is our medium. Things get too intense too quickly otherwise.

Same for all of them, really.

Gage was willing to risk their bond just to give me a pity fuck when I was so pathetically honest with him. It's a tad embarrassing now that I look back on it.

I'll make sure to withhold such pitiful stories in the future. I'd rather them not pity me at all.

I want their admiration instead.

That's much harder to achieve, but the reward would be much better.

"I was wrong about why you hated me," I tell him as he glances over at me. "Gage had his own theory, and he was wrong too. I was wrong about all of it. I thought I had you all figured out as we floated down that fiery lake on the back of that beetle."

He just smirks.

"Then you tell me why you hate me over and over," I say, shrugging. "But it's all a lie. Not even Gage truly knows you, and he's the closest to you."

"I can assure you that I hate you just as much as I like you. You weren't wrong about that."

"Well, I guess it isn't *all* a lie. But you're not worried about me choosing favorites and riding off into the sunset with one, while destroying the other three."

The confident smirk slips from his lips.

"You know I value your bond. You've seen me preserve it to the best of my ability. Albeit, I have understandable moments of weakness. I don't even want you one-on-one. I'm

selfish for wanting all four of you, while expecting to be the only one you want, but I'm not greedy. I don't want more than that. Just the four of you. You know that. I can see it in your eyes," I go on. "It's why you like me."

I can see him guarding himself, careful not to react.

"Maybe one day you'll tell me the true reason you're afraid of even taking this risk, when you're the most reckless of the four. Your menace is half your charm, so it doesn't scare me anymore that you hate me. I just want to know why."

He leans back, swallowing.

"You couldn't bring yourself to go against my wishes when I told you that you couldn't touch me. Not after the trials. You bartered with Ezekiel, knowing I wouldn't even hold it against him."

I arch a challenging eyebrow at him.

"You know I don't hurt the bond," I say, as though hearing it aloud again makes him all the more intriguing. "So what scares Death himself?"

"The answer would be simple if you stopped to think about it," he says so quietly I almost miss it. "You inspire a fear none of us have known before."

He looks away, and silence descends around us for more uncomfortable hours. I stare at the ceiling, idly wondering what the other guys are up to.

"Does she ever plan to show up?" I ask him as he moves to the window to look out.

"Patience," is all he says.

"You really trust her?" I ask on a sigh, needing him to keep me from being on edge right now with the heaps of dread flowing through me.

So soon after the trials, when everything was life-or-death, is not the best time for someone new to come into the picture and wreak havoc on my nerves.

“With my life,” he assures me.

He says it to ease my worries, which is the nicest thing he’s ever done. But it weirdly feels like a knife to the heart for no reason at all.

I try not to be envious. I really do.

But I sort of want to kill her already, if I’m being completely honest. I think it’s best not to inform him I actually am as insane as he accuses me of being.

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## Chapter 11

Jude drops down to the bed beside me, like he's sick of finding uncomfortable furniture to sit down on and crane his neck to watch the TV that only has a good angle from the bed.

The furniture, by the way, is nailed to the floor. Rather peculiar establishment, if you ask me. And Jude says we're not allowed to pry it free because it's an important meeting place for a lot of *surface guardians*—which is still just a fancy term for reapers.

He's careful not to touch me, unsurprisingly. Especially since I gave up being phantom and went whole hours ago to gain control of the remote.

It's almost dawn—the next day—and there's still been no sign of Lake.

“She must know I'm here or something,” I say as the light starts glowing through the curtains.

We missed one hell of a party last night. The streets were loud, and I really wanted to join in, but Lake is a very annoying girl who thinks her time is the only time that bears importance. Selfish brat if you ask me.

No, I do not sound petty.

“No. Only Lamar and Lucifer have sensed you. Lamar has a link to spirits, which is part of his power. It's probably why he sensed you when the hell spawns didn't. And Lucifer is Lucifer. I'd be alarmed if he hadn't been able to sense you, especially in hell.”

“But only when I was close enough to touch,” I decide to point out.

He purses his lips.

More silence and impatient waiting follows that comment.

We watch *Friends* like we're not both waiting to be dropped into hell by an escort he knows but won't really give me many details about, because he's apparently more loyal to her than to me.

Then again, at least I know she exists. She doesn't have a clue about me. Even Jude has become protective of that secret. So that means I'm winning. You know, if I was in a contest with her or whatever.

My mind reverts back to the theories I've been working on silently in my head for the past several hours when we both grew tired of veiled insults.

"I think Kai is Conquest/Pestilence. The thing he did to those two guards seemed like he was infecting them with poison. But it could be disease," I state randomly, causing him to groan again.

"For the last time, the Four Horsemen were killed centuries ago during a collision of the two kingdoms."

"Who told you that?"

He gives me a dry look. "*Plenty* of people, *including* Lake. Like I said, it was the first obvious answer."

"I don't trust Lake."

"You don't know her. Anyway, it hurt the balance significantly, though the details are murky as to why they were killed. *But* if by some chance all of that was inaccurate, and by some narrow miracle we were the special quad who were that powerful, we'd be accepted into hell. In fact, they'd even drag us there if they suspected it, because our presence topside this long would shatter the balance. In fact, we would have already shattered it by now if we were them."

"Balance, balance, balance," I say on a frustrated breath. "I'm starting to hate that word."

"Get used to it. That's all we're constantly trying to do: Keep the balance. Both sides, no matter how differently opinionated they are, agree on one thing, and that is the

importance of balance. Good must level out with evil, or the world becomes too corrupt too quickly, and hell spills over.”

“Wouldn’t the Devil want that?” I point out.

“Fuck no.” He looks at me like I’m a total moron. “It would be the end of hell if the world had no good left in it.”

“Why?” I ask, moving closer like I’m desperate to know.

“Because without balance, there is no such thing as good or bad. Free will becomes null and void, and so do both kingdoms.”

“That makes no sense,” I grumble.

He stands quickly and goes to grab an old-timey scale with two small plates on either end.

He puts it down on the table in the center of the room, and I move to the end of the bed, no longer giving the TV my attention as he places a few lead balls on each of the pans on the scale.

“There is a perfect balance to everyone who can be topside. You have an exact amount of purities and impurities,” he says, putting a lead ball on each plate.

The scale stays perfectly balanced as he moves his hand back.

“Like you told Lucifer you guys were,” I say, frowning. “He seemed surprised by that.”

“Because he senses our impure imbalance, yet we have our souls intact and it defies the laws of balance,” he tells me, though it doesn’t make a lick of sense. “Plenty of our kind is balanced, otherwise, we couldn’t be topside. The most powerful of the balanced ones usually become royal escorts.”

He puts an extra ball on one side, tipping the scale.

“And the ones with an imbalance of impurities or purities go up or down to maintain surface balance,” he goes on.

“Define purities and impurities,” I tell him.



“Impure thoughts, emotions, urges...those are impurities. Compassion, loyalty...things like that are purities,” he says absently before continuing. “Humans have some far more pure than others, and far more impure than others. It’s their actions and reactions that define the topside balance, but an impure balance of one of our kind topside would have too much dark influence, inadvertently affecting free will.”

“Would the same be true if a good angel were walking topside?” I muse.

“They follow the rules better than our kind do, so I don’t know,” he answers.

I snort, and his lips twitch. It’s sort of nice how he’s just talking and explaining things without looking at me like I’m searching for a way to use it against him.

“People like Lake have that pure-to-impure balance and can be topside. Many do. But we’re an enigma,” he continues.

“Because you’re the Four Horsemen, but you have souls to keep you from being imbalanced. I thought all the creatures had souls.”

He blows out a frustrated breath. “The souls choose a new form. We’re in our original. Our soul is still mortal with immortal properties and shrouded by an unnatural immortal body. It balances itself against our impurities.” He quickly adds, “But we’re *not* the fucking Four Horsemen.”

“Famine is Gage. I saw what he did that beetle. It was like he drained it until it was shriveling from starvation,” I go on, undeterred.

He looks up from the scale, his brow furrowed.

“Why would you say that exactly?” he asks, clearly intrigued.

“When something starves, it starts eating itself from the inside. The beetle was clearly doing that, hence the shriveling. I would think that was obvious.”

He starts to speak, but I continue on.

“And Ezekiel is War, surprisingly enough. He doesn’t create chaos. Chaos would have them running in a frenzy and spurred by random events. War is a simple-minded thought to kill the opposition at any cost. Ezekiel just confused their minds with who the opposition was and created a civil war from thin air.”

He steps closer, tilting his head.

“As I said, you’re clearly death. Death can come in any form. You didn’t need a spear to kill them, because you were Death itself.”

He blinks and slowly shakes his head. “Famine. No one has ever suggested Gage’s power being famine. He drains things.”

“He starves them and dehydrates them,” I correct.

“Famine’s power was to kill the land with pests and such,” he tells me dismissively.

“Because he drained the land of nutrients and starved it until it killed everything to keep itself alive and not share resources,” I go on. “The land is just as alive as you or I. It only makes sense he could do it to a living being as much as a living entity.”

He points a finger at me. “Your ability to rationalize your point by twisting theories and half-cocked hypothesizes makes you impossible to reason with. You make me think things I know can’t be possible. The Four Horsemen are dead. That is something agreed on by everyone.”

“Then why give the quads so much extra attention?” I ask him, arching an eyebrow. “Why not just leave you forever locked in hell’s belly if Lucifer truly wants you dead? Why the theatrics for a man so powerful?”

His hands fist, but before he can answer, I hear the door opening. Instantly, I go phantom, just as a very familiar brunette walks into the room, her smile spreading when she sees Jude.

Envy like I've never felt before slices through me so powerfully that bile almost rises to my phantom throat when he grins genuinely back at her.

It isn't because he's smiling at her.

It's because I know this girl.

"Two years ago, the four of you shared her," I say on a shaky breath as Jude goes to hug her right in front of me like she's nothing more than an old friend.

He ignores me, the girl who doesn't really exist, as the one they've touched between them before laughs and pulls back, greeting him.

I remember the way she kissed all of them, savored them with a familiarity I couldn't understand. Most of the other girls always seemed like strangers to them, but she seemed as comfortable with them as they were with her.

It's now I realize why.

They shared her more than once.

I just got to view a reunion.

Staggering back, I watch as her hand slides down his arm with ease and comfort.

Jude clears his throat, and withdraws from her touch as I stare numbly at the scene at hand.

"I really don't trust her now," I tell him, trying to mask the fact my feelings actually can still be hurt.

Admired not pitied—my new goal, remember? I get nowhere with them when I wear my heart on my sleeve.

She moves to the scale, grinning over at him. "Playing with lead balls, Jude? I hardly pictured you as the idle-hands type after knowing you for so long."

"It took you longer than usual to show up," he tells her casually, moving to sit on the end of the bed near me.

Me? I'm trying not to visibly sulk. Jealousy is a powerful emotion. I literally want to kill this girl. I had no issue with her back then. I mean, of course I was jealous, even tried to possess her—like I did many of them—*especially her*.

She was the one they seemed to really enjoy, and she was flirty and fun, not at all timid or apprehensive of the debauchery they showered her with.

And the most beautiful.

Now she walks in here and makes Death himself smile as though it's a simple task.

She looks around, as though she's searching for something. Everything she does is suspicious now, because I'm just looking for a reason to kill her.

"Now I know why you made me promise to behave," I state dryly.

Jude's lips twitch as she faces him again.

"I was waiting for your brothers. I may not can sneak you all in, but I assumed there'd be a little trade for this very deadly risk I'm taking for the four of you," she says, smirking before she winks.

"I'm going to have to kill her," I say on a sigh, then stiffen, realizing I said it aloud.

Jude clears his throat, his humor gone.

"Fine. I won't kill her." *In front of you*, I add silently, deciding I'm really good at negotiating. Seems like a fair deal to me. No need in getting his vote on the matter.

"My brothers stayed home. The soul breaks are getting worse, and we're stationed in the highest concentration of the breaks right now."

He tells her this easily, even though this is the first I've heard that tidbit of information. One more reason to kill her. She makes my place feel threatened, and I don't particularly care for that feeling.

“Would they have *paid* her the way she clearly wants to be *paid* if they’d been able to come here?” I ask, deciding that is very important information I need to know before I decide if I’m an idiot or not for thinking I was special.

I really will leave and find a way to extract myself from them completely if he answers *yes*. Even if it’s just to be a snarky dick to me. I will so be gone, just as soon as I return him safely home.

Those three were beginning to make me feel like I was as important to them as they are me, yet they didn’t mention any of this.

Jude, of course, doesn’t answer me, since he can’t talk to a phantom his guest can’t see, without being terribly suspicious. Since she seems to be as paranoid as he is with trust, that would be bad.

I decide to make him talk so she doesn’t trust him. I’ll find a way into hell to gather their information. They don’t need her.

“Would they?” I ask him again.

He signs the letters *n* and *o* behind his back. Hmm... I can read sign language? Oh, he’s telling me *no!* They wouldn’t have. I hope he’s not lying.

As she comes to stand closer to him, her eyes raking over him, I move to his side.

“You’re turned on without them,” she says, glancing at his lap.

That has me scooting away, since that’s my effect.

Jude clears his throat as he leans forward, hiding the noticeable erection he certainly shouldn’t be having with another woman in the room.

“If I’m a conduit for your attraction to her, I’ll be forced to make her ugly very soon,” I tell him seriously.

He gives a subtle shake of his head. I'm not sure what he's telling me, but I think he's asking me not to kill her or telling me it's not her effect.

"I mean it. I will not be the little magic gem that offers you an independent boner so you can screw another girl in my presence."

"I'd never betray my brothers by taking someone without them," he tells her.

I really hate the way he calls them his brothers. It's confusing. Which in a sense, they are. But not in the blood-relation sense.

"The Kincaid brothers only share," she says on a sigh, as though she's repeating something she's heard too much. "I remember well."

"All quads share," he says dismissively.

We'll have to circle back to the *Kincaid brothers* thing. That's the first I've heard of that, and again, they're not really brothers.

Her eyes close, like she's relishing a memory. My phantom fists clench.

"You being turned on by her definitely makes you my least favorite," I mutter under my breath.

Pettiness is my new shade of personality lately.

His eyes dart to me as his jaw tics, but he immediately looks away, unable to say whatever it is he wants to say, since she's here.

I like that I'm making him want to talk. I need this siren gone before she sings her song and I lose him completely.

"You four don't have the same last names if you were born to different families. I've not even been able to uncover your last names. So why does she refer to you as the Kincaid brothers?" I muse aloud.

“Are we going to hell or not, Lake? Time is very precious right now, and I’ve been separated from my brothers too long. You know how quad bonds work,” he reminds her.

I’m not sure why my stomach unsettles, but it’s not envy this time.

I look back at her as her eyes open, and she gives him a small, sympathetic smile.

“You’re hurting for their presence. Sorry. I really did expect them to be here with you, or I wouldn’t have made you wait for so long. The truth is that I was trying to get out of my latest assignment, which is the main reason I’m so late.”

He cocks his head.

“What do you mean?” he asks as he stands.

She takes a step back, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“This culling is terrifying everyone. Lucifer hasn’t stopped it yet. Forty more escorts were killed this morning. He wants nothing but devout loyalty, and you know where I stand on that fence if I’m willing to break the rules to take you under,” she says, smiling sadly up at him.

“You think you’ll be in the culling?” he asks, sounding concerned.

There’s that damned envy again.

“All of the participants of the trials survived, sans the two you and your brothers killed,” she tells him.

“Everyone survived those trials?” he asks incredulously.

She nods, a huff of a breath escaping her. “Lucifer retrieved the others before their deaths. They never made it past even one obstacle. But he needed them to start a change. To replenish what he’s recycling, because there can be no vacant jobs, obviously. Everyone has a task to be fulfilled to preserve the balance.”

“I don’t understand. No one gets out of the trials without completing them,” he goes on, confused.

Her watery smile doesn't sit right with me.

"I'm afraid you have no idea what you stirred up by surviving that third trial. It was *impossible* to complete every task in the three days allotted. Even in a month, no one could have done that. I never believed them. They tried to tell me, but I refused to believe it could be true, because I really like the four of you."

I step closer, tilting my head. What does she think is wrong with them?

"She thinks something really bad, but she doesn't know I helped. Tell her so she'll stop believing whatever it is," I tell him, not liking the way I'm now worried about her damn opinion of him.

After all, I want her gone.

"What's going on, Lake? Do you know what Lucifer was trying to achieve?" he asks, not telling her about me even though I'm giving him permission.

She nods once, then meets his eyes. I step in front of him, trying to inspect her look closer.

"I'm afraid I do. And I'm sorry I have to be the one to do this," she says.

I see it too late. She's incomprehensibly fast.

The glint of the blade is barely recognized before it's halfway through my body. It's so fast that I barely even register the fact she's slicing through me.

I don't even hesitate to turn whole, pain lancing through me as the blade gets jammed in my upper stomach, slicing through my spine as I shove power out of me.

She's launched backwards, cracking the wall and hitting the ceiling, pinned there but not dying. Because it hurts too much to strain for the acid.

Two arms catch me before I collapse, and I choke on the blood I feel gurgling in my mouth, tasting like acid on its own



as the black streams of it trickle down.

It's like a heavy drumming happens in my ears. I can't hear what Jude is saying, but I feel his power flowing through me as ashes flit around the room.

His eyes are feral and wide as he hovers over me, and I cry out when he jerks the dagger out of me. Pain. All consuming, burning, excruciating, agonizing pain has me almost blacking out.

The trickles of a cold sweat break out across my skin as I start struggling to breathe, coughing. I still can't hear much, but I do hear him shouting on the phone.

In the next instant, I'm in our house. He siphoned us...

I try to go phantom, hoping it can heal me, but a scream is ripped from my throat as it only makes the pain worse, leaving me unable to leave this dying form.

All four of them are hovering over me, panicking, working tirelessly to save me. My head lulls to the side just as Ezekiel gets my dress ripped open, exposing the proof there's no coming back from this.

The black veins are climbing up me from the poison on the blade as black blood pumps out through the cracks of Gage's fingers. He presses down harder, and I scream in pain as he tries to keep me from bleeding out.

*"Devil's poison!"* I hear someone shout loud enough to just barely cut through the continuous drumming in my ears that is increasing in tempo.

This weak, pathetic form I coveted and craved so much is poisoned.

But this form is what saved them when the phantom couldn't.

"Run," I tell them on a gurgle. "She...wanted...to...know...where you...were," I manage to choke out.

Kai is suddenly cradling my head in his lap. I can't hear what he's trying to tell me, but I can see the grief already shading his eyes.

I'm not going to survive this.

Something is getting shoved into my mouth and slathered over me in the next instant, but I choke on it and spit it out when it makes it feel like my mouth is about to explode and pain shoots through my head.

Four gazes swing to me as the veins only slither up farther, stealing my breaths and causing me to convulse.

I never even got to tell them why I'd give everything to keep them safe.

Maybe they know.

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## Chapter 12

Agony.

No, not agony.

Torture. That's what the burning sensation feels like when I open my eyes.

Next feeling?

Panic that overrides the pain, because I'm inside a motherfucking box! A wooden one lined with silky fabrics as though that's supposed to excuse the fact someone has locked me in a box.

I don't care how soft that gray silk looks, this is *not* okay. In fact, it's weird and very unsettling. Even by my standards.

Still whole, I bang on the lid, but no one comes to open it.

"Let me out! This isn't funny!"

And just why the hell am I naked?

A black shard of singed fabric is all I find while searching around for the handle that will let me out of this damned thing. There is no handle. At least not on this side of the box. Why does it still smell like something is burning?

My vision is in gray, so obviously it is very dark in here if I'm using my fancy new night vision...that only worked so well in hell...

Flicking the confusing yet useless piece of singed fabric away, I close my eyes and concentrate, reminding myself I'm a badass and I can fight through the pain. That is not as intense as the last time I was awake.

Frustrated, I start looking around the box again.

Why the hell is the back of this box charred?

Am I actually *in* hell?

It hurts when I strain for phantom, but at least this time I can do it.

Immediately, I sit up, and see...dirt under me where there should be a box like everywhere else around me. But it's just lots of dirt and charred pieces of wood around the edges.

Am I in the ground?! Is the ground smoking?!

I drop my head back down and observe my surroundings with a newly informed eye, as I'm forced to turn whole again and endure the endless pain. This box is not just a luxurious box. It's a freaking casket. And I've been buried.

Naked, for some reason.

Possibly in hell.

I'm *really* not happy with this current situation.

I thought turning phantom would instantly heal me like it made me sober. Though the wound is not quite as grave as it seemed earlier—*I must have been a little dramatic, now that I'm really looking at it*—it still hurts.

The veins are gone. The flesh is pulled back together. Only a very large bruise remains as proof I didn't make the whole thing up in my head.

Yet, the pain is still unbearable. It's as though I'm still burning alive from the inside, and it's weakening my ability to turn ghost girl.

With all the concentration I can muster, I focus really hard on going phantom, but I can barely sense them when I feel myself fighting to stay in intangible form. It feels like I'm being pulled in four different directions at once.

I zap myself seven feet into the air—*calculating an extra foot for human error in depth since I can't see*—and fall the extra *two* feet back to the ground, landing in a crumple as a real girl who can feel that shit.

They buried me a foot short. Dicks.

I can't even go phantom again when I try.

Oh damn. If I can't go phantom and zap myself all the way back to them, then how the hell am I going to find them? It's not as though they've ever *walked* home.

Looking around, I note that it is a very familiar cemetery.

Then, of course, my eyes dart to the headstone to see how they've endeared their fearless, selfless, wonderful, doting guardian, though they never helped determine her virginal status.

No name.

The stone simply reads, "*Comoara Trădătoare.*"

There's also a bed of quickly wilting roses I'm sitting in. I don't feel a single thorn.

It reminds of the roses they showered onto those women as a gift to bring them into the folds. They always took care to remove the thorns. I found it so thoughtful. It was one of those things that just reeled me in that much more.

Now that I've apparently died—*again*—one of those assholes finally got me my damn roses. Whichever one it was, they're my new favorite. I don't even care if it's Jude; this one is a win.

"Lovely," I say to myself, grinning at the heaps of roses surrounding me, even though the ones under me smell like they're burning.

Lush, luxurious, red...and faded red/pink. And dried and dead beneath.

For an entire moment, I'm distracted from my pain as I bask in my roses, then bewildered by their varying degrees of decay.

Just how long have I been dead?

It surely took a while to get such an ornate gravestone, though they certainly could have put a little more thought into the inscription I was supposed to be left with for all time.

Where are my awesome quotes? Not even any dates to show my very short time as this version of me. Just that damn *treacherous treasure* crap that is certainly not a sweet term of endearment.

I'll get mad at them later.

The pain will be distracted no longer.

Staggering to my feet, I look around, confused. How do I find my way home in this mess?

I manage to walk, despite the pain, focusing on the guys, thinking of everything about them. It seems to lessen the pain.

Two people stumble over themselves, gaping at me like they've been traumatized.

"It's just a naked body," I tell them with a bitter smile as I flip them off and keep hobbling along.

Dying apparently makes me very cranky. Especially when I come back whole and struggle to cling the form I once despised.

I tell ya, there's just no way to make me happy right now.

I can't even conjure some clothes for myself. And somehow I'm still dirty even though I did go phantom.

"Sheesh, someone get me a cheese plate to go with my *whine*."

Yeah, my recycled-yet-slightly-altered bad pun doesn't even cheer me up.

The back alley I turn down doesn't look promising. The guys are in a much nicer area.

The three guys who swing their gazes up in shock and very alarming delight has me looking over my shoulder as I pass them.

They're definitely about to piss me off.

Predictably, they cut off my exit and surround me, all of them leering.

“What do we have here?” Mr. Cliché asks from behind me.

“You have a very naked girl who just dug out of her grave—figuratively speaking on the *digging* portion. If I’m a zombie, you idiots will be the first I infect,” I tell them flatly. My gaze deliberately dips to one’s crotch. “And depending on your intent, the bite wound could be vicious.”

The one in front of me looks hesitant now, as though he’s not sure if he wants to do terrible things to a girl who might just be crazy enough to bite away his manhood.

I’ll do far worse, but they’re human and don’t know that. Yet.

“I’m in a lot of pain, and I’m a little lost right now. I’m almost suspicious it’s because I’ve been away from my four very ungrateful boyfriends for too long. Care to hurry up and exercise your free will so I can decide if I’m going to kill you or not?” I ask with an impatient smile.

The one in front of me turns and runs when I smirk at him. When I flick my gaze to the right, the guy there sees something in my eyes I’m apparently missing.

Or maybe it’s the fact the concrete under my feet seems to be sizzling and burning away without fire the longer I stand here. That’s rather curious.

It makes me look back on everything that’s been going on since I woke and consider all the burning smells.

He runs as well, while the one behind me jerks me back by my hair and calls them a string of very emasculating names.

My lips tense when the fella jerks me back harder, trying to force me to the ground. But he cries out in pain before I even do anything to him.

“I think that’s enough free will for the day,” I say before reaching back and grabbing his hand, yanking it away before throwing him against the wall with it.

His eyes widen as I stalk toward him, and I grin as he starts convulsing.

A sick feeling lands in the pit of my stomach, and I blink back, staring at the man who is nothing more than a pile of ash now.

What the actual hell just happened?

Cursing, I turn and start walking again. For whatever reason, I just enjoyed killing him way too much, and I didn't even particularly mean to kill him. I'm not even sure how it happened so fast. One second he was there, and the next he was ash.

Sure, he needed to die. He's not exactly going to be missed from humanity, but killing has always been an indifference of sorts—in the short time I've had the ability. I neither like nor dislike it.

I'm going to choke those bastards for burying me if the distance has made me someone who enjoys killing.

I'm not sure how the two are linked, but all my instincts point to those four assholes.

Sighing, I turn around. Then brighten.

Harold.

I know where that damn pawn shop is.

Hobbling, I ignore the indignant gasps and the four fender-benders I cause as I cross the street and hurriedly move toward the pawn shop.

Any time I stop for too long, the concrete starts burning again. This is new.

Even the casket was burned all the way through in the back where I was touching it. I assumed that meant I was in hell.

Is this a side effect of dying? Or has this been something I never experimented with?

When I pull Harold's door open, I hold on too long, and the handle burns off and turns to ash in my hands.



He's immediately in front of me, the tip of a sword pressed to my neck.

"Who the hell are you?" he growls, even as my feet start burning through his store's floor.

That tip draws closer, pressing into my neck. My last experience with a blade has me freezing in fear for a second.

"If I don't run in place or something, I'll keep burning a hole through your floor."

He looks so puzzled about the words I choose to use when a sword is pressed to my neck. I'm a little confused by my own thought process.

"I realize we've never been properly introduced, and I'm afraid to shake your hand at the moment, but if my quad doesn't come to me soon, I'm afraid I might die again. And I *just* got myself out of a very depressing grave."

He pulls the sword back, still looking terribly confused, and I hiss out a breath while jogging in place, stopping the burning.

His eyes dip to my breasts, given the fact the running-in-place has given them some bounce, but they come back up quickly.

"Sorry," I tell him, not sorry at all, "but you're quite literally the only person I know outside of them. And Lake. But Lake is dead now, because—"

"Who the fuck are you?" he asks on a rasp.

"I still haven't quite figured that part out yet," I tell him, only adding to his confusion. "But I do need your help, Harold."

The sound of my voice is a little off, and it comes out with quite the enchanting echo. He sneezes then glares at me.

"No need in trying to force me. This is neutral ground. No one from hell or anywhere else is allowed to force anything on neutral ground."

“The only thing I’m trying to force is my other form, so that I can quit running and trying not to burn the ground. No such luck. I need my guys. I think. I’m not sure, but I think. Please. The Kincaids.”

The name has his entire demeanor changing. I’m going to ask them what’s up with this weird name and why they’re pretending to be brothers. After I bitch about my simplistic gravestone.

“You’re picking the wrong fight right now,” he tells me, his eyes narrowing.

“Oh, I’ll be picking a fight about that damn pathetic excuse for a headstone and the fact it took me dying to get roses. But first I need to hug them or something, so call them.”

He looks wary. Understandably. He doesn’t know me, and strangers are hard to trust.

“Call them and tell them one sentence, and I swear they’ll want to see me,” I assure him.

He points that sword at me. “If this is a trap for them, it’ll do you no good. This place has been sanctioned. No deaths can happen here.”

I still haven’t figured out why a pawn shop is an ideal location for sanctuary. Nor do I particularly care.

“If I don’t find them soon, I can assure you my death will happen right here,” I go on. “Just do it. I’m going to walk around so I can quit all this bobbing up and down.”

He huffs like he’s not sure what exactly to make of me.

So I give him the one line that always seems to help an older guy along with decision-making with a younger girl. “What would you want someone to do if it was your daughter standing before them as I’m standing before you now?” I ask with as much emotion in my tone as possible to sell it.

I’m jogging and not standing, but pointing that out just sounds weird, and it’s not the way they say it in the movies.

*Movies, please don't fail me this time.*

He sighs as he grabs his phone.

He's already dialing someone when he says, "I'll kill you if you make me regret this."

I give him the winning words, and start perusing his store as he dials three different people, cursing them for not answering. I strain to listen, making sure he's not calling someone else to come take away the crazy naked girl burning holes in his shop floor.

"Yeah?" a hoarse voice asks, sounding very unhappy to be answering the phone. The word is so gravelly, I'm not sure whose voice it is.

"Got a pretty little naked girl here looking for you," Harold tells him.

Hmm...that might work too.

"Don't give a fuck," the familiar voice of Gage says with a little more definition in his tone.

Harold glances over at me, and I give him the get-on-with-it look.

"*Comoara trădătoare*, is what she says—"

His words are cut off, when Gage is suddenly in the room and throwing him up against the wall with his hand clutching Harold's throat. Harold's eyes widen in horror, as the phone slips from his hand and he struggles to pull Gage's hand away.

"Where'd you hear that phrase?" he growls, putting his face right in front of Harold.

"From the *treacherous treasure* herself, of course," I drawl, wiggling my fingers at him.

Harold collapses in a heap as he heaves for air, while Gage turns a black-eyed murderous glare on me, his lip snarling as he moves toward me in a less-than-ideal manner.

He looks pissed instead of apologetic for having buried me.

In a blink, his hand is suddenly on my throat as he tosses me against the wall and starts strangling me. “Who the fuck are you?” he snaps.

I shove his chest so hard he’s launched across the room, hitting the wall with so much force that he bounces to the ground beside Harold.

Harold grabs his abandoned sword, racing toward me, but a renewed sense of energy is swirling through me after having felt Gage’s touch. I sling him across the room without even touching him.

That sword clatters across the ground, and Gage grabs it, his eyes on me as he slowly stands, weapon in hand.

“Have you lost your damn mind?” I shout. “How long did I have to be dead before you assholes forgot me?!”

I see just a spark of hesitation.

“You have a handful of seconds to drop that sword before I sling you like sleeping Harold,” I warn him, gesturing at Harold, who is unconscious. “I would rather be hanging on the side of a mountain or plummeting from a fiery lake than be so near a sword. Neither of the first two ever actually killed me. And I hate waking up trapped in boxes now too, by the way. Quit piling on.”

The sword clatters to the ground, and he staggers back like he’s seeing a ghost. Speaking of...

I change to phantom form easier, but it’s still a strain to hold it. Sensing them still proves difficult as well.

“Where’d she go?” Harold groans from the floor, looking around.

Gage continues to stare at me with a stupefied expression. “Keyla?” he asks as though he’s scared to say the fake name aloud.

“I already told Jude I desperately need a new, more badass name. Now I’m certain. Not even Keyla could have just climbed out of a grave without freaking out.”

The second I go whole, Gage is suddenly blurring to me again, and just as I'm about to defend myself, I stop. Because his lips land on mine, and he pulls me to him in a crushing embrace as he kisses me stupid.

"I've been alive too long," Harold grumbles from somewhere nearby.

Gage's hold is a little painful against my still bruised and battered body, and I break the kiss. But he immediately starts kissing me harder, even as the wall behind us starts to catch fire.

A loud *whooshing* mixed with something high pitched forces us to break apart as Harold goes to using a fire extinguisher on us and the wall. An alarm wails over our heads as though we can't see the fire and need to be squealed at by the infernal contraption.

Still crabby.

"What the fuck?" Gage roars.

"She's going to burn the whole place down. Get her the hell out of here."

Gage snatches me at the waist, and we're gone in a dizzying instant.

His lips are back on mine in the next, and we're backing up against a familiar feeling kitchen island. That also starts burning against my skin.

He rips me away from it, staring at it like he's confused, and I leap onto him, since his clothes are already falling into ashy heaps. The rest of him is clearly fireproof, which is the important part.

Then again, I never questioned if I could hurt him. It's like I knew I couldn't.

"What's going on?" he asks on a rasp whisper, even as I cling to him like a spider monkey. "Am I mad?"

“Mad like crazy or mad like angry? Because I was thinking a little of both, since you threw me against a wall. What the actual hell?”

My legs tighten around his waist, and my arms tighten around his neck, as he reaches up and cups both sides of my face.

“You’re fucking dead,” he finally says, as though he’s trying to convince both of us of this. “And never recycled.”

I push away from his hands and start rubbing my cheek against his like a cat starving for affection, because the pain seems to lessen the longer he’s touching me, or maybe he’s just that distracting.

“I gathered as much when I woke up in a damn coffin,” I tell him, still rather unhappy about that. “You could have at least buried me in the backyard so I could find my way home. Or just let me keep the west wing of the house.”

He laughs a little too wildly, and I pull back as he starts running a hand through his hair. I’m clinging to him without any help, because his hands are no longer touching me.

“I’ve gone crazy. I’ve reached a state of imbalance, and I’ve officially gone as mad as we all worried we’d become.”

“I’m very confused, at the moment,” I tell him, looking around to see the house is a little trashed.

Furniture is flipped over. Windows are broken. It looks like they’ve stopped giving a damn about how pretty their home is. It’s always been kept so clean and almost regal.

Now it looks like they’ve been fighting so hard to stay alive in my absence. How many people have tried to kill them?

“Where are the others?” I ask, worrying about him being alone when I’m possibly too weak to defend him.

“What the fucking hell?” Ezekiel’s voice has me snapping my gaze over, and I grin broadly at the man gaping at me.

“You see her too?” Gage asks, his hysterical laughter tapering off as his hands slide around me at last, helping me hold myself up.

“What is she?” Ezekiel asks, glaring at Gage. “What the hell have you done?”

Gage’s grin slowly spreads. “It’s really her,” he finally says, then looks at me again like he’s finally convinced.

“Yes, it’s me. And just because you’re finally acting happy to see me, that doesn’t mean any of you are off the hook for that terribly simple headstone. Where were my damn quotes? I’ve said some very memorable and insightful things that should be shared with the world.”

Something crashes to the ground, and I look over as a grin starts to spread over Ezekiel’s face, even as he slumps against a table. But it’s seeing Kai gripping the edge of the same table that has me doing a double-take. How long has he been there? And why do they all seem *that* surprised to see me?

I mean, we met *while* I was a spirit who’d somehow clawed her way back into existence. It shouldn’t be that hard to believe I’m back again.

A vase lays broken on the ground before them, one that used to don that table, and dead flowers are spilling from it without a drop of water.

“Exactly how long have I been dead?” I decide to ask.

“Just over a month,” Gage says reverently, his eyes raking over my face as I turn to look at a mirror.

My hair is messy for the first time ever, since I never fixed it in phantom form. As a person who hates a messy appearance, it’s rather irksome, but there are far more important things to deal with at the moment.

Besides, I don’t look like a rotting corpse, so I’ll consider it a win.

“I look damn good for a dead girl no matter what form I’m in,” I say aloud, trying to lighten this terribly stuffy air.

“It’s really her,” Kai says, a hesitant grin starting to form.

My body washes over with tingles as the three of them so close starts to push that pain much, *much* deeper down, almost extinguishing it completely. It’s such a different sort of pain than I’ve ever felt, nothing like the pull of being away from them too long leaves me with.

As the pain ebbs, the reality of the situation slowly starts to sink in.

Gage lets me down when I start wriggling, and I test my theory. The floor doesn’t start burning under me. I knew it was linked to all of them, just like the horrible pain.

They weren’t together, and I couldn’t sense them like usual. I think them being separated from *each other* was what was making me hurt and tearing my heart in four different directions.

How long have they been apart?

Gage jogs off, and I hear him in the kitchen as the other two just silently gawk at me. Ezekiel even startles back a step when I start toward him.

Determined, I strut right up to him anyway, and throw my arms around him. “Either hug me back, or I swear I’ll never let you sleep peacefully again,” I threaten when he remains still in my grip.

In the next instant, two strong arms almost squeeze me too hard, and a shuddering breath snakes out of him as he trembles just slightly.

I pat his chest, and struggle to get free, but he finally lets me go to Kai.

Kai, unlike Ezekiel, is on me before I can reach him, his hand roughly digging into my hair as he kisses me so hard I feel the bruising power of his relief.

My arms slide around his neck, returning the kiss, as Ezekiel presses against my back again, his lips moving to my neck.



“It’s definitely her,” Kai groans against my lips before tearing his away as he steps back and adjusts his very happy-to-see me erection.

Ezekiel turns me, his lips finding mine just as hungrily. Now *this* is the reception I expected the first time I came into their lives as a real girl.

Much better than my last experience.

His hands travel down my bare body, pulling closer as the kiss heats. I almost don’t hear Gage talking on his phone in such a quiet voice.

“Just get back. I can’t...I just can’t explain right now. Get back.”

Breaking the kiss with Ezekiel is a little hard to do, now that we’re back to that survival and sex thing being linked. I’m so relieved to be alive that I want to feel it, but I first need to set some things straight before they start teasing me again.

Gage comes jogging back in, tugging on a pair of track pants as his no-longer-black eyes rake over me like he can’t look his fill.

“I’m assuming that was Jude?” I ask, and he nods once.

“Good. While we’re waiting on him to come remove the last bit of pain plaguing me, I have something very important to tell you.”

They all step in closer. I found it so sweet when I first found all those beautiful roses with no thorns. I didn’t have all the details then.

“I died saving you assholes, and you repay me by putting me in a hole that far away from you?!” I snap, watching as their eyes widen and their grins curve up. “Seriously? *That’s* all you could come up with on my headstone? And for a solid month, the only thing you lazy asses brought me was roses?”

They all dart a gaze behind me, just as I hear Jude’s familiar voice wash over me with surprise and awe.

“It’s her.”

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## Chapter 13

I whirl around, tempted to go to him, but not emotionally capable of dealing with rejection at this very trying moment.

“Yes,” I say with a bitter smile. “Apparently I’m too stubborn for *Death* to deal with properly.”

I give him a pointed look, hoping he gets the little pun.

I expect a snappy comeback or some hostile suspicion. What I don’t expect is for him to be across the room in a blur of motion.

His lips crash against mine for the first time, and it’s like a storm pulses in my body. All the pain is gone at last, and warmth travels up through me, as though he finally just sealed the last piece of something into place and made me truly whole.

I moan into his mouth as he grips me closer, his hands moving all over me like he doesn’t know what he wants to touch the most.

I’m beyond drugged and unable to pull back, as I clutch him closer, kissing him so hard that my lips start to hurt. I knew it’d be violent with him. Just as it is with all of them.

It makes the times they’re soft so much more special.

When he breaks the kiss, he’s panting, his entire body shaking against me as his breaths rattle in his chest.

“Now *that* is how you welcome a girl back from the dead,” I say on a shuddering breath. “Congratulations. You’re finally my favorite again.”

They all look torn between laughing and murdering someone.

Jude forces himself to release me and take a few steps back, his body visibly straining with the effort it takes. I’m a

little lightheaded, if I'm being honest.

It really does feel like the final piece has clicked into place. I feel so much stronger now.

I go phantom with ease and zap around the house several times before landing back in front of them with a grin on my lips.

“Much better. Apparently the four of you still make me stronger.”

They don't look quite as amused as I do.

“Great,” I groan. “What now? What have I missed in the month I've been dead that has put all of you in such a terrible mood?” I ask on an exasperated sigh.

Given the condition of the house, I've missed a lot.

“Not much,” Ezekiel says, clearing his throat. “No one has tried to kill us since Jude killed Lake. Only the Devil's highest appointed generals should have been able to kill an escort. It seemed to send a message.”

I look around the house, seeing all of it torn to pieces. Hell, even the chandeliers look like they're warped.

“Then why does it look like a war raged on in here?” I ask, bringing my gaze back down.

“You were fucking dead,” Gage says again, coming closer as though he has to touch me after saying those words. “We broke laws, hijacked royal escorts, and broke into hell numerous times to find out what happened to you. Not recycled. Not in hell's throat. Simply fucking dead.”

His hand moves to my cheek, cupping it.

Kai moves forward, reaching his hand out for me. I take it and let him pull me away from Gage and into his arms.

“But what happened to the house?” I ask him, since Gage didn't answer.

“You fucking died,” Kai says, and this time...I get it.

With a more educated eye, I look around again, seeing the distress and anger that went into destroying this room. Beyond us is the kitchen in the same disarray, but I notice the dents in the walls and pans, the fury that went into all that destruction.

This wasn't a struggle to survive. This was a grieving tantrum.

They grieved me?

"Oh," I say on a quiet breath. "Didn't realize you four liked me quite that much," I add even quieter, rather shocked, really.

Kai's finger slips under my chin as he glares down at me. Leave it to Kai to act like it's my fault they buried me so far away.

"I might have healed faster if you'd left me in my damn room instead of tossing me out like yesterday's virgin girlfriend," I state primly.

He grips my shoulders as his eyes harden. I don't tell him it actually kind of hurts. My entire body is actually a little achy, if I'm being honest.

One type of soul-burning pain has been replaced with an achy, uncomfortable, and certainly untimely sort of pain.

"You. Were. Fucking. Dead," he says, punctuating each word very unnecessarily loud.

I'm not sure why he's insisting on saying that. I said I get it.

"That doesn't explain why you buried me instead of leaving me in my room," I point out, ignoring the growing ache spreading out from my stomach. "It's not like any of you ever used my room before I took it, so it's not putting you out."

Kai gives me the neck-wringing look before his lips are on mine again, almost punishing me for trying to make sense of their rambles.

As much as I want to keep kissing him, I can't. My head drops to stare at the subtly expanding bruise on my waist, and I slightly curse. I might finally get my virginity taken if I wasn't in too much physical duress to do it.

"Shit," Kai says, almost as though he's just noticing the fact the stab wound isn't there, but it's still leaving a mark.

In the next breath, he's lifting me and cradling me to him, and I give him an incredulous look. "I'm not quite that helpless. I can still stand. Just maybe don't grip me so hard," I tell him, expecting a grimace and an apology. Not an exasperated eye roll. Which is what I get.

He sits down, still holding me like I'm glass, and cradles me to him like I'm precious. To be honest, it's freaking me out.

"Who are you and where is Kai?" I ask him, moving my hand up his chest a little hesitantly.

The really angry glare he gives me can't be duplicated by anyone other than Jude. So I realize it's actually him. And he's being nice. It's still freaking me out.

"I can't be satisfied," I say on a sigh, annoyed with my own self.

Nobody even bothers to ask what that means. It's as though they know it's a private conversation with myself. It's like they *get* me. Finally.

Sort of.

They're still completely disregarding my list of expectancies.

Ezekiel crouches in front of me, his finger tracing over the bruise, and I wince while painfully swallowing back the weak little cry I almost give up from such a little touch that shouldn't hurt so badly.

"Lucifer's poison did this to you," Ezekiel says while grinding his jaw. "Lake was armed with it either by him, or by

her father. She was part of a group preparing to overthrow hell, though the facts on that are still murky,” he adds.

“But she was also a royal escort—”

“No, royal escorts wear bags over their heads. I’ve seen what they look like without them,” I point out, then smile bitterly. “She definitely didn’t have to wear a bag.”

“In hell, she’s hideous. Topside...you saw. The balance was grotesque in one place, exquisite in another,” Gage goes on, cracking his neck.

“Wait, you mean those scarred, charred, and half human guards...she looked like one of them? They made them bag their heads because the Devil thought they were too *stomach-curdling* for him to have to see so often.”

Frowning, I try to remember exactly how I know that last part. Did Lucifer say something about it?

“The point is,” Gage goes on, drawing me out of my reverie, “she worked for both. She might have done it for the rebellion because Lucifer needs us. She might have done it for Lucifer to spare herself from the culling going on. So we don’t know which one wants us dead, and which one wants us on their side. But in the past month since Jude killed her, everyone has gone silent. Not even Harold has called me until today. We’ve not even been charged with bringing in souls.”

“But why would—” My words cut off when I feel something coming, and I go phantom in the next instant.

I also put on the first outfit that comes to mind, like I’m shielding my naked form before someone sees me and pisses off the guys. They like me, so that means they’ll be jealous, right?

Seems important they be jealous, though I’m not sure why.

I shake my head, blaming the fact I’m still a little poisoned for my even more random-than-usual thought process. I feel so clean now at least.

“She’s back, isn’t she?” a familiar voice asks from behind me somewhere.

Kai leaps up, and I end up on the chair alone as he passes through me and turns around, taking a defensive stance.

I poke my head through the chair, seeing Lamar standing there and looking overly excited. Jude swirls a sword in his hand, coming to stand a little in front of my head like he’s protecting me.

“I thought so,” Lamar says as he takes them in. “We heard of a botched attack on one of you in New Orleans last month. Then I lost the feel of her,” he goes on, stepping closer. “Then I felt her again, and knew this time without a doubt it was her. She feels weakened, though.”

Jude takes a step toward him, and Lamar frowns at him like he’s offended for some reason.

“I’m not sure what’s going on right now,” he says, sounding genuinely frustrated. “I understand she somehow resurrected you as mortals and gifted you a chance to live with a balance that defies all laws. She never was much of one for the rules, and she broke them quite frequently. But why keep up the charade now that you’ve clearly been outed?”

“Is he talking about me? I think he’s confused,” I tell the guys, moving closer to Kai, even though the wound is starting to drain me now that the adrenaline is wearing off.

“She’ll heal faster in hell,” Lamar goes on. “You know it. They’ll never know I gave you passage, and you can continue to keep your secret. I won’t tell them, if she really doesn’t want them to know. But why keep it a secret from me?” Lamar asks, actually sounding a little hurt. “Especially when she’s spent over a month healing from whatever it is she could have healed immediately from with my help.”

“Anyone have a clue why he sounds betrayed?” I stage-whisper.

“No,” Kai says from beside me, confusion written all over his face.



Lamar looks between the four of them, who are all staring at him like he's just tipped over the edge of the weirdo cliff.

Lamar has a moment of confusion cross his features when he sees it written all over theirs. I'm not sure if he's mimicking subconsciously, or if he's genuinely confused by their confusion.

It's all really *confusing*, if you want my opinion.

Then his eyes widen as though he's just realized something as he takes a shaky step back.

"You truly have no fucking clue who I am, do you?"

"Yes..." Gage's drawl is exaggerated, as though he's talking to a crazy person. "Your Manella's boyfriend."

"Only because the royals don't believe in marriage of any kind," he feels the need to defend. "But at least you said boyfriend instead of lover," he goes on.

*Noted.*

"That's all you know me as? You're not just playing some game?" Lamar asks as though this is a very crucial question.

The quad exchanges a look of confusion, and Lamar takes a step back. "Son of a bitch. How the hell did she do that?"

"He's not making a damn bit of sense," Ezekiel points out.

"Thank you," I groan. "I was worried that I'm just stupid."

"Is that how you have a balance now?" Lamar says as though he just thought of something that makes him a genius.

"I'm about to go whole and shake him down for answers that make sense if someone else doesn't do it for me," I say on a sigh.

Ezekiel is grabbing Lamar in the next instant, but Lamar simply winks, and we're suddenly in a windowless room full of elegant décor.

"And we're in hell," I say on a sigh. "Again."

But the pain vanishes, and I make the phantom shirt disappear to reveal the bruise is finally gone.

“She’s better, isn’t she?” Lamar asks, and I quickly make my shirt reappear and dart a gaze up at him.

He’s not looking at me. *Whew*. Thought he could see me.

His eyes are on the four guys who are all slowly looking away as though they were studying the healed injury as well.

“Feeling much, *much* better,” I tell them. “Don’t kill him yet,” I add to Ezekiel, whose lips twitch as he takes a step back and releases Lamar.

“She just told you not to kill me yet, didn’t she?” Lamar asks with an excited grin.

“You heard her?” Jude growls, as though Lamar has committed a grave offense.

In the next instant, Kai is behind him, a sword pressed to the base of his neck.

“Either you’re being very cruel right now, Paca, or they’re not the only ones who lost their memories. Which means everything I just think I figured out will be null and void, and you might very damn well let them kill me. Which means I’m an idiot for bringing you all here without alerting anyone.”

He clears his throat.

“A big, dumb idiot,” he says nervously as he looks around, waiting for someone to crack a grin and tell him we’re all kidding.

No grins are cracked.

“I can’t hear her. I just know that’s something she’d say if she was toying with me. But I’m starting to think she genuinely has no clue who I am. But why would she save me in that damn prison if she didn’t know me? She knows my role with spirits and—”

“She doesn’t know your role with spirits, but I’m really intrigued, because I’d also like to know,” Jude tells him,

smiling wickedly as Kai steps a little closer with that sword, bearing in a bit, just barely not breaking the skin.

“You should sharpen your blades some time,” I tell him. “Apparently you’ve all gotten volatile and lazy this past month when I wasn’t around to make you awesome.”

Ezekiel blows out a harsh breath, as though he’s silently imploring me to shut the hell up.

“I think it’s time I explain a little better,” Lamar says a little less confidently, keeping his hands raised to show he’s no threat. But I’ve seen a lot of power roll out of him.

He could easily knock them away long enough to disappear. Or possibly kill one.

That has me on high alert as I cross my arms over my chest and pay attention to his every movement. Lake taught me to never be caught off guard again.

No wonder the guys are so paranoid. Now I finally get it. You just can’t trust people associated with hell. Who knew?

I never trusted her, of course, but they spent centuries trusting her—even caring for her.

I’m so glad she’s dead.

“You see, we worked really hard to keep you out of the trials, because—”

“It was you?” Kai growls, at the same time I say, “That’s a terribly stupid way for him to start this explanation.”

Jude snorts, then looks really angry when he has to fight a grin while he’s trying to be really pissed off. It results in him glaring at me as he finally straightens his face.

“For a reason!” Lamar shouts.

Kai barely eases back.

“For a reason,” Lamar says again, swallowing thickly.

Then he disappears, and we whirl around as he lands on his desk, sitting comfortably.

“I’m afraid I’ll need some distance from you four until Paca remembers me.”

“Paca is so not the badass name I was looking for,” I tell them. “I’m a Xena, or Phoenix...something like that.”

Kai groans as he glares over at me.

“She’s consistently saying inappropriate things at the worst possible times, which debunks the very serious nature of the situations around. Am I right?” Lamar asks them. “Is she the same?”

“I think he can hear her,” Ezekiel decides.

“No!” Lamar shouts when they start to advance on him. He holds his hands up defensively, then adds, “I can kill you, since you’re lacking a lot of information about your power, it seems, but you can’t kill me. However, I can swear I won’t touch you at all. She’d kill me if I did.”

“That last part actually made sense to me, so that’s improvement,” I tell them.

“She loves hard,” he goes on. “Very hard,” he adds, smiling like he’s proud of that. “She’s the most jealous person you’ll ever find.”

That makes a few of them smirk.

“I’m not *that* bad,” I remind them.

“She’ll go to the ends of the earth to save you four. And she’ll always be serious when it counts. Because while she distracts you from the intensity of the situation, she’s cataloguing each new piece of information, filing it away, recording it for later, then she puts it all together with the most reasonable way to approach a situation. Though to us, we often find it maddening or just crazy. But we don’t have the same ability to reason as she does.”

“He was doing good until the end,” I say, convinced he’s kissing my ass because he thinks I’m running this show. It’s rather empowering, if I do say so myself.

“Let him live. I’m healed, so take me home and give me many orgasms,” I state like I’m the queen and they must do my bidding.

Kai snorts, reminding me that’s not really the way this relationship works.

Lamar groans, probably because he has no idea what their seemingly random facial tics and amused or disgruntled sounds are in response to.

“The point is, I know her. She’s actually my best friend,” Lamar adds.

I perk right up at that confession. I’ve never been someone’s best friend before. The novelty of it is quite intriguing in itself.

The others aren’t quite as impressed as I am.

“Fine, let’s start with the basics. You four don’t even know who you are, do you?” Lamar asks.

“The Four Horsemen,” I state automatically, acting as though I’ll win a prize if I say it first, even though I can’t be heard by him.

“No,” Ezekiel says, rolling his eyes at me.

Kai presses himself against my back, giving me those tingles I can feel again now that *all* the pain is gone.

“I figured it’d be obvious by now, but you’re the Four Horsemen,” Lamar tells them.

I fist pump the air, and my outfit turns into the sexy Devil Halloween costume just to bring some rather insensitive humor to the moment, as I start pointing at them one by one.

“See? I knew it! And I was right. It’s actually a little anticlimactic because of how glaringly obvious it’s been all this time,” I say, feeling a little deflated by the end.

The quick burst of adrenaline burns out from the lack of suspense that led into it.

“But they died during a collision of the two kingdoms or something,” Gage states as though he’s reminding him of that.

“Of course they died,” Lamar agrees. “But I’m not cleared for the true details as to how you were killed.”

“They couldn’t be recycled because they were too imbalanced or something,” Gage goes on, dealing with the partial bits of information they’ve collected about hell over the years.

“Recycling doesn’t work this way. We would have been spit out into hell’s throat again for a new form. Not reborn topside,” Ezekiel is quick to add.

“They were imbalanced, and it made sense to believe that death was permanent. Recycling certainly does *not* end up with a new birth. Yet here you are,” Lamar goes on, gesturing at them. “New bodies. New faces. No doubt hand-selected by her. I’m almost positive that’s why you’re built with bodies and faces that perfect.”

I grin, liking Lamar a little more now, as I wink at the guys.

“He’s saying you’re pretty because I’m shallow.” I rock backwards on my heels, clasping my hands in front of me. “You’re welcome,” I add.

I even sit down in a chair like a dainty little girl in my devilish attire.

“You’re saying we died, but she brought us back as mortals, handpicked how we’d come back, *and* somehow managed to offer us immortality without us having to turn our souls over to hell and risk a harsher internal balance,” Kai states like Lamar has just crossed a line of nonsense.

I understand none of this, but I keep listening in, weaving together what I can, and quietly threading my own conclusion one piece at a time.

“She kept history from repeating itself. Made you mentally stronger this way. But I don’t know how she did it. It’s as

though your souls were stolen, swiped clean, restrung with the first breath of life, and now you're all back together again. I'm not even sure how you found each other if you didn't know all this," Lamar goes on.

"The bond drew us together," Jude tells him, frowning. "Like all quads."

"Certainly not like all quads. You're the first. The rest are all poor-man's copies—a cosmic echo of sorts. There's never been a bond as strong as yours. Trust me. They've been hoping to find your replacements for centuries. Manella hid you, because we both saw the enigmas you were—no deaths, yet pure immortals? Impossible. And only Paca aimed for the impossible."

He clears his throat, his eyes seeming a little misty. "However, we didn't wholly believe you were them, if I'm being honest. It's painful to get one's hopes up. But we liked the hope it offered, so we hid you, pretending as though we were playing Paca's or your game. Lucifer isn't aware of that, of course. But we knew if you wanted in, you'd eventually let us know...but we thought you had your memories."

No one seems to know what to believe. This time, standing on their side of things as someone you aren't sure if you can trust, even though they're begging you to follow them out onto a treacherous ledge as they twist everything you thought you knew into something impossibly possible...I suddenly get it.

I just finally proved myself to them. It took dying to get all four, but at least I didn't stay dead. Again. I doubt Lamar would be willing to go to the same extremes I have.

"Lucifer knows it's you now, though. Surely you realize that," Lamar tells them. "He's waiting on you to come explain yourselves. He all but called you out before the trials. He designed that course to be identical to the course Paca gave Nicholai on the last birthday she got to celebrate with him," he goes on.

I look around at the four of them. “Which one of you is Nicholai?”

“Nicholai?” Jude asks him, sounding as annoyed with him as he sometimes gets with me.

“I...uh...Famine,” Lamar says uneasily.

“Gage,” I whisper softly, remembering the way his eyes lit up when I accused him of actually enjoying the danger and unpredictability that course played with life and death.

Everyone in the room stills.

“I’ve said something that has finally jarred a memory?” Lamar asks hopefully.

“Not one from the life you’re saying we had,” Kai tells him vaguely.

“Look, there’s no way you could have survived that course without remembering those riddles and having a great deal of prior knowledge of hell. Paca was there telling you the riddles and offering hints to the answers when you struggled the first time,” he tells them.

My stomach coils with dread.

I started giving hints by the end...

Ezekiel’s eyes meet mine as though the same thing pops into his mind.

“And the very last riddle alone is enough to squash any remaining doubts,” Lamar continues, not realizing he’s finally gotten us all to take him a little seriously.

I’m not even making jokes right now.

“How do you defeat a never-ending army of hell’s most vicious predators, cast to the belly straight from the throat, when there’s not enough power to kill them all?” Ezekiel says, echoing the question he once asked me.

He actually asked two of the riddles while we were down there like he’d figured the right questions out on his own. His



nightmares also happen to be the worst.

“No,” Lamar says, shaking his head. “How would *Paca* face a never-ending army of hell’s most vicious predators, to the belly straight from the throat, when there’s not enough power to kill them all?” he corrects. “She’s rather vain that way.”

To this, a few snorts sneak out, and I flip them off as they regain their composure quickly.

Lamar grins knowingly. “But the answer is true regardless. She’d set her mind on a solution and faced it as she did absolutely everything in life. Fearlessly.”

A little chill slithers up my spine, and I lose my ability to be inappropriately humorous, and allow for a moment of dread to settle in.

As he warned, I’ve been cataloguing every bit of information, adding it to all of this I’ve just learned. I don’t like the riddle before me, because I hate the answer I’ve concluded.

It simply sounds crazy, and I can’t even bring myself to actually *think* it.

“Tell him I’m terrified of mountainsides, firefalls, and now most definitely swords,” I say on a rasp whisper, causing Jude to noticeably flinch with that newest addition. “Which means he’s wrong. Tell him that. Now. Or I’ll turn whole and tell him myself.”

Ezekiel gives me a puzzled look, but it’s because he can’t hear the thoughts hovering in my mind. The ones I’m forcing to stay back.

“She’s terrified of hanging from mountainsides and firefalls,” Gage says, moving closer to my side.

Lamar gives him a watery grin.

“She actually has some of the most random, irrational fears. It’s the things that actually require bravery that make her serious and fearless. And it’s good she’s not always that way.

The intensity of those moments...the pure, determined, fearless, selfless way she makes the impossible happen...those are the times she made all of you fall in love with her over and over and over again. If she was that way all the time, Hera would lose her title as the world's best seductress, because Paca would be the only one considered irresistible.”

“Sounds like I need to be more serious on occasion then,” I say too quickly, trying too hard to lighten this moment, and finding it to fall flat because I can't even pretend that I'm not terrified of where he's going with this.

“How could she do all this?” Gage asks obliviously. “What do you mean over and over?”

“In all your mortal lives,” he says, smiling grimly. “I'm just realizing she would have taken that gift from you. It was a game to see if you could fall in love in every life, and you always did. All of you fell in love with her, and she fell in love with all of you. It should have been impossible.”

I swallow thickly.

“You'd just finished a mortal life—the five of you always died together.” He clears his throat, smiling tightly. “I'll tell her more when she shows herself to me.”

“To go back and live mortal lives, you have to be royalty or blessed by royalty,” Jude argues.

Kai glances down at me, almost as though he's searching my eyes for something.

“To create an obstacle course in hell's belly just for her current favorite's birthday would also imply royalty,” Lamar states, causing me to freeze.

“What did you just say?” Gage asks, looking at Lamar. “Her current favorite?”

“Her favorite constantly changed. It was a game you five played. It kept things from going stale. But you were always her favorite on your respective birthdays. After all, she was reasonable, as I said.”

Kai's lips tug in a grin.

"This is not a grinning time. You have terrible timing for humor," I tell him, looking back at Lamar.

"She could send you back for mortal lives because she gave you each a piece of her balance and broke every law when she did it. But as I said, she never cared much for rules. In doing so, she made all of you stronger. And she saved your lives back then. Dragged you all from imbalance's insanity and did what had never been done before in accomplishing it. She saved your lives the first time she met you, and you all saved each other over and over. But this last time, she truly died. Or so we all thought. I'm wondering if it was just the bond that managed to pull her together and allow her to defy the impossible once again."

They all just stare at him until they look right at me like they finally understand what's going on.

"He's trying to say I'm the Devil's daughter, isn't he?" I ask them, shaking my head. "But there are only six," I remind them. "Only two of them are girls."

"Yeah, but the twins could count as one," Kai says, as though he's considering it.

"I know they can count as one, but they don't because five would be an imbalance so they have to count as two," I argue, then frown at knowing that since I don't know how I know it, and since it sort of confuses me. Shaking my head, I go on. "Four boys and three girls would still be an imbalance, because there would be seven heirs instead of six, and the gender would then have to be the balance."

"She's right. That would be four boys and three girls even if the twins did count as one," Ezekiel agrees.

Good job.

Though now I'm simply more confused.

"He's my favorite now just because he's got my back," I whisper almost silently. "Like *baby got back* kind of back."

He just shakes his head, cursing as he leans up.

“Did I use it wrong?”

My question goes unanswered as Jude once again huffs. “No one has ever considered the sexes to be a part of the balance before. It’s been four boys and *two* girls for a very long time. Pretty sure they’re *men* and *women* by now,” Jude says in his overly sarcastic tone.

“The sexes and numbers are even. Three females and three males,” Lamar says conversationally, as though he’s simply reminding us of something. “When all heirs are in hell, the twins count as one person—one male—with their yin and yang balance. They only count as two when influencing, since they have two separate dark influences. All the heirs have their own dark influence—hence the seven deadly sins.”

“What?” Jude asks on a breath.

Lamar’s eyes widen, and he tightens his lips. “Only the royal family and closest lovers are to know some of that. There’s a vow of death. You make a deal with the Devil to be allowed so close to the royals and inner knowledge of their balances.”

It’s like he’s reminding us of an oath we took that still binds today, even though we don’t remember taking it.

“He’s all gibberish and nonsense,” I argue, shaking my head emphatically. “I want to go.”

“We can’t go until we find out if he’s lying or not,” Ezekiel states quietly.

“You’re having to convince her she’s Lucifer’s youngest daughter, aren’t you?” Lamar asks, grinning like he’s amused. “I can’t help but wonder what she was thinking when she did all of this. Clearly she planned for a true death to have made this happen. The bond alone couldn’t have accomplished quite this much. You’re the only ones who can see or hear her.”

“Can’t he see I’m trying to talk myself off a ledge here?” I ask them incredulously. “I can’t be Lucifer’s daughter. That

would make me way older than the nineties, first off, and the nineties is the main source of my ingrained information. Not hell politics. You guys are centuries old, which means we would have had to die long before the nineties. He's wrong."

"Why would she be rambling about the nineties if what you're saying is true?" Kai finally asks him.

Lamar's eyes water as though Kai's just asked him something very personal that has made him emotional.

"We can see a lot of the future. The human future, that is. We spent centuries perfecting our nineties slang," the watery-eyed man says very quietly.

"Not quite perfected even after all that," Jude says as he looks back at me, smirking. Then gives his serious face back to Lamar.

"She and I made a pact that we'd go mortal in the nineties. She wanted to be a dancing pop singer, and knew you four would end up her backup dancers or a boy band."

I'm so stunned that I can even recycle my *One Erection* joke.

Lamar continues speaking when no one says anything, and the guys just stare at him like he's lost his damn mind for suggesting such a horrible thing. They'd be an adorable boy band.

"She wanted to read about the scandal later when she had all her memories and her body back, and like always, you'd all sit around basking in how you fell in love again, even though you had no idea who you were in that time. I was going to become a politician, because we both knew Manella would go if I went, and we'd fall in love there. He'd never gone mortal before, but promised me he would in the nineties. It would have been a helluva scandal for us to enjoy upon our return."

"Did he go?" I ask, feeling my heart hurt a little for no really good reason.

"Why would she—"

“Did he go?” I ask louder, talking over Jude, who looks at me like I’m going crazy.

“Did you go?” Kai asks him on a sigh.

Lamar’s jaw trembles and he clears his throat while blinking and looking away. “It didn’t seem right to go without her.”

Deflated, I sit back.

“I believe him,” I say quietly. “I’m the Devil’s daughter with a horribly non-badass name like Paca. Who names hell spawn something that *bubbly*? I’m not bubbly at all.”

“What’s she saying that has all of you looking at me like you want to do harm?” Lamar asks, frowning.

“We’re trying to decide if you’re lying or not. She believes you. It’s not going to be good if you’re fucking with us,” Ezekiel drawls, looking at his nails as though he’s bored.

“Touching her seems to amplify our powers,” Jude goes on, his hand slipping through mine. “Supposedly I’m *Death*.”

Lamar slides off the desk slowly, so as not to make any sudden movements.

“Paca, I know you’re probably overwhelmed if you prevented yourself from remembering all this for whatever reason. But trust me when I say we’ll figure all this out together. You sought me out in hell’s throat. I spent five years convincing myself it was not you I kept feeling, because it was impossible. Then I felt you. Then they said *she*, and I finally knew we’d been right. They were yours and you were back.”

Just feeling their tingles start to surround me helps. Kai and Gage are also touching me. It’s Ezekiel I’m worried about. He’s not touching me, and he looks much too calm for the embodiment of war who got used to peaceful sleep, only to have it ripped away from him for over a month.

He’s the one who might actually kill Lamar before I can decide how I feel about him.

“Lucifer knows. He knew even before I did. I told you that. The trials were just him throwing it in your face that he knew so you’d stop pretending you all weren’t back. He figured it out months ago as his madness continued to lift the closer to hell she got. Manella told me this just after the night Lucifer exonerated me—the night his lucidity completely returned. You know the Devil’s games...I would have told you sooner, but I thought I was playing *your* game, even as it hurt my feelings to be left out.”

Looking betrayed makes a little sense, if we really were besties.

“Is that why he tried killing us?” Jude asks, a lethal, hard edge to his tone as he takes a step away. “Because of him, she was killed a month ago.”

Never mind about Ezekiel. Jude’s the one to worry about now. He’s the one who watched me die, and then kissed me for the first time when I came back because I wasn’t dead.

Very hard man to impress, that one.

“And all along he could have healed her? Did he know she wouldn’t really die?” Gage asks with an eerily calm tone.

Shit. Now he’s the one who might kill him.

“Kai, please just stay behind me. I need some tingles, and Lamar has enough of—”

Before I can finish the sentence, Kai is holding a sword under Lamar’s chin, appearing there in less than an instant. Now *he* really might kill Lamar too. Damn it.

“Move and I’ll do worse than cut you. Answer the questions,” he growls. “Did he kill her just to punish us for not properly playing a game we had no idea we were even playing? A royal fucking escort killed her.”

Lamar glances at him, not moving anything other than his eyes.

“No. There are always rebels in hell. It’s hell, after all. Rebellions spring up like weeds. We’re stifled by the volume

in this particular rebellion, since Lucifer has been decommissioned for so long with your dead girlfriend's father in his ear. At least we assume it's him, due to her involvement in the botched assassination attempt on your lives. You were just caught in the crosshairs. Apparently we're not the only ones who've noticed Paca back. And the Devil's youngest daughter back from a true death and back to reign with her four unstoppable horsemen? I thought the five of you were playing a very dangerous game."

"Rebels. Really? Rebels are trying to kill us and not Lucifer? I don't know what to believe," I grumble. "His timing is just terribly suspicious."

They all give me a look, as though they're exasperated with me for saying that, considering I heard that from them quite a lot when I first popped up, and I held it against them.

"I do believe I'm the Devil's daughter, though. Oh, and in case this was the only thing still holding you back, it's become abundantly clear I'm most definitely, without a doubt, unquestionably *not* a virgin."

Kai turns and tosses the sword down like he's frustrated, while Jude just huffs.

"On a related note, my vagina *is* most decidedly evil, so you win that argument after all," I add.

"For fuck's sake, Paca!" Kai gripes, saying the new name with ease like it's perfectly natural. "Just take this seriously for a damn second. Do you have any idea what he's saying?!"

I just stare at him, feeling my heart beat a little in my intangible chest. Something about him saying this apparent unbadass name of mine feels like a memory, even though there's no real memory accompanying it.

He's breathing heavily, his eyes hooded a little as he stares at me like he's thinking the same thing. His eyes flick to my lips, and Lamar sighs loudly.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same. The air in here just got considerably warmer. You four were always



pissed or serious when you used her nickname. And she always loved it when you did. She loved angry sex,” Lamar says, smirking.

“I’m really curious about seeing if that’s a real thing,” I tell Kai, gesturing toward the door like it’s an invitation.

He groans before turning his back on me and cursing.

“Wait, Paca is a nickname?” I ask, snapping out of my trance as I look back over.

Jude repeats the question aloud to Lamar, and Lamar nods, eyebrows furrowing.

“Yes. And not *your* nickname for her. Everyone called her Paca. But the rest of the time you all called her various things. Mostly, however, the four of you seemed to call her one phrase over and over in each life. You used it as a caution in every language you ever learned as mortals. Then you used it when you returned home to hell as a term of endearment.”

“What was it?” I ask immediately, curious what they called me back when they apparently loved me.

Me. The daughter of the Devil.

Ezekiel repeats my question so Lamar can hear it.

“The last language was Romanian, I think, because you’d just come back from mortal lives there before...” Lamar lets his words trail off.

“Before we were killed,” Kai supplies.

Lamar nods, the life drifting from his eyes a little as he gets distant. With a more informed eye, I almost see a reluctance in his gaze to revisit this memory. As though it’s painful for him. *My death* was painful for him.

“Romanian?” Jude asks, stepping closer as he visibly tenses.

“Yes,” Lamar says with a shrug. “*Comoara trădătoare*,” he says, causing the air to get sucked from the room. “I think

that's roughly the Romanian translation for *treacherous treasure*. You always called her that in numerous languages."

Lamar just stares at us as we all remain still and silent. Well, he's not staring at *me*.

"You remember?" Lamar asks, once again sounding hopeful when he reads their expressions wrong.

"No," Ezekiel says shakily.

"Suddenly that headstone sounds much more endearing than it did a few hours ago," I tell them quietly. "I almost forgive you for its simplicity now. *Almost*."

"If you don't remember, then why is everyone reacting to that odd endearment?" Lamar asks.

"Because we just realized we're living a rerun from the longest running show in history, and we have no idea what happened in the rest of the countless seasons before," I say on an exhale.

Lamar doesn't hear this, obviously.

"You said Paca was her nickname. What's her real name?" Jude asks for me, cycling back to that question, since he knows I'll want to know once I get over the bomb Lamar incidentally set loose.

"Oh, I thought that was obvious by now," Lamar says, frowning in my direction. "Especially after telling you that you're the Four Horsemen. Everyone knows you're the Four Horsemen of *The Apocalypse*."

"Say what now?" I ask dryly.

"Are you saying she's the apocalypse?" Gage asks incredulously.

"I'm saying she's *The Apocalypse*. Her name is Apocalypse. She puts *the* in front of it when she wants to remind everyone she's the only one who can truly level the world. As I said, *she's rather vain that way*," he says jovially as he reuses the one joke that got him a few snickers last time.

No one giggles this time.

It's not funny anymore.

“My name is Apocalypse?” I ask on a hushed whisper. “As in the end of times for the entire world?”

My four guys look at me, regarding me like they're waiting to see how to react.

“Now *that*, I did not see coming at all,” I utter on a shaky breath.

I don't realize, until Lamar's eyes widen, water, and clash with mine, that I've accidentally turned whole. And apparently I must look exactly the same, since the recognition in his expression is unmistakable.

I guess that explains the horror on most of the people's faces who could see me in between life and death.

After all, I'm as bad as it fucking gets. I'm sure I have a reputation.

“I take it back,” I say as I swallow hard, my eyes tearing away from Lamar to look at each of my guys individually. “I don't want a badass name.”

## Chapter 14

“Paca,” Lamar says on a choked sound, causing me to turn back to him as a lone tear rolls down his cheek.

He opens his mouth to say more, but only a strained sound comes out. I guess believing and seeing are two different things in this case, because he almost looks like he can’t believe what he’s seeing, when he believed it before this moment with no problem.

“How do you have your own body?” he asks on a shaky breath, his eyes trailing down and...then his head jerking back as confusion creases his features. “And what the hell are you wearing?” he asks, less reverent and more incredulous.

I glance down, remembering I am indeed still wearing the sexy Devil costume.

“An outfit that wasn’t quite so ironic when initially chosen,” I say absently.

His grin spreads so wide, and tears wobble in his eyes as he laughs so genuinely that it warms me.

“You said Lucifer knew. Who else knows?” Jude asks him, moving closer.

Lamar blinks, returning his attention to him. “Too many people have likely figured it out. Especially since the trials. The second trial always ends up killing the echo quads, even though they put the rumor out there that some survive.”

“Echo quads?” Ezekiel asks him. “You keep mentioning that.”

Lamar grabs some books from behind him, and he starts putting them on the desk as he talks.

“Echo quads. There are so many echoes. The Gemini Twins were the first *pair*. Their echoed pairs are stronger than

echoed quads. Echoes don't have the same fierce bond as the originals—you. There was one obstacle to always drive out the posers in case the four of you ever returned home. You'd never leave a man behind."

My mind flicks back to Kai's injured leg, and the terrible options we had at hand. They would have died beside him before leaving him behind.

He hands them a book, and Gage warily takes it.

"That one is everything on your origins," Lamar tells him.

"It's blank," Gage says as he opens it.

"It's the only one. We never wanted anyone else trying to recreate the four of you. If you want to read it, spill your blood and start reading. The words will appear in whatever language you choose," Lamar tells him distractedly as he grabs what looks like a journal.

"These are all my notes on you and several other sets of quads I suspected to be...well, you," Lamar tells Ezekiel, handing it to him.

Ezekiel takes it and tucks it into the back of his jeans, not looking directly at me.

"These will tell you all her purities and impurities so you can understand her better," Lamar tells them as he hands Jude a thinner book.

"Say what now?" I ask, holding my hand up.

Lamar grins over at me a little sadly.

"You have no memories at all?" he asks quietly.

"I have certain bits of knowledge, but no memories."

He nods slowly, as though that's finally sinking in. "Then I should warn you not to trust anyone on the surface. Right now, the ones who remember you want you dead. Again. And they'll kill your boys to get to you. You're all weaker topside."

My stomach tilts.

“If they die, do they heal like I did?” I ask.

“I’m not really sure what will happen to them, to be honest. Their bodies were destroyed, and since you’d given them each a piece of your balance as protection, you made them as immortal and untouchable as you were—back then. Now? You spent a month healing topside for an injury that could have been instantly healed here. I’m not sure if they still hold that piece of you,” Lamar tells me honestly. “Because I have no idea how you did any of this.”

His eyes stay on mine, seeming to want to say more, but holding back for whatever reason. I’m not sure if it’s because he doesn’t want to say it in front of them, or because he’s worried about overwhelming me, or if he’s hiding something.

All three are valid and reasonable options.

“How did I give them a piece of my balance to keep them safe?” I ask him.

His lips curve in a grin. “It figures that’d be the first question you ask. You see, when you gave them that piece of you, you said you started to *feel* more. Soon, the five of you were inseparable. Those pieces pulled your souls into one bond, and it made you all invincible. Or so we thought. But it certainly made you all...better.”

“The piece is still in all of us,” Gage says quietly. “That’s why it was so hard to fight.”

“Gee, thanks for making it sound like I forced you into this, when I clearly just saved your lives,” I state dryly.

He cracks a grin at me, cupping my chin and letting his thumb roll over my cheek. He leans down, his lips ghosting my cheek as he reaches my ear and whispers too quietly for anyone else to hear.

“I’m not complaining. I’m just glad to finally have answers. You really are ours,” he says, his fingers moving across my neck so sweetly yet erotically at the same time.

“Actually, *you’re* really all *mine*,” I counter softly, my eyes fluttering shut when his lips brush softly against my skin.

“Just curious, for the sake of old times, who’s her current favorite?” Lamar asks.

“I am,” Jude says, at the same time I dreamily say, “Gage.”

Gage grins, Jude arches an eyebrow, and I shrug unapologetically.

Lamar laughs like he’s delighted and watching his favorite show that just came back for a reunion.

I really need to quit comparing our hell squad drama to TV shows.

“Hera knows, which is why she tossed in the aviary reptiles—or, bird-snakes, as you would probably call them—into the third trials. You always hated their tails for some reason,” Lamar says, causing everyone to smirk as they glance at me.

“We’re still supposed to be tensing when he says something that resonates. Not smirking,” I tell the four of them.

Lamar’s grin only grows as he continues to carefully select books, moving from one to another to decide which ones we need.

“Cain figured it out after the twins swore on their harem they weren’t the ones to drop his pants and humiliate him in front of the Trials, no less. They pointed a finger at you,” he goes on. “They’re the reason the other quads got through the second trials, because they were fucking with Lucifer’s game. They’re smarter because they share a brain.”

For some reason, I almost smile, thinking about Cain’s rage as he chased those two. I was so proud of something so petty.

“Sibling rivalry always did make you smile,” Lamar tells me as he hands Kai a book. “Manella, of course knows.”

My face falls. “Yeah, because you’re a gossiping little girl who ran off to tell him they said *she*.”

It’s an accusation with a little too much heat of betrayal that I shouldn’t feel. Lamar’s grin only grows.

“I’m sorry. Manella didn’t ever really believe me when I said I felt you. He hoped they were yours, but it was a faint hope. Only you could have found a way to save them.” His smile slips. “For whatever reason, he said there was no way you could ever come back.”

Tension spreads through the air, and my gaze subtly drifts over to see my guys all going a little rigid. Manella is back on the suspect list now.

Lamar doesn’t notice as he continues to gather books, moving on from the harder topic and onto trying to jog a memory.

“I’m fairly sure Lilith doesn’t know, because she’d have never touched Kai at the party if she had. She didn’t fear her own sister very often, but one of the guys would have really made her suffer back then,” Lamar goes on.

Kai smirks as his hand slides down my back, and he takes a seat on the edge of the chair I’m in, almost as though he’s soothing me from the instant jealousy in my gut.

“She’s trying to restock her own harem, since the twins just recycled them all a little before the trials. She always keeps four in her harem, same as you.”

I freeze. “What?”

The guys clear their throats and try to mask their smiles.

Lamar turns and looks at me. “You always had four in your harem. Before them, you had a series of really underwhelming males who could be seduced and lured away by Lilith, easily killed by Cain or the twins, and constantly trying to get into Hera’s harem without her seduction. After all, beauty is her main purity.”



A growl slips from my lips, and Lamar smirks like he knew it was coming.

“You, my dear, are made up of a lot of envy and just the right amount of beauty,” he assures me. It’s not really reassuring.

“That’s all?” I ask in horror.

Lamar laughs like I’m thoroughly entertaining him this evening.

“Of course not,” he finally says around his chuckles.

“I’m still hung up on the fact we’re her harem,” Kai tells me, his hand still stroking my back as a grin flirts with his lips.

“That makes it sound far more scandalous than having four lovers,” I point out. “I sort of like it.”

I finally think of something really important.

“Lamar, why do they go into a trance when I change into this?” I ask as I go phantom and change into the Egyptian Princess outfit before turning whole again.

The guys...don’t go into a trance. Not even Ezekiel, and he missed it the first time. It makes me look like a liar. Weirdly, I take offense to feeling like a liar.

It’s weird because I’m the *DEVIL’S FUCKING DAUGHTER* and *THE APOCALYPSE*, but being thought of as a liar irks me. My priorities are so messed up.

“Okay, so last time I had to change into a dolphin because they lost their minds,” I assure him. “I’m not a liar.”

Lamar isn’t smiling. He swallows hard as he snaps his fingers. Something with a tarp over it lands in the room, and he clears his throat as he walks to it.

“It was an echo of a memory. Sometimes, if you don’t have the memory, you can still have a strong reaction to the echo of a memory. Like you all seem to have been doing with whatever similar things cross paths from then to now,” he goes on.

He tugs the tarp off, and my breath catches as I look at the woman in the painting. It's me. With different hair. And four guys are all crowded around me, looking just as menacing as the four in this room. But that's where the similarities end.

The four men in the image are harder, but just as attractive in different ways. Standing up, I go to kneel in front of the painting, my fingers tracing over each one of them.

The outfit I'm wearing in the painting matches the exact outfit I'm wearing now.

"They were your harem when you were Cleopatra," Lamar finally says. "It was one of your favorite lives. You all loved that life, except for War. He didn't get to be the favorite as often in that life."

Two strong arms come around me, drawing me to a hard body, and I know without looking it's Ezekiel.

I stare at the picture for a minute longer.

"Why is it here instead of in that hall?" I ask him.

Lamar sighs heavily. "The only ones who know you ever really existed are the ones who were alive five hundred years ago when you were killed. *The Apocalypse* stopped being considered a person by anyone younger than your death."

Five hundred years ago.

Five. Hundred. Years. Ago.

And we were already planning for the freaking nineties?

"Because," Lamar goes on, "for the past five hundred years, no one has been able to utter your name. Lucifer made it a law when he started going crazy from suffering the loss of his favorite child. Even Manella didn't dare utter your name, and he's your favorite brother. It hurt him the hardest."

I'm not even asking. I just can't right now. Round and round the conspiracy theories go every time he drops a new bomb that changes the suspect pool.

Ezekiel pulls me closer, forcing me to turn around in his arms and let him hug me.

“Manella will be coming down any minute now. They’ve been in a meeting. You should go before he comes, or face your father if you’re ready,” Lamar says a little too hopefully, like he expects me to move back in today and pick up where I left off, when I can’t even remember where that is.

“I died a month ago,” I say to him. “I just got back today and found out I’m the Devil’s daughter, the end of the world, and apparently died five hundred years ago from a mysterious cause that is no doubt linked to hell. I think I’m going home to process for a while. It’s sort of been a shitastic month.”

He clears his throat, blinking as though he just realized exactly the load he’s dumped on me.

“Of course,” he tells me, smiling tightly. He grabs something from a bag and hands it to the guys. Jude accepts it as Lamar explains, “That’s enough power to cloak the entire home, should you choose to move its location. It’ll do that. It’s from Paca’s own stash.”

“Don’t ask that question, or we’ll never get out of here,” I tell Kai as he opens his mouth to ask a question, having already gravitated to my side. He looks at me, his mouth closing as he swallows the curiosity, and I add, “And I’m not ready to meet my *family*.”

“I can’t give you access to the underworld. Only Lucifer can do that.” Lamar stares at me with a smirk. “But she has access already. She’s still the same, unlike you four.”

Pushing away from Ezekiel, I start backing out. Ezekiel grabs another stack of the books that Lamar didn’t even offer, following behind me. Lamar just grins like he expected that.

“See you soon, Paca,” Lamar tells me.

In the next instant, we’re standing in the middle of the living room.

Jude opens his mouth to speak, but I hold a hand up. “Not now. Not today. Today, I need a drink, a lot of food, and other things that don’t have to do with hell.”

“I was just going to ask you if we’re calling you Keyla, Apocalypse, or Paca?” he asks, sounding way too damn amused. Why is he amused?

“Paca. It *feels* familiar, and it’s not quite as horrifying as the longer version,” I decide. “Besides, it’s growing on me.”

A heavy silence falls over us, none of us really saying anything after that, as we just stand in a semi-circular formation. No one is really looking at anyone.

Ezekiel leaves the room abruptly, and when he returns, a smile spreads over my face. He smirks as he hands me the jar he’s holding, and I take it, sniffing it first.

It smells like citrus, and tastes just as good. I file away one of his preferred tastes.

I turn it up and drain the entire jar. Before I can put it down, Jude is pushing another one into my hand.

It tastes like a Bloody Mary. Figures.

I wish I knew how I know what a Bloody Mary tastes like.

“Well,” Kai says as he tugs the drink from my hand. “We all wanted to know who we were.”

He takes a long drink then hands it off to Ezekiel.

“Yeah, but we didn’t expect it to be an ages-old, *apocalyptic* romance story,” I state dryly, stealing the jar from Ezekiel before he can get a sip.

My four psychos burst out laughing, and I turn to walk away, taking the alcohol with me.

“You four have a terrible sense of humor,” I call over my shoulder as I move to drop down in front of the TV. “Come show me how to livestream movies because I can only work the DVD player. I’ve apparently been studying Patrick Swayze

when I should have been paying more attention to Keanu Reeves.”

Kai settles down right beside me, taking the remote. “I’m going to need more to go on than just Keanu Reeves, since I have no idea what that has to do with anything.”

Rolling my eyes, I point out the obvious. “I spent all those years learning about a lovesick ghost, assuming that’s what I was. When really, I needed to be watching Keanu.”

They just look at me like I’m crazy, and I snatch a quarter from the table.

“Heads, we watch Constantine,” I say as I flip the quarter. It, of course, lands on tails.

“What’s tails?” Jude asks as he drops down to my other side.

I sigh as I lean into Kai’s side, feeling some of the inner chaos settle as I soak in his warmth. “Devil’s Advocate.”

## Chapter 15

“We were horrible people,” I state quietly to myself.

Apparently not quietly enough, since it causes Jude to jerk awake beside me on the floor-pallet-bed the five of us fell asleep on in the living room last night.

He groans when he looks at the time, and his arm tightens around me as he pulls me away from Gage a little.

“What the hell are you doing up so early after drinking all night?” he grumbles around a yawn.

He dozes back off, saving me the trouble of confessing my new obsession.

I flip the page on the book I’m reading—the book I spilled my blood on to make words appear.

It’s a very dirty retelling of how we fell in love in the life I had as a Duchess, who didn’t know she was quite so into debauchery when she was an innocent virgin the Duke—also known as Nicholai/Gage—forced her to marry him.

My gaze flicks over to Gage, wondering if he’d have a memory echo or whatever if I made myself look like this little drawing. Maybe all of them would.

Count Lavelle, also known as War—aka Ezekiel—was the first one to come in and defile the Duchess after the Duke gave his blessing. She really liked the way he just took her without warning.

The Duke watched, made her think it was him fucking her so hard from behind, when it was really the Count. My legs press together, and Jude tenses from beside me.

“What are you reading?” he asks, rousing from his sleep a little more.

“Go back to sleep,” I say in deflection, reading on as two Earls, who I’m assuming must be Jude and Kai, come to take their turn with their friend’s new wife.

As mortals, they could have any woman any time, it seems. But even with no prior knowledge of who I was or who they were, we all ended up in our little circle. I say circle, because reading all these has led me to believe we’re an endless line that is seamlessly tied together and ever circulating.

The part where the Duke holds his wife down for the two Earls to take their turns is wrongly turning me on. I can get an image of how confused I’d be if I couldn’t remember them, yet feel like it was so wrong to easily give into this.

They’d make me take it, knowing I’d want it, even without knowing me. They *did* make me take it. Over and over, and apparently I secretly loved it, even as I fought them as hard as I could.

It’s disturbingly wrong, which makes sense. I’m the Devil’s daughter.

That thought has marinated during the entire time I’ve been reading, reevaluating every active thought I’ve had.

We all fell in love eventually in this story. I skipped to the end, just to make sure, then went back to the beginning.

Well, the guys just have a strong bond in friendship, and they love each other like brothers. Kind of disappointing. I was hoping for some guy-on-guy action, even though I’ve never seen them cross that line before.

But they all love me. And I love all of them.

Yet we always sort of hate each other to start out with. At least a little.

It’s pretty hot when you read about it instead of feeling the frustration when it’s actually going on. I really want to slap them while reading the story about the Duchess. At least in the beginning.

Gage mutters something beside me in his sleep, moving closer as I fan myself and continue reading.

I have to quit reading this. Right now, with all that's going on, sex doesn't need to be on my mind. They didn't even kiss me after we returned from hell, so I'm assuming they're prioritizing as well, even though they did give me the night off to watch movies and sink into a silent stupor.

When I woke up at three this morning, I started reading. And haven't stopped.

Do you know who my mother is?

No? Well, that's because the Devil is an overachiever and had me on his own, and not in the way one might think. I was never really a child nor was I born. I was created.

I'm a manifestation of impurities and purities, then given a drop of Lucifer's blood so I could take form. I'm apparently the most successful blending of the children because of my incomparable balance. My presence doesn't hinder the balance topside no matter what day it is.

I'm a neutral entity. A weapon. A being who isn't really supposed to have any personality at all, according to the original plan. I'm supposed to be cold logic and firm dictation.

Epic. Fail.

Lust is one of those impurities of mine. Love is one of the purities. Envy, of course, is an impurity. Greed is unsurprisingly not one of my impurities. I knew I wasn't greedy. I've been telling the guys this, but they never listen.

They still haven't bought me the gifts they bought those other women. Being covetous is certainly one of my impurities.

My entire thought process is making more and more sense the more I learn about my genetic makeup. It's logically sound to dissect myself more now.

Not to mention, I'm inherently easily distracted, like all of the children, it seems. We like shiny things, booze, violence



and sex. We don't do serious very well.

Blowing out a breath, I decide to continue reading about the Duchess after all, and blame my easily distracted mind on *Daddy Issues* or genetic makeup.

Unlike in this life, they didn't avoid sex with me in this retelling. They took it. Made me want them as much as I hated them. My body stayed on fire because they were constantly driving me over the edge.

In one chapter, I spent two days tied to a bed as they took their turns, bringing me to so many orgasms that I seemed to float off into a transcendent head space.

"Totally gipped in this life," I mutter under my breath, flipping the page.

This chapter might be my favorite, because in it, I struggle with a conscience, telling myself it's wrong to love all four psychos. Me. The Devil's daughter.

Apparently I only had a conscience when mortal. I'm sure that was quite the annoying thing to suffer through.

Weirdly, I remember expecting to have a conscience when I first started coming about. I knew it was wrong to watch them in their most private of moments.

I thought I just learned not to care. But nope. I just finally crossed a line and never felt guilty about it. Because guilt isn't one of my purities. And a conscience doesn't exist for this hell spawn.

Obviously, the Duchess version of me was also clueless about her origins, and she'd been raised in societal norms where letting four very corrupt men have their wicked way with your body at their leisure while your husband allowed it was not very ladylike.

So she runs, trying to escape them.

My lips curl into a grin when they find her within a day, and they punish her by taking turns as she fights against them, trying to resist, but unable to really do so in her mind.

Spoiler alert: That's when she finally admits she loves them and accepts the fact she's just as dark and twisted as the four of them.

My eyes close as the book comes down to my chest, and I imagine what it would be like for one of them to hold my shoulders down, two of them to hold my legs open, and then take turns on who fucks me into submission.

Everything inside me clenches, and a moan slips out of me.

The book is suddenly snatched out of my hand, and my eyes fly open as I scramble to grab it back from Gage as he jumps to his feet.

Jude snatches me at the waist, dragging me back down and holding me to him, as Kai's mouth goes to mine.

"Hurry and see what it's about while she's distracted," Ezekiel says as Kai kisses me stupid.

Jude's fingers are sliding up my side in the T-shirt I fashioned before bedtime. All the sensations are definitely distracting.

"Damn," Gage says under his breath. "We were twisted fucks in this life, and she apparently really likes it."

Kai breaks the kiss, a dark grin on his lips, and I jerk my head over to where Gage is grinning mockingly at me.

"This could work out with what we planned," Gage goes on, tossing the book to Ezekiel.

Kai is on me again, ripping me away from Jude, and coming down on top of me as his lips crash to mine once more.

I moan into his mouth as he shoves my legs apart, making room for himself.

"How twisted?" Kai asks, biting down on my bottom lip.

"Very fucking twisted," Ezekiel says on a shuddering breath, his voice thick with a reflection of the same twisted desire.

We should probably not be feeling so good about being evil. It probably upsets someone's balance somehow.

In the next instant, Kai is shoved off, and the book is pushed into his chest as Ezekiel takes his place on top of me.

I'm in a haze of sensation, pulling E down to me so I can soothe some of the ache I've been left with.

He kisses me hungrily, groaning into my mouth as he rips me up from the floor. When he starts walking, carrying me in the process, my legs wrap around his waist.

Breaking the kiss, I pull back to look at him, seeing the other guys have disappeared.

"Don't stop, and you'll be my new favorite," I assure him.

His eyes light up with that gold as he siphons us, and suddenly I'm being dropped to a bed.

That has me pulling my T-shirt over my head in an instant, but he just grins instead of coming down on top of me. My eyes get distracted, taking in the room I haven't returned to until now.

My breath leaves in a rush when I realize we're in *my* room, but it's completely redone.

All the magazines that I've idly been tearing apart and collecting ideas for my dream room...it's all here. Even the bed. The bed that stretches from one wall to another, making it the largest bed I've ever seen in my remembered life, and perfectly comfortable for five to sleep in.

"When did you—"

"We went feral like I did in hell's throat. The mindless haze lasted for about four days. After that, we were just miserable," Ezekiel tells me, surprising me.

"When tearing the place apart and fighting with each other got old, we started doing this," Gage says as he appears, smirking. "One piece at a time."

Someone appears at my back, but before I can turn around to see who is on the bed behind me, a dark, silky blindfold comes down over my eyes.

My breath hitches as my blinder deliberately takes his time tying it into place. I realize it's Kai when he leans down to whisper in my ear.

"It's not fair for you to know who takes your virginity," he says against my ear. "You might favor them for too long."

My heart starts hammering in my chest as heat swarms my body.

"I'm not really a virgin, so clearly that's not an issue. And I want to see."

"No," is Jude's response really close to my ear. "You don't remember having sex. So this is ours to take, yours to enjoy, and all of ours to keep safe by not letting you get too attached to *just* one of us. Promise on our bond you won't go phantom to peek."

I hesitate, because that's totally what I was going to do.

"I'll know who it is based on the piercings. You all have different ones," I remind them.

A deep rumble of mocking laughter comes at my ear as Gage gets close enough to murmur, "You'll be so lost to sensation you won't be able to pinpoint something as trivial as what piercings do what."

A shiver runs down my body.

"Why do you have the piercings?" I ask, rambling at this point when I hear the distinct sound of clothing being shuffled off.

Now that my moment is finally here, I'm freaking out a little, if I'm being honest. I've dreamed of this for so long that it almost seems too surreal and overwhelming.

Understandable, especially given our newly discovered, daunting circumstances.

“Surface guardians get ink or piercings to signify their levels. We have the most,” Jude answers, sounding amused.

“Gage, lose the tongue ring so she doesn’t figure that out,” Ezekiel says.

I groan, and they all laugh under their breath.

But the laughter is gone, and my breath is stolen when someone grabs me by my shoulders and pins me to the mattress. The sound of me swallowing is all I hear when they wrench my hands above my head, only touching me at the wrists.

The huge bed allows for a lot of space, which they’re going to take advantage of, it seems.

Two sets of hands shove my legs apart even as I try to press them together, feeling a little exposed when they can all see me but I can’t see them.

The grip on my legs firms, and soon another set helps to pry my legs open, which has my back arching seconds before a mouth is suddenly on me.

My startled cry is swallowed as a second mouth finds mine, stealing all my sounds as the mouth fastened to my clit starts wreaking havoc on me.

It’s sensory overload already.

I come so quickly that they actually chuckle at me, everyone except for the one still between my thighs and driving me crazy as I clench around nothing.

It’s too sensitive, and I fight to get free. They hold me down, and I force myself not to phantom out just to get away from the pleasure that has a fine line of pain. Until I’m almost on the cusp again, another orgasm coming so quick that it’s sure to shred me.

Nothing could possibly be better.

The mouth rips away from me, leaving me just on the cusp, and I cry out in frustration. Arms grapple me down seconds

before a strong hand clamps my hip, and something smooth and blunt prods my entrance.

I feel a clench down there, desperate to be filled, as two sets of hands roughly force my legs open wider. So many sounds and words escape me in unintelligible fragments.

Then suddenly fire rushes through my veins as someone thrusts deep inside me without warning. Every nerve in my body lights on fire, as an ache like I've never felt before doubles, almost feeling desperate for so much more.

A groan is muffled somewhere above me, before the hips pull back and surge forth again.

The hands on my legs tighten, and I feel the weight of their hungry gazes even as I'm forbidden to see them. The one inside me thrusts in harder, more urgently, and the hand on my hip starts lifting me at just the right angle.

I can't control anything.

They have sole control.

It's as maddening as it is incredible.

A new mouth finds mine, kissing me hungrily, as the man fucking me starts pushing me over yet another edge. My nails press painfully into my own palms, offering me just enough bite to keep myself from floating away when the third orgasm shatters me.

The body above me shudders fiercely, as they manage to hold onto their sounds much better than me, careful to give me no hint as to who is my current favorite.

I'm panting heavily as he clumsily pulls out of me, almost as though he feels as boneless as I do in this moment.

"I want to see your expression," I whisper softly. "It's not fair that you see mine if I can't see yours."

No one answers me as another body moves between my legs, causing a dirty shiver to spread through me when it sinks in just how deliciously wrong this all is.

It's a heady feeling to embrace it and savor it. It's almost worth losing their expressions in this moment.

Another mouth is one mine in the next instant. I always feel them come to me, but I never feel them leave me. They always stop kissing me when I'm too distracted to notice.

My body arches off the bed when the new man thrusts in forcefully, and they hold me open for him, making me take him even as my body still continues to shudder from the last orgasm.

He only thrusts in three times before he's ripping himself away and flipping me to my stomach in one harsh motion. A grunt rushes out of me, but then I'm lifted into the air by two sets of hands.

When I come back down, my skin connects with warm, incredible skin, and I end up straddling one of them as his mouth fuses to mine. I'm so drunk on sensation that I can't even discern the mouths kissing me from one to the next.

My hands are tied behind my back before I realize it, and the man under me thrusts up, pushing inside me almost too easily. Something slick and wet trails around my backside, as the man underneath me fucks me to distraction.

The sensations are different from this angle, especially with someone else behind me, running their lubed-up fingers down the path of my ass. I suck in a breath, breaking the kiss, as the one behind me pushes in just one finger.

A groan passes out of the one under me when I start moving harder against him, desperate to have more of each.

Hands tighten on my hips just before a much broader tip starts pressing into my ass. Definitely not a virgin there either, because virgins probably don't love the bite of pain as someone works their cock into their ass.

"I only feel two of you," I say on a breathy, half-coherent tone. "Are the other two watching?"

Hands come around to my front, as a voice comes to my ear. “Yes,” is all that’s whispered so softly that I can’t discern whose voice it is.

The man behind me slides his hand up my throat as he starts fucking me in time with the man under me. The movements all feel so much more intense, packed inside me as I shudder uncontrollably against the powerful sensations.

We move as one unit, drawing out the most pleasure, easily synchronized as though we’ve done this countless times. It’s like our bodies have remembered what our minds have forgotten, even if they’re not all technically in the same bodies.

Such delicate care is taken not to hurt me, and our bodies writhe like sex and filth with a seductive, heady concentration. Their hands get more impatient, and I keep kissing one then another.

I’m almost positive it’s Jude and Gage. Then those hands tighten and I’m certain it’s Kai. Definitely Kai. I can feel him.

Nope. It’s Ezekiel under me. Has to be.

For fuck’s sake, why can’t I tell them apart right now?

A moan is torn from my lips, and swallowed halfway through when the one behind me wrenches my head back to kiss me, even as both their hips start moving faster.

I can’t...It’s just too...I just can’t...

I’m shattered in the next instant, the most powerful orgasm yet thundering through me with so much crackle and mind-numbing euphoria that I swear it feels like I’m floating.

In all actuality, I’m collapsing into the arms of the man under me as the two of them continue to drive in and out of me with more frenzied, urgent motions.

They come at the same time, both sucking in breaths as their hands tighten on me.



I'm too groggy to really and truly fathom how long we've been at this when the one behind me slides out first. I wince from the sting of pain and sense of loss when he's all the way out.

Someone lifts me off the other one, and his cock is slowly dragged out of me as my pussy clenches from aftershocks, demanding to keep him in.

Some rustling is all I hear as I'm gently laid on the bed, and someone starts untying my blindfold.

"That wasn't four of you, was it? Did Kai do those few pumps and move on like the selfish man he is, robbing me of my fourth experience?" I ask on a shaky, but certainly accusatory, breath.

Four sounds of laughter comes as the blindfold falls away, and an amused Kai is hovering over me with an arched eyebrow.

"Actually, we decided there should be a balance," he says, leaning forward to nip my lips. "You wanted to see our expressions. We needed you not to know the first person inside you. So I'm taking my turn last to give balance."

At my confusion, he tips my chin up.

"I took last instead of first. You now know I'm certainly not the first one inside you, but I'll be the only one you get to enjoy experiencing you for the first time," he says, brushing his lips over mine as he shifts himself to be right between my legs.

My smile spreads as heat blooms across me. I'm covered in all things them, essentially marked forever.

He grips my hip, and I lick my lips as I watch him grab his very hard, very large cock in his hand and strokes it once. It looks angry, almost throbbing with the desire for relief.

Jude's lips brush my throat as he comes onto the bed beside us. Ezekiel's mouth goes to my breasts, and I grip them both, touching them as I watch Kai stroke himself.

Gage moves above of me, bending to kiss me as that warmth continues to spread over my chest.

“So fucking beautiful,” Ezekiel whispers against my ear as Gage breaks the kiss and leans back, his fingers trailing down my cheek.

“More beautiful than Hera or Lilith?” I ask automatically, not even sure why I ask it.

Jude snorts derisively, and I start to get my feelings hurt, until he says, “They can’t even compare.”

A goofy girl grin spreads as I tell him, “Now you’re my favorite even though that was so fucking cheesy.”

“Enjoy while it lasts,” Kai says to Jude, smirking as he draws my attention back to him.

The other four move back just a little as Kai leans over me, lining himself up just right and raking the head of his cock over my very slick entrance.

His eyes flutter shut as his jaw tenses, and I commit every feature to memory. Licking my lips, I watch as he works the tip in, and his muscles bunch as his eyes barely open, a hooded, sexy expression on his face.

Inch by slow inch, he pushes inside me, more and more of that relief, pleasure, and indescribably hot patience on his face.

When he’s halfway in, he suddenly thrusts hard, burying himself to the hilt. His eyes roll back in his head as his mouth falls open, and his sexy rumble of approval vibrates against me.

It feels just as good as it has since the beginning, the fourth piece of my heart clicking into place as my soul is fed by the hunger and pure pleasure on his face.

My hands go to his hair, keeping his head up when he tries to drop it. I need to see all of this. I want to drink it in.

None of them ever looked as lost to sensation as he does when they were with the other women. My jealous nature

appreciates that immensely.

“Is this how you all looked?” I ask in awe as Kai stays still inside me like he’s savoring it.

“Yes,” Ezekiel whispers close to me.

“Now I wish I had thought to go last,” Gage groans.

Kai is taking it slower, relishing the feel of me and allowing me to relish the feel of him as he draws back and slides in with an effortless ease, despite the snug fit, pressing against every nerve I have in a way that is almost *too* intense.

I pull him down by the back of his neck, eager to taste his kiss while he’s lost like this.

The second his lips touch mine, he devours me, kissing me as he grips one of my legs at the thigh and hikes it up. He uses his new hold as leverage to pull back and slam into me.

A startled cry has me breaking the kiss as he raises up and sets a rhythm that has me arching toward him.

Hands grapple me to the bed, pinning me in place as Kai starts working me over, taking me like he’s envisioned this hundreds of times and is on a mission to steal all he can from this moment.

My eyelids try to flutter shut reflexively, but I force them open so I can watch each expression as it crosses his face.

His eyes are burning a solid gold as he stares at me, unable to look away. My eyes screw shut, unbidden, when a pleasurable painful orgasm sweeps through, reminding my body I’ve received far too much pleasure for any one person.

A hand grips my jaw, and my eyes fly open when Jude turns my face toward him.

“Watch, *comoara trădătoare*. Watch him so you know what you did to us,” Jude says as he turns my face back to see Kai.

It’s like sweet anguish, as though the pleasure is so intense he’s straining to drain every ounce of it out. Then his hips slam

into me one last time, and his entire body shudders as he grips me painfully.

His eyes open heavily as he pants for air, staring directly at me like he sees me differently but still the same. I get it. Everything about each one of them now feels more intimate.

He drops to me, kissing me so hard, as though rewarding me for my lazy part.

My fingers tangle in his dark hair as I suck his bottom lip into my mouth and bite it gently.

He groans and shudders again, moving inside me like he's ready for another round.

"Enough for now," Jude says, even as Kai's hips continue to move.

I kiss him harder, not wanting him gone just yet. His hands fly to my hair, gripping it as he starts thrusting like he can't slow down, desperate to feel another release.

"I said enough," Jude bites out.

"Let him. She likes it," Ezekiel says from beside me, moving to watch my eyes as Kai fucks me like he can't stop.

"She can take as much as we can give," Gage says, smirking as he steps back, taking in the scene like he wants to watch.

Kai is stilling again, already coming. My orgasm total for the day has been met, so I don't feel gipped that I don't get another one at the end.

Kai's body goes lax on top of mine as he lazily he kisses me with appreciation, his weight crushing down on me.

"If he got two turns, then I vote I get mine later," Ezekiel points out.

"After mine," Jude drawls.

"Or mine," Gage says.

Kai grins against my neck like he's enjoying this. My legs wrap around his waist, and my arms go around his shoulders like I'm hugging him to me.

“Whoever is my next favorite will get me again. For now, I'm sexually sated but completely physically hungry,” I tell them, running my lips up Kai's cheek.

If I continue lying here, basking in all this intimacy, I'll blurt out something stupid. I've learned men hate that.

Giving them no warning, I go phantom and zap myself to the kitchen.

From messy to clean within a flip of a switch, I set about my new task.

I grin when I hear them all follow, siphoning in here behind me. And I don't even care whose arms go around me or who kisses my cheek as I start cooking for five.

It's the first time since I started my lonely, anonymous existence that I finally feel whole.

## Chapter 16

“Well, this says the Devil’s seven children spread their dark influence when needed or when imbalanced. One guess as to which of the seven deadly sins I am,” I state blandly.

“Wrath,” Ezekiel pipes up, staring over at me like he expects a treat.

“You don’t get to be my favorite by answering rhetorical questions,” I immediately fire back.

He rolls his eyes and mutters something petulant, and I grin because I think I just embarrassed Mr. War.

“Found the origins book,” Gage says around a mouthful as he walks into the kitchen with a burrito in one hand and an ancient, possibly priceless book in the other.

The two look very odd paired together.

He tosses it to Jude, who catches it midair and starts reading from beside me.

“Read it aloud, jackass,” I tell him as I eat one of my ten burritos.

Told you I was starving.

Kai snorts. Jude glares at me.

“Please,” I add with faux sweetness as I bat my lashes.

He rolls his eyes, working to hide his smile that he really doesn’t want to give me.

Some things never change.

He gave Lake that smile, but I don’t bring her up. The house is still in disarray because of my death—which is highly empowering—but clearly they’ve only started to heal from her betrayal.

I’m just happy she’s dead and that Jude killed her for me.

That's better than any smile. I'm the Devil's daughter, so it's okay to be insane like that.

It's the universal excuse to all my issues now. That's the upside.

Jude blows out a breath. "It says we're four parts of one balanced compass, and essentially the metaphorical needle shifts toward whoever is needed the most for the compass holder."

"I'm guessing that's me," I say with a frown. "I forced you all to be my balance or whatever after giving you that piece of my balance?"

Suddenly, the seven remaining burritos don't look as tempting because my stomach starts to sour.

"I don't think so," Jude says distractedly as his eyes scan the next page, apparently reading ahead silently.

"Aloud," the other three all snap at him.

"For fuck's sake, you read it," Jude growls, shoving it at me.

Pushing my unwanted plate back, I take the book, go back to the first page and start reading it where he left off.

"Lucifer needed four soldiers to divide four treacherous, dangerous powers between. Power that, if seduced by greed, could lead to the world's ultimate demise," I read aloud.

The words on the next page take a moment to rapidly shift through fifty or more languages before finally settling in English.

"Since greed was not one of her impurities and she was bored, Apocalypse decided to remove this burden from him and tasked it to herself. As the world grew, she became in need of more power without disturbing her balance, and four soldiers that strong could provide that balance infinitely through time."

I look up, confused. “I thought Lamar said I was balanced and you four weren’t.”

“Yeah, all the children are—apparently not as well as you, but still balanced. However, they still have to maintain that balance. Needing more power means needing a counter balance,” Ezekiel tells me. “Hence the reason Lilith offers a gift with a curse. Cain has his methods, along with the rest. This is saying you found a way to grow stronger and balance yourself with little maintenance.”

I push the book away, not wanting to read more, and Gage picks it up to start scanning its contents.

“So I stole you and somehow tethered you to me to help me keep this balance,” I say quietly.

This morning’s incredible rendezvous now seems... cheapened. And wrong. Even with my new universal excuse for the wrong things I usually enjoy.

“No,” Gage says, smirking as he starts reading aloud. “Apocalypse wanted four strong, fiercely loyal men in her harem who couldn’t be recycled during one of her brothers’ tantrums or stolen when one of her sisters decided to take new lovers.”

“Not helping,” I say with a tight smile.

“But she chose four of the most damaged men in the underworld who could no longer exist inside a mind without madness,” he goes on. “To keep balance.”

“That makes no sense,” I point out.

“They were already too imbalanced. In other words, you were able to give a gift with no strings attached, because of that imbalance. You were the only one who had to sacrifice anything, because they’d—*we’d*—already suffered too much,” Gage patiently tells me.

“I still don’t get it, and it’s starting to make me feel like an idiot,” I say on a sigh while running a hand through my hair.



Kai starts explaining. “When you’re a resident of hell, you can’t repent. You can hold only a certain amount of impurities—usually it’s a very high threshold. But if those impurities tip the scales, you’ll start going mad. Much like humans, only on a much more volatile and dangerous level.”

“Once you start going mad, there is no turning back,” Jude goes on, frowning. “At least not that I’ve heard of. It’s why we try to keep balance. If you preserve balance, you maintain balance within yourself. Affecting the balance of the universe without consideration for the balance will drive you mad.”

“Okay...” I draw the word out, looking around at them.

Gage continues reading. “These four were deranged, scarred from hell’s black heart where they were kept when they couldn’t be recycled.”

Kai groans, pushing his own food away. “We were in hell’s black heart?” he asks incredulously. “No one leaves there.”

“Hell’s black heart?” I ask, lifting a finger as though I’m asking a question in class.

I suppose I’ve never really attended class.

“It’s a place where they send the ones they can’t recycle. Madness keeps that from happening, because there’s no mad monster Lucifer wishes to create. There’s a chance the imbalance would just force them to cease to exist, but they seem leery of that option. So hell’s heart is where you’re left chained, alone, and forgotten for all eternity.”

“That sounds terrible,” I say as a chill slithers up my spine.

“Hell is not supposed to sound like an inviting kingdom,” Jude reminds me. “Unless you’re royalty or upper level, it’s actually quite the fucking opposite. Some spend centuries being brutally ripped apart as their soul takes a new form. That alone can drive one mad in a different way.”

Gage keeps reading, and I try not to interrupt this time.

“The four had been lost to hysteria, left alone, and chained in the dark chambers where the only sounds were their own

screams or those of the souls who just wanted to die, but couldn't. Because they were eternal now."

He swallows thickly.

"The nightmares," Ezekiel says quietly.

"We thought they were a vision of the future, when really it was just an echo of the past," Kai says on a groan. "We've been chasing away a fate we've already endured. All that paranoia for nothing."

"What?" I ask, but they ignore me as Gage continues reading.

"Apocalypse found the most damaged men she could. The ones who needed this relief with desperation. The only way to save them was to give them the power that could tear apart the world and shatter the balance completely if anything went wrong."

"That doesn't sound smart," Ezekiel says with a grin, looking over at me. "We were mad."

"Well, apparently I was too. The point is, did I make you slaves as my payment?" I ask, seriously worried just how horrible I truly was.

"No," Jude says like he knows the answer. "It was a truly free gift. Besides, that would have been too easy and you secretly hate easy."

"He's right," Gage says, drawing my attention back to him. "You healed their bodily wounds. You released them from the chains. And you pushed the power into their bodies one at a time. Then you hovered over them, caring for them for almost a century, as their minds and bodies continued to grow stronger. They slept under your watchful eye for the first time since the madness crept in. And they made up for the many centuries that sleep had evaded them. That version of you was enchanted by the effect you—and only you—seemed to have on them—on *us*."

Ezekiel's hands slide around my waist, almost as though he's drawing some of that *peace* out of me. Rather ironic that I provide peace, given the obvious.

"The end of the world offers the four of you peaceful dreams. I'm starting to wonder just how mad you must have been," I state dryly.

Jude's lips twitch as he leans over to my ear. "That means we were really fucking terrible before you."

Suppressing a shiver, I stare at Gage as he grins enigmatically.

"After a century of peaceful rest in her chambers, the four awoke ready to destroy the entire world so it would only be the five of them," he says conversationally.

"Geez, you psychos," I say on a breath. "You even scared the Devil's daughter."

Gage chuckles, handing the book off to Kai as though he's amused. Kai grins broadly.

"Apocalypse, being ever so vain, refused to admit failure. Besides, she'd gotten so attached to the four after watching over them for a solid century that she couldn't bear to hand them over to Lucifer to drain the power from and toss back into hell's black heart."

Kai pauses his reading, meeting my eyes.

"So she gave all four of them a piece of her sacred balance, disrupting her own stability in an effort to save them from themselves," he adds, holding my gaze. "She tied herself to them, leaving her less than whole. When their bond suffered, she suffered twice as much."

I swallow thickly.

I enjoyed killing an insignificant mortal man. I also left a fiery trail behind, burning the world around me uncontrollably. All because their bond to each other was hurting so much in the wake of my death.

“Simply put, you gave up bits of your much more powerful balance and infused it with ours in an effort to restore our stability by stealing from your own,” Jude says, brushing a piece of my hair away from my shoulder as he stares at me differently.

“The power did bond the four of us, uniting us in a way that helped stave off some of the madness, but it didn’t restore the balance like you’d assumed,” Gage goes on, also staring at me a little differently. “You had no idea just how unsalvageable we truly were when you came to care about us.”

“And you refused to send us back to our place in the black heart, and instead gave away something you didn’t even know if you could afford to give away. And to four men who were still unpredictable and could hurt you at their leisure by simply abandoning you and sending you on to live the fate we’d just managed to escape after the madness took you,” Kai continues.

I need a drink.

“Which is really freaking dangerous, considering I’m *The Apocalypse*,” I say on a breath. “Not to mention, the four of you are notably ungrateful, so it’s doubtful you felt immense gratitude for such an incredible self-sacrifice of my own.”

Jude chokes back a laugh of surprise, shaking his head. Clearly they must have been grateful if the world isn’t in ashes all these years later.

“*The Apocalypse*, as she often referred to herself, took the most selfishly selfless risk in doing so. Instead of betraying her, as she’d feared, they proved to be the most loyal harem she’d ever invited into her bed. And she was their first taste of pleasure in centuries,” Kai reads on.

His eyes flick back over me, raking down my face and to my body.

“It’s a wonder we settled for less even without our memories,” he murmurs to himself.

I sit a little taller, if I do say so myself.

Ezekiel moves and takes the book away, reading it for us now.

“Lucifer trusted her when she said they were ready, and he granted them protection, power, prestige, and various other things Apocalypse asked for, in an effort to help keep them safe, since she broke the law and gave them bits of her. Lucifer would never kill them now. He simply couldn't. His daughter would suffer a fate he couldn't spare her from if he did, for she'd shared too much, and only she could take it back.”

“Guess that means I'm too stubborn to do so, since you all clearly still have a piece of me wedged in you. That's why I can't be away from you for too long. Even in whole form, I have limits it seems. But how were you reborn with the same piece if we were all killed?” I ask, looking at Ezekiel. “Does it say?”

He shakes his head. “This is just the origins. The rest is a series of equations that make no sense to me to explain proper balance, execution of power, and various other things. If I could understand the equations, I might could understand our powers better.”

“Well, what can kill us? Clearly the Devil's poison couldn't truly kill me. What about you?” I ask.

“We've been out of hell this entire time, not getting our power boosts and such,” Jude says on a breath. “It makes us more vulnerable than we apparently were in that life. In that life, it would have been impossible to kill us.”

“Evidently that's not true,” I point out.

“According to some of the notations in the margins, only the Devil himself could have killed us in hell,” Ezekiel says absently, still studying those equations.

Daintily, I dab the corners of my mouth with my napkin, then go phantom and put on clothes. No need to be naked right now. We'll not be going for round two just yet.

They're all just in jogging pants that they put on while I was cooking. It's actually a very domestic image of us. Or at

least it was.

“Why are you wearing your badass clothes?” Gage asks warily.

“So you finally admit this outfit is badass,” I state, becoming whole to see how the weapons fare.

“They’re plastic,” Jude says as he picks up a knife from my hip, rumbles of laughter following that with more carefree abandon than I’ve ever heard from them.

I’m almost distracted by the way all of them are laughing, and I don’t even mind that they’re laughing *at* me and the fact I apparently suck at making my weapons as real as I am.

“Glad we didn’t have to rely on these in the trials,” Ezekiel says through his guffaws as he throws a plastic ninja star.

It bounces off the wall.

This renews their laughter.

A smile creeps across my face as I take it in, all of them snickering around the brunch table like I’ve never once—during all my years stalking them like their unseen guardian—seen them do before.

It’s not dark laughter. It’s not amused laughter. It’s surprised, real, hardy laughter that goes on and on, everyone keeping it rolling by lifting another weapon and making a joke.

“Could you imagine if we’d stabbed one of the blind tribesmen with this?” Gage asks, barely choking the words out through his chuckles as he stabs Ezekiel.

It breaks on impact, and it sets them all off again.

I take it all in, unwilling to break up this rare, never witnessed moment between the four of them.

They look...human. For just this brief glimpse in time.

No wonder the old me wanted as many mortal lives as possible with them. It let me see them like this. I can only

imagine how'd they'd be now if they hadn't died and come back with cleansed souls that expelled the madness altogether.

“You expect diamonds and lush gifts, when these were the gifts you offered in a land of every form of death?” Gage asks through his own hysteria.

“I gave you a course of monsters and blind cannibals filled with death riddles in hell's belly for your birthday. The fact I'm a terrible gift-giver is quite apparent. Side note, none of you should be encouraged to ever tell me your birthdays.”

Because the laughter momentum is already fierce, they finally laugh at one of my jokes the way my joke deserves to be laughed at. I quite literally pat myself on the back.

“So, seriously, why are you dressed like that right now?” Kai asks as their laughter tapers off.

“Because now I realize who killed us, so I'm going to nip the problem in the bud before history repeats itself.”

The lingering laughter dissipates with that.

Ezekiel moves toward me.

“What do you mean?”

“It means I'm going to go kill the Devil, of course,” I say with a shrug before going phantom and focusing really hard on the underworld.

On Lamar.

On Manella.

On Lucifer himself.

“Shit,” Jude shouts, breaking up the silence.

I feel tingles pass through me from four directions just as my eyes open to see I most definitely just siphoned myself to hell.

Looking around at four angry glares, I realize I also brought along some stowaways. How is that possible? I can't siphon them!

“You four can’t be here,” I hiss, shoving them away from me.

I flick my wrist, expecting them to go back home, but apparently the Devil’s daughter doesn’t know how to use all her power. Doesn’t matter. I know how to use the killing ones.

“You can’t be serious,” Gage growls as I stay in phantom form.

“Actually, I am. I just need to find a book that tells me how to navigate the illusions the hallways present to keep you walking in circles.”

I go whole, walking toward the massive bookcase filled with little details of hell, I’m sure. Seems I landed us in the last spot we left when we visited hell.

Two arms immediately grab me, but I go phantom and roll my eyes, walking on undeterred.

“You can’t kill the fucking Devil,” Jude growls, getting in front of me.

I pass through him and start looking for the appropriate book. One catches my eye, because the word *PACA* appears on the binding for a split second before disappearing.

“I think I can. After all, I apparently have the power to destroy the world. I’m sure the Devil made me for that reason because he couldn’t do it himself. By the way, if the Devil made me, you were wrong about him not being capable of such, back when we had this discussion before the trials.”

“Stop talking in circles. Damn it, Paca, Don’t fucking do this,” Kai snaps, trying to grab me as well.

“I’m phantom,” I remind them. “Will one of you be a dear and collect that for me? I think it’s mine.”

Gage grabs the book and holds it up like it’s leverage as he smirks. “If you want it, come and get it.”

I put my hands on my hips as I level him with an unimpressed glare.



“If I don’t kill him, he’ll come to kill us,” I point out.

“That makes no sense. He could have killed us in the trials if he wanted—”

“He’s waiting for me to appear so he can kill me too,” I say, interrupting Ezekiel. “Reasonably speaking, if he’s the only one who *could* kill us, then clearly he’s the one who *did* kill us. I’m not overly concerned with his motives. I just want to stop him before he succeeds twice and steals all these memories as well.”

Gage hesitates, like he’s considering opening the book for me instead of leveraging it against me.

“That’s insane. You don’t even fucking know if you can kill him,” Jude barks, refusing to let this lie. Figures. He’s always the last to come around, it seems.

Gage is immediately back on his side.

The more things change, the more they stay the same...

“Lamar stated I have the best reasoning even when it doesn’t make sense to anyone else,” I primly remind them, shoulders back and head held high.

Four incredulous glares meet me.

“So now we’re trusting Lamar because it’s convenient to your argument?” Kai asks me dryly.

“He’s not wrong. I’m undeniably reasonable about everything but the four of you. The heart gets a little too involved there,” I state absently, turning back around and looking for more of my books. “The Devil needs to die, and I’ll either kill him today or wait until you’re asleep to return and kill him later. Your interference only hinders me in this moment.”

“What the hell makes you think you can kill Lucifer?” Jude snaps.

“What makes you think *The Apocalypse* isn’t stronger than the Devil himself?” I volley.

I grin over my shoulder at them, and they all glare back at me.

“Worst case scenario, I still can’t kill him, despite my level-ups, and I scoot out of there before he kills me. He won’t come topside, and we’ll continue to thwart attacks,” I go on.

“I knew you were here.” Lamar’s voice cuts through the room like a shock to the system. “I assume she is too.”

We all turn to stare at him in the doorway as his face lights up like hell’s worst aren’t literally standing in his room. Alone. With him. After already being undecided on whether he dies or not.

He’s not a very smart fellow, is he?

His smile disappears. “Oh shit. You still don’t remember.”

“We’re here because you told her she was reasonable,” Gage tells him in accusation.

“It’s the one thing she knows for certain is true,” Jude goes on, quite dramatically sarcastic, if you ask me.

“Okay,” Lamar says, looking confused. “What is wrong with her being reasonable?”

“Because reasonably, it’s safe to assume the Devil killed us,” Ezekiel says, glaring at him.

Lamar pales. “Oh dear. That’s not at all—”

“Don’t bother backtracking,” I say, turning whole and cutting him off as I gesture toward the journal Gage is still holding. “Open it up and tell me how to find the Devil. Or do you already know?”

“I know how to find your father—”

“Don’t try to humanize him or me by calling him my father, when I’m without a conscience,” I point out, interrupting Lamar and reminding him of the knowledge I’ve gathered about my manufactured self.

“You’re not capable of guilt or conscience, so when you feel regret, it is true, unpersuaded, heart-wrenching regret,” he says seriously, causing me to hesitate for a split second. “And you’d certainly regret this.”

“You’re not strong enough to kill your father, but he is strong enough to kill all of us,” Gage says like he’s trying to reason with me. “Let’s think this through.”

“He can’t come topside. That much we know. The longer we delay, the longer he dangles us on his strings whilst he plays the mad puppeteer,” I say on a frustrated sigh. “I’m not opposed to killing, and it seems to be the most logical solution to our current problem. I just got you four. I’m not ready to die without at least a little fight.”

Lamar pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Just remember you convinced her that she’s reasonable,” Ezekiel growls, causing Lamar to groan.

“Well, the old Paca was very reasonable, but also very knowledgeable and not running on snippets of information,” he finally gripes, glaring at Ezekiel before looking back to me. “You need to read your journals.”

“Do they say I’m a daddy’s girl or something? We’re in hell. He’s the Devil. I expect manipulation and tricks. I won’t believe words just because they’re on a page in a book we got from *hell*.”

“I don’t know what the journals say, to be honest. You blessed them so that only your blood would reveal the words,” Lamar answers.

“You were going to read my journals?” I ask on an octave higher. “Those are private!”

“Someone else reason with her. I’ve forgotten how exhausting she can be,” he groans.

“If Lucifer didn’t want us dead because it would have made his child suffer, I highly doubt he’s responsible for our deaths,” Jude says, reciting the origins journal.

“That was from the beginning, and a lot of centuries have passed since I spiced the four of you up real nice. I was created to be a robotic weapon. What if I decided I never wanted to blow the world to bits and he killed me so he could replace me, because there has to be six, not seven children, even though there are already technically seven children, regardless of the weird loophole rule?”

Everyone flicks a gaze between them, almost as though that hadn't crossed their minds.

“Oh for heaven's sake—”

“Really, Lamar? *Heaven's* sake? Is that entirely appropriate?” I ask seriously.

He groans and scrubs a hand down his face.

“What on earth are you wearing?” he asks as he shakes his head.

“My ass-kicking, badass attire. Blame Catwoman for making leather bodysuits so fashionable while whooping ass and taking names. Take me to see Lucifer, get me all my journals, and then we'll be on our way.”

He just studies me, and I study him right back.

“How about a compromise?” Kai bites out, glaring at me. “You pretend you have your memories and just speak with Lucifer. It'll be you manipulating him to find out the truth about what happened.”

“And what if he kills her on the fucking spot?” Ezekiel snaps, shoving at Kai's chest.

“So you admit he's likely the one who wants us dead,” I say to Ezekiel, patting his shoulder and ignoring all the sounds of exasperation.

“Lamar, send them home. I'd like to see my father now,” I tell him with a smirk.

“Lamar, don't you fucking—”

Jude's words are cut off when the four of them are suddenly no longer in the room.

"They're in the graveyard now," Lamar says, opening his eyes as his jaw tics.

I cock my head, a slow grin forming on my lips. "I just gave you a command, and you totally obeyed."

His jaw grinds more, and my smile only grows.

"Like an actual command instead of a gently worded request," I ramble.

Still, he says nothing, just narrows his eyes on me.

"Dance for me," I say with the same authoritative tone.

He immediately springs into action, and music weirdly starts playing inside the room as Lamar river dances and curses.

"This is humiliating and degrading," he growls.

"Then stop doing it," I say with an even bigger grin.

He and the music stop at once.

"Next time I ask a question, maybe you should just answer it before I make you do it," I say as I move closer.

He gives me a hurt look. "You always admired it when I looked out for you and never made it your duty to remind me of my place as the others did. Well, the way they did before you became my friend, and I became your only friend who wasn't a lover or family."

I move to pick up my journal that fell from Gage's hand before the siphoning. I open it and peer down before staring at my hand.

Just the right thought has the tip of my finger opening up and a drop of blood spills out onto the pages.

My breath goes out shakily, because I have no idea how I knew how to do that.

My eyes flit down to the journal, expecting it to be in English, but it's not. Weirdly enough.

"What language is this?" I ask.

He peers over, studying it. "Romanian," he says with a sad smile, then starts reading the words to me in translation. "War is the one who will always side with you first, because he thinks like you the most. However, don't mistake that for him being weak or sweet. He'll punish you for that. Regardless, his constant championing will keep you from feeling so outnumbered," he reads aloud to me, frowning. "It's almost like you wrote this to yourself."

My lips tense, and my back stiffens. Why would I be writing to myself unless I expected to die?

"The next line is in Egyptian," he tells me. "Old Egyptian," he goes on, gesturing to the hieroglyphics. "Death is his opposite, in that he will push you to the last morsel of your sanity by forcing you to listen to all the facts. Without him, you're too rash."

He points to the next line.

"This is Russian, and I'm rusty, so bear with me," he says, then starts reading. "Conquest will never do as you expect. He's also your best warrior when you need him most. He'll fight at your back even when he wants to throttle you. You need him to be that unpredictable variable."

He flicks his gaze to me, but doesn't bother telling me what the next language is before he starts reading.

"Famine will be your most solid advisor, but he'll likely side with Death more than you, simply because he likes to annoy you the most. He's secretly the most viciously protective of the five of you."

The next words that appear look like gibberish.

"This is your own made-up language for your personal notes. If you wrote this to yourself, then you had no clue your memories would be gone when you returned."

“But I thought I was going to die before I wrote this, and I clearly planned on coming back,” I say quietly.

“Which is certainly news to me,” he says as he clears his throat. “I thought you were gone forever. But then again, you were always paranoid, so it’s possible this was just a precautionary measure.”

“If I thought I’d have my memories, why write this at all?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “Maybe you planned for the absence of memories, but didn’t expect to lose your knowledge. You coveted your knowledge.”

Now I know a lot about the nineties, movies, current events...and not much else. Lovely.

I close the journal and look at him. “How do I find my father? Answer me this time.”

It’s a command that he follows with sad, kicked-puppy eyes. “You simply stay whole as you walk. Your blood will guide you to whatever location you wish to see.”

He sounds...pitiful. I pat his shoulder.

“If I can command people, I’m sure Lucifer can too. How are rebellions even possible?”

“Commanding the loyal isn’t hard. It’s commanding the disloyal that proves tedious,” he bites out, still miffed.

“You forget I don’t feel guilt, so you can stop trying to make me feel guilty for not trusting you or for questioning your motives,” I say with a bittersweet smile.

Turning, I walk out, moving down the hallway in whole form. The hallways change before me, shifting and moving, and creating a new passage I wouldn’t have seen as a phantom.

That makes this trickier. Phantom keeps me safer.

“Guilt is actually a second-generation purity, one of the very few adopted from the impurities,” he calls to my back, surprising me enough to turn around.

Usually I drift down a random path, and leave jaws unhinged as I strut away in peace.

“It belongs in neither, and should the scales ever tip back into purer times, it will be passed about again,” he says as he moves closer, another of my journals in his hand.

“Guilt is considered a purity for the time, because of the good it does. It forces one to heed their conscious. The guilt forces them to repent, to love unconditionally, to be there for someone who needs them, and to protect. Guilt has been accused of affecting free will on multiple occasions, and it remains one of the biggest debates today. But there’s no way to truly eradicate guilt, so they have to balance things.”

“I think I’ve finally found someone more random than me,” I tell him honestly.

Now I know what it’s like to be this side of someone who is spewing nonsense.

“But you’re a being with no conscience and no guilt,” he goes on, undeterred as he patiently moves toward me, finally stopping just a few feet away.

“You spent years searching for four boys, exactly four, who could love you and never envy the other. Four boys who could construct a bond like no other since. You searched until you found it, because unlike all the other children, you have patience. You selfishly shirked all your responsibilities until you found them, also, because you knew the world needed them and you wanted them to be yours. And you’re the only one who could have created them as they are.”

My brow furrows, because I’m not sure why he’s kissing my ass and insulting me at once.

“You’re a selfish being designed to be so. You selfishly demand things of life as though you’re entitled to them. You selfishly break the laws of balance and reason with yourself that you can tweak things to even the scales, despite the fact no one else is allowed to do this without a death sentence.” He grins as he says that, though I have no idea why.



“Because you selfishly know that they really can’t kill you because of all the balance you provide. So you do as you please with no regards for empty consequences,” he goes on.

“That sounds very reasonable if I’m not actually upsetting the precious balance,” I feel the need to point out. “But someone did kill me. Likely the Devil.”

He grins so broadly, as though this is familiar for him. Me pointing out the logic after him browbeating their version of the story at me.

“Indeed it is. Which is why *they*—the ones who take offense—never pretend to notice. I have *no* idea how you did this without upsetting the balance. It defies every law imaginable, and it worries me of how your fate came to be for this to have even worked. But you were always smart and selfishly selfless. You’re Lucifer’s favorite.”

He’s really trying to force this *daddy’s girl* thing.

“I don’t know whether to thank you or slap you,” I tell him, genuinely perplexed by the plan of action I need to take before I sneak away from his randomness. It could be catching.

“You had no conscience, no empathy, and no guilt, but you had reason. You didn’t have greed, so your reasoning capabilities kept you from exerting your excess amount of power without justifiable provocation.”

“So I won’t go *boom* because I’m pissed?” I ask, sincerely interested in this.

It’s not easy to make me mad, I’ve learned. I’m more amused by things or terrified. Not so much of an angry person. Jealous? Hell yes. Angry? Not usually.

But still...

His grin spreads again. “Certainly not. My point to all of this is the fact that you loved so hard, you did the impossible.”

He steps closer, pushing my journal into my hand, but holding onto it even as I grip it. His eyes stay fixed on mine as

he speaks.

“You’re selfishly selfless. Which means there’s a reason you started all this. And you prepared to find the boys, but expected to have your memories, or at the very least, your vast amount of knowledge. In those journals, I’m sure you’ll find whatever you need. I’ll help when you let me. I miss feeling that love like only you could provide,” he says, the last part coming out a little quietly.

He releases the journal and takes a step back.

“*That* is why I will earn my way back into your life. That magnitude of love *only* comes from you. Despite what everyone says, *that* is why you are your father’s favorite. Because how could you not be?”

He clears his throat and takes a step back as my eyes water for no apparent reason.

“Kill your father if you must, Paca. But you’re making a grave mistake if you succeed.”

He starts walking off, and I dart out to get in front of him.

“The earth was scorching under my touch. Was it because I was so far away from them, or was it because their bond was shaky.”

“Shaky?” he inquires, sounding confused.

“They weren’t together, and they’ve apparently fought a lot since my latest death. I was in severe physical pain, and—”

“You’re *The* Apocalypse. Topside, when your balance suffers, so does your control over your very strong, destructive nature. If their bond was *severely* hurting, then yes, you’d be likely to suffer the repercussions, and the world would pay the price.”

*Great.* So I can go kaboom by accident, after all. He’s a big fat lying liar.

That’d be a shitty thing to do—destroy the world by accident just because I’m imbalanced. Humans are a lot easier

to kill than hell monsters, I've noticed.

“Can you tell me how to figure out my language?” I go on, not sharing my inner musings with him.

“The only one who thinks like you *is* you, Paca. Whatever it is you wanted yourself to know, you'll figure it out. Just try to do it in time.”

He pats my cheek and walks away.

In time for what?

“I currently hate being touched by anyone who isn't them,” I call to his back.

“I know,” he says without turning around.

Dick.

## Chapter 17

I spin around and quickly move through the corridors, trying to ignore the ruthless and completely obnoxious heartbeat pounding in my chest. I'm about to have to be really good at acting.

And even better at manipulating.

Manipulation isn't an impurity of mine, so I'm on my own with outwitting the Devil. Just awesome.

Or die. I could always die.

I'm starting to think this was a terrible idea.

Why do I think I can stick it to the Devil, exactly? Am I that arrogant with my vanity?

I start to turn around and abandon my mission until I'm more prepared, when I see a picture. It's the Gemini Twins divided into two segments of the same image.

A dark twinkle rests in their eyes as they both smirk like they ate their teacher's head or something. A shotgun on either hip, they stand proudly.

I read the plaque underneath, even though I should be leaving.

*William "Devil Anse" Hatfield and Randolph "Ole Ran'I" McCoy*

*Casualties – minor*

*Historical effect—still the most legendary blood feud to-date*

Unbelievable.

This is like the Devil's version of hanging his children's accomplishments on the fridge.

I move on, not paying attention to all the rest of the freaky hall of fame paintings. I do notice there aren't any up of me, yet I've clearly led some wall-worthy lives.

After all, Lamar said I was Cleo-fucking-patra.

Changing course again, I end up turning and moving down the hall in the other direction, walking briskly with determined strides. Not destroying the world by accident takes precedent over pretty much everything else.

And I can't help but wonder if maybe my death wasn't to prevent such a thing. Why did my paintings come down? Why can't my name be uttered in hell? What if *I'm* the bad guy? It'd clearly make sense.

We can't keep searching for answers in a home that doesn't have them, when all the answers are in hell. No matter how much we prepare, we don't have enough information to ever truly be ready for what happens next.

Time to stop procrastinating and delaying the inevitable.

The wall in front of me suddenly vanishes, unlike last time when I came through here with Lamar.

There's a room I don't know in front of me. A huge, ornate bedroom with a large bed even bigger than the one the boys built for me at home.

I whirl around, trying to take in my surroundings and wondering how I just ended up in here, but I stop as a cold sweat breaks out over me.

Leaning against the wall like he's been expecting me all day is none other than Lucifer himself.

He's smirking at me, a dark, lethal look to his gaze.

"Hello, Paca. I've been waiting for you."

*Silence of the Lambs* flashes through my mind. Along with Darth Vader. It's a scary combo.

“That’s not creepy at all,” I mutter under my breath.

Clearing my throat, I stare at him like I’m not terrified. What a fearless fool I was to think this would be no big deal.

I’ve stood before him in the past without pissing myself. However, he’s a hell of a lot more intimidating when I’m in whole form.

“I came here to kill you,” I tell him, smiling darkly as I begin the ruse of pretending I’m really *The Apocalypse*.

“Oh?” he drawls, his lips curving out in a smile, as though that pleases him in some twisted way.

Lunatic.

Or maybe he’s just that unafraid of me, which means I likely can’t kill him. Damn it.

“But, thanks to last night’s movie night, I’ve *just* decided to take a different route,” I tell him, glancing down at my nails like they’re fascinating, while secretly watching him with a wary peripheral.

“And what, dear daughter, might that be?”

He’s still smirking when I look up.

With a steady voice and a creepy smile of my own, I answer, “I came to make a deal with the Devil.”

## **End of book 2**

Book 3 is finished, and it won’t be too far behind! Keep going for a note from the author and the places where you can keep up with updates from the Dark Side Series. <3

From the author:

Well, I really hope the answers you've gotten so far are what you were hoping for, if you figured it out early. Or I hope it was a good surprise if not.

Two books left in the series, with *Two Kingdoms* up next. Yes, the books are titled like a countdown. Felt theatrical and dramatic, just like Paca, the anti-heroine whose head I love to visit.

Plenty of places to get updates available, but my facebook groups are usually the first to know things since I hang out in those a lot. <3

Where to find me:

[My Facebook](#)

[Private Book Club](#) (Very adult group. No drama. No judgment. And no one outside of the group can see what you like, post, or comment on.)

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