


A REVERSE HAREM SERIES



TWO
KINGDOMS

THE
DARK SIDE
BOOK III

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Two Kingdoms

The Dark Side III

by

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Chapter 1

Supposedly, when I make up my mind, I put my head down and accept my fate fearlessly. At least that's what Lamar said.

He said it with a believable dose of conviction, so I don't think he was lying.

I just think he's an absolute idiot.

Because as the Devil wickedly grins at me like I'm the most amusing thing he's ever witnessed, I don't feel fearless at all.

Fake it until you make it.

"You want to make a deal with the Devil?" Lucifer asks me, almost parroting my words.

Then he imitates a man who is waiting patiently, as though he expects me to beg to retract my naïve words.

I try to recall exactly what made me think I could pull this off, but it's too late now. I've committed to this role, and there's no turning back.

I've prepared for him to manipulate and trap me into some semblance of my deal, but in reality, I'll only get a little back. He'll be like the damn genie with three shitty wishes, so my wording has to be on point.

"Yes," I tell him with a firm nod. "But on my terms."

He scratches his chin, studying me a little differently.

"And what, might I ask, exactly are these terms?"

Clearing my throat, I move to take a seat at the end of the bed on the pretty little purple stool there, pretending he's not the least bit threatening. I try really hard not to react when several other things in the room start weirdly turning purple—even some walls.

He doesn't move from his spot. The Devil simply watches me. I should *not* be losing sight of him to track the progress of the rapidly spreading purple. But...it's sort of shiny and pretty and...*soooooo* not important.

“My boys will gain access to hell and whatever boosts they need to make themselves more invincible again,” I tell him, readying for his counter offer that will slice my request down to nothing and force me to stand firm.

“Done,” he says with zero resistance and a shrug of his shoulder, like it's no big deal.

Apparently, I'm aiming a little low.

“But what exactly will I be getting in return?” he asks.

Without hesitation, I say, “I've not finished stating my terms.”

He grins. “Of course not. You never did know how to deal.”

Bristling at the familiarity he seems to find in this moment where I feel like a fumbling novice, I go on. “I want them to be able to come and go as they please. They *will not* be prisoners.”

His grin only grows. “I only assumed as much, Paca. Trickery is reserved for those who don't have the capacity to make my life miserable, as you well know.”

He narrows his eyes, even as his twisted version of a grin stays in place. It's a rather unsettling expression.

I'm positive it's his "*evil*" expression, if *evil* has an expression.

But I just learned I have the capacity to make his life miserable. So...there's some bonus information. I'd prefer definitive confirmation that I have the capacity to *end* him, but I'll settle. For now.

"They can visit Hell's Black Heart to restore their strength the quickest," he adds.

A cold shudder passes over me. "As guests who can come and go as they please?" I reiterate, super careful about unspoken words that need to be spoken.

He rolls his eyes. "I've stated as much already. Why do you insist on hearing it more than once when I still have questions of my own we should be getting to?"

Clearing my throat, I continue.

"Due to my perfected balance, I want the freedom to roam topside when I please," I go on.

His expression changes, although it's subtle. It's the barely-there slant of his head and the way he cuts his eyes toward me like I've just asked a slightly surprising question, instead of stating a logical demand.

"Of course," he says, back to looking just as indifferent, but something has changed.

I can feel it.

And I hate that he's masking it for some hidden, *likely evil*, agenda.

To keep him from being suspicious, I go for something that has been nagging at me. I'm sure it would have irked the old me as well.

"My paintings should *all* be restored to the hallway," I tell him firmly, intoning no room to broker for less.

He wipes away his smile as his eyes brighten. "You always were vain. I'm surprised you've made it this long without demanding that particular request."

"My vanity is your own doing, since it was an impurity you handpicked for me," I say, pretending I know *everything*.

I'm worried it comes across as trying too hard. One would assume the Devil's daughter would find it a lot easier to be awesomely deceptive.

"Indeed it was," he answers, but there's still something peculiar shading his eyes.

"And I want to take hell books with me whenever I please," I proceed, remembering what the boys said about knowledge being power.

He bats a hand as if to say that is fine as well.

Where is the Devil's manipulation I've heard so much about?

Why is it putting me on edge that he's not even trying to negotiate me into a shitty deal instead of just accepting my terms with no counter?

“But we still haven’t reached my part of the bargain, have we?” he muses. “What do I get, Paca?”

“I know what you did. You get to live for as long as you leave us be with all the amenities I just mentioned. That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.”

I’m so proud of how badass my voice sounds.

He nods slowly, his smile slipping a minimal, but still noticeable, bit.

“And what is it that I did exactly?” he draws.

“Obviously you made sure I died,” I tell him vaguely, leaving an opening just in case he had it done instead of doing it himself.

He may have given someone else power.

Clearly he’s capable of doing far more than most people are aware of, so that’s a huge possibility.

“Is that so?” he asks, sounding ever so intrigued as he takes a step closer. “And how did I do that?”

I hold my hand up and pretend to be annoyed instead of piss-my-corporeal-panties panicky.

“Let’s not play games. I think we’ve done enough of that. I’m stronger than you thought, and I’m back. Stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of yours.”

He randomly erupts into a fit of hysterical laughter, as though I just told a joke. No one ever laughs at my jokes, but everyone always finds me amusing at inopportune moments of pure seriousness.

And...he laughs for a really long, slightly terrifying amount of time.

Warily, I take a step back, preparing to go phantom.

However, after this continues for an obnoxiously long time, it just grows agitating.

He pretends to be wiping tears of laughter out of his eyes as he faces me again at last.

“You don’t remember a thing, do you? Well, that explains so damn much. Here I was going to punish you for your insolent, long games in such a dire time.”

He’s so damn amused. So damn sure of himself.

“I do remember, Lucifer. I remember it all,” I assure him.

In the next breath, he’s suddenly right in front of me, his hand on my neck. Something crackles in the air, and my skin heats like it’s trying to burn for an intensely brief second.

I try to go phantom, only to watch in horror as his eyes turn solid black—*like that cliché that I once carelessly mocked*—and I stay frozen in this form.

“You’re very lucky I’m lucid enough to see my daughter’s presence and don’t mistake you for a shapeshifter.” With a dismissive shove, he releases me, and I stagger a little, still dizzy from the power that rushed through his touch.

As he leisurely eyes one of my journals, he begins to slowly move in a predatory gait.

“If you could remember, you’d know I had nothing to do with your death.”

“How convenient,” I bite out, clutching my throat.

It doesn't hurt at all. The burning dissipated as quickly as it began, and there's no proof it even happened. He never squeezed or even choked me. But whatever he did has left me unable to go phantom.

“Very neat little trick you picked up since your death—only letting your boys see you.” He struts around so casually, like he hasn't done anything to me. “Your trick will work again once you're out of my presence. I mean, clearly you know how to unravel my magic and can fix it yourself now, though,” he goes on, a challenge in his tone.

This is the devil's manipulation...

I wasn't prepared for this level. He's slithered in through the back like a snake—*well, that really shouldn't surprise me*—and hit me with a sucker punch.

“I can see we don't have a deal,” I say tightly.

He just grins. Suddenly, there's a sword in my hand. I drop it like it's a scalding block of ice as my heart thumps wildly in my chest.

“Well, now, that's rather alarming. Is that fear I see on my fearless daughter's face?” he asks in a deceptively curious tone as I recover.

Rolling my shoulders back, I bend and pick up the sword, ignoring the unsettling feeling of touching it. When I look across at him, he has one of his own.

Are we about to sword fight? Because...that's totally unexpected and not at all something I could have possibly prepared for.

The answer I have is not the answer I thought I was going to luck into. It makes me realize just how lucky I've been up to this point.

"I expected it to turn into a snake or something," I say bitterly, playing off my slip.

His lips twitch.

Then, in a completely foreign language, he strings together a bunch of hard consonants that I think are supposed to make up words. I stare blankly across the room at him, because I think he just cussed me out in that gibberish.

"In your favorite language, I just threatened the lives of your boys," he tells me.

I lunge for him before I can think it through, sword raised above my head. With lazy movements, he blocks my wild strike with his own sword in just one of his hands, and he stops his blade inches from my neck with his counter attack.

Freezing in place, I suck in a sharp breath. My sword stays out beside me, clutched in my tight grip, as my eyes stay locked on his. The black of his eyes recedes, fading into a duller hue.

"You didn't understand my words until I repeated them in English, dear daughter. You've never been good at hiding secrets from me." His jaw grinds as he slowly lowers his sword. "Deception is not one of your impurities. It's like you're still gone even when you're right in front of me. But I'll fix that. Time in hell may restore the things you've forgotten."

I say nothing, because I really don't have an option to argue at this unfortunate moment where swords are involved and my phantom is blocked.

“And you'll remain here full time until said memories are hopefully restored,” he adds with a smirk. “The rest you can have. That's the deal. Take it or leave it.”

“No,” I say coldly.

He grins. “Some things never change. You never did like to negotiate. Should we settle it then? The way we always settle a stalemate?” he asks.

I say, “Yes,” before I can stop myself, because something about him makes me far too competitive.

It's like I need to win this argument with the same urgency a human needs a breath of air when they're drowning. Right now it feels like I'm scrambling to break the water's surface, yet it only seems to be drifting farther away.

He holds his sword out, the tip pressing to my chest. I take a few steps back, and he follows me, his blade never pricking the skin.

After he finishes walking me to where he wants me, he moves back to his original spot. It's when he lifts his sword and takes a proper fencing stance that I suddenly understand the random appearance of the swords.

He saw this moment coming, because I'm predictable to him.

Apparently we once settled disputes by sword fighting.

Just freaking peachy. Why can't we settle things with nineties trivia or an old-fashioned foot race?

"Then let's fight for it, dear. First one to be stabbed through to the hilt is the winner and their terms will remain," he tells me, smirking like he's already won.

He doesn't know how much I don't want to be stabbed.

"Any use of powers will be an immediate forfeit," he goes on.

Which deflates what little bit of a bubble I have left.

"*And go,*" he says without any other warning, swiping my sword out of my hand in the next instant, leaving a gentle *clang* in the air around us.

I barely recover my balance in time to see him lunge, sword aimed at my stomach. For a split second, I almost fear I'm about to freeze, but I manage to roll out of the way and collect my sword before I shoot back to my feet.

A surprised cry escapes me as pain lances my side, and I whirl around, clutching my hip where the Devil has sliced me.

A taunting grin is on his lips. "Something tells me I'll be winning all the arguments for a while. I rather like this aspect of your memories being gone," he goads.

Teeth gritted, I lunge for him, slicing my sword through the air, but the dick dodges me easily and slams the blunt hilt of the sword against the back of my head.

The pain that shoots through my skull is nothing compared to the indignity of me stumbling forward like an idiot as he toys with me.

“Perhaps I’ll add killing *one* of them to the list to see if that inspires a jump in your memories,” he drawls from behind me.

I’m not really sure what happens, but this time when I whirl around and lunge, it’s faster, more precise, and he barely blocks the swipe of the sword aimed for his neck.

His eyes flare to life as a grin spreads over his lips, and he comes down hard with the sword. I dodge it, seeing sparks fly when metal clangs against metal.

The air around us electrifies, causing all the hairs on my body to prickle and tingle with defensive awareness.

My fist flies out, nailing him in the face and surprising him so much that he stumbles back from the impact. To be honest, it surprises me a little as well.

“There’s my girl,” he tells me, eyes on me like he’s excited, as the small split on his lip heals in front of my eyes before blood even drips from the small wound. “It’s an echo of a memory—muscle memory. Try to extract the actual visual, Paca.”

He lunges hard, and my knee flies up on instinct, connecting with his torso. I slam the butt of my sword against the back of his head this time, making *him* suffer the indignity of it.

But...he merely laughs harder as he turns around.

“I’m about to stop taking it easy on you,” he confesses, giving me a wink as he tries to unravel my newfound thread of confidence.

He attacks first, and I roll under the swipe before shoving my sword upward, driving it into his torso. His eyes widen as I

leap to my feet and ram the sword the rest of the way in, a sound of pure determination straining from me as bones audibly crunch inside him.

Despite the fact it should be agony, he doesn't exactly scream in pain. Not even a little.

A little arrogantly, I hold onto the sword instead of running for my life as I lean over to his ear, ignoring the fact the psycho is still chuckling.

“I win. My deal *sticks*.”

I leave the sword symbolically stuck inside him like a bad pun, as I turn to walk away, trying not to act like it's a big deal I'm leaving the Devil my vulnerable, *real-girl* back.

“If you could remember, you would have known you already have all those same amenities, sans the reborn boys having access to hell,” he calls to my back, laughing lightly. “I was just fucking with you, dear daughter.”

My teeth grit together as I blow out a frustrated breath. I have no idea what to make of him.

“Put my paintings back up,” is the last thing I say as I cross the threshold.

I feel his power melting away from me, as though simply passing through those doors broke the confining spell. Without hesitating to try, I turn phantom and get the hell out of hell.

Chapter 2

When I silently land back in the kitchen of our house and the Devil doesn't chase me down to kill me—possibly for the second time—I breathe out in relief and sag against the island.

I need someone to slap me in the face the next time I have a ridiculous plan like that. How could they let me go through with that? Are they crazy?

Sure, I had them sent away, but still, someone should have talked some sense into me before things escalated to that level. Unbelievable.

Hearing the muffled voices upstairs, I silently grab a pan. As I go through the motions of heating the oven and putting in some cookies, I try to process.

Right now, I want to sink to the floor and hug myself for a while. But the guys can't see that. They need to see someone who is as fearless as I apparently used to be.

Back before someone killed my fearless self and stole my precious knowledge and memories.

Taking one last fortifying breath, I zap myself upstairs to my room, where two angry glares immediately find me.

Jude and Kai are lounging on my bed, both of them training those lethal eyes on me.

“Before you say anything—”

“You wanted us to care,” Kai says, interrupting me, slowly standing to his feet.

“Of course I did. I still do, and—”

“You fucking maddening, suicidal, infuriating hell spawn,” Jude growls, interrupting me again.

“I realize I’m technically hell spawn, but I find name-calling to only be fun when I’m the one creating the names,” I say, trying to lighten their eerily similar, brooding mood.

Doesn’t work.

“Well, we care, and you go throw yourself at the motherfucking Devil!” Kai snaps. “And kick us out of hell when you know we can’t get back down there without an escort!”

They don’t usually yell at me quite like this. This is more grievous fury than the typical irritable outbursts.

“It was selfish, half-cocked, and completely unnecessarily stupid!” Gage’s voice booms from behind me, and I whirl around to find him and Ezekiel standing there, arms crossed over their chests, and heavy glares leveling me...predictably.

“But it was fearless,” I remind them, grinning, even though it’s a little forced.

They don’t grin.

At all.

“So here’s a riddle,” I say to lighten the very dark moods storming across their somewhat terrifying expressions. “Did the monsters move out of the way because they feared the creature running toward them with no visible sign of fear? Or

did they scatter because they feared the Devil's youngest and *most* destructive daughter?"

I hold my hands up expectantly, waiting for an answer.

Kai gives me an incredulous look.

Jude looks like he's just ready to throttle me, per the usual.

Ezekiel and Gage just stare at me like half my head is full of gibberish and they're waiting on the other half to start working.

"What happened?" Ezekiel growls, biting the words out.

Huffing, I roll my eyes. "Clearly I didn't attempt to kill the Devil. I decided that may have been too ambitious when I'm so new to discovering who I am."

They all relax a little, and Ezekiel pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Do you have any fucking idea how worried we've been? And we couldn't do a damn thing about it," Gage snaps.

"I'm killing Lamar," Jude growls.

"Lamar really had no alternative. Apparently I can command him."

They just continue doing that death-stare thingy.

"This is good news. Commanding Lamar could be a huge help," I say happily, but clear my throat and mask my smile when that earns me even scarier expressions.

I turn to face Ezekiel, the more reasonable one of the four, according to my journal...

Shit. I forgot the journals in that room when I was concentrating on fighting the Devil. Not that I could have taken them, since I can't zap around with such things.

“A move *had* to be made. Lucifer thought I had my memories, and he was waiting—”

“*Thought* you had your memories?” Gage cuts in, a fiercely unhappy look on his face. “As in *now* he knows the fucking truth?” he adds.

“Someone please tell me what to say to make you see it my way,” I say as I turn back around.

My breath leaves in a rush when I find Jude inches from me and towering over me as he grips one of my hips and pins me against the door. His gaze rakes over my face in equal parts hunger and fury, though the latter of the two is slightly dominant.

“You don't get to make those kinds of decisions on your own,” he grinds out.

That...actually confuses me. “Why not? You four make decisions on your own quite often. I'm a real girl now. Surely you're not actually clinging to some archaic sense of misogyny at a critical time like this.”

Cursing, he turns and runs a hand through his hair before pointing at Kai. “You fucking deal with her,” he gripes.

I giggle a little at Jude's accidental joke.

“*Aaaaaand* she's laughing,” Gage says on a frustrated breath, also running a hand through his hair as he turns and walks away.

“It was just the choice of words,” I try to explain. “*Deal* with her.”

“What’s so funny about that?” Kai groans.

“I guess it’s only funny since I’m the Devil’s daughter and you want to deal with me after I just made a deal with the Devil,” I say with a shrug before going phantom and zapping myself back to the kitchen.

Five...

Four...

Three...

Tw—

One second earlier than I predicted, I hear something crash to the ground, something else shatter, and four angry Horsemen shouting very not nice words about me.

“I’m going to fucking kill her myself, damn it!”

“For fuck’s sake, she’s going to drive us all insane!”

“When I get my hands on her...”

“We need to find a way to chain her to the fucking house!”

Sheesh. They act like they like me, but I think they’ve just missed threatening me.

Idly, I realize the slice from the Devil’s blade on my hip is long healed. I’m not even sure how long the wound was there, which is far different than my last experience with a blade.

“What the fucking hell?” Ezekiel roars, storming into the kitchen with the rest of the furious quad.

“So you really did find the motherfucking Devil?” Jude snaps.

“Of course I found him. He was actually waiting for me, because clearly that entire meeting was inevitable at some point,” I say, trying to sound as dispassionate as possible in hopes of staving off some of their nuclear anger.

“I really didn’t expect so much hostility,” I lie, peering at them with wide, innocent doe eyes.

Yeah, it totally doesn’t work.

In romance books, the girl gets away with everything while the guys dote on her and affectionately stroke her hair. So not fair. Fiction is starting to annoy me with all its misleading inaccuracies.

“What the hell happened? And start from the part where you had Lamar send us away while you decided—*on your own*—to go face the Devil without a plan, a weapon, or even a fucking clue,” Jude growls.

“Apparently, I can move around whole and find my way around the illusions of the royal section, and—”

“You went in whole?” Ezekiel asks me, staring at me like I’m an idiot, while also seeming to get randomly queasy as he pales slightly and sags to a chair.

“It was the only way to get there,” I say on a sigh. “And Lucifer can’t hear me in my phantom form. Lamar seemed confident in the fact *Daddy* didn’t want me dead, so I concocted another plan,” I add, making it sound much more thought-out than it truly was.

I'm not sure why I went in so damn determined I could handle that.

“What the hell happened?” Jude insists, just as the timer goes off. “What did Lucifer say?”

Putting as much gravel in my voice as possible, I answer, “He said, ‘*Paca, I am your father.*’”

For a small moment, it's like hearing crickets at the Apollo after an awesomely unappreciated joke.

“I'm going to fucking kill her,” Jude says seriously to Gage, as Ezekiel groans and scrubs a hand over his face.

Surely that deserves at least a little laugh.

“What did he really say?” Kai insists, not sounding *as* annoyed with me as the others do.

My outfit changes to the sexy devil costume, then I turn whole and pull the hot tray out of the oven with my bare hand. Turning back around, I give them a very grave look.

“He said, ‘*Welcome to the dark side, Paca. We have cookies.*’” I'm nailing that gravelly tone thing today.

I fight really hard to keep a straight face, as they all stare at me blankly.

Jude finally pushes off, turns on his heel, and stalks out, yelling behind him, “I *can't* handle her right now. Someone else make her stop being ridiculous so I can effectively yell at her some more!”

I just grin at them.

“How the hell did you time that?” Kai asks me, gesturing to the cookies and barely resisting the clear urge he has to grin.

“If I’d skipped the sadly underappreciated Darth Vader joke that no one with a sense of humor could have passed up, it might have had more impact, since that’s when the timer went off,” I point out as I put the cookies down and start eating them. “Aside from that misstep in timing and the confusing tones, this has been mostly predictable,” I go on around a chocolate-chip mouthful.

Kai snags a cookie, regarding me with a humored gaze as he eats it.

“Don’t encourage her, you dick,” Gage snaps at Kai, shoving at his shoulder.

Now that their tempers have substantially cooled, I finally tell them the important parts. “You have access to the underworld and its power boosts or whatever. You’re also guaranteed safe passage while you’re down there. You have the right to come and go as you please, and you can take as many books as you need.”

Gage snorts derisively.

“What’d you give him in return?” Jude asks as he comes back in, apparently never fully leaving.

“Nothing really,” I say with a shrug. “I just promised not to kill him while he abides by the rules.”

Four suspicious eyes narrow on me. It’s like they genuinely question my badassness.

“He really does know I have no memories,” I finally concede, knowing there’s a distinct lack of badassness compared to what I evidently used to be.

As they erupt into more yelling and chastisement, I notice some more of my journals have magically appeared. I suppose Lamar is useful, if he's the delivery boy.

Taking the journals, I grab a cookie and start walking away, knowing they'll follow, since they're ready to throttle me again.

"And he really went for this deal when he knew you couldn't remember?" Ezekiel snaps.

"Not until I bested him in a fencing match. I think I've now overcome my fear of swords," I tell them absently as I sit down and open my journal.

The journal's words are still there, and they swirl around in their various languages. I flip idly through the pages, thankful for their moment of stunned silence when I find a passage that fluidly translates itself to English.

You'll need answers to the puzzle you've laid. To seek such, refer to all things from your favorite decade.

Oh, great. I'm a rhyming riddler in here, it seems. Makes me wonder if Lucifer read me grimmer versions of Dr. Seuss when I was in my early years of becoming a manifested being.

Just freaking fantastic.

Sighing, I look up to find all of them staring at me like I've sprouted a second head.

"You bested Lucifer in fencing?" Jude asks skeptically.

"Considering how many times I've managed to save your lives based on sheer intuition alone, the surprise in your tone is actually a little insulting," I point out.

He looks amused and pissed at the same time—a look that only he can execute so flawlessly.

With his outrage slightly subdued, I continue. “Supposedly, I was a master in a former life, and somehow I triggered an echo of muscle memory. For the record, he was quite annoyed I couldn’t remember.”

They exchange a dubious look before facing me again.

“Then it couldn’t have been him who killed you,” Kai says.

“If Lucifer had killed you, you would have likely stayed dead,” Ezekiel goes on, like he’s trying to drill that thought into my head.

“Precisely,” I say in agreement, already coming to that conclusion since the adrenaline has started to fade.

“You’re agreeing?” Gage asks warily.

“For now, it seems unlikely Lucifer’s hands caused my demise. Especially given our weird encounter. He wanted me to win that sword fight. Toyed with me until he triggered my buried instincts with the blade. Whoever killed *us* didn’t kill us very well, since we’re standing here. And I might have seen it coming,” I tell them, holding up the journal.

Ezekiel takes it, his eyes skimming over it.

“I only know some of these languages,” he tells me.

“Better than me, since I only know one,” I grumble.

Gage takes it, studying the pages. “How’d you get this out of hell when you can’t carry things in your siphon?” he asks distractedly as he reads.

“Are we seriously fucking done with the topic of her going to make a deal with the Devil without our consent?” Jude snaps.

“I don’t need your *consent*,” I remind him with my favorite fuck-you grin that earns me a scowl before I turn back to Gage. “I’m assuming Lamar sent the journals here.”

“Or Lucifer,” Kai says quietly as he goes to read over Gage’s shoulder.

“What does it say?” I ask them.

“Roughly translated,” Gage says, his finger moving over the words as he traces them. “*The final level always takes attempts in thrice. Move too fast or hesitate too long, and you always pay the boss man’s price.*”

“As ominous as that sounds, it makes zero sense,” I decide to point out. “Maybe I was *mad* as well,” I add on a groan.

“This part is even weirder,” Gage goes on. “But it seems to have something to do with your current circumstance.”

I lean up, ready to listen.

“*When lives are lost, you start from the beginning. You move through the obstacles with a sense of past failures instead of the feel of winning.*”

“Yeah, no, that doesn’t really make sense either,” I say on a breath.

“The rest of this is in hieroglyphics on this page,” he says, flipping the pages.

“Just translate what you can into English for me. I’m going to go read more of our past lives in the meantime.”

“Why?” Kai calls out as I stand up.

Going phantom, I change my outfit to a long T-shirt I know will be more comfortable to lounge in.

“For one, you guys were way hotter back then,” I deadpan without turning around as I pick my cookie back up and head upstairs.

A few snorts follow that.

The truth is, I have questions about the past. Everyone looks equally innocent and guilty in our deaths. My questions stem from the fact no one is volunteering information about *how* we died. It’s irritating because I feel like I’m being coddled.

It sounds ridiculous and insane, so I don’t share it aloud. They’d just stare at me like I’ve lost more of my mind.

I still can’t shake the sinking feeling that things are about to get really complicated.

Chapter 3

“He gave us free access to the Hell’s Black Heart,” Kai states, parroting my words as he moves in closer to me on the bed, his lips brushing the column of my throat as I read about our lives as Vikings.

They sent Kai up here to get more answers since he’s still my current favorite. Manipulative devils.

“Yes,” I say absentmindedly, unable to stop reading about the scandal on the pages. “You know, we should paint my room purple, I think,” I add in a quiet murmur, still distracted as I make it sound like I’m attempting a conversation.

They were rather ruthless and brutal in this life too. And very possessive of me. Stole me right from my family’s poor home as payment for my “father’s” debt.

Then took out their payment on my body.

Over.

And over.

And over.

We’re simply a long collection of fucked up dark role players out in the real world.

They’re only referred to as their Horsemen selves in this book, instead of their Viking names.

Conquest loved sneaking in when the other three were off pillaging and plundering and doing whatever else needed to

be done for them to be the proper villains.

“I think Jude was my first,” I tell him.

“No one is telling you who went first,” he’s quick to say.

“It’d make sense,” I proceed. “After all, he didn’t have any firsts yet, and there should be at least a little balance among you four.”

“Your ass was a first too,” he crudely points out. “And there was also your first three-way. And the first time you’ve been on top. And the first—”

“Never mind,” I grumble. “You’ve successfully stifled that entire argument.”

I feel his grin grow as I continue reading.

Conquest would take her, shoving her to her belly and holding her in place while he pushed into her body and subdued her fight. Her fingers clung to the bedding under her as she cried out in fear and guilty excitement.

Guilt could only be felt in mortal form, and it was a rather consuming emotion.

She felt guilty every time she enjoyed the wicked and terrible things they did to her.

“You have to stop reading that, or I’m going to take another turn before anyone else gets caught up to me,” Kai says on a threatening breath so close to my ear as he pulls open one of my thighs.

My breathing gets harder as I start reading aloud to him.

“Conquest wanted her the most in the beginning. The others took a bit longer. But he wanted her every chance he

got, and took more than his share.”

He groans against my neck before moving between my legs, pushing the book out of my hands as his lips come down on mine, all of it happening in one swift motion.

My hands go to his hair, fingers twisting in the soft strands as he works the T-shirt up over my hips. I start kissing him harder when he reaches between us to undo his jeans.

In the very next instant, he’s ripped away from me, and my eyes blink open to see Ezekiel glaring at him as he shoves a laughing Kai against the wall.

Kai runs his hand over his lips, his eyes intently focused on me as Ezekiel gripes at him.

“Fucking really, Kai? We’re trying to get all the details of the deal she made. Not fuck her right now.”

Kai shrugs unapologetically, and I arch an eyebrow at him, wondering if he’s going to let Ezekiel just win this.

Kai smirks at me even as his eyes narrow. “The vixen is trying to tempt me.”

I’m the one to shrug unapologetically this time.

“You’re still my favorite,” I remind him. “No one else has done anything to earn the title, and only my current favorite gets to touch me...unless you all touch me at one time.”

I wiggle my eyebrows at them when they both simply stare at me.

“Don’t play games, Paca,” Ezekiel groans as Kai walks out, laughing quietly to himself as he goes.

“I’m apparently a child of the Devil. Games are just a part of my genetic makeup. I’d apologize, but I don’t have the ability to feel guilt,” I state dryly. “Now, were *you* my first? You seem a little territorial over my vagina right now.”

My gaze stays fixed on him as I wait very expectantly.

He just narrows his eyes at me.

“Can you tell us more about the deal?” he asks, trying to use a softer approach to coax me into sharing all the details yet again.

Going phantom, I let the book drop through me and zap myself to the bathroom doorway before the book ever hits the bed.

“I’m not spending what is possibly very limited time alive repeating myself on a loop,” I tell him dismissively.

He curses as I leave him behind, and I strain my hearing when I feel him siphon out of the room.

Turning on the shower, I zap myself downstairs, staying phantom and quiet as I eavesdrop on their conversation. I remain hidden in the billiard room beside Jude’s bedroom as the muffled voices get clearer.

“If it’s a trap, we’re dead,” Jude is saying.

It’s not a trap—if they’re discussing the deal, that is. The more I think about it, the more I trust it to be true. Lucifer could have simply killed me if he truly wanted me dead. Then again, I suppose he could be playing some sort of game...

I’ve read a lot about the *Royals*—myself included. Games really are a huge piece of our personalities, though there’s no

decidedly logical explanation as to why. Lack of conscience?
No true motivation to take things very seriously?

“True, but why bother trapping us when he knows exactly where we are?” Ezekiel asks, bringing me back to the eavesdropping I’m supposed to be doing.

“Because all the previous attempts on our lives have been in vain. What if this is his smart-play to end the game once and for all?” Kai asks quietly.

“He could have done that in hell’s throat,” Ezekiel points out.

“He could have done that when he called us in for a meeting,” Gage adds.

“That’s before he knew Paca had no memories. Knowledge is power,” Jude draws.

They all grow quiet for a second.

“Let’s say this is a trap, just to be safe. How do we play it?” Ezekiel asks.

So they *do* suspect Lucifer? Or this is just a precautionary measure? They’ve been trying to convince me it couldn’t be him. Just as I start agreeing with them, they change their minds?

Those moody sons of bitches. I think being moody is secretly their balance, despite all that other drivel about leashing emotions that Gage was going on about in the third trial.

I need a handbook: *How to Sync Mensies with Your Harem.*

“Then we fight our way out. She amplifies our power,” Gage points out.

“It strengthens our bond to her when we use her,” Ezekiel says quietly, his tone not telling me if that’s a good thing or terrible thing.

“Good,” Kai states flippantly. “The stronger the bond, the stronger we grow. Already I feel stronger than ever, and we apparently need to be at full strength to face whatever the hell is coming for us. Because we all feel it; something *is* coming.”

A dark chill slithers up my ghostly spine as I continue to listen. *Something is definitely coming*, I agree, mentally pretending I’m also a part of this important conversation.

“Then we’ll go tomorrow. Tonight, we try to forget we might die tomorrow,” Gage says on a groan.

“I’ll let Paca know once she’s out of the shower,” Ezekiel tells them.

I wait for a second to see if they’re going to object.

When I hear them walking out instead, I zap myself back upstairs and into the shower, leaving myself naked as I turn whole under the warm, inviting spray.

I’m not sure how long I’m in here, but when I’m finally done, I elect to wrap up in a towel instead of turning phantom and cheating the drying process the way I usually do.

Sometimes it’s nice to do the work yourself.

With my hair still wet and the towel tightly bound around my middle, I step out into my room, and—

A scream almost bubbles out of me, but a strong hand clamps around my mouth seconds before the towel is violently ripped away from my body. The only thing that stops me from going phantom is catching sight of Ezekiel in the mirror. He presses against my back as he shoves me forward, pushing me into the bed.

My damp body presses into the bedding, and my sound of surprise gets trapped in a muffled gasp.

Ezekiel stares down at me, even as he keeps one hand against my back, holding me in place, while his eyes rake over my body. He's fully naked, standing behind me like a blond Adonis in need of something dark and sinful.

A sexy, sinister look gleams in his eyes when he catches my mirror-watching, and a smirk dons his lips as my stomach clenches in anticipation. Roughly, he shoves one hand in my hair, and another, more distinguished sound of surprise slips out of me as he tugs my head back, forcing my body to bow in compliance.

The second I squirm, he thrusts into me without warning, burying himself halfway inside before allowing me to fully bend again, giving himself a better angle for the next thrust. It's just shy of painful, since I'm nowhere nearly wet enough. But the pain is exquisite.

He pulls back just a little and shoves himself inside me again, this time forcing himself all the way in. I try to move up on the bed, but he's so damn strong that he just wrangles me in place, pulling my hair hard enough to make me cry out as he starts thrashing with violent control.

Sensationally powerless and exquisitely helpless, all I can do is watch him in the mirror.

His other hand clutches my hip, anchoring me to him as he takes what he wants. Almost angrily, his hips crash against my ass as he drives in and out. His teeth grit in concentration as he watches himself disappear inside me...and withdraw from my body...over and over, his speed building.

I'm so wet now that it's an easy glide, and my body hums with so much desire that I start to ache. It feels too vulnerable. Too exposed. Too fucking good.

Each sound that tears from my throat is suppressed by my need to be quiet, worried one of the guys will come in and stop him. I'm too desperate to finish to risk that happening.

Movement to my right causes me to attempt to turn my head, but Ezekiel yanks at my hair harder, forcing me to remain right where he wants me. That blessed bite of pain only spikes the heat in my blood, stirring inside me with a vitalizing force.

"She's fucking beautiful," I hear Gage say quietly, though there's a hint of menace in a statement that should sound far more endearing.

"Yes," Ezekiel grits out as he continues to possess every current piece of me. "She is."

Gage moves to be in front of us, his eyes on my face as he leans against the wall. He watches as Ezekiel savagely takes my body like it's his to do with as he pleases. I'm too caught in the thrall to do anything but stare back, lost to sensation—both pain and pleasure bound into one divine package.

After freeing up a hand, I snake it between my thighs, causing Gage's eyes to flare with heat as I aide in hurdling myself over that line.

"Fuck," Ezekiel groans when my orgasm surprises me, peaking far too soon.

My eyes stay barely open, even as the pleasure crashes over me, around me, and through me. My gaze holds Gage's while Ezekiel's thrusts grow more insistent.

He releases my hair to grab onto my other hip. I almost feel hollow and empty in the very next second when he pulls out and spins me around.

My back drops to the bed as I try to process what's going on, until he comes down on top of me again, letting me see the desperation on his face as he pushes back inside me and starts fucking me anew.

Gage suddenly grabs my hands, roughly pinning them to the bed above my head.

"Will you be able to?" he asks Ezekiel, which confuses the hell out of me, since I can't follow a conversation and fully revel in all the incredible sensations going on at once.

Ezekiel's answer seems to come in an incoherent string of words as his eyes roll back in his head and his hips jerk against me in short, hard motions. He gives another few lazy rolls of his hips, a look of relaxed bliss highlighting every hard feature on his face as it visibly softens.

He finally stills inside me, and his eyes slowly peek open as a daring little grin spreads across his face.

“Fucking amazing,” he says on a breath before he’s kissing me, his hips beginning to rock again, even though he’s not hard inside me anymore. “I want to fuck her all day,” he adds on a groan against my lips.

“*Comoara trădătoare,*” Gage says closer to my ear before he nips it.

He releases my hands and pushes off from the bed, as Ezekiel kisses down my neck.

“You want a turn?” Ezekiel asks him, even though his hips are still rocking like he’s rushing his dick to get hard again.

“He can’t,” I say with a grin, letting my fingers come up to tangle in Ezekiel’s hair as he continues kissing a trail down my neck. My eyes stay on Gage as I add, “He’s not my current favorite.”

Ezekiel’s laughter rumbles against me, as Gage narrows his eyes.

“How did you become her favorite?” Gage asks in a bored drawl that doesn’t complement his intense eyes.

“I gave her a taste of a fantasy,” Ezekiel murmurs against my throat.

A moan passes through my lips when I feel him start to grow hard again at last, as he runs his lips teasingly up my throat with his incredibly skilled mouth.

Two more bodies are suddenly bursting into the room, and Ezekiel barely lifts his head to smirk at them as they take in the scene.

Kai starts toward us, a clear, understandable look in his eyes. He wants a turn.

I can't make it *too* easy on them. I mean, after all, I had to die to get them to trust me. They at least need to work for it. I bet that's in the *How to Control Your Harem* guidebook. I bet the old, incurably vain me wrote it.

Bitch.

"Did she see something shiny?" I hear Kai ask, smirking at me as I blink out of my distracting train of thought.

I realize they're all staring at me like they're amused. Just how long have I been in my head?

"You're not my favorite anymore," I tell him dismissively. "All of you should leave so we can finish," I add.

Gage rolls his eyes, but Jude flips me off.

"We have a new invitation to look at, so get your dick out of her. The words won't appear until all five of us put blood on it," Jude tells us. Rather crudely, I might add.

Hell people are so insensitive.

"What?" I ask, confused as Ezekiel pulls out of me and leaves me in a pile of mushy muscles and weak limbs.

I go phantom, mostly to snuff out the lingering tingles of pleasure since Ezekiel has left me in a drugged state, then dress myself and turn whole.

Jude reaches for my hand, and I give it to him. When he pulls out a knife, I don't even flinch.

His lips twitch as he slices my hand open, and that does make me flinch; I don't enjoy *this* particular burn of pain.

Gage pushes the invitation under my hand. He and Ezekiel add their blood to it, as a solitary drop falls from mine. The skin quickly mends before I even fully look away.

“Did you tell her?” Jude asks Ezekiel as the words start to form on the invitation.

“Didn’t get to that yet,” Ezekiel announces with a smug tone before facing me. “We’re going down below tomorrow to see if we really can venture that far. We thought you could stay in phantom form at first, and then distract Lamar for us.”

Frowning, I tilt my head.

“We’ll just be doing a quick book-grab,” Kai goes on, adding to the lie.

“We need to see if there’s any more information we can use to our advantage without them monitoring which books we take,” Gage goes on, only piling on at this point.

“I see,” I say tightly.

I guess they think I deserve this. It’s a reminder that I’m still not one of them in this lifetime the way I was the last one. It’s not fair to mourn the loss of a bond I can’t truly remember.

That version of us had millennia to form that bond, so I need to be a little more patient. Weirdly, patience is supposed to be one of my purities. Where the hell is it hiding?

“Fine. I’ll distract him,” I offer, knowing the only route to closeness is earning it.

Words start appearing on the paper, which fortunately draws their eyes off me. But I refrain from smirking when I see what it says.

Residents of Kincaid Manor,

The Devil himself requests your attendance at tonight's gala.

That fucks up their plans, since they wanted to wait until tomorrow to manipulate me and lie some more. I'm not sure why I'm so amused by this, but there's a sense of déjà vu.

But my smirk vanishes when I read the rest.

Dress formally. Paca comes out tonight so the family can look united once again. Failure to do so will result in unfavorable consequences. Black tie required.

Best wishes,

Lucifer

The Devil

The Ruler of Hell

King of Sin

Maker of Monsters

Master of Dark Influence

The list goes on, since apparently Lucifer considers himself important enough to have a hundred other titles. Little vain if you ask me. I bet my titles were more awesome.

“She’s wondering if she has any titles behind her name right now,” Gage says, lips twitching as I jerk my head up like a guilty girl.

“No I’m not,” I say too quickly.

Jude and Kai just quirk their disbelieving little judgy eyebrows at me.

I may can play along with things, but I really am bad at deception. How is that fair? I’m hell spawn.

“It’s like he knew we were plotting something, and he’s forcing our fucking hand to reveal her to everyone who wants her dead,” Ezekiel growls.

Jude shoots him a glare, and I play dumb, pretending not to notice the slip. I’m a little detached at the moment, trying to calculate all the factors before deciding how to feel about their lies and secrets.

For whatever reason, I feel like I should deceive them a little too. Surely I can be at least a little good at deception, so long as I keep my mouth shut.

It also makes me sympathize for a moment with Lamar. I’m not capable of empathy, but understanding one’s point of view without genuine empathy is still possible.

I reach back and grab my balance book, reading over my purities. Nope, no empathy. Just double checking.

“We’re weaker up here,” I say, gesturing around us absently. “We’re clinging to the surface, and he’s forcing us below because he wants me stronger. I feel so much stronger down there.”

“You’re the Devil’s daughter. Of course you’re strongest there,” Jude states dispassionately.

I turn to face him. “I’m still healing from the first death I must have suffered, and then I suffered a second one. Since then, I’ve been stalled without any new level-ups.”

The flicker of regret in his eyes has me curious. From what I can tell, no one in hell can survive with the ability to feel guilt, so I know he doesn’t have that purity. Then I remember what Lamar said about true, unpersuaded regret.

“I’m not trying to take a jab, Jude. I’m pointing out that Lucifer wants me there, and he’s trying to force our hand. Because he *wants* me stronger. Is that a good or bad thing?” I ask him, wondering if any of them will admit they *do* suspect him now that I’m forcing them to tell the truth or lie to my face.

Again.

Jude doesn’t even blink or hesitate to answer. “I don’t see how it could be bad to want his daughter stronger. We’ll go tonight and see how it plays out. If shit hits the fan, we’ll have an escape plan. But if he wanted us dead—”

“We’d already be dead,” I say with a tight smile. “I’ve heard you say that enough times to get the point.”

I pat his shoulder, not calling them out on their lies. Having a best friend would certainly be useful right now, and I miss the relationship I never remember having with Lamar.

Because as it is, I let them talk amongst themselves, withdrawing as I have a seat in the gown I’ve fashioned. They plot multiple escape-hatch ideas, and even start gathering go-

bags, as though we can run and hide from the Devil—The Four Horsemen and *The* Apocalypse hiding from the Devil.

It's laughable on a level they don't have the sense of humor for.

Our place isn't among humans. At least not full time. Not now that we know the truth.

Stewing over the fact I'm being forced into this after winning that sword match, I creep out while they're busy doing their sneaky thing and go do my own sneaky thing.

You know...for balance.

Chapter 4

“Boo!”

Lamar squeals like a little girl when I appear right in front of him with that one-word, unoriginal opener.

He clutches his heart as I take a seat in his room, glancing around.

“Did I do that very often back when we were besties?” I ask him, taking in the nude lover’s painting of him and Manella hanging on the wall across from me.

I think it’s weird to see that much of one’s manifested sibling amidst the throes of passion, so I quickly look away.

“Not quite that way,” he says, clearing his throat and trying to recover, even as he beams a telling shade of red.

Interesting...hell people *can* blush.

“So we’re not demons, I’ve been told. What do I call hell people?”

“Call them by their titles. Royals. Escorts. Castle guards. Prison guards. Spirit balancers—”

“Spirit balancers?” I ask him, keeping my eyes on him just in case I’m wrong and he tries to stab me in the gut with another powerful weapon that might have some secret royal killing ability.

“Yes, spirit balancers. It’s a power you bestowed upon me. It’s one of the highest honors. I help find a new position for

one who's unbalanced to see if their balance can be restored before it progresses to a point of no return," he continues.

"Did you do this for me?"

"I knew your balance, but I never had to check it for you," he says with a soft smile. "Every decision you make is selflessly selfish. You maintain your balance without even trying, because you're a master, even now. It's why you were the most successful of the royals."

It always sounds like he's kissing my ass, and quite frankly, it's just uncomfortable.

"So being selflessly selfish *is* my balance?"

He nods, frowning. "I thought I made that clear the last time we spoke. Before you went to kill your father."

His lips twitch like he finds that last part amusing.

"You were a box of nonsense prattling on about really confusing things that pertain to balance."

I hate all these sad looks in his eyes when I say something that apparently isn't something I would have said back then. It's like he's mourning the loss of the friend he had while staring at the flimsy version of her that's left.

"The word *balance* sounds so simple. But it's equivalent to a human trying to stand on one leg for four days without wavering in the slightest. It's impossible to without a crutch of some sort. Except for you. You never needed methods to maintain your balance, and you effortlessly stood on one leg from the day you were created until you ceased to exist."

He swallows while forcing a tight smile.

“As I’ve stated before, only you strived for the impossible,” he adds.

“I’ve saved my reborn harem numerous times, even gave my life—without knowing I’d rise from the fiery grave. I’d say that’s *just* selfless.”

He smirks. “Yes. It is selfless to love so fiercely you’d trade your own life for one—*or all*—of theirs,” he agrees. “There’s no doubt you’ll always put them before yourself. But it’s also selfish, because you love them too much to suffer through the agony of losing even one. You’d *rather* die.”

When he puts it like that...

I bristle in my seat, now thinking back to every single decision I’ve made that bore enough weight to affect this internal balance.

“When you trust me enough, I’d like to check your balance, though. I’m simply curious if anything has changed. Especially considering the emotional distance left between you and the boys,” he continues.

I grow wary at how he seems to know there’s an emotional distance. Though, considering he saw us back when we were so in love that it was sickening, I suppose that could be easily purported as emotional distance.

“We’re in a new phase of our relationship. It’s an adjustment period,” I state vaguely.

I get a sad nod that I really don’t think should be all that sad. Adjustment periods are normal.

“But why do I need to trust you for this?” I ask him, frowning.

“Because *I* need to trust you won’t recycle me when it hurts,” he states like it’s obvious.

“Why does it hurt?” I ask, dubious.

He gives a lazy gesture around us. “Because it’s hell. Everything hurts.”

Right. Should have guessed that one on my own.

“I felt you years ago, but was convinced it was wrong. You felt...*different*...but so similar. I thought I really might be imagining things,” he continues. “Which is why I want to check it.”

“Well, earn that trust so I don’t recycle you, and then we’ll talk,” I state facetiously, glancing around.

He’s grinning when my eyes come back to his. “So who was first this time? Just curious.”

“That’s a completely inappropriate, personal question, and I’m so glad you asked,” I say, a little giddy as I sit up straighter, causing his smile to broaden. “I think it was Gage.”

His smile falls as an incredulous look forms on his face. “You *think* it was Gage?”

“Well, they didn’t want me to know who was first so that I didn’t have a favorite. But I always have favorites that change based on the moment—you know. They’re just being ridiculous.”

He sits back, still seeming oddly confused.

“They blindfolded me. The only one I saw was Kai, and that’s because he was last,” I explain.

“I’m just surprised you allowed that,” is what he finally says as he sits back, perplexed.

“Why? Am I supposed to be a control freak?”

“You’re supposed to be too selfish to allow something like that, even with a selfless counter reasoning, because that completely changes the dynamic of your group,” he says seriously, leaning forward like who-went-first is a huge deal.

“Well, how did we do it last time? I chose who went first?”

He’s quick to nod.

“You sent them to their own separate rooms, and you visited them one-by-one. You told them all they were first. They all believed it, and swore to keep that information sacred, so that they always secretly felt like your favorite, no matter who the current favorite was,” he explains.

I find myself inching closer.

“Who really went first?” I ask like it’s a bad habit already.

“I have no idea,” he says with a shrug. “You never told anyone but me what you did, but you never even trusted me with the secret of who went first. You simply said it didn’t matter, because you drew the names at random. But you see how this changes the group dynamic exponentially, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” I say while batting a hand like it’s no big deal. When he continues to stare at me expectantly, I sigh. “Fine. No clue. How did it change?”

With a flick of his wrist, a string of rope starts snaking across the ground, moving toward us.

With wary interest, I keep my eyes trained on it as it starts lifting into the air, circling until the circle is complete from end to end.

Then the rope does something weird, fraying and spinning out one section of its braid, forming four straight lines that move to the center of a circle. With some amazement, I watch as it spins what looks like a female rope-figure in the center of the circle.

Four ropes tie to the figure's arms and legs, and the figure pulls that rope, bringing the circle tighter.

"You controlled the dynamic last time. You pulled, and they went with you so willingly and effortlessly," he says.

Suddenly the circle starts widening, and the figure's arms and legs start being stretched as it tries to go in four directions with the circle, straining not to break.

"They have the power in this dynamic, and they're pulling you along with them. It's a huge concession on your part, because you held all the power."

I'm not really sure what to say about that.

"So...do you think it was Gage or not?" I ask instead. "You know the old them enough to help me out, surely."

He just blinks at me.

"This is serious. The Four Horsemen have more power in your relationship than you, *The Apocalypse*."

"Yeah. I heard you. I already know that, and I'm okay with working my way toward being an even member, though it can be frustrating at times. Don't tell them that, though. I want

admiration, not pity. However, right now, I'm just trying to figure out who my first was."

He sighs heavily, even though I see him struggling not to grin.

"No clue. The men I knew would have battled to be your first and not taken a vote on the matter. While you're all the same in a great many respects, you're also completely different."

I'm not sure how long I've been gone, so I stand, nodding, at least feeling better about talking this through aloud.

"Thanks for the pep talk. Tell Lucifer I won't be showing my face at the party tonight, because I stabbed him through the stomach and won."

He blinks, seeming visibly stunned by the abrupt shift. I feel like I get an award for not being the predictable old Paca that everyone but me remembers.

He opens his mouth to speak, finally recovering, when I add, "A deal's a deal."

Going *Ghost Girl*, I zap myself back to the guys, appearing just in front of Kai as he steps into my bedroom.

"Where have you been?" he asks with a frown.

Terrible at deception and all that, I decide to grab him by his shirt with one hand, drag him down by his neck with the other, and kiss him until he forgets he asked a question.

Just when he groans into my mouth and grabs a double handful of ass, I pat his chest and break the kiss, whispering across his lips, "You're still not my favorite."

I grin when he curses and falls through my phantom form.

My next favorite will be whoever tells me what the real plan of the night is.

“Fucking tease,” he calls to my back, question forgotten.

Chapter 5

We've been waiting for whoever is coming to pick us up for hours now. It's encroaching midnight at this point.

Gage is 'resting' his eyes with his head in my lap as I read.

I've decided that if it's not the Devil, it has to be one of my evil siblings. More specifically, Lilith. She's the eldest—manifested only hours before Cain. After all, her deadly sin is *envy*. Just like Lamar was saying.

However, mine is wrath and I don't want to go around killing people or making them kill each other like it's a compulsory disorder or anything.

What if I influenced someone to take wrath out on me?

My conspiracy theories are turning into threads of more conspiracy theories, backed up with rumors from other thin conspiracies.

I need a drink.

Or an orgasm.

Or both.

Absently, I run my fingers through Gage's soft, light brown hair that is dusted with traces of blond. I didn't realize how very peculiar and interesting his hair was back before I was allowed to touch it.

It makes me wonder if what Lamar said about designing them to my specifications had any merit.

This is all rather frustrating. I hate not having the answer to the worst riddle.

Who killed the Four Horsemen and *The Apocalypse* if not the Devil?

I never wrote much about the other, less hellfire place that I'm scared to mention, since I'm sort of evil and worry that I'm not allowed to say its name. Was it someone from that side who had the power to strike me down?

"No. That would have to disrupt a balance," I whisper to myself as Gage stirs ever so slightly in my lap before releasing a heavy sigh.

Still, seems prudent to consider such a possibility, since rationally it would be our most obvious enemy. Have to say, I don't know how I feel about being the bad girl who was killed by one of the good guys. Sort of makes me feel like I have no right to complain, since I could be the end of all civilization.

But it also really makes me stabby.

Two hands move to my shoulders, and I almost drop the book when they begin massaging me, loosening the muscles that have apparently grown tense during my long reading session.

"This is possibly the quietest I've heard you be since you woke up from your faint that first night," Jude says smoothly from behind me, working away the last of the tension that has gathered in my shoulders.

"I've spent longer actively ignoring all of you before," I murmur absently.

My head lulls back as I soak in his touch. I haven't really gotten to enjoy it as much as the others, since he only recently came around. I decide not to mention I was very quiet for the month I spent dead and buried.

They seem to be sensitive to dead girl jokes so soon.

My eyelids lift, which surprises me because I don't remember them closing, and I stare up at Jude as he stares down at me.

"I'm trying to learn who else may have had cause to get rid of us, and working through the scenarios of why and how we died to go along with each new theory. Lilith is one of the top contenders," I explain.

His hands pause on my shoulders as his brow wrinkles. "Do you think she'd be powerful enough?"

I shrug. "With the help of the Gemini Twins, I think it'd be very possible. Also, there's Cain and Hera. They regularly team up against the old me in these books. Cain recycled three of my harems before the four of you, after I did something of equal measure to piss him off. It's rumored that we're rather deadly when dealing with our sibling rivalries."

I state all this without any emotion, because as I said, I've detached myself from the situation. The girl in these journals, for all intents and purposes, died with her memories.

I'm just trying to figure out who I am now, and what pieces of the past we should concern ourselves with for the future.

"In one of the books, it states your siblings were allies. I'm not sure when, but at some point, they protected us. Mostly because pieces of you lived inside us. It's all we could

translate from that section,” he tells me, messing with that theory.

However, it’d be foolish to dismiss it because of one redeeming instance.

After all, we’re discussing the Devil’s children. In this particular case, *the devil truly is in the details*.

“What do we know about Manella?” I ask him, returning my attention to the book in my hand. “And the place that is not hell?”

“Purgatory,” he supplies like that’s the place I’m referring to.

“The purer place,” I counter.

“Ah. Not much really. Harold is tight-lipped about anything on that front. He said it didn’t really concern us, given the obvious; we were designed for hell.”

“Have you spoken to him since learning new information?” I ask.

“I’m afraid to share that information, since apparently it’s not good news to most of hell. He’ll find us if he hears the whispers.”

“What about your souls when they were truly mortal? Before the first visit to hell that ended with an imbalance and the ensuing madness?” I go on, absentmindedly.

His hands pause on my shoulders again. “We haven’t found anything on that yet. I’m not entirely sure I want to know. The more we learn about ourselves before you, the less I want to learn.”

My smile tugs at one corner of my mouth.

“That was then. The four of you before me in this life seem to have done just fine,” I tell him as my gaze flicks back over the pages.

His hands on my shoulders remain still for a second, and he squeezes them once more before walking off.

I resume reading and stroking Gage’s hair, but pause when Gage sleepily says, “We weren’t doing well at all. We just found ways to supplement something we didn’t know was missing.”

Clearing my throat, I restrain my smile. I doubt he’d say that if he wasn’t halfway asleep.

“Our bond wasn’t complete with just four,” he adds before drifting back off, as though he specifically woke up to say that.

Gage is definitely my favorite.

Ezekiel walks over, taking the book from my hand, and I peer up at him. “Someone’s coming,” he tells me quietly.

I go phantom immediately, putting our plan into action. Well, the part of the plan I’ve been informed of, that is. I haven’t eavesdropped anymore on the secret planning.

Gage’s eyes pop open, and he looks up, confused as his head drops to the couch after falling through my phantom lap.

His eyes widen when he senses whatever Ezekiel just did, something I apparently am unable to sense just yet. It makes me wonder if Lucifer isn’t right about me needing to spend some time at *home* until I’m back at full strength.

Though I did sense Lamar coming that one time...

I just don't know how to convince the guys to spend a lot of time in hell, since they're still hiding their suspicions about Lucifer.

All four of them move to be in front of me, and I poke my head around Kai's arm just the doorbell rings.

With a flick of my wrist—*something I've been working on in between reading various family history pieces in my journals*—the door opens.

More and more of the journals have appeared all throughout the day. Lamar has even sent some post-it notes on them, estimating the ages of the journals based on the power he feels from them.

The distraction of my wandering mind has caused me to miss the fact three beautiful men have entered. I bet they have to wear doggy bags over their heads when they're *downstairs*.

"We're ready when you are," Gage says to them.

"We were instructed not to take you to the gala until you were all five in attendance and wearing your masquerade masks," the escort closest to us says.

Damn Devil is fucking with me again. He really does like his games.

I guess I should have been more specific when I said I wouldn't *show my face*.

Materializing four masks is a simple task since my last upgrade, and when I become whole, I have their masks in my hands. My mask is already on—an ornate silver one decorated in diamond trimming. It covers three-fourths of my face, leaving only a small corner of my mouth revealed.

My gown is silver as well, shimmering as it gracefully clings to me in all the right ways, giving the illusion my body is far more impressive than it actually is. I'm going into hell already *hot*.

I laugh a little at my own inside joke, even though I doubt the guys will be overly impressed. Their expectations are unreasonably high, I've noticed.

The dress hides my shoes, allowing me to wear less-than-glamorous footwear that is far more comfortable beneath the pooling fabric.

I've been wearing something completely different all afternoon, thinking of all the things I'd do differently now that I've had time to actually design a gown in my head.

When I step around the boys, holding out their masks, I hear a couple of groans.

The three escorts startle, their eyes dipping. Kai starts to do something stupid when one of the strangers licks his lips.

Pretending not to love the fact he's getting a bit protective—*or maybe jealous?*—I give Kai a dry look as I grab his wrist. "I've seen what his kind looks like in hell. You can't even possibly think I'd be into that. I'm a horrible, shallow person, remember?"

Kai's lips twitch, his anger dissipating, since I'm good at least that much, even if they rarely ever laugh at my jokes.

The escort doesn't even seem bothered by what I've said. Or deterred. He still seems to think he has a chance. Four guys is more than plenty, especially since I've barely even had a taste of them yet.

It's like this entire mess paused while I died for a month, and resumed the second I returned. Again.

They all put on their masks, and I take in the perfect colors I've chosen. Black gets passed off to Gage. Red goes to Kai. White is the one on Jude, simply because I'm ironic. Ezekiel's is pink with hearts and flowers because I'm an asshole right now, and he is supposed to side with me about stuff...but he hasn't been doing that.

"Seriously?" Ezekiel asks me, but I ignore him as his mask turns gold, something he's apparently doing.

I guess it'd be hard to take him seriously in pink, and I need him serious tonight. My petty passive aggressiveness will just have to wait until a more appropriate time.

I pointedly ignore the escort who is still leering at me as I run my finger up Gage's arm, letting him grope my ass as a show of caveman possessiveness or whatever. Totally not letting him know how much I enjoy the possessiveness.

"Escort us, already," Jude drawls.

They do.

Well, sort of.

One second I'm with all four of them in our living room, and the next I'm alone with that one escort. At a quick glance, it looks like we're in a servant's quarters—readily available knowledge that makes no sense to me.

I don't know if we're in hell or not, since he looks the same and not like the usual mutated guards or escorts.

"Fresh reaper, are you?" he asks.

Ohhh, so he singled me out intentionally. *Sigh*.

“Surface guardian,” I correct.

“Very disrespectful of the Elders, it seems. When graced with one’s presence for an escort, a girl should definitely show more respect.”

Damn my four psychos. They knew he wasn’t an actual escort. They know these things, and they know I don’t. Yet they let me talk shit.

No wonder Kai was so damn amused.

He saw this coming.

Is this how the Horsemen treat the woman they share? Is this really the sort of romance I’m destined for?

Considering I feel power practically humming through me, I come to the conclusion we’re certainly in hell.

In the next breath, the man has me slammed into the wall, his arm coming up to my throat. I feel power gently running off him and into me, but it’s not very harmful. In fact, it almost seems to be fueling my own power. Given his expression, I don’t think that’s its intended effect.

“First I’ll show you what the new ones do when graced with an Elder’s presence as an escort, and then I’ll show you what happens when you disappoint,” he says in a quiet, lethal tone.

“You didn’t exactly inform me you were an Elder,” I point out.

“You *feel* it, girl. Don’t act like you don’t.”

The only thing I *feel* at the moment is rather annoyed with his proximity and the fact he's touching me. I wasn't kidding with Lamar when I told him I only enjoy *their* touch.

Even Neal's touch wasn't what I wanted, even though I tried to want it. I wonder how old Neal is doing. I hope he tells a girl he may one day possibly love her, and has to watch her literally run away.

Hmmm...I wonder if he'll ever end up in hell. I could torment the guys with his presence, assuming they learn to trust Lucifer and let us move down there.

I'm scratching my head now, wondering why in the hell I expect them to ever trust the Devil. Just how crazy am I?

"Is it illegal to kill an Elder in hell?" I ask the guy when he presses closer, bringing my errant mind back to the current problem at hand.

He snorts, and then he looks at me like I'm a complete imbecile.

"Even if you could manage the impossible," he says, running his thumb along my lower lip before lifting my mask and tossing it away, "you'd never make it out of hell alive."

His eyes rake over my face like he enjoys what he sees, not an ounce of fear flickering across his features. Time to practice being a badass before I have to face the Devil again.

"I've been told I like impossible odds. I'd wager you're less than five centuries old."

His eyes narrow as his gaze comes up. "How could you possibly know that?" he asks me, suspicion in his tone.

I step into him, a simple act that causes him to stumble back, while I exert very little effort. That's a good sign. Fingers crossed—with any luck, this will be easy-peasy.

“Because you'd know better if you were older,” I say before he's suddenly launched out of the room and slammed against the wall.

I did that! I mentally put the celebratory dance on hold, trying to look like I already knew I was going to be a badass on command.

He immediately throws out a shock of power I can't see, but I certainly feel it. In fact, it hums through me, causing awareness as it tickles across my skin.

When I clear my throat of some weird giggle from the insistent tickles, his eyes widen in horror. Something about the fear in his eyes draws forth a familiar feeling of dominance and power.

A feeling of invincibility with a sense of command.

A capable sense of *knowing* and *understanding*.

Let's call this...my inner crazy girl.

“Who the fucking hell are you?” he bites out as I walk by, letting his power roll off me, channeling it back toward him in a way that feels instinctive and oh-so natural.

His eyes turn red as he starts to choke on nothing at all, and I tilt my head, wondering if this is the outcome he expected his power to have on me.

If so, that's rather abrupt. This guy barely knew me. My one crime is not knowing he's a big shot. Hell people get kill-

happy real quick.

I suppose I should have seen this coming, in all honesty.

His skin starts to crackle, and ash fills in the creases as he begins to wilt away before my eyes. Is this my power or his? I don't know, but I'm alarmingly fascinated by the process.

“Who?” he asks through strain, as I kneel, unmoved by the sight of his death, yet still entranced with the simple act of the uniqueness in which he's dying.

He strangles on air, his eyes widening as the fear starts working him into a faster grave. This is his power. It's like I can sense and taste it now.

He really should have kept his power to himself.

Feeling that familiar sense of authority rolling through me, as though my surroundings are trying to remind me of who I am, I whisper, “I'm *The Apocalypse*.”

The name's not so bad when you're terrifying an already dying man with it, instead of overthinking its meaning.

I walk away before my mind rambles into that territory, following the sounds of what has to be the party. So this is what it feels like to be Lucifer's youngest daughter.

Creepy, dark power trip. Got it.

I go phantom and reappear with a new mask that still covers most of my face and a fresh dress the other escorts—who may have also been Elders—won't recognize.

The red dress flows to my feet just as the silver one did, and the red mask will match Kai's. In fact, he's the one I spot first, standing in a corner and pouring a drink.

However, he's wearing the black mask I intended for Famine instead of the red one I chose for him.

I notice Gage near him, wearing the *white* mask. They're like little girls trading clothing.

His eyes meet mine over the rim of his glass as he sips his drink. He props up next to a mantle, watching the dance floor like he's pretending to be interested.

His grin spreads like he knows I just killed a man.

We really are horrible people, no matter what life we're living.

Two arms come around me from behind on my way over to him, and I spot a flash of inky black hair next to my face, telling me it has to be Jude.

"Do you feel better now that you got to kill someone?" he asks as he nuzzles the side of my face, kissing a spot just behind my ear that momentarily distracts me. "You've been cranky *as hell* today."

I snort at the punny hell pun, but then I quickly school my features. It's time to play a little bit hard to get. They turn me into putty too easily.

"I'm indifferent to killing. Apparently I don't enjoy it as much as you...unless the ground is sizzling under my feet."

He looks confused as he moves in front of me, wearing the *red* mask.

"In other words, don't do me any more favors. Killing a random hell dude isn't the hell spawn equivalent to popping a Midol," I dutifully explain.

He always looks angry when he wants to smile about something stupid I've said. Taking my hand in his, he pulls me close and begins to dance with me. His other hand draws me closer at the waist until our bodies are flush against each other's.

We move in time with the haunting music so fitting for a royal hell gathering. Idly, I wonder when the hell I learned to do this dance. I almost feel like I'm being cheated out of the fun parts of learning these things with *this* memory.

"This is the first time you've acted truly angry," he tells me, his intrigue shining in his dark eyes. "What's going on?"

My jokes never get much of a reaction. But my anger always seems to amuse him. I suppose it should be fair, since his anger can amuse me at times.

But this is different.

"Thousands of years of memories are just gone. Memories of who we were, how we came to be, and what we once shared. A bond that left powerful echoes throughout time...the entire world envied us, even as they feared us. All of that's just someone else's story now. That Paca and those horsemen really are dead."

His hand comes up, slipping into my hair as he tilts my head back and studies my eyes, his amusement quickly fading.

"The longer I dwell on it, the angrier I become, even if I'm not demonstrating rage," I confess. "*I'm angry* that I feel like two people instead of one whole one. *I'm angry* that I've been robbed of my memories. *I'm angry* that the four of you found each other centuries before you found me. *I'm angry* you don't

love me anymore. *I'm angry* that we aren't all coming together and forming that bond together the way it happened last time—when I was just as important to the bond instead of simply an addition. I'm angriest at the little clock ticking in my head as if it's telling me there's a timer on us. *I'm angry* at my father, just like Richard Gere in *Pretty Woman*. That man turned a prostitute into a classy woman in a cocktail dress.”

He bites down on his fist, likely to keep from making any comment and acknowledging the last part of that otherwise perfectly well-rounded assessment. I smile, because it's hard for me to stay so serious when he's taking me so seriously. It weirdly seems to give me a headache.

One can only assume *The Apocalypse* should be wary of headaches. You know, in case I accidentally go *kaboom* or something. I doubt an “*Oops, my bad,*” would make up for me accidentally destroying everything.

Someone really needs to explain.

“You lied to me today. Ezekiel lied to my face, and all of you lied by keeping your suspicions and theories secret and apart from me all day, even as I shared all mine with you.”

His eyes widen briefly before narrowing.

“You don't treat me like one of you. You treat me like—”

He leans over, his quick movements causing my words to cut off as I suck in a breath of surprise. His hands grip me tightly, and he drags his lips up my throat to my ear.

After nipping my earlobe, he whispers, “You went after Lucifer and had us sent away—”

“That sending-away part was an accident,” I feel the need to defend, unsure why he’s even bringing this up when we’re discussing something completely different.

“You went after him and left us out of the decision,” he continues, the words so quiet I barely hear them.

And then I get it.

It’s not so much what he says as the way he says it.

As though he’s been trying to tell me this all along, and he feels as though I’ve finally heard him, he adds, “You can’t expect us to treat you like one of us until *you* treat us like you’re one of us. We’re not fighting this anymore, Paca. You just don’t realize you’re the one fighting us.”

I pull back, letting his lips brush mine as his eyes find mine again.

“You make decisions together,” I state like I’m finally catching on and feeling stupid for not realizing I actually must have hurt *their* feelings for a change.

Or scared the unholy hell out of them, given the fact I’d just come back from the dead. In hindsight, I suppose it was more insensitive than I gave it credit for.

“*We* make decisions together,” he echoes. “You made yours on your own. And it was a decision that needed a lot of planning and deliberation you didn’t take the time to account for.”

He bites my bottom lip in a way that’s both sexy and punishing at the same time before walking off. As though I’ve been handed off to the next horseman for the evening, Kai

steps up, pulling me against his body. I'm not finished with Jude yet, damn it.

“That dress is so much better than the silver. But red is Jude's favorite color. Not mine. Mine's black,” he answers.

“Perfectly aware of your favorite colors. Pink was simply to fuck with Ezekiel. But now Jude went and made me feel like the ass who deserved the pink mask,” I grumble.

“Pink is less of a punishment for girly girls,” he decides to quip, almost like he overheard my conversation with Jude and doesn't need to ask *why*.

“Considering the obvious, I think pink would look silly on me as well. But purple could work,” I say, tapping my chin as I pretend to be my normal self.

Ezekiel's eyes meet mine from across the room, and I look next to him...where Hera is loitering.

I freeze, having temporarily forgotten I have psychotic siblings who've killed, fucked, and stolen my harems in the past. Technically, the guys aren't really my harem; they...hold irretrievable pieces of myself.

They *own* me. Not the other way around.

Hera moves closer to him, and he keeps his eyes on me, never looking at her, almost as though he knows I will lose my shit if any interaction happens between the two of them.

I will so cut my unnaturally gorgeous sister who really does need a few blemishes on that flawless face of hers.

Talking to girls is fine. I'm not that crazy. But not Hera. I don't have the memories of how easily she stole men from me,

but I do have the feeling of pure dread and unbridled envy pumping through my veins.

It's like I remember without the memories about what she's capable of.

Her eyes follow his as a dark, twisted grin lights up her features, and when her eyes meet mine, an actual chill forms in the pit of my gut.

Kai's grip tightens on me, and Hera takes a step closer to Ezekiel, as though she's deliberately trying to provoke me.

Another step.

And another.

Now it feels as though Kai is preparing to hold me back.

"Don't do it, *comoara trădătoare*," Kai says close to my ear, his voice barely a whisper.

In the next instant, I'm suddenly phantom and zapping myself to be in front of Hera, though she has no clue I've done so. Her brow furrows as she looks around like she's trying to see where I've disappeared to, having no idea I'm now between her and Ezekiel.

Ezekiel snorts then coughs to cover the sound, before wandering off while Hera is distracted.

"Couldn't have been her," Hera seems to whisper to herself, and for a second, she almost sounds saddened.

Which is hella confusing, since five seconds ago it seemed like she was trying to provoke me.

"Hell is seriously frustrating," I mutter to myself.

Overall, the party is rather overwhelming, even without Hera's confusing antics. It's like my head is doing all it can to file away every piece of information and see if it rings any dormant bells.

But no memories resurface. No unturned stones flip over in my mind to spur some sort of intuitive direction to go next.

Only power comes from revisiting a home I can't remember, and it's as frustrating as it was the last time I was down here.

Still phantom, I walk across the floor, noticing the Gemini Twins lounging. Men and women are hanging all over them, their tongues disappearing into various mouths.

Cain and Lilith are talking in the corner, which is different than I expected, since Cain and Hera are supposed to be teammates. How much has changed since those journals I've read?

Manella was always my backer and sibling friend, something I know from Lamar and the journals. Yet I don't see him anywhere, nor do I see Lamar.

The Devil is also missing from attendance.

That's certainly got a lot of my attention right now.

Just as I start walking out of the room, feeling almost dizzy with all the uncertainty surrounding me, hating the fact we were summoned for the sake of Lucifer's games, Gage steps into my path.

Without looking at me, he whispers, "Stay calm. I'll take your mind off things if you need me to."

Oh, the temptation to pretend something isn't gnawing at me is almost tangible. But something's wrong.

"I'll take you up on that later," I say as I pass through him, feeling those blessed tingles that alleviate some of the dread inside me.

He curses and tries to follow me, but I zap myself to a location that feels familiar, and then I turn whole so I can navigate the hallways.

Glancing around and ensuring I'm alone, I move through those hallways until I come across the paintings. My eyes scan the walls until I see my Cleopatra painting hanging there—the old me surrounded by my four men from that time.

My eyes flit to the painting next to mine, and it's the twins. One has on a British 'red coat' uniform, and one has on a Scottish kilt. Both are smeared with copious amounts of blood and smiling like unrepentant sadists.

First war of Scottish Independence.

No famous names.

Just a lot of bloody warfare for the twins as they worked behind the scenes to stir the feuds.

Confused, I look around, wondering why they're always each other's opposition in the paintings they're in.

My eyes instead land on an image of Lilith with dark hair, smiling wickedly as she clutches a bloody axe, despite the fact she's wearing a prim and proper dress.

Lizzie Borden

Casualties – minor

Historical impact – just shy of legendary

I give an exaggerated roll of my eyes after reading that last line.

I'm beginning to think they caption these images themselves, because you can hear the vanity and self-importance rolling off the vapid overtones.

Just as I find another image of me in a regal gown and read the plaque that indicates I was a very memorable queen once again—who conveniently never married—a chill slithers down my spine.

I don't even have to look over to know the Devil has just located me in his Hall of Sick Fame that I demanded to be a part of. I'm not sure why I thought I could be let out in public.

“Your mortal lives didn't always impact the world,” Lucifer says conversationally, as though we're fast friends now that I've bested him in a sword match.

Winner or not, he still found a way to get me right back down here and possibly threaten my existence topside.

There's the Devil's manipulation that I had expected from the very beginning. I never stood a chance. However, now I'm starting to wonder if he's right.

Without looking at him, I glance at the next image of me. My lips twitch when I see the Duchess I've read about. We

certainly had no historical impact in that life because we were too busy being sexual deviants.

“It’s a hard balance to maintain, and it’s been ours to handle for a great amount of time, since the world always has just a touch more evil in it than purity,” he goes on.

I move on to the next picture, pretending to be comfortable with his presence. I pause when I see the Viking image, all of us being ridiculously crude—*and lewd*—for the pose.

My fingers trace the image of all four of them, wishing I knew them as well now as I did back then. Back when I had all the faith in the world I’d find them in any life.

“The world forgets religion, culture, and various other things that seem prosaic or outdated to them. Morals get twisted for the sake of personal gain. With progression and innovation comes dismissive attitudes of a greater authority,” he goes on. “You have to inspire someone to get on their knees, repent, and strive to be the best person they can be. Because evil exists in all mankind,” Lucifer drones on.

He stays at the end of the hallway, giving me enough space to accommodate me with a false sense of security. He really is good at making it sound like hell is doing the world a great sense of duty...

“So my children make appearances in the world, create a bloody scandal or a war that ignites fear. Fear assures prayer. As mortals, you have no mystical dark influence, even without balance. You use your minds instead of your powers, and you create a butterfly effect that results in repenting lips, sincere tears in prayer, and force a man—or woman—to face their mortality. You weren’t designed to be the heroes. You’re the

true antiheroes. You were always meant to be the villains who create a path for those pure, righteous heroes to emerge and do feats that only prayer and faith could have brought about—creating that balance.”

My eyes land on an American Revolutionary War painting that involves the twins once again, always on opposing sides of a fight.

“The twins always end up fighting each other. They get a thrill from it, so they purposely set themselves up for it so they can laugh about it later when they return home,” Lucifer explains. “Usually they kill each other while they’re mortal.”

“Lovely children you have,” I state dryly. “You must be so proud.”

“Indeed,” he says seriously, apparently not catching onto the wry sarcasm...or simply overlooking it.

He moves a step closer, and I tense, even though he remains plenty far enough away. He pauses in front of a picture and feigns interest in it. I watch all of it from my peripheral.

“We watch the humans. We see their past, present and their future. We know what happens when we don’t step in. We know what happens if we do alter one moment in history. And we do it with war, with fear, and with bloodshed. It’s our part of the balance needed to keep the human world from imploding,” he goes on. “I certainly want to torture their souls for all eternity, but I don’t want the world to come to an end. There needs to be a balance.”

“How *kind* and *noble* of you,” I quip, smiling like the smartass I am.

My eyes flit over a tattered flag on the ground in the painting that is streaked with blood and lives lost for the sake of preserving a balance.

“If people genuinely wanted a utopia, they could create it. They, instead, give way to their baser urges and primal instincts—play too far over on the dark side, disrupting their personal balance and the ability to produce selfless, pure acts. The clothes are more sophisticated, and their words are more refined, but evil still rests at the heart of every man. It’s not our duty to save them. We simply demand a balance so their existence is ensured.”

Now he’s just giving me a sales pitch.

Finally, I turn to face him, and he turns as I do, his lips twitching when he sees the bored expression on my face.

“I get it. We’re evil. Sometimes we do evil things. You don’t have to sell it to me.”

He remains mildly amused, if his expressions indicate his mood. “Either you’ve remembered something, or you foolishly trust me even without your memories,” he says when our eyes lock.

“I guess I’m a fool for being alone in the Devil’s house and leaving my boys to fend for themselves in a roomful of unpredictable siblings, but something about this place draws forth a familiar trust I shouldn’t feel. However...something is wrong. I just don’t know what.”

He nods slowly, like he’s considering that.

“Your siblings are no threat. I’d tell you to trust me, but even I know how ridiculous it sounds to have the Devil ask for one’s trust,” he tells me, wry amusement in his tone.

This moment feels terribly familiar, as though we’ve held this conversation before. And I can see in his eyes that he’s waiting on recognition to spark.

There’s almost a sadness in his gaze when I don’t revisit whatever memory he just tried to provoke.

“Tell me, *daughter dearest*, why is it you stand before me with very little humor and no amusing commentary this day?” he asks candidly.

I arch an eyebrow at him. “I’ve heard that serious situations call for my own personal seriousness. I’m here for answers, and I’m not leaving without them this time.”

“And what do your boys think of this?” the Devil muses.

“They think you’re responsible, but they’re hiding it from me because they don’t trust me not to act irrationally. I’m a logical person, according to everything I’ve read, so why am I acting rash? My memories are gone, but my mind is trying to tell me something. I just don’t know what, and pardon me if I’m serious for a moment because I’m sick of the games I find myself playing for the sake of your amusement.”

He scrubs his jaw for a moment as though he’s frustrated, as a small throb pulses in my temple.

“You are missing four important pieces of yourself because you chose to save them. They seem to be saved, but you can’t retrieve the pieces without your memory of how to do so. How unfortunate you never shared that information with me.”

“I guess that means I didn’t trust you with that information,” I state with a smirk, as though I’ve forced him to slip.

It’s not the missing pieces that’s causing this sense of unknown trickling of dread. There’s a breath of urgency on my back, as though I feel something coming but don’t know which direction to prepare for it.

“Of course not. I would have retrieved your missing pieces immediately. To hell with them. You have no idea how foolish that was,” he says, his jaw ticking momentarily as he seems to struggle to keep his temper in check.

“It tethers them to me whether they want it to or not, doesn’t it?” I ask so fast that it feels like I’ve simply been awaiting an opening.

It’s a weird thing—surprising the Devil, that is. Every time I or the guys cause surprise to flit across his features, however brief, it’s a little unnerving.

Nothing should surprise a man of evil who has watched the world for so long.

“Oh, my pathetic little youngest, you’d be horrified if you heard yourself right now,” Lucifer says while visibly working to restrain a smile. “Dear daughter, are you struggling with your conscience? You know you don’t have one, right?”

I narrow my eyes at him. Anytime he seems to taunt me, it’s like I turn into a teenage rebel of sorts. I’ll be embarrassed about it later.

“I simply don’t like feeling like the interloper who has to force men to want her. I want to know they’d be mine

regardless of those pieces being removed. Because, no, I have no clue how to retrieve those pieces. Even if I knew how, I'm sure I put it into one of those formulas I created with my own language, and that really does me no damn good."

He wipes away his grin and clears his throat. "The boys would still be in hell's black heart all these many thousands of years later had you not spared them. If they were here to hear this—as the men with all their memories—"

"Consider them entirely different," I interrupt, and then I have a subtle moment of panic when I realize I've interrupted the fucking Devil.

Since I've already done it, I roll with it, especially since he seems to be taking me a little more seriously.

"I wrote myself notes to tell myself about the guys. As though I foresaw this coming. What if I found out a way to better their existence, and forgot that I may not be quite as important to them like this?" I ask, feeling a little...weird.

But I try not to make it weird.

"But you are still just as important to them, Paca," he says with a smirk. "It's been a long time since I had to talk boys with my youngest. I have to say...it's making me quite nostalgic."

There he goes...making it weird.

"You realize you just danced around my question," I say on a sigh.

"They have nightmares, don't they?" he asks, causing me to stiffen as I look at him.

“If they have no memories, they’d be riddled with nightmares as a balance,” he says as though he’s explaining. “But in order to create theories about what may or may not have happened, you need to know how you died. More importantly, you need to know *when* you died.”

My eyes find his and hold there expectantly, wondering why he hasn’t already told me if he’s no way involved. Why hold back?

“Well?” I prompt, trying not to sound too desperate for the answer and give the Devil the power of leverage. “Skip to the *how*, since I know the *when*. I know it’s been five hundred years.”

“The *how* part will take some explaining, and trust me, we will be having that conversation very soon. It’s one of the reasons I had you summoned tonight.”

My heart thumps heavily in my chest as he starts nearing me, and I make a conscious effort to remain rooted to my spot. The goal is to appear unafraid, but I feel the menace rolling off him the closer he grows, and my resolve wavers no less than four times in under five seconds.

He’s the only person whose presence I’ve *felt*, aside from my siblings and Lamar. I wonder if it’s because I’m too powerful to feel the lesser ones such as escorts or Elders—who aren’t very elderly, if you ask me. Five hundred years is not that long, in the grand scheme of things, and he clearly had no idea who I was until I went all psycho devil child on him and told him my badass name.

But if I’m that powerful, why would there be any rebellions at all? They’d never stand a chance. The divide in

power is unconquerable.

Lucifer stops just a foot in front of me as my inner ramble comes to an abrupt halt, and I startle when he lifts his hands. He moves so fast that I don't even gauge his next motion until he's stepping back with my mask in his hands.

His eyes almost seem to soften as he rakes his gaze over my face.

"The boys have only been dead for three hundred and fifty years," he says with a slight frown. "Though, technically, they weren't dead for long at all, since they've existed centuries since."

"Five hundred years. They've been missing for as long as I have," I argue.

He nods slowly. "The moment you were killed, they lost it, unable to function without you. The madness set in. They damn near destroyed the world with a single day of unbridled, grievous chaos. Echoes of Malek's plagues still come and go, and seeds of wisdom and medicine have formed in the minds of righteous men to counter such."

Reaching up, I touch my heart when it hurts, and vaguely I think of the destruction they caused just recently. They didn't even particularly like me this time when I died. Still, they grieved and tore apart the home I know they love, for whatever reason.

I can only imagine the four of them in such deep love with me when I died. Centuries upon centuries of bonding with each other....

It might have devastated them, especially since I was their savior back then.

“It took all my heirs and myself to bring them to a hilt and lock them back away. The twins built an entire area in purgatory to lock them in, just trying to keep them alive long enough to figure out a way to bring you back, without putting them back into Hell’s Black Heart.”

“How did they die?” I ask on a rasp whisper.

He lets my mask tumble to the floor. “Manella broke the law and recycled them as a mercy, and it was assumed they’d ceased to exist—along with their powers—when they didn’t return to the throat. He never told Lamar. He let Lamar hope it was possible, giving him that gift even as he never truly believed it.”

He blows out a breath as I remain silent for once, just listening.

“But Manella, like all of us, believed we’d really lost you. He didn’t want them to suffer any longer. But clearly something happened after they were recycled, because they are a balanced imbalance that makes no sense outside of you.”

“You had me until that last part, and now I’m just confused,” I grumble.

His eyes harden. *Slightly terrifying too.*

“I’m saying, without a masterful balancer, there’s no way they would exist. I don’t know how, but you saved their lives even after you’d been dead for over a century. Tell me, Paca, are there truly no memories at all?”

“I wouldn’t be standing here listening to you endlessly ramble about things I haven’t asked about if I had any other way of gathering information,” I point out. “It’s unbearably tedious.”

His lips twitch with the beginnings of a grin.

“Very well. I think it’s time we tell you what we know. But first, it’s time for a family reunion.”

My breath leaves in a rush when I suddenly feel like I’ve quickly stepped through a tornado. The air stills in a hallway I’ve never seen before, at least not in the memorable past.

How the hell did we get here?

Knots tighten in my stomach, and a red door suddenly appears on a stretch of wall that had no door there before. I’m not sure if I’m terrified or stupidly excited that this is about to happen, but I do know I wish the guys were here right now.

I actually dart a glance around, wondering if I can find them. Lucifer doesn’t miss anything I do. It feels like he’s constantly reading me.

“You shouldn’t be spending so much time away from them. You’re strongest with them,” Lucifer tells me as we take a walk like he’s the hangman leading me down to the gallows.

The excitement is decidedly gone, and dread continues to unfurl. I have no clue if I even have as much power as I used to, back when I was *The Apocalypse*.

“I’m not doing this,” I say as I stop. “I never agreed to this. You forced my hand, and then you make little inside jokes I can’t remember about trusting the Devil,” I add, turning to face him, stopping far away from that red door.

His eyebrows bounce up, and I half wonder if I've almost surprised him, or if he's simply humoring me.

"I won that sword match, and then you turn around and try to manipulate me just as you said you wouldn't for someone who could make your life hell."

"By being absent," he bites out, "you *are* making my life *miserable*—not hell. I prefer not to use *hell* like it's a foul word, since that's the name of the home I'm trying to bring you back to, Paca."

I suppose using *hell* as a derogatory term could be considered offensive to the Devil...

These are the fucked up new days of my life.

It was so much simpler when I was just a lonely, shameless, perverted phantom girl.

"Regardless, you still manipulated me, and something tells me that not even the old me would have just laid down and taken this," I go on. "I think I'll be leaving now."

"You will make an appearance, if for no other reason than to stave off the damn rebels."

"Like the rebels really pose a threat," I say on a humorless laugh. "I killed an Elder tonight with very little effort. You could mow down half of hell yourself. Easily."

"You killed an Elder tonight?" he asks incredulously, his expression almost causing me to laugh.

I only thought I knew what Lucifer's face of surprise was until this moment, because this distorted expression is less unsettling and much more comical.

“He wanted to put me in my place, since I’m just a lowly surface guardian,” I explain.

His mouth forms an *O*, and that weird sense of familiarity spreads throughout me again. I just blurted out that I killed an Elder of hell to the Devil, and never thought twice about it...

It feels like a father/daughter bonding moment.

Why did I start sounding proud when the words just tumbled right out?

Hell girl problems.

His eyes almost soften, as though he realizes why I’ve stopped talking.

He huffs out a breath, muttering something I miss, even with my keen hearing.

Just as I open my mouth to speak, I see his brow furrow as he takes a step back. When his jaw tics like he’s eavesdropping on a conversation not even I can hear, I half wonder just how much better his hearing is. And I get a little annoyed that it’s better than mine, if I’m being immaturely honest.

“Congratulations, Paca,” he says as he glances down at me. “You get to remain a secret for at least another day.”

I don’t even get a chance to celebrate my small win, because I’m suddenly stumbling forward in our surface home’s living room.

As if cued, all four guys are abruptly in the room with me, but they don’t even glare at me for a full second before they siphon out of the living room.

No one asks me any questions, which is clearly not what I expected. We have a system: I do something that pisses off the four of them, they rant and mime wringing my neck, and... *now* we can have angry sex. It's on the table, right?

We've read countless times that I enjoy a little chase.

They enjoy one too.

Maybe I need to be better about chasing a little less.

Huffing out a breath, I zap myself up to Ezekiel's room, hoping he's in a reasonable mood. Oddly enough, I'm supposed to have the most in common with *War*.

I suppose that should say something about my personality.

Then again, my name should make it obvious, so I don't know why I'm doing an inner ramble and just staring unabashedly at Ezekiel as he undresses in front of his bed.

"I get that you're all pissed, and I understand why—"

"We're all going to sleep tonight—in our own rooms. No arguing or talking. Tomorrow you can tell us what you learned," he says dismissively.

His bare ass flexes as he plugs his phone into the charger, then he walks over to his dresser and starts pulling on a pair of boxers.

"Look, I don't want to argue either. But I talked to—"

"Tomorrow," he bites out, finally glaring over at me. "Trust me. Not tonight."

"I can't believe we visited hell, where the Devil and I held a private conversation, and you don't even want the details. It could be important."

He snorts derisively.

“*The devil’s in the details,*” I add to him in my super ominous voice.

He doesn’t even have a glimmer of amusement. Tough crowd tonight.

“What you fail to understand is the fact the Devil plays games. Always. He’s running a game with every single person he comes into contact with, because it’s the only way he can interact with people after being a major participant in hell for this long. It’s the same for all the heirs, including Manella. It’s how we were kept out of the damn trials for so long—a fucking game. It’s starting to feel like you’re playing your own games as well.”

“A game they—Lamar and Manella—thought I was playing,” I say quietly, skipping over that last dig, since I know he’s just pissed and saying things he doesn’t mean. “And it was because Manella was giving Lamar hope. He loves him, and Lamar missed me.”

Ezekiel snorts again. “Doesn’t really matter. They’re all playing a game of sorts, and we’re centuries behind the moves they’ve already made, and we don’t even know why.”

His eyes swing up to meet mine before he continues his tirade.

“Then you refuse to stick with us, and we wonder if maybe this bond isn’t really supposed to happen a second time,” he adds, his jaw grinding. “But then I think of what we went through when you died, and I realize it’s already too fucking

late. It's just as bad as it is when we go for too long without being with each other. And—”

“Wait, you go crazy without the guys?” I ask, jumping in.

It reminds me of something Lake said back before she stabbed me. I was clearly more distracted by the fact she was a girl they had slept with before, and that little morsel of information slipped through the cracks after I died and all.

“*We hurt* after we've been separated for too long. It strains our bond. It's why our rooms are all lined up. We wanted our own spaces within the home, but we wanted close when we slept.”

“So then our bond has already started, and regardless of why you're stuck with me, the point is you *are* stuck with me. Right?” I ask, causing his eyes to narrow as I feel relief filling me.

Sheesh, this moral dilemma stuff shouldn't burden a girl with no conscience and no guilt. Apparently that purity register of compassion is higher than the journals suggested, because it's the only reason I can logically assume was the catalyst behind said moral dilemma.

Good thing that's now over. It's totally a load off my mind.

“It used to be you who needed us,” he bites out as if he's accusing me of something.

“I need your bond to be strong in order for me to be strong, so I don't go *kaboom*. And I certainly still need you, in case you've forgotten the whole burning the earth around me thing that happened after the four of you rudely buried me in a

graveyard so far from the house, instead of just letting me keep my room.”

From brooding anger to baffled incredulity, he says, “*You were dead.*”

“Not this again,” I sigh while pinching the bridge of my nose and shaking my head.

He makes a sound of the same exasperation I’m experiencing, as if I’m the exasperating one.

“What are the chances that the woman meant for us, no matter what damn lifetime we’re in, is the most infuriating person I’ve ever met?” he asks, leaving me to idly wonder if it’s a rhetorical question or if he’s genuinely expecting me to do the math.

“What are the chances I have four guys who can only have free-play sex with me, and I’m constantly dealing with taco blocko?” I counter, leaving him with the same debacle of deciding to do the math or presuming the question to be rhetorical.

“Taco blocko?” he groans.

“Beaver dammed?” I amend.

He blinks at me.

“Twat swatted?” I suggest when the other two seem to puzzle him.

He just glares at me when he realizes I could do this all day.

“Clam jammed...” I let the words trail off and decide to stop when he starts looking slightly murderous.

He closes his eyes and exhales as if mediating, his muscles visibly tensing like he wants to be violent. I'm the stupid girl who sits down on his bed, completely unafraid.

"Jude's right, and I rarely ever say that. It's impossible to have an actual conversation with you," he growls as he stalks out of...*his* room.

"My social skills are terrible because I only had myself to argue with for over five years," I call to his back, reminding him that I'm Casper the sad little lonely ghost—or at least I was for the vast majority of my remembered existence.

He pauses as he turns and looks over his shoulder, and I exhale my own annoyed breath as I move closer and prepare to sound pathetic for the sake of an explanation.

"There's an adjustment period, Ezekiel. I spent all those years watching, listening, and talking. None of you knew I existed, so you'd never repaid the courtesy and listened to my input," I start, propping up beside him and staring out over the foyer that sits in the center of two large staircases.

"Like you said, we didn't know you existed," he agrees, calming just a little.

"You don't seem to understand that our *relationship*, a term I'm using loosely, started for you the day you first saw me," I go on. "But for me, it started that first day I spotted Gage. On my end, I'm still talking, and the four of you practically pretend not to hear me unless you're yelling at me for having a thought you disagree with."

He clears his throat, looking away. I only notice from my peripheral, since I'm not looking directly at him.

“Most of your ideas are half baked and possibly suicidal,” he grinds out.

“Most of my ideas have worked in our favor so far,” I decide to remind him.

That trademark glare they’ve all perfected isn’t quite as intimidating when there’s just one of them exercising it on me.

“I’ve had no guide book or another person to explain this process of my existence to me,” I continue. “My survival has been solely based on trusting my instincts since I came about. Such as, how to keep from sinking into the ground and fading out. How to stop fading out based on watching you... I’ve learned, grown stronger, and clawed my way into a world from which I’d already been evicted, and only my intuition got me here.”

Turning around, I lean against the banister and let my head swivel toward him. It’s his eyes not meeting mine this time.

“My ideas and half-cocked plans admittedly come off as crazy, and there have been few times I really wished someone had stopped me. Intuition isn’t an exact science, and the stakes rise considerably with each new level-up.”

He angles his head, his eyes finally meeting mine again with that glimmer of gold in their depths.

“But when I’m still being dismissed completely, it doesn’t feel any different than the days when you didn’t know I existed. In those days, I was forced to be overlooked and ignored. Here and now, I still have my instincts, and no one but me trusts them.”

He starts to say something, but I continue before he can.

“I get *why*. The four of you have spent a lot of time cultivating trust and closeness. I just can’t let the four of you make all the decisions, when my intuition has also been a major part of keeping you alive as well.”

Pushing off from the bannister, I start walking away.

As I hear him walking back toward his room, I add, “Goodnight.”

Predictably, he doesn’t return the sentiment. Which is good, since I just showed my pathetic side again. I don’t want pity *goodnights*.

I don’t poke my head through the doors tonight, since I’m whole and that won’t work, and I don’t feel like straining my tired phantom in this moment.

However, I rap on the doors one by one to tell them goodnight. Silence is what answers me, because they do love a good sulking.

I’m tempted to tell them about our deaths, but they’d likely sneak off to kill Manella if I told them he recycled them as a mercy for losing me.

Now I’m not so sure they’d consider that such a mercy.

Isn’t that ironic?

I’m not a fan of irony.

Chapter 6

The screams rip free from my throat as I remain suspended, held in place by power I can feel but can't see. My insides feel shredded as the next scream bubbles from my lips, and I cry out, begging for someone to free me from the madness.

How the fucking hell did I get here?

Where am I?

What're those sounds?

Who's screaming?

Dark shadows race through my mind, searing me with the urge to kill, taste, destroy. But I can't do anything, because I'm held in place.

"Ssssoooo pretty," comes a hiss through the tunnel just as another scream is pulled out of me when it feels like acid-dipped claws are raking over my face.

The harder I fight to move, the worse pain is.

The first slash across my back feels like fire being inserted into my veins, burning me from the inside out. The second slash makes me want to die just because I already crave the relief.

By the fifteenth, my head lulls forward, the pain too intense to focus on the shadows of my mind that provoke so much fury, so much hate, so much anger. All the worst of the

impurities flow through me like a relentless disease, renewing their efforts.

Tears start leaking from my eyes, because I know the whip master has just felt their stirrings. He'll punish me more to drive them back down. How do I know that? Why is this happening?

Shrouded by his hood, I only see hints of his mangled face as he steps in front of me, and my eyes land on the flaming whip in his hand just as it crashes down against my bare chest.

The flames shoot inside me with the contact, and my head falls back as my throat tears from the powerful scream forced out of me this time. I find myself ironically praying for someone to save me.

"Paca, wake up!" someone shouts as the black tower I'm in starts to shake.

No one will save me.

"Paca!" comes another shout as the walls start to crumble from the pits of hell they thought they could lock me in.

Me.

The fucking Devil's daughter.

My eyes open on the whip master, and a dark, bloody smile forms on my lips as he drops the whip and stumbles back.

The room around me rattles and clatters, as though there's glass to break, but I don't see any glass. I only see stones that are struggling not to crumble under the bone-crushing fury running out of me.

The whip master is blown back against the wall, getting held there as he cries out and struggles. Then I see a flash of Kai's face under the hood, no longer the mangled one that the whip master had, and fear spikes in my blood, worried the face is an illusion. But the panic inside me has me also worried I'm killing—

"Paca!"

My eyes open, which is weird, since I thought they were already open, and darkness veils me as I struggle to break free of the hands all around me that are holding me down.

"Let me go!" I shout, causing all the lights to suddenly burn bright, illuminating the dark room long enough for me to glimpse Jude's wide-eyed face over mine.

The lights all burst, sending the glass bulbs off in a spray, and the rumbling of the house intensifies for a brief second. The realization that I'm somehow safe back inside the house with my boys is a chilling relief.

How did I get out of hell?

Why was I being whipped?

Where are those damn shadows that were taunting me inside my head?

The room around me goes still and silent as my breaths come out shakily, and Jude exhales in exhausted relief as he glances over at Ezekiel, who is—

Holy shit, Ezekiel is holding up the wall that has started crumbling.

“A little help here,” Ezekiel bites out as Gage goes to aide him in trying to fix it.

Something inside me stirs, and the wall starts fusing itself back together again. All the things that have shattered to the ground catch my eye next.

I wasn't trying to destroy hell. I was...freaking dreaming.

My lips part in surprise, and I clutch the sheet closer to me as Kai groans and stands from the ground, a little blood coming off his forehead.

“What happened to you?” I ask him, feeling warmer than usual, and frowning at the singed pieces of my bed.

Relieved from holding up the wall, Ezekiel and Gage warily approach me.

“*You're* what happened to me when I stupidly tried to shake you awake,” Kai says, wiping blood away from his mouth.

I'm off the bed and in front of him in the next instant, my hands flying up to his face as my eyes rake over him for inspection. Dread unfurls in me, and I wipe the blood away from his lip.

“I'm so sorry,” I say on a whisper, swallowing thickly as my eyes meet his.

Spitting out blood to my floor—*something I'll yell at him for doing later, when I'm not worried about the fact I almost killed him*—he pulls me closer, snaking one arm around my waist.

“It was my fault. I knew better than to crash a bad dream, considering we’ve all made the mistake with each other at some point,” he says absently, meeting the eyes of the others like they’re sharing some private conversation.

“Clearly she has bigger consequences when involved with the nightmares,” Ezekiel says on a huffed breath as he sits down on the edge of my bed, scrubbing a hand over his hair.

“It’s the first time I’ve ever dreamed, and it had to be a nightmare?” I ask, then groan. “Of course it’s a nightmare. I’m devil spawn. We don’t get sweet freaking dreams. The house won’t survive my nightmares if they’re all that bad.”

“We always have the same nightmares,” Jude says quietly, sitting in the corner now with a thoughtful look on his face.

“Whip master with a flaming whip that feels like explosive acid when it connects with your skin?” I ask them. “Is that what you always dream?”

They all seem to freeze and stare at me.

“The nightmares vary from night to night. I meant we have the same nightmares on the same nights. And tonight was indeed the Devil’s whip,” Jude says while studying me.

A growl bubbles out of me, and the house quakes like there’s an aftershock.

Jude’s lips twitch, and Gage slaps him on the back of his head before stepping in front of me and clutching my shoulders.

“You’re having dreams from our time in Hell’s Black Heart now,” he explains, or thinks he does.

“The Devil’s whip?” I ask, focusing on that part. “The Devil did that to you?”

“No,” Kai states rather emphatically.

“How do you know? Do you suddenly have memories of this?” I ask, turning around to face him as the house starts to shake again.

Something dark and angry burns with remembered fury from that horrible place.

“It’s not fucking funny anymore,” Jude says on an exhausted exhale as he shoves his way to be in front of me once more.

When he touches me, he’s the fourth one to do so. The other three are already touching me, whether it be unconsciously or actively done. Some of that ire starts to ebb as my body slowly begins to relax.

Jude’s brow starts to furrow, and I lean back on Kai, taking in the peace *their* touch offers. Figures they’d be soothed by *The Apocalypse*, and I’d be soothed by the Four Horsemen.

We’re rather horrible people like that. Not that I mind, but I’m fascinated by just how twisted we must be in equal parts.

With my mind rambling like this, I already feel better.

“The Devil’s whip doesn’t actually belong to the Devil,” Jude says, his tone distracted as he continues to study my eyes. “You were about to go try to kill the Devil again, weren’t you?” he adds, quirking a knowing eyebrow.

Clearing my throat and feeling overly worked up, I shrug. *Wrath* and *anger* should not be in the same body. It’s a deadly

combination.

Anger is one of my impurities, but it's usually overcome by my logical ability to rationalize and internalize and ignore...

Rambling more than usual now.

"Maybe," I finally admit, bristling at the way they all groan in unison. "To be fair, that was my first dream, in case you've forgotten. I thought I was really there, because I'm fairly certain you don't experience physical pain like that in dreams."

"Hell's nightmares are far different from mortal dreams," Ezekiel states absently. "We've spent centuries thinking it was our future. For fuck's sake, we've obsessed over our balances, trying to figure out how it all goes to shit before it happens. We never stopped to consider it might be our past...until you."

"I can't believe you have those nightmares every night," I go on.

Then...I remember they *don't* have them every night.

Not anymore.

A chill creeps up my spine, and the rambling in my head comes to an abrupt halt as that thought really sinks in.

When my eyes lock with Jude's, I see almost a blurry image of him as something hot and wet drips down my cheeks.

"You'd all really rather sleep in your own rooms because you're mad at me, and suffer through those nightmares, than to have to share a bed with me? I thought you were simply being petty, but you must truly hate me to knowingly put yourselves

through that,” I say on a strained whisper. “All because I wandered off to try and learn more about myself while the four of you plotted your own plan behind my back? Do you not see the hypocrisy, or do you just find my thoughts and needs to be completely irrelevant? Am I still really that insignificant?”

I’ve never seen Jude’s eyes so stunned before, and if I’m being honest, I think there’s a little panic there too. Kai, Gage, and Ezekiel talk over each other, each of them spitting out two random words, before going awkwardly silent.

Apparently, these relentless tears of mine are confusing the hell out of them as I turn and shoulder by Kai so I can walk out of the room.

“We’ve had them for so long we’ve dulled ourselves to them somewhat,” Jude lamely calls to my back.

I go phantom and zap myself downstairs, needing ice cream. The girls with broken hearts always eat ice cream in the movies.

I settle for spray whipped cream since there’s no ice cream.

They show up just as I’m walking out of the kitchen, the four of them warily watching me like I’m going to explode at any moment. Sadly, I can understand that being a legitimate concern.

“If you’re going to be incurable dicks to me, the least you could do is keep the freezer stocked with ice cream,” I point out dryly.

I leave them behind as I zap to the living room.

They stalk me there too, and I turn a glare on them for a change.

“I think I’ll just stay up and watch a movie. No worries. I won’t be closing my eyes and bringing the house down anymore tonight. You can all go back to your individual rooms and finish up the nightmare you like better than me.”

I flip them off and pair it with my fuck-you grin, and then I turn and face the TV. I choose an oldie but a goodie.

Ghost.

Things were simpler when this was my movie reference for life.

“What happened with Lucifer?” Kai asks me as he gingerly lowers himself to the seat next to me.

“It had nothing to do with the nightmares. That was the first time I’ve slept without at least one of you next to me since the bond really settled into place,” I state dismissively, cutting off that emotion that was drawing out the tears and freaking them out.

“I’m asking the question for a different reason,” he says, trying too...hard.

I turn to look at him, but I notice the other three have taken a seat on the ground near us.

“You four are not doing this. Pity parties are not part of my impurities, so I’ll not have one with the four of you tonight,” I say.

When they don’t automatically spring into action of their own accord, I make a motion to *shoo* them away.

Jude smirks before letting his gaze drop to the ground. Meanwhile, I think of ways to knee him in the balls before he

can stop me.

Ezekiel battles a grin as he looks away, while I ponder the many ways I could torture his balls as well. I'd leave them blue for a month if I let this anger of mine dictate me.

I'm far too evolved for that. Surely.

An indignant sound escapes me, and they all look at me expectantly, as though they're waiting for me to share my inner musings.

"Go. Away," I say instead. "I like talking aloud, but none of you get to hear what I'm—"

The doorbell rings, and we all grow silent as we stare at the door like it's a lunatic.

"Does the bell often ring at two in the morning when you're not expecting anyone? Because it's never happened since I came about," I ramble. "And only the hell people seem to ring the bell."

I didn't bring a purse to forget, so I doubt someone's returning lost articles from the party.

Someone starts banging on the door, and a girl's panicked voice follows.

"Gage! Please let me in! They're going to kill me if they catch me here!"

"Drop the barrier spell," Jude snaps.

Kai beats Gage to the door, and it's ripped open as a bloody girl with gashes all down her face, arms, chest... *everywhere*...stumbles in.

Jude manages to catch her as she falls, and I try to remember she's dying before I go crazy territorial for no reason and kill her myself.

Where's that compassion purity hiding right this moment?

Gage cradles her face as he kneels in front of her, shouting at me to get her some water.

Sheesh. It's too soon for me to see this after nearly blowing the house apart and having to deal with their assholery on full blast.

The floor starts burning under my feet when Ezekiel also dives to her side and starts applying pressure to one of her wounds.

Grimacing, I start walking briskly, keeping the floor from being singed as long as I stay moving, trying not to draw attention to myself. Why am I burning the floor? Their bond isn't strained. I'm not hurting like last time.

Jude siphons in front of me and grabs something from a cabinet, never glancing at me before siphoning back out. Taking a calming breath and once again reminding myself she's some girl they care for, but that it doesn't mean they love her, I get the girl some damn water.

Or...try...to...

The bottle melts in my hand before I can make it back, and I curse as boiling water slaps the floor around me.

"This can't be happening," I mutter to myself, straining to make it stop.

It, however, doesn't stop.

Instead of dealing with it, I go phantom and head back into the room, taking a seat on the couch and watching as Ezekiel presents her a non-boiling bottle of water.

He glances over at me, a concerned look on his face as I pretend to be only mildly interested in the situation. In this form, nothing is burning down around me, so that's good.

Kai's eyes find mine, along with Jude's, but I look back at the girl. Given the concerned looks they keep directing at me, this girl is definitely one they've had sex with before.

But she's sort of dying in our living room, so I ignore my selfish impurity, along with my envy impurity, and try to focus on my compassion purity.

If I don't succeed, I'll blame it on the fact I'm quite literally hell spawn.

Gage's attention is fixed on her, which has me ignoring envy a little harder.

"What happened?" he asks her as Kai starts slathering something on her gashes, touching her.

Touching. Her.

No time to be The Apocalypse right now, Paca. Get your shit together, and stow the inner crazy bitch.

"The rebels...are attacking," she answers through garbled blood and strain.

Lamar could explain everything I'm feeling right now, I bet. He'd even leave me a little note like he did on those journals, reminding me of how awesome I am.

Why am I not friends with him again? I'm struggling not to ring him right now. Do they have phones down there? Or do you have to put the blood of a virgin in a jeweled chalice and chant something creepy to contact hell?

Hmmm...that chalice thing seems weirdly specific.

"Where can I find a virgin at this hour?" I ask myself, tapping my phantom chin thoughtfully.

Belatedly, I realize I've asked that question aloud when Ezekiel and Jude both give me incredulous looks.

"We've never had a virgin, so I don't know," Kai answers me distractedly...before his head pops up and his look also turns incredulous.

"Well, if you'd had her, she wouldn't be a virgin anymore, so that's a moot point, regardless. I doubt they have a superstore for virgin purchases," I go on.

"What the hell are you talking about?" the girl asks Kai seconds before she makes some obnoxious, death-braying noise and chokes back some of her own blood.

She's bleeding all over the place. Those assholes better know I'm not cleaning this up.

"She can't hear me," I remind them. "At least not like this. I'm curious, which one of you picked her out? Oh, wait, I bet it was Gage, since his attention is *glued* to her."

Gage's eyes meet mine, looking terribly exhausted with me, and he arches an eyebrow like he's telling me something I should understand. But I don't understand, because I don't know them well enough to have silent conversations with our eyes.

“They breached Hell’s Heart?” Gage asks the girl in disbelief.

“Hell’s Black Heart?” I ask, a tremor of that nightmare niggling back into my mind.

“No. Hell has two hearts. Hell’s Black Heart is the prison for the extremely unbalanced,” Gage tells me like now’s the time for tutorials.

He looks back down at the confused girl who has no idea what’s going on.

“Who are you talking to?” she asks as she starts healing from the concoction they’re using.

“She’s really easily sidetracked,” I point out to them. “That’s rather annoying.”

They all give me a wry look, except for her, of course. She looks rather confused at all of them staring at what would appear to be an empty couch to her.

“The riot and the rebels,” I prompt the easily distracted quad.

Kai shakes his head, and I bite back a few choice words when she reaches over and threads her fingers with Gage’s.

He subtly unlocks their fingers and withdraws his hand, as Kai asks, “How did they breach the heart?”

“I’m going to breach *her heart* if she keeps trying to touch Gage like that,” I say on autopilot when she grabs his hand again, clutching it as he bites on the inside of his jaw and darts a frustrated glance toward me.

“It’s not like that at all,” he tells me directly. “Not anymore.”

“Logically I know that. However, I’m finding it tedious to be a *good* girl, because I’m *hell spawn*,” I state very seriously.

Before the oh-so-easily-derailed girl can once again ask who they’re talking to, Gage pulls his hand free and curtly says, “*Explain.*”

She sighs but starts talking, finally. Sheesh. Takes her long enough to get to the point.

“They came at us from all angles, so many of them, and Lucifer and the heirs were stored away to keep them safe. The rebels have beasts with them. Hell’s belly beasts. Hundreds and hundreds of them,” she goes on, her voice breaking.

“Someone get her a tissue, for fuck’s sake,” I insist when the poor girl starts sobbing, clearly traumatized.

They’re so inconsiderate.

I stand when she puts her head on Gage’s chest, pulling his hand up to *her* chest like she needs the comfort.

Kai siphons to be right in front of me, his head tilting. “She’s just terrified right now, and for good reason. They shouldn’t have—”

“Stay and take care of her,” I tell him as I change into my badass outfit, but then I flick it back to my Devil Girl costume instead.

Might as well be on-the-nose at this point, even though I’m not a fan of it.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Jude snaps when he sees my outfits flicker.

I really should have changed somewhere else, obviously. They know my hell wear attire.

“Clearly I’m going to go kill some rebels. You’re going to stay and take care of her, because one of my purities is compassion or something annoying like that.”

I turn whole right in front of her, and she sucks in a breath before her brow furrows.

“Who the fuck are you?” she asks, even though she should have probably noticed me when she first came in.

I excuse her oversight, since she was on death’s doorstep...

Ha!

“I just made an accidental pun about *Death’s* doorstep,” I say to Jude, which forces him to pinch the bridge of his nose and mutter something that sounds suspiciously like, ‘*woosah, motherfucker.*’

Awww... He’s quoting nineties movies too. I’ve rubbed off on him. I start humming *Bad Boys*, but I don’t think he gets it. Or his sense of humor is absent at the moment. One or the other.

“Really, who are you?” the girl asks again, not finding my humor any funnier than they do.

“I’m complicated,” I say with a tight smile. “I’ll be back to take them off your hands after I go blow some people up. I think that’s why I’m burning the floor under me right now, and not because you’re touching my *Famine.*”

She continues to hold onto his hand, looking utterly perplexed.

“I could be petty and tell her my name,” I inform them, just to let them know I’m a high-road sort of girl, as I go phantom again.

I siphon out, not really sure where the fucking hell I’m going, since I’m not too good at this. But I focus really hard, letting the burn guide me.

All four of them appear just as I land, as though they somehow freaking followed me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I snap, but our dramatic surroundings steal my attention. We’re directly in the middle of the fray.

“Never mind!” I shout when Jude spins and slices through five men at once with a weapon I don’t recall him having before we left. “You can totally stay,” I add when Kai takes down two rushing us.

He does this with hardly any exerted effort. It gives me a boost of confidence that they won’t die too easily.

Gage spins in the air, kicking one man solidly on the chest hard enough to launch that man into a beast’s mouth.

Without a second thought, I dart out in front of a charging beast that squeals when it spots me and dives under the ground. Thankfully, that freaking terrifying, four-headed thing was old enough to be scared of me.

“For the record, I didn’t mean to actually go to the battle first. I was hoping we could get details and formulate a plan,”

I call out. “I’ve never been here, so I don’t know how I just landed here.”

“No, *you* were going to do all that *alone*,” Ezekiel growls as he slices off a man’s head.

“Now’s so not the time to continue that argument, *dear!*” I chirp, punching something that has tentacles and leaves a slimy trail on my hand.

“*Gross*,” I groan, quickly ducking as something flies over me.

We’re right in the thick of it, and all the hooded soldiers are mixed in with men in capes—*really? Capes?*

Not superhero capes, either.

They look like Spartans, right down to the armor and footwear, and they’re *not* hideous. I wonder if they really are Spartans.

“I just got an idea for my next harem,” I say to Jude, who growls at me as he slices through something.

I think that prick slaps my ass. If not him, it’s one of these really stupid soldiers who will lose a hand later.

I notice men in tuxedos turning into Spartans as they leap over us, firing pulses of sharp power from their hands that spews into the fray.

Gage spins again, and as he does, his shirtless body is covered with something leather and armored, just before his boxers turn into some sort of black leather warrior thingy I know better than to call a fringe skirt. Something tells me that would be a bad thing to say aloud.

Gladiator flashes through my mind.

A sword appears in his hand, glistening under the fires that are shooting out just above his head. When he comes down, something dark and oh-so alluring drills out of him, almost conducted through that sword.

I practically gravitate toward the power like it's intoxicating.

The horde of beasts charging us shrivel and collapse before turning to mummified carcasses. He lands on his feet, his eyes staring at the sword in his hand like he's as stunned as I am.

He looks down at his new apparel with the same quizzical brow, and when our eyes meet, we actually have one of those silent conversations that I found impossible a few minutes ago.

What the fucking hell just happened? Why is there a thickly fringed leather skirt hitting just under the knees on that fine male body and showing peeks of those muscular upper legs? Will that pierced dick fall out of that leather thingy underneath, since it looks like it's barely holding all the goods in?

Okay, maybe it's not the *exact* same conversation. But it has to be close.

Blinking out of the trance, he spins, using that sword to slice through men.

Jude dives, grabbing someone's abandoned bo staff, coming up just in front of me before a giant beastly woman almost catches me off guard.

The same thing happens. Sort of. His clothes change to be an exact replica of Gage's, and the bo staff turns onyx. It

glistens as he brings it across her middle, sending her thundering down to the ground as he yells with the effort it takes.

As he brings that bo staff back down, a curved blade forms at the end of it, turning it into a scythe as the blade connects with her neck. Just as she turns to dust, he stands and slings the scythe outward, obliterating everything in its immediate path, ashing the line of rebels who are charging at us with their mangled faces and barbaric weapons.

These are just the soldiers, not the ones we should be wasting effort on killing. We need to find the source and cut off its head.

Whirling around, I spot Kai as he drops to the ground with a sai in his hand, ramming it into *something's* neck.

Right as he's about to be charged from behind by a horned snake beast, my hand flies out, sending the beast soaring into the side of the monstrous black castle behind us.

Oh, thank you for you working, fickle power of mine.

Idly, I notice the stones on the crumbling side of the castle is glowing with the same onyx twinkle as Jude's new scythe.

"Kai!" I shout just as a barrier breaks and rebels spill into the area he's in, rushing him from all four corners.

I go phantom and zap myself there, but before we can fight, he takes on his own transformation, and the sai extends into a triton, coming down in front of me like he's the one protecting me instead of the other way around.

I feel the pulse of power like it's coming from me instead of him, but I know it's really his. So dark, so mesmerizing,

so...lethal.

Eyes start bleeding as the infected drop to the ground, screaming and writhing in agony. The next line attempting to break the rest of the barricade stumbles back.

A sense of pride washes over me, and a calmness joins it, weirdly enough. My hand runs up his arm as he strains to reach the next line without their invasion, trying to kill them all before they can escape to regroup and try again.

A warm feeling passes through me, and my chest brims with something almost intoxicating.

My eyes flick to Gage as I start walking through the crowd, feeling something whipping behind me. Glancing down, I see red fabric blowing in the wind with its gold trim, and feel the long slits that show off my legs, leaving only scraps of long fabric to drag the ground in premediated placements.

I didn't create this one.

The air tingles over my midriff and exposed sections of my back, and gold jewels start forming at my neck, cuffing a portion of the dress into place as the rest amazingly forms all on its own.

Ezekiel makes his change with me, side-by side, as a staff of some sort forms in place of the sword he was wielding. A small blade pops out on the end of it as if punctuating the entire scene.

That blade is sparkling too much to be anything other than diamonds.

I *love* diamonds.

When he spins it, the rebels turn on each other, as if he just controlled them all now that the flock has been properly thinned.

I walk higher, looking down on the souls who need to be recycled. Rebels who need to be reminded of their place.

It's hell for a reason, after all. It's supposed to be oppressive down here.

And they've just disrupted the balance by breaching walls never meant for their attendance. Balance is far too critical right now.

I have no idea how I know, but I *know* what needs to be done to restore it.

My eyes scan the crowd below me from the perch I've picked. As they move to help with the attack on the lower castle doors, something just sort of naturally happens all around me.

Something dark and heavy runs out of me, almost feeling tangible as it slithers from my heart and starts down my legs, moving into the ground beneath me.

The ground cracks open as the small, visible, worm-like movements under the ground grow in size, doubling with each passing second on their rapid descent.

The red dirt flies and scatters into the air, and black liquid shoots out, spraying the entire line at the castle doors. Screams ignite in the air as something else rumbles free from me, quaking the ground around us as my eyes flutter shut.

Intuition demands I let go. It demands that I free whatever is trying to explode from me. Now's as good a time as any to

prove my intuition is an intricate part to all our self-discoveries.

As my fingers begin tingling, thrumming with a warning, I slowly lift my hands. White hot light explodes from them so abruptly that I stagger back, and it pulses into the air, creating a violent ripple.

“That’s new,” I say as it suddenly erupts into a massive ring of pulses that explode outwards.

People are launched in all directions, slamming the ground below as the ground around us quakes a few times until those pulses fade.

I realize it did more than that, when one by one, they all burst into ashes, the ground swallowing them up to take them to the throat.

I’m not sure how I know it, but again, *I know it*.

No more screams. The beasts I haven’t yet killed are fleeing as the disease Kai gave them starts becoming a flesh-eating problem on their retreat.

“Ungrateful lot, aren’t they? All they had to do was deal with their eternal punishment for their mortal sins, and they may not have been recycled to start the torment anew,” I chirp, feeling so much better now that I’ve gotten all that off my chest.

I turn to look at everyone we’ve managed to save—all the little bad guys who take care of the *really, really* big bad guys: My family and all.

Something suddenly starts forming on my head, and I reach up, feeling what is most definitely a jeweled crown of

some sort.

I'm not sure why that makes me smirk, but it does. It feels like I've missed this crown, and I don't even know what it looks like. However, I certainly never want to be parted with it now.

Did I just get a level-up?

My eyes scan over the death and pestilence left behind in our wake, seeing ashes flickering in the sky as the devastated multitude lay riddled in waste, slowly being eaten by the ground. Now I can say I've done something productive for the day.

And I'm not even tired...

It's like a scene from...the apocalypse—the *non-name* version of it.

It should probably disturb me how much I needed this release. I guess I'm still a horrible person in all my lives.

"The balance is right again," I say under my breath as if it finally makes sense.

When I turn back around, everyone is still staring at me, including the guys, who still seem a little befuddled by their ridiculous clothing and weapons.

However, Gage grins very fondly at his sword.

Jude glares at his scythe like it's the most offensive weapon in all the world.

Jude's eyes meet mine, and he darts a glance to the crown before saying, "Fucking figures."

I snort.

“Says *Death* as he holds his *scythe*,” I fire back, an arched eyebrow accompanying my snark. “Who’s the real stereotype in this scenario?” I add with a fuck-you smile.

Ezekiel coughs to cover a laugh, as everyone else just sort of awkwardly stares and watches the five of us. These people were just attacked, so you think they’d have better things to do than gawk.

Like maybe show some gratitude? Doesn’t anyone do that anymore? Not one person has said so much as, “*Thanks.*”

“I’m cool with my new weapon,” Kai says, swinging around his trident.

At least fifty or more onlookers drop to their stomachs and cover their faces like they’re terrified he’s going to accidentally give them the same face-eating disease he gave those others.

My guys all stifle a grin, since that would be, *you know*, psychotic to grin about.

Too late do I realize I’ve forgotten to stifle my own grin, so I’m the only one who looks psychotic.

My life can be unfair at times.

“I assure you they’re far worse than me,” I tell some of the really pale and terrified people on the ground. “We’re not going to kill you unless you’re a rebel. Are any of you rebels who slipped through that we forgot to kill?” I ask, not really sure what a rebel looks like and idly wondering if I accidentally *recycled* some of the wrong people...

Clearly they all rapidly shake their heads. I’m certain, at this point, if they were rebels, they won’t be any more.

“Good,” I state happily, causing all of the guys to restrain smiles for a new reason.

“So when is it not too soon to point out that your ‘badass’ fight clothes are skirts?” I ask the guys, no longer interested in the gaping crowd around us who are still on their bellies.

Four dry looks are my response.

“Because that’s simply fascinating,” I go on, my grin only growing.

“Thought you didn’t want them thinking you’re the most psychotic,” Gage states flatly.

“I think it’s too late for that. Besides, I know you four are worse than me, even if they don’t. Can we go see if any rebels got away? That really made me feel better after seeing all four of you paw all over that girl. Who was she? She was a relationship girl, wasn’t she?” I prompt, feeling much more rational about the whole situation now that I’ve raged a bit and spread around some *wrath*.

“Can we not do this here?” Gage asks me, sighing heavily.

“Where would you like to do it? Is she the reason you didn’t join me in bed and stave off that horrible nightmare?” I prod.

“Of course not,” Jude answers, groaning like I’m impossible.

“Gage was her favorite,” Kai tattles. “Her name is Chloe, and she’s a castle guard.”

“Would it be petty of me to recycle her for abandoning her post when I technically don’t have the authority to do that?” I

muse aloud.

“Yes,” they all four answer in quick unison.

“Are you seriously defending *her* over *me*?” I ask with a mock gasp, hoping they buy my act, since it’s funny to watch *them* actually be horrified by *me*.

They don’t give me a horrified look, unfortunately. It’s more of a bland, exasperated look.

“Congratulations. You’ve officially become the most psychotic person here,” Jude states with a fuck-you smile that is too much like mine, even though mine’s still better.

Rolling my eyes, I once again give the people on their bellies my attention. “Now that we’ve sufficiently snuffed out any individual complaints this day, can anyone point me in the Devil’s direction? I need to appropriately mock him for not being able to handle this uprising himself or with the help of all those lesser heirs of his,” I prattle on, not understanding the value of *less is more*.

Jude scrubs a hand over his face, and Gage groans while shaking his head. Kai grins at me, which makes him my current favorite, since Ezekiel is giving me that neck-wringing motion.

Instead of a death maze in hell’s belly, I’m going to give them all mime-school certificates for their next birthdays so they can learn some new tricks.

A feminine set of giggles from far above has my spine stiffening. My gaze swings up to see the Devil’s heirs lounging carelessly in some hammocks attached to the overhang of the castle.

Sure. Makes perfect sense to put hammocks there.

Both Hera and Lilith are sharing a hammock and a bowl of popcorn, their lips curved in familiar grins.

Cain is scratching his balls with one hand while snorting something up his nose that looks suspiciously like hell drugs. Are there hell drugs? I'm sure there are.

Manella and Lamar are lovey dovey in their little hammock, looking drunk off the carnage.

The twins are in separate hammocks. One has a guy sucking him off, and the other has a girl sucking him.

Classy bunch, I tell ya.

Hooking a thumb in their direction, I look back at the guys. "Who did you say looks the most psychotic?" I ask Jude, giving him the fuck-you smile right back.

He bristles, unamused, and the four of them move toward me as someone starts a slow-clap.

Everyone else remains on their bellies as the clapping echoes, coming from one of the holes that has been blown into the castle wall just in front of us. The clapping nears with all the dramatic, ominous build one would expect at a moment like this.

It's cliché, if you ask me.

The guys cut off my vision when they line up in front of me like a wall, so I go phantom and zap to be in front of them just as the Devil emerges from that gaping hole and steps out, still clapping like an underachieving smartass.

The smirk on his face has me almost hating him for what he's about to say, because I realize now what just happened.

Damn that Devil and his manipulations.

All these heirs were simply waiting on me to arrive, like they knew they didn't have to lift a lazy finger to help out. And Lucifer just let it bait me down here because he really does know me far too well.

He stops clapping, that calculated gleam in his eyes twinkling as he gives me the definition of a devilish grin.

“Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to reintroduce my favorite child and her harem,” he says, never looking away from me. “You’ve probably heard of them,” he goes on, looking away for a brief second before his eyes lock on mine again.

Apparently he likes suspense, because he leaves everyone hanging for an annoyingly pregnant pause.

“The Four horsemen of *The Apocalypse*,” he concludes.

“*Dun! Dun! Duuuuuunnnn!*” one of the Twins adds with even more theatrical dramatization.

I think I hear every person on the ground suck in a terrified breath, so I stand a little taller to ensure I look the part. It's too late to take it back now, and it'd a horrible idea to look like I'm anything less than super crazy and powerful.

The Devil played me, and I was too stupid to realize it.

He wins.

This time.

Everyone rises from the ground enough to get on their knees and bow to me properly in a wave of motion that gives me little tingles. Adjusting my crown, I keep in character. Sort of. Not really though.

A grin spreads over my face as I reach back and thump Jude's chest.

“Now *that's* the reaction I expected from the four of you after I appeared and became the solution to all your problems; not that any of your ungrateful asses took notice,” I say, gesturing to all the bowing people on the ground who respect my awesomeness.

My grin only grows as I look at my psychos' stoic faces. Kai snorts derisively, and I wink at Gage when he gives me his best unimpressed expression. Ezekiel becomes my favorite when he grins too.

My gaze collides with Lucifer's once more, as he adds, “Welcome home. We have a lot of work to do now that the world knows you're back.”

Damn Devil.

Even my smile dies with that announcement.

Chapter 7

The Twins have lost their appointed cocksuckers when they walk into the room the guys and I are already seated in. I'm drinking out of a jeweled chalice, but there's no virgin blood in it.

There is, however, some really awesome wine of some kind in it, and I've decided it can be my "ice cream" the next time the guys hurt my feelings or whatever.

They're the Four Horsemen—beings so evil they once had a maddening imbalance that apparently even haunts my nightmares. I suppose some hurt feelings isn't so bad in the grand scheme of things for hell spawn.

The twins smirk in our direction, and a rumbling sounds underground when they get too close. Both of them laugh like they enjoy provoking me, and they take a seat across from us.

I'm wrath, so...why would anyone *want* to provoke me? Psychos. It's like I'm surrounded by people who don't have a lick of sanity.

Gage pulls me onto his lap, and Jude takes a seat on the ground in front of us, dragging my bare foot over his shoulder and resting his hand loosely on my ankle.

Kai sits on my right, his hand settling onto my thigh, and Ezekiel sits on my left, his hand also going to my thigh.

I'm still in my level-up outfit that I haven't fully explored yet, but those wide slits go all the way up to the gold belt at

my skirt's waist. My top is really ornate, matching the red and gold trimming of the skirt to make it seem more like a two-piece dress.

The gold cuff on my neck reflects in the warped mirror far across from me, but I barely glimpse the golden crown full of red rubies before I'm distracted.

"I hardly think it's fair that she's immediately your favorite again, considering she disappeared without a word for five hundred years and had to be tricked into returning," Lilith is saying to Lucifer as they walk in.

She barely even tosses a dismissive look in my direction, as Lucifer's lips twitch.

Something sizzles inside me, and a visible spark ignites on her dress, erupting it into flames that have her hissing and shrieking as she manages to extinguish the flames with just her mind. At least, I assume that's how...

Her gaze narrows on me, and she takes a threatening step forward as something dark and sinister rises to the surface once again.

She's launched back suddenly, slamming into the wall so hard that it spider-veins all around the area of impact. Then... she drops in a heap to the ground with a grunted curse.

I feel genuinely badass, because I'm not even trying to do this stuff. Sibling rivalry is where all the *wrath* is really hiding.

Duly noted.

"What the hell was that for?" she snaps as she leaps to her feet and pushes her hair out of her murderous eyes. "You know you don't deserve to be his favorite."

“She has more envy in her than you,” Lamar tells me from the corner, working damn hard to keep a straight face.

“That’s why Paca’s the favorite when she’s home,” Manella drawls, like this is yet another rerun. “Lilith whines more when Paca is the favorite, and whining entertains Lucifer.”

To spice things up, I send her sailing *through* the wall this time, as her shrieks echo through the corridor. I arch an eyebrow at Manella, expecting a reaction, but he simply smirks at me like he knows exactly what I’m thinking, and he’s still unimpressed.

Drat.

Still a rerun.

She rushes back in, hand in the air like she’s about to strike, when Jude is off the ground in a blur of motion, his scythe blade slinging out of his bo staff thingy and pressing right against her throat before she can budge another inch.

“That was for Kai,” I tell her, feeling Kai’s hand tighten on my thigh as a sideways grin forms on his lips. “You let him writhe in pain as you walked away, and if you know me, then you knew you’d be punished. I’m just getting started, I assure you.”

The words just flow from my mouth on autopilot, and she snaps an accusatory glare at Lucifer. “You said she didn’t remember us.”

“She wouldn’t have stepped in and saved the day if she had her memories. But she has echoes of memories,” he explains,

studying me like he's filing away every bit of information I unintentionally reveal.

I don't like how our minds seem to work too close to the same. Sort of creepy, since, you know...he's Lucifer.

"Why wouldn't I have stepped in?" I ask, staring right at the manipulative asshole.

"Because clearly you'd have known it was a ruse to make you out yourself so I could keep my end of our deal," he says with a careless shrug.

"But you still manipulated me," I accuse.

"Of course I did. I always try, but you always *used* to see right through me. It's nice having an edge on my favorite again," he drones on, causing Lilith to groan as she backs away from Jude's scythe like she never truly feared it.

"She really doesn't remember," Lilith sighs as she drops down next to Hera, and Hera pats her hand like she's comforting her.

It's just one more weird thing to add to the weird list.

Hera rakes her eyes over my guys, causing me to shift my interest in which sister to fling through walls.

"They look a lot better like this. Why haven't I noticed sooner?" she asks more to herself than anything, as a very pungent sense of seduction palpates the room.

After all, as one of the seven deadly sins, her dark influence is lust.

I'm a little unnerved when I realize that growling noise is coming from me. Jude is currently my favorite, since he's the

only one of the guys who doesn't have to resist laughing.

Dicks.

“Some things never change,” she mutters, rolling her eyes as the heady, seductive air dissipates. “She’s still as selfish as always, and they may as well be impotent.”

“I growled a lot at you back in the good ol’ days, did I?” I ask with a slight edge.

Hera gives me a bored look. “So what *do* you remember, Paca?”

Everyone looks at me like they’re expecting something major, and I’m apprehensive to tell them that there are zero memories, since these idiots keep trying to provoke me.

I don’t like this. At all. No one has even bothered to formally introduce themselves, so I’m assuming they don’t know that *I don’t really know them* anymore.

“Who killed me?” I ask instead.

Everyone’s gaze shifts to Lucifer, and I zap in front of Jude to stop him from stupidly turning that scythe on the Devil.

Lucifer’s lips curl in a sneer. “My brother,” he answers.

It’s like hearing a lot of suspenseful music that has been building in tempo and volume, and then having the balloon burst somewhere else in the background. I can actually feel this incredibly important moment losing the climactic construct when the big reveal finally comes.

I look at all the guys, and they all look at me, confusion undoubtedly going around.

Clearing my throat as Lucifer's eyes seem to go wild with rage from whatever memories he's currently lost in, I ask, "Who's your brother? Like one of your wings-and-halos brothers, or are we talking about a manifested-evil brother?"

His eyes bounce to mine as his forehead creases, and two feminine snorts sound from the right. Damn evil sisters.

"She really doesn't know a fucking thing," Cain states dryly as he lies back and closes his eyes. "We're all officially fucking dead."

My brothers aren't any more useful than my sisters.

But as his words sink in, that has the tension ratcheting back up.

"What?" I ask in unison with all my guys, who seem to catch on at the same slowed speed.

"His brother killed you, and now we're all dead," Cain repeats, still sounding serious and not sarcastic.

Lamar looks as confused as all of us, so now I believe he had no clue who killed me. But Manella refuses to meet my eyes, so I'm assuming he kept this from Lamar.

I have to do a lot of *assuming*, because these crazy motherfuckers are a bunch of unapologetic liars. It's not like I can trust the words out of their mouths. I have to pay attention to their body language.

"Rafael," Lucifer tells me, watching for...some spark of recognition, I'm sure.

"The only Rafael I know is green, wears a pointless red mask on his eyes, and is a hero in a half shell," I ramble,

feeling a little on-the-spot as more groans sound out.

Jude's arm snakes around my middle, pulling me closer to him. It's not an overly affectionate maneuver, but coming from *him*, I feel like this is PDA. It's terribly inconvenient, because now I'm hella distracted. He's more important than whoever killed me, since my killer didn't kill him.

My brother did.

Families really are a cluster fuck...

"She's even more delusional than usual if she's randomly bringing turtles into this," Cain groans like I'm the annoying little sister he never wanted back.

To clear up the point I was making, I add, "The mask is pointless on those turtles. What other mutant turtles are out there doing karate under the tutelage of a giant sewer rat? It's one case where a superhero's secret identity is—"

"My brother, *Rafael*, is an archangel born of unbiased purities with the power to deliver swift and harsh judgment," Lucifer bites out, interrupting my ramble.

I take a second to process that.

"Okay. So that would make him an angel, right? One of the good guys? I gotta say, I'm not too bent out of shape if one of the good guys struck me down. *Whew*. That could have been bad, because I think Lamar lied when he said I couldn't get angry enough to accidentally level the world," I prattle on, drawing a series of confused expressions from absolutely everyone—well, not my guys.

They're unsurprised by most of the things that tumble out of my mouth with all the finesse of a sheltered virgin

attempting dirty talk for the first time. Kudos to me for shocking Manella, because he finally looks something other than tired or bored.

“Is it my maturity that is shocking all of you?” I muse. “I can forgive and forget,” I add very assuredly.

“Shit,” one of the twins says.

Side note, I really do need to learn their individual names. Seems rude not to know their names, since we’re apparently family and they didn’t kill me.

“We really are fucking dead,” the other one states as though he’s finishing the first’s sentence.

“Were all our family meetings so dire and cryptic in the past?” I chirp, needing a point of reference as I try to liven the group up before I take another shot at Lilith. Or maybe Hera this time.

You can’t go attacking your long lost sister a third time unless people are still in laughing moods.

Before anyone can answer, there’s a loud, ominous ringing, sounding eerily like church bells. My eyes swing up like the bells have magically appeared above my head. I half expect a hunchbacked hell boy to be swinging from a giant rope and shouting something about *sanctuary*.

Don’t worry, there are no literal bells. Just creepy bell sounds with no physical manifestation.

All good. All good.

What is my life?

“Looks like the family reunion is just getting started,” Lucifer says with a bitter smile. “Time to relocate.”

Something dark prickles my spine before a shot of white light blinds me.

Chapter 8

“We’re in purgatory,” I let the guys know as I peer around at the grayish hue of the canyon-filled landscape surrounding us.

I have no idea how we got here. Did the church bells send us here?

“Excellent powers of observation, *comoara trădătoare*,” Ezekiel states blandly, his eyes scanning the same wasteland as mine, while a tumbleweed tumbles by like a bad cliché in a western wanna-be movie.

“Being observational is one of my heavier purities,” I tell him without missing a beat.

Kai gives me an incredulous look. “You just made that up,” he accuses with a barely suppressed grin.

“She’s telling the truth,” Jude says distractedly. “I’ve memorized all her purities and impurities,” he adds.

“*Guess who’s my favorite now*,” I say in a singsong voice as I turn around and start walking, wondering why we were left alone out here and where everyone else went.

“We should probably stay put,” Ezekiel states reasonably, even as he follows me.

“I don’t like staying put in purgatory, because things pop out of the ground and eat you,” I say with a shudder. “Big monsters are loud when they move underground. At least they

can't sneak up on you so easily if you're moving, and I'm starting to wonder if those bells were dinner bells."

"So now you've cycled back to the Devil as the prime suspect, despite the killer angel proclamation," Ezekiel says from my side as he keeps a vigilant eye on our surroundings.

"Excellent powers of observation you have there, *War*," I retort, smirking at him when he looks over and rolls his eyes at me.

"Pettiness is one of her impurities," Gage points out, the edges of his lips turning up with arrogance. "I have that memorized as well. Does that make me your new favorite?"

I know he's just being a smartass, but I still answer seriously. "Until that girl is informed of the fact you're with me, you can't be my favorite, because you're *her* favorite."

He groans and drops his head back as the others just shake their heads. They're not subtle; you can tell they enjoy it when it's not them I'm giving hell.

Ha! *Gotta love my inner hell puns.*

"That's her I-just-made-a-cheesy-Death-pun face," Kai says, winking. "Now who's your favorite?"

"Actually, it was a hell pun, but you can be my favorite just because you're so pretty," I state with all seriousness. "Especially in a skirt."

His eyes narrow on me, as Ezekiel snorts.

"Can anyone siphon?" Jude asks.

"I can't even go phantom," I say, distracted by the subtle tremors in the ground beneath me.

The conversation is interrupted when I scream like a pansy ass little girl at the same time something roars so loud it actually hurts my ears. Whirling around, I see the ground breaking up and gray dust spraying into the air like *Tremors* just came to life. I hear the ground beneath my feet groaning in pain, as that beastly, likely enormous, certainly intimidating thing races toward us with outrageous speeds and hellacious roars with an admirably horrifying sense of fearlessness.

I think this thing is definitely bigger than those monstrous centipede imposters who pop up like rabid Jacks-in-the-Boxes...

“Can someone let it know I’m *The Apocalypse* before it crashes into us?” I suggest. “Maybe it’ll run?”

“You going to charge it fearlessly?” Jude asks from beside me, twirling his bo staff until the scythe blade shoots out.

“I think an old-fashioned beheading is the way to go this time,” I decide, not feeling so fearless right at this moment. “Even better, do your death funnel thingy,” I add, tugging on one of his leather straps that crosses over his shoulder.

“Your power naming skills are—”

His words are cut off as he’s launched into the air. Something crashes into my back so hard it feels like all the bones in my body break and heal in simultaneous, excruciatingly painful actions.

It takes a second to realize I’ve been forced airborne as well. It’s painfully obvious when I skip across the abrasive sand like an overachieving pebble on a quiet lake’s surface.

A scream tears from my throat as I roll to the side, heaving for air as my lungs try to recover. My ears are ringing as the taste of blood enters my mouth, and through a fog, I see some five-headed beast that would have made dinosaurs seem small as it rears up, only partially out of the ground.

So many teeth snap as it spits and hisses at something, hovering over me as I try to rock up to my knees, too dizzy to get my bearings as I crash back to the ground.

Rolling onto my back, I internally curse the stupid fucking beast that damn near killed me. Again.

“I really hate dying,” I say through strain as something hot starts sizzling around me. Under me.

Kai slides in front of me, stabbing the seemingly invincible monster with his triton. Ashes form all around the wound before healing almost instantly.

“That’s really not fucking good,” he bites out as Jude slashes at the beast over and over again.

My eyes dart over, finding the blurry images of Ezekiel and Gage fighting an identical beast—the one that was hellaciously loud and distracted us from its twin while it hit us from behind.

We were just hunted. How did *The Apocalypse* and the Four Horsemen become the prey?

My eyes focus back on the one that narrowly misses Jude, and something slithers out of me with more force than I’ve felt yet.

The beast shrieks seconds before flames engulf it, and it roars that ear-splitting, thunderous sound once more, which

only pisses me off again. I'm going to be deaf because of this stupid fucking thing.

The smell of charred monster can only be described as the most rancid, disgusting, putrid scent I've ever had to withstand in my short existence. It's all I can do not to wretch as it crashes to the ground. I'm forced to roll out of the way because I can't seem to go phantom no matter how many times I try.

"The Devil blocked it," I say to myself, spitting out blood as I stagger to my feet, using the corpse of the flaming monster—that is still slightly jerking around like a detached lizard tail—to balance myself.

Master of balance my ass.

The flames simply pass over me, not hurting me the way it does the beast.

I glance over to see the twin beast falling down when all four of the guys use their power on it at once, channeling it through their new weapons.

Why is Lucifer doing this? It makes me question everything I thought we'd just figured out, and he's now definitely back on the suspect list. I was just joking earlier.

Now I know better than to make jokes about that unpredictable, *evil* son of a—

Another make-me-kringe-and-piss-me-off slice of pain interrupts my inner rant so I can whimper a little and be a baby.

I lean back on the section of the beast that isn't flopping around. Is it a severed piece?

Who knows?

Who cares?

Hearing is difficult, I hurt all over, and I can't stand without wobbling. Glancing down, I see my knee at an odd angle, and my stomach roils. It's just one more point of pain at this moment.

Closing my eyes, I mutter, "That's probably the reason I can't seem to walk." Exhaling harshly, I loudly add, "Someone fix this before we have to run again and I can't!"

Gage curses, and I startle when I feel hands sliding up my leg with a falsely soothing motion.

"This is going to hurt."

"Observational too, eh?" I bite out. "Just get it over with, already. The waiting is the—"

My words end on a swallowed scream of pain that I barely manage to hold in, as the searing hot misery shoots through my leg, hitting every sensory nerve along the way. I think some new nerves are even created along the way just to maximize the agony.

Someone lifts me, and I don't even argue as I wrap my arms around a neck and loosely cling to them, trying not to focus on the pain.

"What were those?" I ask, desperate for the distraction.

My head lulls back to see Ezekiel, my new favorite, as he glances down at me, carrying me quickly toward...hell if I know.

“Hell if I know,” he says, answering my question while also echoing my thoughts, and causing me to snort out a laugh that ends in a whimper when laughing hurts.

“She’s delirious,” Jude growls. “She took the brunt of the impact.”

“There was an *echo* joke, since *echoes* are a hell thing or whatever,” I explain distractedly, hearing something subtle in the distance. “Shhh,” I add before anyone else can say anything.

A buzzing sound nears, although none of them seem to hear it.

“What is—”

“Run!” I shout, slapping Ezekiel’s arm.

He takes off without hesitation, and the others follow. The buzzing lessens the faster we go, until we’re suddenly racing down a shallow trench.

“Cave over here,” Jude says in a hushed whisper ahead of us before disappearing.

Ezekiel carries me around the same corner, and we duck inside the cave. Kai takes me out of Ezekiel’s arms, assuming the task of carrying me, even though I’m positive my knee has healed.

I still ache all over, so I’m good with being carried like a doll for a change.

Kai lowers us to the ground, keeping me in his lap, as Gage and Ezekiel stand guard at the cave’s entrance.

“What the hell is going on?” Jude asks on a labored breath as they try to catch a little rest.

“Clearly the fucking Devil has an agenda,” Kai growls, hugging me closer.

I soak in the attention, not even caring that he’s not my favorite right now. Or is he? I’ve forgotten. I know it’s not Gage, because Chloe is—

“This really doesn’t make sense,” Jude says in a quiet, pensive way that draws me out of my errant thoughts once again.

I have seriously got to get a handle on this. It’s like I’m getting worse instead of better, and I desperately want to be serious and focused right now.

“I keep feeling like he’s trying to lure us into a false sense of security, and then...*bam!* Crazy monsters are suddenly trying to eat us once again,” I gripe, feeling like an idiot for trusting Lucifer.

“Never trust anyone in hell you don’t share a bond with,” Jude grumbles, as though they’ve forgotten the cardinal rule.

“Apparently, you have a bond with me, but you still don’t trust me,” I decide to point out, mostly because I need the distraction while my mind works in overdrive.

“We’ve trusted you with our lives since day one. Even though we didn’t realize how much,” Gage says dismissively, not even turning around.

“That’s not the same as trusting me. Besides, Ezekiel says you guys were questioning if you were ever meant to bond with me in this lifetime.”

I'm a little surprised when they all turn a glare on Ezekiel, whose head drops back as he groans up at the cave ceiling.

“You fucking told her that shit?” Kai growls.

Aww. His angry scowl makes him my favorite. Then again, the bar is set *pretty low* right now.

Ezekiel's eyes meet mine. “I was pissed. It was just something I said in the moment to hurt you. I didn't mean it.”

I hesitate, looking around at them and then him. “Are you apologizing?” I ask incredulously.

His lips tense as his eyes narrow. “I'm rescinding those words because I didn't mean them.”

“Which is a Horseman's equivalent of an apology, I'm sure,” I state dubiously.

I dart a wary glance at our surroundings.

“Is this cave leaking some kind of hell-slash-purgatory gas that makes you all delusional enough to act out of character?”

“You had just fucking died, destroyed us, and then went off to face the Devil on your own, while leaving us helplessly behind. And then you did it a-fucking-gain,” Ezekiel presses on, growing angrier.

“But *you're* still apologizing?” I ask with a grin.

That neck-wringing glare of his is in place when he starts to speak this time. “For fuck's sake, I'm trying to say—”

“She's deliberately distracting us. It's what she does when she decides in her head what's going on and determines a plan of her own to deal with the situation,” Gage states, surprising me a little with his extreme accuracy.

I feel transparent—and in a different way than my ghostly-transparent form.

I blink at his back, since he's still peering out of the cave's entrance. If it wasn't for Chloe, he'd be my favorite right now just because it feels like he gets me.

Jude and Ezekiel swing their gazes to me, and Kai starts essentially breathing down my neck as his grip tightens.

“Well?” Kai prompts from behind me.

It's pointless to tell them, but I do anyway. “I feel like we're being tested. I'm not sure why, but that's the way I'm leaning.”

“Tested?” Jude asks skeptically.

“Yes, like in the trials. We've gathered a lot more information since then, guiding me to this conclusion. I feel like this is something we're expected to just *know*, but without any memories, we're flying blind. I'm just not sure what's being tested and for whom.”

They all simply stare at me.

“And your plan?” Ezekiel pries.

“I'm still working on that. I figure we'll just kill anything in our path until we figure out what they're looking for,” I answer as I idly glance around.

“If we treat this like a trial, there's an end-point we have to reach,” Gage says, eyes still on me.

“There's no course. No instructions. No guidance at all,” Kai unhelpfully points out.

“Not to mention, we’ve never seen this section of purgatory. I think we’re in the crater lands—also unoriginally referred to as the wastelands,” Jude adds.

Kai reluctantly releases his hold on me as I push to my feet.

Addressing no one in particular, I say, “It’s all a freaking wasteland if you ask me. We can fight our way around until we prove whatever point it is we’re expected to prove. We’ve all recently leveled-up. I don’t find it a coincidence that we staved off a rebellion, got these weird new outfits, and then heard church bells before landing here.”

“Lucifer did mention something about another family reunion. Surely we’re not performing for his *brothers*...” Jude lets the words trail off as he frowns.

A slightly alarming, somewhat monstrous groan comes from the very back of the dark cave that sounds a little deeper than we realized.

“I vote we talk while we run before whatever that is fully wakes up,” Kai suggests as he bounces to his feet.

Jude’s hand snags mine, and we all quickly exit. My knee feels as good as new, which is good, since we’re running like we have a destination to reach.

Every time the earth rumbles under us, we all speed up and run that much faster, eyes open and looking around behind us too. I don’t particularly like knowing two monsters have already outsmarted us today.

A few lesser monsters scream and retreat, avoiding the Devil’s daughter.

After hours of aimlessly running, my legs are burning, my back is aching, and my sides feel like they're splitting in two. I finally lean forward to whine and pant heavily, causing Jude to drop my hand during the abrupt stop.

"*Can't. Breathe.*" I groan as I collapse to the ground a little theatrically, because I'm not used to having to be so physical in physical form.

Totally *not* as easy.

"We don't need to be out in the open. There could be any number of things waiting for us," Gage says as I heave for air, not bothering to even try to stand as I lie on the ground and wait for something to eat me and put me out of my misery.

"Get her," Kai says to someone, ear toward the ground like he's actually concerned something is literally going to eat me.

"Go on without me," I tell them, limply waving them on. "Save yourselves."

Jude snorts while leaning over me, and I groan in protest as he drags me up by my arm, forcing me to my feet.

When the ground gives a little tremble, I start running with a renewed sense of self-preservation, causing all of them to laugh when I begin moving even faster than them.

Dicks.

The more things change, the more they stay the same...

The gray landscape around us looks like a bland desert in some areas, with the occasional rotting tree or pungent carcass of an unidentifiable beast. It's doing very little for my morale; however, it's doing plenty for my growing state of paranoia.

“How do we get out of here if we don’t even know what we’re doing?” I gripe as we stop inside yet another cave that is slightly disturbing.

There’s a giant hole right in the middle of it, and not even I can see down to the bottom.

“You’re the one who said we kill shit until we get out,” Jude reminds me.

“Why is anyone listening to me? I have no idea what’s going on,” I dutifully point out, still warily gauging the suspicious hole in the ground.

“She bitches at us when we ignore her, and bitches at us when we do what she says. I think never being satisfied is part of her balance. Fucking women,” Kai grumbles.

“Just for that, you’re on probation from being my favorite,” I go on, kicking a rock into the hole and counting as I strain to hear it land.

“One orgasm and I’ll be back on top,” he answers dismissively as I get to fifteen-Mississippi.

“Sort of late to spit out a comeback, don’t you think?” I feel the urge to say as I continue listening and silently counting.

“We’re assuming Lucifer was telling the truth about who killed us. We all know the Devil and his games. He’s legendary for being a fucking sociopath. Hell, he was the *original* sociopath and snake in the grass,” Ezekiel is saying as I get to twenty-nine-Mississippi.

There’s a little bit of silence for a second as I continue to count, getting increasingly nervous about just how deep this

curious, gaping hole might be.

“The Devil didn’t kill you. Manella recycled you because you all lost your minds after my death and tried to destroy the world.” May as well set that record straight.

Forty-eight-Mississippi and still going.

“What?” they all snap in unison.

“It was apparently a mercy killing, because you couldn’t live without me. Unsurprisingly,” I add, still only halfway paying them any real attention.

“How do you know this?” Kai asks.

“You were sneaking around. I had to balance that betrayal by also sneaking around. At least my sneaking around produces useful info—assuming my info is true,” I state, my attention still fixed on the hole.

Fifty-seven-Mississippi...son of a bitch, this thing might actually be endless.

“You had to be restrained again after my death,” I go on. “I was spared any details, other than the fact you weren’t put back in Hell’s Black Heart. But it must have been bad to inspire Manella to take action, since his deadly sin and dark influence is sloth. It’s why he’s not in any of the paintings. He’s too lazy to take on a mortal life or push any influence. I read that last part in my journal.”

Silence ticks on for a few beats.

Seventy-one-Mississippi...

A distant *tink* finally sounds, and I shake my head. That’s a long fall, but it didn’t have the landing sound I expected.

“Why are you telling us this right now?” Gage asks really close to my back as I continue staring down the hole.

“Because I’m not entirely sure we’re going to survive whatever is coming—*today, tomorrow, whenever*—and I don’t want secrets between us,” I answer just as I hear a louder *thunk*.

My stomach tightens. My rock *just* hit. Apparently the *tink* was it grazing the side of the hole instead of landing.

“That’s a whole lot of Mississippi,” I say very warily as I turn and find all four of them sucking in a breath as they stare out the cave entrance.

I dread looking to see what’s happening, but I dart to the entryway, observing something that has my stomach sinking.

Gray dust is flying into the air as a ripple effect of the land breaking apart in the distance grows louder and more visible, meaning whatever is happening is heading straight toward us.

“Is that what I fucking think it is?” Kai asks somewhat hollowly.

“What do you think it is?” I immediately demand, my eyes widening as the land continues to break like a semi-melted, weakened glacier, and red water...*or blood*...starts rising through the cracks, boiling hot as it bubbles over the ground.

“Draining day,” Jude bites out.

“Draining day? That doesn’t sound so bad,” I state, not feeling confident at all about that.

“It’s the day everything on the surface or too close to the surface of purgatory is cleansed with the blood of the

damned,” Kai answers quietly.

My eyes dart to that nefarious hole, a sense of dread unfurling in me. Will we even survive that damn fall? I realize we’re somewhat impervious to most things, but I just had my body break and heal once today.

It wasn’t fun. It wasn’t easy. And it wasn’t a huge Mississippi drop.

“How the hell is the blood of the damned supposed to be cleansing?” I snap.

“Really don’t have fucking time for explanations. We need a plan of action and very damn fast!” Kai snaps.

My breath comes out in a rush when I’m hit with a familiar sense of envy, and I turn around just as a flash of red hair catches my sight. Before I can process that Lilith is in the cave with us, warm lips are on mine.

It’s brief. Chaste. Completely fucking weird, since she’s my sister. I don’t condone incest even as the Devil’s daughter.

It’s so quick that I almost wonder if I’ve imagined it when she pulls back, smirking as her red hair starts to turn dark. She winks as she shoves me hard, catching me off guard, all of it happening in less than one-Mississippi.

I’m...falling...

My eyes widen in horror when I realize there’s no ground beneath me, and the guys shout for me and reach too late to grab my hand.

“You’re welcome,” I hear on a feminine, laughing echo as I continue to helplessly fall, flailing my arms like I might fly.

But apparently *The Apocalypse* doesn't have wings. Even dark angels should have wings, damn it.

"Paca!" I hear Ezekiel roar, just as I see two shadows come through the hole.

Another two shadows quickly follow before I lose sight of the hole's entrance altogether.

Those idiots are following me?!

"Paca!" Gage shouts this time, his voice echoing all around me as my gray vision leaves me even less visibility than it did in that creepy freaking hell's belly forest.

"I strongly suggest leaning right!" I shout up to them. "I'm seventy-two percent certain my rock hit the wall on the left before it found the ground!" I shout back up.

It'll take less Mississippi for me to hit the ground than the rock, but I really can't do math when I'm freaking out *and* falling *and* trying to see them.

However, I think my rock must have never really hit and that this tunnel really is endless, because I fall for too many Mississippis.

There's a point when falling stops being terrifying and leaves you with a sense of nervous boredom.

"Any chance you four have popcorn on you?" I call up.

"Really?" Jude snaps.

"Yes, really. I don't joke about popcorn—"

A familiar shock of blinding light cuts off the rest of my words.

Chapter 9

I hit the ground roughly, grunting as I dart a look around and scramble to my feet, my eyes widening as I take in my new surroundings.

Lucifer is here. And...he is glaring at some unkempt, raggedy, dirty guy who is wearing clothes that have rips and stains all over them. Two rows of chairs are facing me, divided by a visible white line. Which is a little random.

Quickly, I take note of our surroundings, feeling like I'm in an ancient arena meant for gladiators, and they're all sitting on the royal viewing platform.

The guy's gladiator skirts spring to mind. I don't like where this feels like it's going.

All the heirs, with the obvious exception of myself, are sitting on one side. Five unknown guys are sitting on the other, all of them looking just as haggard as the one being glared at by the Devil.

A few grunts find my ears from behind me, and I dart a look over my shoulder, counting four important men who scramble to their feet with the same reaction time I did. Quickly, I return my attention to the freaky, unsettling scene at hand.

The haggard men look annoyed. Lucifer looks like a murderous psychopath. My siblings look bored or

disinterested. I'm sure I look confused and ready to kill someone.

“Satisfied?” Lucifer growls.

Why does Lilith have my hair color?

I glance down, and I gasp in a little horror.

I have red hair.

With a red dress.

I know how I got the red dress—I leveled up. How the fucking hell did I get red hair?

Clashing shades of red is not the important thing right now, so I ignore that niggling little vanity impurity and focus on the real issue. Even though a purple dress would look so much better with red hair...

Four distinct presences draw close to my back.

Jude and Kai flank my sides. Ezekiel and Gage share space behind me, all of them touching me as we give the onlookers a collective glare. At least I assume they're glaring. After all, it's what they do best.

Hera narrows her eyes on Lilith, and then she glances over at me, arching an eyebrow.

I'm more interested in the haggardly men who are just staring at me like I've failed some test.

Something crashes in the far distance, but I'm too wary to turn my attention away, just in case someone strikes. I can feel the palpable tension electrifying the air around us.

“I hate to agree with Lucifer about anything, but clearly he’s right on this. She’d have never let Lilith save her,” one of them says, and I back into the guys a little more as Kai and Jude move in closer to my sides.

“They all play their games—the Devil and his twisted spawn. There’s no way to be certain they didn’t plan this,” the one Lucifer is *still* glaring at says.

“Her vanity wouldn’t allow it if she truly had all her memories, Rafael,” another haggard dude says.

My breath goes cold in my lungs, and the guys stiffen at my sides.

This guy is Rafael? The guy with an ungroomed beard that is sticking out in ten directions and looks like he’s slept in a gutter for five straight days? *This* is who killed me?

I’m clearly not as badass as I thought.

“She studied that hole for long enough. She was considering it. She knew how to get out, but—”

“She checked to see how deep it was, brother, as a last resort and not a destination,” another one of them says, seeming overtly bland and not at all attached to the intensity of the moment.

“But she found it,” Rafael grinds out, the only one to have a temper.

The four other haggard guys look at him, and Rafael closes his eyes, taking a deep breath.

“Memory echo,” one of them says.

These guys are angels? Where are the ethereal halos and gorgeous wings, not to mention the immaculate clothing and beautiful faces? They all look like they've spent ten years making a survival film and forgot to shower for this gathering.

When it looks like Rafael has schooled his features and tucked away that impure anger of his, the one on the far end looks back at me.

“One last test then.”

“Excuse me?” I bite out. “We're not your little pawns. We'll—”

“You'll have no choice in the matter if you truly can't remember how to work your powers to their fullest extent,” the man interrupts, a dismissive shrug of his shoulder following.

Jude and Kai twirl their weapons, a smirk appearing on their lips like they're about to make bad life decisions and attack five angels we legit know nothing about. And they call *me* impulsive.

“Paca doesn't have the ability to be deceitful. It was the deal I made before creating her,” Lucifer goes on, standing and toeing just the edge of that white line.

“She's not overly concerned with her current circumstances. Not likely of one so confused about the world around her,” Rafael says with a sneer.

Okay...

So the ages' old rivalry is still firmly in effect. At least that knowledge seems accurate for a change.

“Five angels, including my alleged executioner, are sitting on the same platform as hell spawn and Lucifer himself. I’m definitely confused,” I assure him. “I’ll let you know how it makes me *feel* when I figure out what exactly is going on right now.”

His eyes narrow.

“He’s right. She’s not good at deceit, but she’s excellent at concealing anything and everything she’s feeling or thinking. Master of it, really,” another castaway says in a bored tone. “There’s only one way to check her for deceit. Force her to emotion.”

As soon as those words leave his mouth, it feels like I’m kicked in the chest by a fifteen-ton earth worm monster. My body bows in on itself from the phantom impact, and a breath tumbles from my lips in a pained grunt as I’m flung backwards.

Flipping through the air, I crash against a set of boulders that crack and groan against my impact. Another pained sound escapes me as I drop to the ground in a heap, the taste of singed ash in my mouth.

I look down as the black blood drips from my lips, and with dizzied motions, I stumble back up to my feet. I blamed the Devil’s poison once for the black blood I was leaking. Apparently, it’s just the natural color of hell spawn blood.

My blurry vision scours the land as a persistent ringing drones in my ears.

I see four familiar figures all beating their fists against a dim, mostly-transparent barrier that is barely visible even to

my sensitive eyes. My head darts to the left, spotting my audience for this evening's entertainment.

I crack my neck to the side as I roll my shoulders back and spit out more of the ashy blood.

Lucifer's dark eyes collide with mine just as my vision steadies. There's a peculiar apology in the depths of his gaze that doesn't buy him any favors.

My lids lower for a blink, and my gaze lands on Rafael when my eyes open again.

He drops from the platform as it levitates into the air, and his eyes narrow lethally on mine as he smirks. A menacing look such as that is rather unbecoming on an *angel*.

With two quick steps, I throw my hand out, ready to unleash hell, but I'm...spinning suddenly. A sickening stone metaphorically tosses around in my stomach as the world rocks all around me. Am I airborne? What the hell is going on now, dammit?!

A roar sounds just against my ear as I slip against something wet and sloppy, gargling for air as I slide down the slick surface. The light vanishes, and not even my night vision gives me more than a few glimpses of some rather alarming sights, as I continue getting jostled around in the wet, slimy shit.

That's when I realize *what the hell* is going on.

"I'm so not getting fucking eaten by a monster when I'm in the middle of killing a murderous angel!" I curse, slamming my fist through the slop in a bile-inducing punch.

Something crunches against my knuckles before I feel it give way.

Hot air wafts over my fingertips in an electrifying breeze, as I use that leverage to drag myself out of the side of the long throat of the monster currently eating me.

An explosion of guts push out of my way when I get particularly agitated, and I leap out of the screaming beast before it can drag me under the ground on its retreat.

I'm dropping in the air when the sight of its grayish, scaly tail rattles into the ground, disappearing from sight as a monster scream lingers in the air.

I land with a *squishy squeesh squash* sound, running a hand over the gooey hair in my face to push it out of the way. It just sort of sticks there like it's soaked in quick-drying cement and remains plastered to the side of my head.

This is going to drive my vanity impurity insane. It's like sandpaper to my inner nerves.

Glaring at the hole in the ground, I make a series of really angry screams and sling off some of the disgusting goop. "Allow me to introduce myself!" I shout into the hole. "I'm *The fucking Apocalypse*. I will *sooooo* find you one day!"

I can't be certain, but I think I hear a somewhat satisfying, terrified squeal echo back from that hole.

My gaze flicks back to the only important ones here. My guys all seem to be struggling with fury and relief and something else entirely. They seem angry at me for getting eaten. Or just really angry that they're trapped while I was being eaten. One of the two.

I give them a fuck-my-life look coupled with a helpless shrug.

Then I turn my attention back to Rafael, who's simply staring at me with a quirked eyebrow.

"Clearly, someone forgot to tell it I'm *The Apocalypse*," I explain, wiping away the gross, foul-smelling goop from my mouth and flinging it away. I know how unprofessional this all looks and how it sort of steals from the intensity of the situation. "I've been gone a while, as you're aware."

Quite a few groans sound out at this particularly serious moment, as though these people don't understand the magnitude of what's going on right now. Terribly insensitive, even considering the *evil* audience in attendance.

"You expect us to believe she was killed topside by a simple blade with your poison," one of the so-called angels asks Lucifer.

"Possibly an echo of her true death," Lucifer bites out, drawing my attention real damn fast. "The bond hadn't been reaffirmed. She was more vulnerable. And she's still vulnerable. This can't go any farther."

"That's not your call, *brother*. Her existence is a complete imbalance," Rafael says with a sneer that doesn't exactly scream *angelic*.

"The only one here imbalanced is you," Lucifer snarls.

I have to agree with the Devil on that. I don't think angels should be this petty.

"He's right. This is our call," one of the other good guys says to back Rafael up.

I cock my head. “Shall we get on with it then? You spanking a girl’s ass who has no idea how to control her powers to their fullest just yet? After all, you’re the one who killed me the last time. I thought angels were supposed to be the good guys. Not the bullies and murderers.”

He studies me like he’s searching for something.

I hold my arms out, not even bothering to pretend I know how to fight an angel. Or what it would do to the balance if I even attempted it...

“Hit me again. See if inflicting pain is your new calling. I’m sure that won’t do anything horrible to a pure being’s balance at all,” I go on.

His lips tense like he’s frustrated.

“I still can’t tell,” he says, and I brace myself for the next hit...seconds before I hear my guys yelling in pain.

My gaze darts to the dim barrier, and I rush toward it as my eyes widen.

They’re on the ground, struggling to push up, as blood rushes from their ears. My pulse explodes as panic claws at my chest, and I turn my attention to Rafael, shoving out all the power I can, but I’m launched backwards as a cry of pain echoes in my ears from Gage.

I land in a crumpled pile, and then I feel something slam against my face. The spray of black blood splatters in the path my head is flung back, and the next hit comes so hard at my other side that I spray back over the same pattern in reverse.

Pain lances my side, and a breath is ripped out of me when I’m kicked by an unseen force and blown back hundreds of

feet. The dirt in my lungs tries to block my air, even as I cough to expel it, losing more acidic blood.

I hear Jude's cry of pain, and I heave myself to my feet, biting back a weak whimper as I pop that same knee back into place. The cuts on my face start healing, closing up as my breath rattles in my ears.

My blood burns in my veins when the next hit comes, sending me sliding across the ground and rolling back up to my feet a little slower.

I spot Kai getting yanked across the ground by an invisible attack of some sort, as Ezekiel's chest cracks open.

I'm slammed hard again, screaming in frustration when I'm hit while I'm down, struggling with panicked desperation to get up. I can't breathe. The sounds are all muffled by my hammering heart that is pounding in my ears.

I hear a roar of pain from Ezekiel as hot tears rip down my face, and I stay pinned to the ground, unable to move, forced to simply watch as his neck is broken and his body drops lifelessly to the ground.

"Nooooo!!" My scream echoes over and over, spanning the land all around, as I watch...helplessly.

Ezekiel's vacant eyes stare back at mine, endlessly blank.

My jaw trembles as a hot fury creeps into my chest, and their pained yells only spread it quicker. The tears drip carelessly down my cheeks as I shove to my feet, feeling the force holding me down.

Eyes on Rafael as something powerful shatters against me instead of knocking me to the ground, I let go.

I simply...*let...go.*

Gray dirt explodes into the air, and I scream with the effort it takes to squeeze every ounce of deadly power out of me.

My head tips back as a cry is torn from my throat, and I feel my bones all break at once for another time today. But it's nothing compared to the pain ripping at my heart.

I can't even swallow as the wind starts violently crashing all around me, slamming that son of a bitch angel into a rock so hard he's forced to cry out in pain for a change.

Something shatters at my back and another scream comes from Gage just as it all goes up in flames.

Purgatory catches fire like I'm trying to turn it into hell, and it spreads to cover more and more ground all around me.

I'm blown back as a thundering ripple explodes from me and launches outward in a ring of destruction. The roar of the power in the air is mine for once.

Where was it earlier, damn it?

Hot tears race down my cheeks as I see Ezekiel over and over in my mind, the wrath burning so hot in me that it becomes too painful.

Utter, undeniable, crisp obliteration—that's the only way to describe it. Everything directly in front of me is shattered like glass—from boulders, to trees, to mountainsides...

As I look for the angel, debris rains down heavily, obstructing my view as I weakly shove to my feet once again. The only thing I can hear is the staggered pieces of destruction falling from the sky.

“Gage! Jude! Kai! Somebody answer me now!” I say on a choked cry, limping through the fragments of rock, stumbling my way through thick veil of dirt cloaking the air.

It’s eerily silent, and no one is answering. I’m forced to choke back a sob as I try to stay focused and strong for the moment.

Just for the moment.

“*Somebody answer me!*” I scream louder, ignoring the hot tears rolling down my cheeks as I spin in a circle, searching and finding nothing.

The air around me suddenly clears as a purifying breeze wafts over me. My jaw grinds and I start to throw myself at Rafael when I spot him limply leaning against another angel and simply staring at the ground.

But I forget he even exists when I hiccup out a sound of a laughing sob, seeing *all four* of my guys walking toward me without a scratch on them.

I cover my mouth, refusing to make any of the sounds I want to, because I *just* saw Ezekiel die. Is this an illusion or was that?

“Forgive me,” comes Lucifer’s voice, reminding me what’s going on as my heart hurts and rejoices at the same time, so confused about how to feel.

Needing touch to trust my eyes, I practically drag Ezekiel to me, practically nuzzling him like an affection-starved cat as I narrow my eyes at Lucifer.

“An illusion?” I ask him quietly, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“They now know for sure,” he says with a tight smile. “You’ll heal faster in hell than in Purgatory. You’ll heal faster in Purgatory than topside. We’ll talk when your emotions don’t leave you unreasonable.”

He’s gone before I can call him a whole string of very creative names he can add to that long list of titles he loves so much.

Rafael’s eyes meet mine, and I stay on my feet by the power of utter stubbornness alone.

He almost looks regretful, as though that makes this all okay for his pure-of-heart soul. I don’t like being called a liar, even if I try to lie. I really don’t like being lied to after being called a liar.

He holds my gaze for a second longer in silence, and then he vanishes from sight, along with everyone else, sans the five of us.

The second they’re gone, I give up the charade of being invincible, and give a small cry of pain as I drop, gritting my teeth as I clutch my side.

Ezekiel goes with me, catching me before I hit the ground and eases me down the rest of the way. Eyes go to my middle, taking in all the purple bruises covered in goo and gray dirt.

The bruises are everywhere, and it feels like some things are too broken to heal back as fast as they were earlier.

I’m vaguely aware of the fact I’m only viewing them with one eye, but I don’t care. Because *all four* are here.

All four.

They're all okay.

They're all okay.

The wrath slowly recedes from the edges of my mind, and more choked sobs slink out of me. They all hide any expressions and keep their silence as I take a long few minutes to pull myself back together.

“I’m still mad at you, but you’re my favorite just because you’re not really dead,” I say on a broken whisper to Ezekiel.

His eyes rake over me, jaw grinding, just like all of theirs.

“I’m sick of the games. Someone needs to tell us what the fuck is going on,” Jude bites out as Ezekiel gingerly lifts me, cradling me in his arms like I’m breakable.

He glides with smooth movements, careful not to jostle me, as the muscle jumps along his jaw.

His eyes are cold as he looks over at Kai and says, “I vote we let her heal and start setting fires of our own for a change. Fuck them. Fuck this. Fuck the fucking balance or what-the-hell-ever is going on right now.”

I feel us siphoning, and I let Ezekiel carry me to a familiar bed that has turned fully purple. This is the room where I chatted with the Devil.

“Where are we?” Gage asks as Ezekiel puts me down on my feet.

I manage to go phantom, using that nifty ability to clean myself and change in the short amount of time I’m strong enough to stay in that form.

When I suffer, that form suffers the hardest, when it was oddly the only form I had for so long. It's like there had to be balance for that as well.

"I don't know. It's not like I did that," Ezekiel says quietly as they look around.

I hobble to the bed, not bothering to hazard a guess as to what's going on. I just know everything hurts, and hell's healing abilities are really helping with the unrelenting pain.

Jude looks over as the doors close and lock, and he swings his scythe around, ready to fight.

"I did that. I'm not surprised a piece of information I just *know* is how to lock my door in hell after having my mind thoroughly tortured by my father and my ass kicked by his angelic brother. It's a shit family I've been manifested into," I state dryly.

"We cut through a lot of guards. I'm sure that's going to piss someone off," Gage says on a tired breath.

"When?" I ask, my lids growing heavy as I hide how much pain I'm really in, toughing through it like a boss, if I do say so—

A slight whimper escapes me, and Kai is quickly in the bed beside me, gently slipping his hand through my hair and pushing it back from my face.

"All good," I assure him tightly.

He looks over me as he softly presses his lips to the top of my head in quite possibly the gentlest touch he's ever given me.

“It takes so much to get you guys to be nice to me. It’s hardly worth the effort,” I say through strain, trying to lighten the pitiful stares they’re all giving me.

Kai sighs harshly against the top of my head, not giving me the groan I was expecting.

“I want him dead. Fuck the balance. That was nothing but cold. What’s the fucking purpose of this?” he grinds out.

I’m not sure who the *him* is that he wants dead. There are a few candidates that spring to my own mind.

Lucifer being one of them.

The beating was preferred to the anguish I felt when I had to watch Ezekiel’s eyes go flat. It was so damn real. I even heard the last quiet patter of his heartbeat, and saw it expire through his gaping chest.

“I need Ezekiel for a little bit,” I say as I brush a kiss across Kai’s lips.

His eyes show understanding as he kisses my head again and stands. His fists clench as he walks off, and Ezekiel carefully climbs into bed beside me.

I don’t even care how much it hurts to wrap myself around him, or how vulnerable I look in this particular moment.

The other three take seats on the floor, eyes alert like they’re waiting for something. Anything.

At this point, it’s starting to feel like no one and everyone wants us dead. As though there has to even be a balance to the level of confusion I’m forced to endure.

Chapter 10

Small, gentle circles being traced over my back is what I feel when I first stir awake. The hand pauses for a brief second before resuming those lazy patterns.

“I’m simply here to see if she’s awake yet,” I hear a familiar voice saying.

I barely crack an eye open, seeing the door and a hint of Lamar’s profile beyond Jude’s head, as he mostly blocks the doorway. I locked that door for a reason.

“Until someone tells us what the hell is going on, no one is getting through this door. Unless you really do want to fucking kill me. Obviously, it’ll be every man for himself after that.”

It’s still Ezekiel under me. I can tell by the tribal tattoo coming up from the top of his jeans where his shirt has risen up. His body is warm under mine, and his arms are still around me, holding me to him just the same as when I finally gave in to the emotional and physical exhaustion and fell asleep.

Mentally cataloguing the small bit of residual soreness, I start taking inventory of the guys. Everyone’s attention is on the doorway. Kai’s muscles are bunched as he grips his triton too hard.

They’re also still wearing their warrior skirts.

“Lucifer asked for forgiveness. Clearly you know that means he felt true regret. And that’s a terribly hard thing for him to experience, given the obvious,” Lamar prattles on.

The blood stirs in my veins, and I jackknife to the seated position as my eyes narrow.

Lamar is gasping in the next breath when barely the thought in my mind rips him into the room, knocking Jude aside. Lamar slams into the wall by whatever angry current is flowing out of me, and he clutches at his throat like he's strangling, as his eyes bulge a little.

The guys just look at me when I finally drop him to the ground without ever leaving my spot on the bed.

Ezekiel's hand smooths up my back as he sits up slowly beside me. All eyes move to Lamar as he chokes on fresh air.

"What was that for?" he asks incredulously.

"You sat there smiling after Lucifer manipulated me into coming to hell. Then you sat there when I was dragged up there, where I was tricked into believing I'd just watched Ezekiel die."

When my voice wavers, I stop talking and settle for a really outraged glare.

His eyes soften, and he clears his throat as he stands. "I had no idea that would happen. I'm just learning of these things, and they're only including me because you've started trusting me first. I've not been allowed to know certain things I *really* wish I had known."

"Fucking *goodie* for you," Kai says on a bitter growl.

Lamar's lips tighten. "We're being called to a meeting right now. I was sent to...deliver the message. You apparently gave up your ability to hear Lucifer's calls."

Jude glances at me. I shrug a shoulder, too tired to even hit Lamar with my own fist, because it involves walking over there to do it.

“What are you going on about now?” I ask on a tired sigh.

“You’ve changed a lot of things. You must have made concessions in order to get other things you wanted, including coming back to life after a true death,” Lamar explains in that way of his that makes you feel stupid and frustrated because you only get more confused.

Exasperated, I ask, “How? How do I balance things in that way? Enough to come back?”

“The very power of your mind, of course,” he says like it should be common knowledge.

“Great. So if I truly die again, I’ll just stay dead,” I grumble, pinching the bridge of my nose. “My *mind* isn’t that awesome anymore.”

“That’s a concern for another time. I’ll escort you, and you’ll finally have the answers. Then I’m afraid your work gets very hard. All five of you.”

“Explain,” Jude says to him. “I’m sick of walking into a scenario where we’re the only ones to not know what’s going on. The games end now.”

Lamar’s eyes meet mine, as though he’s considering it, and he finally releases a reluctant, defeated breath.

“You proved to them you truly have no idea who you were, and that the memories are certainly gone. You’re terrible at deception. You never once suspected an illusion,” Lamar tells me.

“*So glad* I passed that test,” I say through a fuck-you and go-to-hell smile, coating the words with as much insulting sarcasm as one can.

“He hurt you too easily, and you’d never have allowed that,” he goes on. “Nor would you have allowed yourself to be separated from them to begin with. Rafael may *finally* have to fall after all this.”

“Does that mean he’ll be down here with me?” I ask conversationally, hoping the answer is *yes*.

“I don’t know. I’m not really sure what happens to fallen angels, aside from Lucifer,” he answers. “But I do know why they want to see you. It’s become clear you’re no longer an option for the *pure* plan. The only thing left is the impure one.”

I glance at Ezekiel, but he’s still staring at Lamar.

“Just fucking tell us in small, literal, detailed, and easily understood words what the hell they want from us,” Gage growls as he takes a threatening step toward Lamar.

Lamar smiles grimly. “I thought it’d be obvious by now,” he says in that annoying way of his. “They want you to be The Four Horsemen and *The* Apocalypse. They need you to do what you were designed to do, because the time has come.”

No one really says anything for a second, but I finally release a humorless laugh that borders on hysteria as I turn phantom and zap myself off the bed.

I turn whole a few feet away from him.

“I’m about to be *The* Apocalypse right this very second,” I caution him.

He swallows thickly and gives one curt nod.

It's a bluff. I feel just as miserable as I did that night I spent on the bathroom floor after my first experience with Harold's liquor, so I don't have that sort of power inside me at the moment.

"You've wanted answers, Paca. You have to know that everything Lucifer has done up until this point has been to protect you and hell. Passing the test means you finally win the argument you fought for five hundred years ago."

"I argued to blow up the world?" I ask dubiously.

I know I'm not that kind of horrible. It goes against everything that I do know about myself. I only kill when necessary or for balance—according to my journal. I never kill just for funsies.

"Not quite. It's more complicated than that," he says uneasily. "I'm afraid it's more complicated than I can explain. You came for answers. Stop arguing you're way out of them just because you got hurt. You're tougher than that."

His pep talks usually involve more ass kissing. I prefer that version of him.

"Fine," I say curtly, going phantom.

His eyes dart around like he's looking for me, as I change my outfit, collecting an exasperated curse from Gage just before I go whole and reveal my newest ensemble.

Lamar's eyebrows hit his hairline as he looks at me.

"What on earth are you wearing?"

“Something insensitive and rude to distract them just before we unleash hell and set them all on fire,” I say with a firm nod of my head, expecting the guys to reel me in and tell me I’m insane. “After we hear whatever glorious excuse they have for all these damn games, of course.”

I glance around when no one does the predictable *Paca-is-crazy* tirade. Even Jude is quiet.

Lamar looks a little queasy.

“Sounds like a plan,” Kai says with a shrug as he walks over to Lamar. “Lead the way. Let’s see if we like what we hear or not.”

For the first time, it feels like we’re a true unit.

Simply because I can’t believe they’re going along with me, I have to ask, “Just so we’re clear...we’re going to walk in, fuck shit up, and walk out like the evil bosses we are, right?”

Jude shrugs a shoulder as he smirks. Kai gives me a devilish little grin.

“Depends on what they say,” Ezekiel tells me in a noncommittal sort of way, as Gage gives his sword a bored look.

“Fuck my day,” Lamar says with a tired expression as he turns and leads the way.

Chapter 11

The doors fly open dramatically without me actually asking for it to be done, and they clang on either wall as the six of us strut in. I almost want to do a hands-on-hips superhero pose.

If only I had a cape...

Lamar flanks to my right, moving toward the corner, as we walk to the long table full of my siblings and the haggard angels.

Rafael doesn't meet my eyes. It seems we're interrupting a conversation between him and Lucifer.

We remain standing instead of taking the five vacant seats.

"He must fall. Then Paca and her Horsemen will level the world. After that, you seal up your home, and I'll seal up mine. It can have whatever remains. It won't gather the strength it needs," the Devil says, his eyes cutting to another angel.

"She still has unimaginable power. We felt it the same as you did. It just needs to be strengthened down here for a few months, and she could spare us all of this," that angel argues.

This...is not the argument I expected. In fact, I'm not sure what this argument even is. It's stealing some of my kick-ass-and-take-names vibe.

"She's not designed for that. For the last fucking time, she never was!" Lucifer shouts, slamming his fist down on the

stone table so hard it cracks. “You can’t change the game at the final stage!”

“It’s not a game, Lucifer!” one of the angels states emphatically.

“It’s all a game!” Lucifer says in a somewhat crazed tone.

Hera swirls her chalice and takes a sip. The Twins flick a triangle piece of plastic through finger-posed football goals. Manella is asleep. Cain is rolling dice and cursing the snake eyes. Lilith is rifling through her purse, pulling out rocks that turn to liquid. The liquid starts turning into little figurines of clay men.

Shaking my head and turning away from the distraction, I return my attention to the vehement argument still underway.

“She’s simply not capable at this point. Never was,” Lucifer is saying.

“Because she shared her balance with them,” Rafael snarls, pointing an accusatory finger at my guys.

I guess that means they’ve noticed us and find us to be a tedious detail in the grand scheme of things. I prefer to feel important when people are toying with me and erecting ridiculous expectations.

I’m not even sure what *ridiculous expectations* are being placed on my shoulders, but it’s sort of the gist of the argument going on.

“It doesn’t matter what she did, because she didn’t compromise the integrity of *her* balance. She *never* has! You killed her and tipped the balance.”

“It would have shattered had I not been right!” Rafael shouts as he leaps to his feet, breathing heavily...but his anger visibly starts to deflate.

He blinks and clears his throat before sagging back to his chair.

“No. It’s because of all she did to bring them and herself back that the balance didn’t fully shatter,” Lucifer says on a snarl, then he smirks like he’s won when Rafael says nothing in return.

“Why was I killed?” I ask, cutting in with a direct question.

Lucifer starts to answer, but I’m sick of his circling commentary that never really leaves me feeling like I’ve learned *truthful* information. Instead, I look at one of the angels, who is staring at me with a horrified expression.

I think it’s the first time I’ve been truly noticed since our badass entrance went ignored.

Well, all the angels, sans Rafael, are staring at me like they’re horrified now.

“I’ll hear it from the good guys who aren’t supposed to be able to tell lies. Though...clearly that manipulation rule is up for grabs,” I go on.

They just continue to gape at me.

Lilith gives me a dramatic roll of her eyes.

“*Suuuure*. She puts on a sexy angel costume and *that’s* attention-grabbing. So immature.” She shakes her head, muttering under her breath, “I’d look better in it.”

She forgot to mention the red horns on my head that are holding up the fuzzy white halo. I smirk when they continue to gape.

It's rude to be so impure in front of the pure, but these guys did kill me and helped torture me recently.

My heart and body are both still sore, so the memory is still really fresh. It grates on that *petty* impurity of mine.

“Someone should start answering,” Cain says, leaning up. “She’s got that crazy look in her eyes, and they’ll follow her lead. You’ve spent too long pissing them off.”

Cain is officially my new favorite sibling.

I recant that when he reaches down and scratches his balls with a firm look of concentration on his face. Man, with the effort he’s putting into that, they must *really* itch...

I just threw up in my mouth.

“Just over five centuries ago,” the angel closest to me starts on a huff, eyes averting my distracting ensemble that is sheer and very indiscreet, “our champion faced Jahl.”

There’s the bubble popping in the background again, shattering that suspenseful build that’s been steadily growing.

“What does that have to do with me?” I ask, not letting on that I don’t know this Jahl person.

“Our champion lost,” Rafael says quietly, still staring down at the table. “It should have been impossible. He was the perfect counter balance to Jahl, but still, he lost. And Jahl almost got loose into the world.”

“Who is Jahl?” I finally have to ask.

No one looks thrilled about me needing to know.

“It’s not a *who* but a *what*. The child I never had after I was refused the right to use my blood,” Lucifer states, eyes on me. “It would have been my first. It was created to catch the impurities that escaped to keep all of it from spilling into the world. Hell is messier than a place of pure intent. We have more spills.”

He stands, electing to sit on the edge of the table, presumably so he can see me better before he continues.

“It was a failed creation from the beginning. Without my blood, Jahl never grew into a true being. It could mimic emotion but not feel it, and *it* was pure, unadulterated evil when the shaky balance of it collapsed in a short amount of time. There was nothing to do but lock it away until a champion could be trained.”

Glancing around, I notice no one even bothers to react to his words, my guys included. I guess they’re all just glossing right over the fact the Devil just called something else *pure, unadulterated evil* like it’s a bad thing. Not terrifying or anything. *Got it.*

“Jahl couldn’t catch all the runoff as intended,” the angel next to Rafael tells me. “Hell really is far too messy. It was doomed to become imbalanced, even if it had become a being.”

“As a being, it would have had more weaknesses,” Lucifer says, going off on another tangent, because clearly they have centuries of unresolved issues, along with half-brokered arguments.

“Back to how this has *anything* to do with me,” I say, gesturing to myself.

“You’re all a bunch of spoiled, self-serving, disrespectful abominations, and yet you think your life carries more merit than anyone else’s,” Rafael says through gritted teeth, angry eyes finding mine.

“Yeah, and you’re just a selfless, compassionate, sweet little angel, aren’t you?” I drawl with a quirked eyebrow as I cross my arms over my chest in disbelief. “I just healed, in case you want to take a few more swings at me. I think I leveled-up, so it may be more interesting this time.”

I feel Jude’s hand subtly move to my back, touching me through the lacy fabric there, like he’s preparing to channel from me.

He’s stupid if he thinks we’re facing them head-on. We’ll have to do this sneak-attack style.

Ezekiel is going to need to go first to see how well *War* works against hell spawn and angels. My lazy siblings will have to pitch in that way.

“You see it as much as I do. Me killing her and you killing them restored her balance completely. Those pieces are back where they belong. That’s why the balance didn’t shatter. She fights him, or we do this all over again,” Rafael says, spitting the words out at Lucifer.

I almost point out that Manella was the killer of my boys, because we like shit really complicated around here. It feels like they just expect us to be okay with all this dying now that we’ve managed to return with no memories of the events.

“Over my cold, dead, fucking body,” Lucifer says with an eerily chilled tone, eyes on Rafael like he’s daring him to make a move. Weirdly, a drop of black blood drips from his nose. “I’ll fling you in there with him and see how well you fare, brother, *long* before you touch my daughter again.”

“They are tools. They are *not* your true children,” Rafael growls.

Rafael moves around the table, and Lucifer slowly stands, straightening out his jacket like he’s calm and cool, but ready to kill someone.

It’s when he’s calm that he’s the scariest.

“Can I beat Jahl?” I ask as the two move toward each other.

Going phantom, I quickly zap myself between them reflexively, surprised to find myself standing in this predicament.

They both stop advancing, standing on either side of me.

“No,” Lucifer says, at the same time Rafael answers, “Yes.”

Who to believe? The lying Devil, who has manipulated me one too many times, or the unbalanced angel who killed me and enjoyed slinging me around for the purpose of exposing a lie in place of the truth...

There really is a damn balance to every decision. It’s becoming tedious now.

“If she could beat him, you killing her would have shattered the balance,” Lucifer growls.

But...it could be more circling commentary with well-placed words to manipulate the entire situation.

“She’s twisted this entire situation to her benefit! It’s what she does. She’s selfishly selfless!” Rafael snaps.

“Selflessly selfish,” I amend, causing Rafael to scowl down at me. “You got it backwards.”

“You’re actually both,” the twins say at the same time. “Depending on the motives and the circumstances.”

I just grin at Rafael, because he seems infuriated about his insulting rant getting interrupted.

“Explain,” Kai says to the Twins.

“If she chooses to do something for a selfless reason, she has to find a selfish reasoning to do it as well, in order to preserve balance. She’s selflessly selfish in that equation, because she had no prior selfish motives. It’s all about motives and reasoning,” the one closest to us says in a bored tone.

“The overachiever she is, she usually only has to put thought into the big decisions,” the other twin says. “Because the small ones are subconsciously made with an easy balance for her.”

I glance back at Rafael when he releases a snort of derision.

“You’re pretty judgmental for a murderous psychopath with a halo. Curious. Do you have wings? Are angels allowed to have sex?” I prattle on, only needling him farther because it feels good, considering what he put me through. “Want to see what it looks like with your own personal harem? We’re up for demonstrations.”

Gage makes a sound of amusement, along with Ezekiel, making it hard to decide on my favorite at the moment.

Oh wait...*that's right*. Chloe is still an unaddressed issue. *Ezekiel it is*.

Rafael snarls at me as my head continues to go off on sporadic tangents.

“She *still* thinks she’s funny,” Lilith adds on a groan.

“No. I think I’m hilarious and completely underappreciated. And I think no one wants to explain anything because they’re too busy arguing or distracting me. But that’s just one girl’s opinion, and I did die. *Still* not clear on the reasons *why*.”

Rafael looks even angrier, so I take a step closer to Lucifer. I don’t know if he’s stronger than Rafael, but it feels safe to gamble with the Devil I know right now, instead of the one who wears a halo when killing.

I still hate Lucifer for his manipulative illusions, but I’ll deal with him later.

“You think you’re the victim in this scenario, which shouldn’t come as a surprise. Hell always plays the victim, despite their sins. The righteous are always judged by all of you,” he goes on.

“Says the guy who *killed* me and beat me for the hell of it today, while letting the Devil break my heart and torture my mind. My soul is dark and twisted. What’s your excuse?” I volley.

“Sitting yourselves on a pedestal as you hold yourself to such a small standard of accountability,” Rafael bitterly

rambles, not acknowledging the fact I just spoke.

“She couldn’t defeat him!” Lucifer snaps. “Now we know that for certain.”

At this point, I think Lucifer is just shouting things. Truthful or not? That’s the balance with him; you never know when it’s a lie.

“I can do this all day. Out of the two of us, I’m the only one who hasn’t murdered the other,” I say sweetly, batting my lashes at Rafael and ignoring Lucifer’s outburst. “Hardly think of you as righteous, so you can stop with the haughty tone.”

“Why are we even arguing? This is my decision now,” Lucifer growls.

“You really plan to do this? It won’t work,” Rafael says in a desperate sort of way that only confuses me more. “She has to fight Jahl.”

“She has to fight pure evil? How? She *is* evil!” Lucifer shouts back.

“But she has enough compassion and the perfect balance for this,” Rafael goes on.

Turning my head from side to side, looking over one shoulder and then the other, I listen as the angel and Devil argue back and forth. I shake my head, wondering how this metaphor just got so real.

I gesture between them as they take another few jabs at each other, and give my guys that unspoken question I expect them to hear. *Can you believe this is actually happening right now?*

Jude gives me that neck-wringing glare and points to his side like I'm supposed to immediately obey and zap myself there.

Right. Serious shit is going on. No time to be distracted by shiny things.

Still, when they lean over me to argue over my head—the Devil on my left and the angel on my right—I snort and choke back a laugh.

Rafael takes a few immediate steps back as I recover from my momentary slip. I hear Lilith and Hera both giggle as well, so I know they at least got the silent joke.

I hate them a little less for that.

“What’s truly funny, and you’re missing the point, is the fact you think I’m the villain and you’re the misunderstood victim in this equation because you have no memories of the truth, Apocalypse,” Rafael says with a snarl. “*You’re the villain.*”

“Simply because you have unsullied lips and mine are poisoned with sin?” I volley.

“No,” one of the other angels says, drawing my attention away. “Because instead of making a selflessly selfish or selfishly selfless decision, you just made a selfish one. You were going to end the world and help Lucifer seal hell,” he tells me, stealing all the lingering humor from the air.

My brow furrows as Rafael takes a step toward me, regaining my attention.

“You wanted to level it all, shatter the balance, and lock yourself safely behind hell’s front door and give Jahl the

world.” He takes one step closer as a heavy weight settles on my chest. “After, of course, you spent a mortal life as a Romanian gypsy with her traveling harem,” he adds bitterly.

“That doesn’t sound quite like me. I was fearless,” I argue. “Everyone and everything says so.”

He goes on as though I haven’t said anything at all.

“Hell can’t fully be sealed to contain all its occupants, as you once were perfectly aware—no entrances, but plenty of one-way breaches. Who knows what would happen if Jahl gathers enough souls to breach one or both of us eventually,” Rafael continues as I slowly take a step back. “He has plenty of followers already in hell who would gladly turn over their souls, believing him to be a grander Devil than Lucifer.”

Lucifer groans. “I’m *the* Devil,” he states.

“But it’s just the Devil with a little *t* in my head. I have a big *T* with my title,” I state as if compelled to do so, and then I grin when Lucifer glares at me.

Why does it feel like I’ve just somehow won a prize?

“The point is, Jahl’s people—your rebels—would possibly drag all the souls from hell that Jahl needed, and you lazy, selfish, distracted ingrates wouldn’t do a thing to stop it,” one of the angels dryly states, giving Manella an incredulous look when Sloth himself startles awake.

He smacks his jaws before releasing a loud yawn.

“If Jahl can consume enough true souls like he’s been attempting to do for centuries, he could eventually consume both heaven and hell,” another angel supplies, eyes on me.

“That doesn’t mean she deserved to die!” Lucifer says, restarting the argument. “It was never her place to have to fight him!” he roars, shoving Rafael, who simply turns the other cheek.

“I killed her because the balance needed to tilt to purer times, and the only way to do that was to banish a great evil. She was acting selfishly, so there was no cost of balance from her death,” Rafael bites out.

“Did it work?” I ask Lamar, glancing over my shoulder as a dull pain starts in my temple. “Did the scales tip to purer times?”

“No,” Lucifer growls as Lamar lowers his eyes like he’s not allowed to speak. “It’s gotten considerably worse. Because he killed the only one of us with an ounce of compassion.”

He shoves Rafael across the room, and the angel grunts when he hits the wall, but his eyes stay averted as his jaw tics.

“Better or worse is actually highly subjective, depending on perspective,” an angel replies.

“Paca was the balance holding hell at bay, and none of the rest of us are capable of caring what happens to the mortal souls, least of all me. There’s a reason she was a master at balancing—she saw the part everything and everyone played,” Lucifer says, snarling.

Rafael ignores Lucifer as his eyes land directly on mine, while I try to pretend to be the impervious hell spawn I’m supposed to be in this moment.

“You wouldn’t risk your precious Horsemen. The five of you together could have ended this and saved the world. But

you'd never let them fight, so you ran. Like a coward. So much for the fearless Apocalypse," Rafael says seriously.

"You want to see a coward?" Lucifer asks as a familiar laugh echoes behind me.

I whirl around as the Devil adds, "I'll show you a true coward."

My eyes are on the movie playing out before me like a phantom projector is in the room, casting the screen on the wall.

It's me. In a very familiar graveyard. The one the guys use a lot when reaping escaped souls.

I'm not really sure where the reel is coming from or if it's just another illusion.

"Or you could simply make my room purple. It's my new favorite color. Lilith is being greedy by keeping that color to herself for so long," the *me* on the screen is saying to...no one.

It looks the Paca on the reel is talking to herself, much like I do now. I gravitate toward the screen, seeing the past Paca with an easy, wicked tilt to her lips.

"Yes, I know greed isn't one of her impurities," she says on an annoyed groan. "It's a figure of speech. You really should expand your vernacular at some point. The nineties will be here before you know it. Just a few short centuries away."

Her head falls back, and she smiles as her eyes close like she's enjoying something. "Gotta go. Malek is trying to summon me, and I can't find this imbalanced royal escort Heratio swore was wreaking havoc and tipping the scales topside."

The Paca on the screen stops talking to herself, looking around like she senses something.

“Heratio, I think your angel radar is messed up. I feel no imbalances that are lethal. You’re supposed to be a master of balance too,” that Paca says loudly, eyes up like she’s saying this to the skies.

Snow is falling, blanketing the ground, piling up on the gravestones she’s walking around. Not much has changed in that cemetery in the past five hundred years.

She sighs like she’s agitated, and when she turns around, I suck in a sharp breath, because on the screen is a very familiar man.

“Unholy hell, Heratio,” that Paca snaps, throwing her hands up. “Why are you sneaking up on me? Do you want me to explode your head?”

That man’s name is not Heratio. That man’s name is... Harold. Even through the unkempt beard and ragged clothing, I recognize him. I know very few people in this life, after all.

Gage’s hand is suddenly pulling me closer to the four of them. I’m not even sure when or how I’ve moved this far over in the room without realizing it.

The five of us stare at the screen, needing to see what happens next.

“There *is* an unbalance, Apocalypse,” Harold tells her, smiling grimly. “Know that I get no joy from this.”

I startle when past Paca’s eyes suddenly widen, and my eyes drop to the tip of the sword sticking through her stomach. One second it’s not there, and in the next it’s back again.

Her head lazily drops as she staggers, the blade still sticking through her, somewhat resembling this latest death I just suffered. Her veins start turning red, slithering through her as *red* blood drips from her lips and the wound in her abdomen.

Her eyes pitifully look up at Harold's as she drops to her knees, and that's when Rafael steps into view, eyes hard and cold like he's handling an issue and not taking my life.

"Betrayal isn't an imbalance I was expecting," that Paca says so quietly that almost no one else hears it. "Someone's going...to regret...that," she adds on a strained whisper.

She doesn't even spare Rafael a glance.

Harold looks away, turning his back on the girl whose red blood is melting away the snow.

"Have no pity for a being incapable of offering you the same if the roles were reversed," Rafael states hollowly to Harold's back.

It looks like a long, agonizing death happening as her body violently convulses, and she crawls across the ground, heaving for air, trying to speak like she's going to call out for help or say something important. The attempt at speaking ends with her choking on her own blood.

I almost want to look away, but my eyes stay riveted to the screen, worried I'll miss something too important if I so much as blink.

"A blessed champion's sword dipped in the blood of a righteously balanced angel can turn us mortal and kill us, if we're topside," Manella says from behind me, proving he's

fully awake for the family movie night, as we all watch me slowly die on the screen.

When I collapse to the snow, lifeless and still bleeding out, the two angels finally vanish from sight.

Without regret.

Without guilt.

After all, I was just *The Apocalypse*. Why should they care?

I ignore the fresh tear that rolls down my cheek, blaming it on the emotionally taxing forty-eight hours. I can't even look at anyone in the room right now, aside from my Horsemen.

The four of them are staring at the dead girl on the screen, not displaying any visible emotion. It's like they've shut down their feelings, or maybe they're indifferent, since they don't remember how much that version of me loved them.

This is the day it was all taken away. A very long lifetime that was just ended so easily after surviving for so long.

As my body begins flicking to ash, swirling in the wind, instantly decaying, the reel stops playing.

"A true coward stabbed you in the back, because you wouldn't be their new champion after theirs was slain," Lucifer goes on.

Staring at the blank wall, I swallow thickly, the pain intensifying in my temple.

"Jahl's rebels have been trying to kill your guys for months now, until Father became lucid and intervened. He immediately started the rebel culling to keep them away for

you,” Lilith goes on. “Even after you’ve been dead for five centuries, you’re still his favorite. Such a spoiled little cunt.”

When the pain lessens, I half wonder if she knows I’m hurting and cursing me with insults, while also gifting me doses of relief.

It’s like I’m trying to figure every little thing out, and too many contradicting things start flying through my mind.

She sighs like she’s terribly putout by this, as though they’re all numbed to what I just saw for the first time.

As though this has all gotten terribly drab and inconvenient...

I can’t siphon as a whole being. I can’t carry things when I siphon. I can’t create real weapons, but I think I should be able to do all of it. I can’t find my crown, damn it.

“Total downer,” Cain says on a yawn, only proving my assessment about their attitudes correct, and also seeming to lessen that persistent pain in my head.

I’ll have to process all this later when I don’t have an audience staring at me, waiting for me to make the next move. I’m not sure who the bad guy is right now, but I also know something about all of this still feels wrong.

“If Jahl isn’t a being, then why does it have a name?” I ask as I steel myself and face them.

Gage pulls me back, keeping my back flush to his front.

Rafael’s eyes are facing downward, not looking at anyone.

“Because *everything* has a name,” Lucifer says dismissively. “Jahl is from the angelic language.”

“What does it mean?” I ask him, ignoring the little throb in my frontal lobe that is pulsing with more and more pain.

“I thought it’d be obvious by now,” Lucifer says, sounding far more condescending than Lamar does when he pops that line off. His eyes hold mine as he finishes his dramatic pause and adds, “The English translation is *beast*.”

Well, this just got substantially more terrifying. And I already have a migraine.

Chapter 12

It grows silent in the room.

The guys have barely made a sound during this entire thing. It's like they're simply absorbing the answers to our questions while they're accessible.

My head hurts so bad that it's almost becoming debilitating. Swaying a little and cursing the fact I'm showing weakness, I glance down as a single drop of black blood drips from my nose.

Kai is suddenly in front of me, blocking me from view, as Lucifer and Rafael begin arguing anew.

In an almost drunken slur, I say, "An angel and the Devil are having drinks at the bar, and the Devil asks the angel, *'How's work?'*"

"What?" Ezekiel asks as the arguing in the background gets louder.

Two heads turn into four, and then eight, as they blur in front of me.

"The angel tips his glass back and sighs as he puts it down, before saying, *'All's I can say is that 'at least it's not hell,'*" I ramble on, not really sure why these words are spewing from my mouth.

There's a loud rimshot drumming that follows that, and I glance over just as the pain eases somewhat, allowing me to

see a lot clearer. The twins are twirling phantom drumsticks as they start a beat after that, drumming away.

The weird part is that it sounds like actual drums.

It's as annoying as it is distracting, which is good, since it's distracting me from my headache.

"You were designed to be a weapon to destroy the world and give souls mercy, should he ever escape," Lucifer says to me, shouting the words like he's still in argument-mode and has too much momentum to slow down right now.

"That's just an excuse to keep her from using her power in any other way than the way you want," one of the angels snaps, slamming his fist down on the table in frustration as the argument rages on.

"As the Angel of Death, you should understand that we all have our roles to play, Azrael," Lucifer bites out.

The angel sighs and groans, massaging his temples. At least I'm not the only one with skull problems.

"It doesn't make sense," I tell the room, drawing all eyes to me, including Lucifer's. "It's out of character for me to run. My vanity wouldn't have allowed it. I'm compelled to face things," I answer, unable to tell the angels I do things that seem fearless even when I'm actually afraid.

Seems important they regain their faith in my fearlessness, since I want Rafael terrified of me as soon as possible. The throbbing in my skull eases just a little bit more as the twins' drumming ceases.

"I went into the trials with no knowledge of who or what I was," I say as I take a step forward, holding their gaze. "I fell

from a hellfire firefall to face death with Famine.”

A sharp pain slices and renews the throbbing in my temple, but I work through it and try to keep it from showing on my face. Gage makes a sound behind me, but I press on, determined to get to the *real* truth.

“You wouldn’t have *really* died,” Lilith says as though I’m being dramatic. The second she says the words, the pain in my temple decreases once more, drastically. “You just like theatrics. Always wanting attention. It’s so childish and pathetic.”

“You don’t even know what she’s talking about,” Manella says dismissively.

“Don’t have to. I just need the historically accurate facts as evidence. Hellfire can’t kill hell spawn,” she goes on.

It’s not like I knew that, and her interruptions belittle the point I’m trying to make.

The pain continues to lessen.

“I faced the Devil and won a sword fight after just dying—again—from being stabbed topside—”

“That wasn’t a real death. Just a temporary one. Those aren’t really all that impressive,” Lilith cuts in with an eye-roll. “It’s not as impressive as coming back from a true death, which has never been done before.”

“Well, it’s been done now, since she’s standing here and ranting for being called a coward,” Cain points out, smirking at Lilith, who rolls her eyes again. “Sounds just like her old self, too.”

My head feels *soooo* much better.

“*Overachiever*,” Hera says in a singsong voice while blowing her red nails that turn purple.

“Purple is my color right now,” I snap defensively at her, and quickly shake my head when I realize I’ve already gotten way too distracted *again*, and this time I’m actually trying to stay focused.

But...it is *my* color. I’ve already called dibs.

Apparently, I’ve waited five hundred years for it, so it’s clear I have dibs.

Great. So not the time for one of my mind rambles, nor is it the time for my weird new color obsession.

“And Daddy would never kill his favorite,” Lilith resumes. “You’re not as heroic as you’d like to think. You just pretend to be badass. I could be your version of badass if I really wanted to be.”

“Can I punch her?” I ask anyone who wants to answer, flicking my gaze around. “Will it affect any balance?”

“I think it’s safe,” Jude drawls from my side.

Lilith vanishes and reappears at Lucifer’s side, smirking as she props up on him.

“I hate for my girls to fight,” Lucifer says on autopilot.

“This is why she’d be a terrible champion,” one of the angels who hasn’t spoken yet finally says to the other four. “She can’t even finish a sentence without being distracted.”

I feel like we’re all the naughty hell spawn being chastened by an archangel.

I pause...trying to recall who, if anyone, has mentioned they're archangels, but I stop immediately when my temple starts to hurt again.

The twin closest to me leans over and stage-whispers, "Pssst...You forget we're evil fucking hell spawn." With a smirk and a normal register to his voice, he adds, "We can't take things *save-the-world-serious* for too long. It's naturally bad for our health."

Suddenly, those bouts of temple pain make a lot more sense. The *Joker* pops into my head with, *Why so serious?*

I think humans understand balance more than they let on.

"Fighting Jahl takes a lot of focus, intent, and pure determination. There's nothing pure about her that doesn't have an impure balance. It's likely it would never be selfless enough to counter her selfish intentions, even if she sacrificed herself," he continues, throwing those last words out there like they genuinely think I'd die for them at this point.

I'm pretty sure *The Apocalypse* shouldn't be expected to be quite so noble after just watching herself be gutted and having some epic romance ripped out of her hopelessly romantic heart.

"Thank you, Michael!" Lucifer shouts, pointing at the angel who stands. "Thank you! I've been saying this all along."

"That's nothing like you've been saying," Azrael argues.

"Of course it is. Word for word," Lucifer states, though I suspect it's a lie, given the expressions in the room.

I haven't heard him make that argument, but I've been missing for five hundred years!

"I heard him. It's the exact argument we've had since we came in here," one of the twins says absently as he carves the Gemini sign into the stone table.

Ah, so definitely a lie then.

"Doesn't matter the argument. We came to see if there was any way she could defeat Jahl now that she's come back. She wasn't an ideal candidate back then. She's certainly not an option now. We'll both seal our gates after she levels the world and sends the remaining souls to their eternal resting/unrestful grounds," Michael continues conversationally.

"NO!" Rafael shouts, pointing at me. "You saw that power. Even weakened, she's brimming with it. A few months in hell, and she'll be more than ready."

That mind-searing pain in my head is back.

"*Revelations*, brother," Lucifer bites out. "The Four Horsemen of The Apocalypse will start things off. Then she'll level the world as much as she's able. After that, the few who survive will face Jahl."

They continue arguing again, and I turn and walk out. None of this feels right. I'm trying to remember a life I can't remember, and too many things are just popping into my mind that *I know*. I don't know how I know them or why the thoughts haven't been there up until now, or why it feels like there's still a jack-hammering in my head, or why I really want to find my pretty crown....

I pause and blow out a breath.

“Where are you going?” Gage asks as he catches up.

“The Four Horsemen and *The Apocalypse* are about to walk into a pawn shop on the seedy side of town to see a lying angel-slash-fake Elder about a dead woman in a cemetery. Just a regular...what day is it?”

“Thursday,” Kai states conversationally as we continue walking instead of siphoning, because I *really* need to take a walk.

The farther away I get, the lesser the migraines—*because there’s certainly more than one going on right now*—become.

“Just a regular Thursday,” I continue.

“You have blood dripping from your nose. Stop for a fucking second,” Jude snaps.

“There’s blood dripping because of the multiple migraines. If this is the balance to multiple orgasms, I may forgo sex,” I tell him seriously.

He doesn’t look convinced.

As if he’s trying to scare me in my moment of weakness, Lucifer appears directly in front of me, startling the shit out of me.

We all stay quiet as I just glare at him.

“I’m not in the mood to face my *Daddy Issues* at the moment,” I tell him curtly.

“You’re on your way to visit Harold,” he says with a shoulder shrug. “Understandable. You can’t kill him. The balance will be devastated. He’s currently neutral, and Lamar killed his Elder powers that I still have to restore.”

“Lamar didn’t stab him, and Harold is definitely still alive.”

“Yes, he did,” Lucifer says with certainty. “And he killed his Elder powers. Not his angel. You’re welcome. I made Lamar do that and wiped it from his memories. Harold would have sensed a shape shifter,” he goes on.

I blink at him.

“He’d have done it himself if he’d have known the truth. Killing Harold’s Elder power keeps him stuck topside, since he was close to redeeming himself and returning home,” he continues, smirking. “He’ll face Jahl too now, after you destroy the world, as punishment. To be safe, let’s not tell Manella that I used his boyfriend. He tends to be petty over such things.”

“You’re unbelievable,” I say in exasperation.

“I’m *evil*,” he reminds me. “So are you. So are we all.”

Why do I bother? He can’t help himself. He has to lie and manipulate, and I can never tell what’s really going on in the moment. He says everything with conviction and sincerity in his eyes, and then he backs it up with a reasonable point.

I say nothing, and he rolls his eyes. “I’m not sure why you insist on continuing to take your anger out on me.”

“I find it really hard to believe it was so easy to simply end my life, given the fact I’m supposed to be this all-powerful entity,” I bite out. “Since I’ve returned, you’ve lied to me, you’ve manipulated me, you’ve played me like a chess piece, and you really crossed a line with that latest illusion,” I go on as the blood continues to drip and the pain in my head grows.

“I’m sick of the lies and half-truths that are wrapped around
—”

My words cut off as I hiss out a pained breath.

“What do you get when you cross a platter with a vagina?” Kai asks, confusing me as I keep my eyes shut and focus on massaging away the pain.

“A platterpuss?” I guess.

He snorts. Three others groan. Miraculously, my head feels surprisingly better.

“Hilarious,” I state dryly.

“Better than half your shit,” he mumbles under his breath.

“You’re my favorite just for making the effort,” I tell him, blowing out a breath of relief.

When my eyes open, Lucifer is just staring at me, giving the *illusion* of a patient man.

“Feel better?” he muses.

“I’d feel a lot better if I could find my crown.”

He nods like that makes perfect sense. “I’m sure it’ll turn up. Are you done with your rant or did you have more to add?”

I tap my chin like I’m giving it serious thought, before giving him a bored look. “I think that covers it. Unless you’re willing to tell me why I wanted to walk away from a fight and take the easy way out, when it completely goes against everything I *do* know about myself.”

His eyes go a little cold.

“You were designed as a failsafe weapon, but we soon realized you were so strong. If ever too strongly imbalanced, you could damn well destroy us all,” he states like it’s no big deal, taking a few steps away as he pockets a hand. “You lessened your strength by giving away important pieces of your balance to your boys.”

My paintings suddenly appear on all the walls around us, and I do well not to startle about that too.

“You’re the perfect antihero, along with your harem of destruction,” he continues. “Exquisitely balanced like no other, with a system too complicated and intricate for any other to copy.”

He pauses in that dramatic way of his before adding, “I created you in the peak of my madness, because as we all know, with pure genius comes pure insanity.”

It feels like he’s playing my vanity card right now, so I immediately go on alert, even if I do give into the urge to smirk.

“Only you could take that as a compliment,” Ezekiel mutters on a groan as he scrubs a hand over his face.

“I don’t know about the old me, but the new me is starved for a little recognition,” I state dryly.

Bye, bye, headache.

Lucifer gives me a thin smile.

“Of course *they* wanted me to destroy you. All my brothers voted in favor of your immediate termination, before you had the ability to affect the cosmic balance with your death.”

My little bubble just has to get popped every time it's barely inflated.

"I know I'm evil, but that's a little overboard," I decide to point out.

He nods, his smile lifting at one corner of his mouth.

"Indeed. But you'd already started balancing hell, and you were evolving as this magnificent, feisty, arrogant little thing. The more you worked, not even really exerting much effort, the more lucid I became. The clearer I could see things...so many things. Images were coherent instead of just the scattered, frozen pieces inside the fissures of my mind."

His nose drips a drop of black blood that sizzles in the air as it hits the floor beneath us.

"You mostly balanced me. They knew I'd never give you up after that. You're my favorite child for so many reasons. That's just one of them," he continues, wiping away the next drop of blood.

"You weren't strong enough to face Jahl, because you'd shared your balance with them," he says, gesturing to all four of my boys. "But with your death, perhaps those pieces have returned."

I shake my head. "Not possible. They only get individual erections with me."

It's entirely the wrong choice of words to use for the argument, but it's a little too late to do anything about that now.

Lucifer seems stumped on how to respond. I feel like a pat on the back is deserved for stumping the Devil.

“We still feel her,” Gage tells him, his reasoning sounding much better than mine. “That bond is there.”

“Of course the bond is there,” Lucifer says dismissively. “The pieces of her balance had nothing to do with the bond. That was only ever to restore your own personal balances. You no longer need her balance for that.”

This could be a big fat lie, but I have no choice other than to roll with it.

“Then I’m confused. How did I find them if my pieces are gone, and how is there a bond?” I ask, holding up my hand like this is class and he’s our hell teacher.

“You spent centuries together. That sort of time is what forges the bond. It’s how you fused those pieces into them. They’d suffered the same misery in Hell’s Black Heart, and it joined them in comradery. They’d forged a bond already, and you cemented it when you gifted them with the Horsemen powers.”

I glance back at them and then to Lucifer, suddenly seeing where this is going, and hoping I’m wrong.

“You were never meant to be a champion. You were supposed to be the weapon to end the world in the event that the champion failed. To preserve balance, only one champion could exist at a time, and it took many centuries to grow that power before he could face Jahl. When Matthew was slain, desperation struck, and you were tasked with an impossible feat.”

“But I like impossible feats,” I state, my journals moving through my mind.

“You do,” he says, nodding. “And you’re fearless when challenged. You’re too vain to run from a fight, and far too wrathful to pass up the opportunity to cause mass destruction. And *you* can find a balance to make any decision you truly want to.”

A stone settles onto my stomach, as another drop of blood leaks from his nose. I worry he’s bleeding because he’s being too serious, which means he could be telling the truth and only the truth.

“You’re also reasonable,” he grinds out. “You knew you couldn’t defeat Jahl, and you’re not selfless enough to sacrifice yourself in vain. It’d shatter the balance if you did. But you wouldn’t just say that to them. You refused to give *them* that information, and *I* trusted my daughter, who lacks the capability of deception, when she told me to trust her.”

He laughs humorlessly, running his hand over the continuously leaking nose.

“*Even I know how ridiculous it sounds to have the Devil ask for one’s trust,*” he says, the words parroting the exact words he said to me when I once assumed he was attempting to provoke a memory I don’t have. “Those are the words you said to me when I told you to let me explain the truth to them,” he continues.

“It was so easy to kill me, because I allowed them to do it,” I say quietly, swallowing thickly.

“You went topside, even though we both suspected this would be something they attempted. You didn’t even fight back, because you needed that shift in balance—*your* unnecessary death at the hands of the pure—to achieve the

impossible,” he goes on, his voice getting raw. “You didn’t even warn me you were about to put a plan into motion, because I was part of your balance for this equation. A small piece of it, no doubt, considering all you would have had to shift around to make this happen.”

His eyes water a little as he takes a step forward.

“Betraying me was a selfless act, because you knew I’d stop you, and there was only one way you could restore your Horsemen’s true balance, and possibly defeat Jahl. Simply because you can’t walk away from a challenge,” he goes on.

Even without a conscience, I was almost feeling bad, until that last part.

“You’re trying to make me feel bad for wanting to save the world?” I ask dubiously.

His chin wobbles. “We’re not heroes. You’re reasonable enough to know this. You didn’t want to do this for the heroics; it was just your vanity and pride talking.”

“I doubt I was trying to be a hero. From the sound of things, Jahl is eventually going to kill us all, even if we do seal everything up and level the world. It would have been a selflessly selfish decision,” I argue.

“At the cost of my sanity for over five-hundred years!” he snaps. “And you didn’t even warn me,” he goes on, his voice growing quieter.

When a tear drops from the Devil’s eye, I get so queasy, feeling like a horrible person. How terrible is a person if they can make Lucifer cry?

“They were more important to you than your own father,” he goes on, another tear falling. “And you didn’t even allow yourself to remember me.”

“Well, clearly my memories were a huge sacrifice I had to make in order to come back,” I reasonably point out. “And my knowledge. I don’t remember my *harem* either.”

Oh, fuck my life. I’m seriously trying to console...*the Devil*.

He cuts his eyes away, blinking back tears as he turns his back on me.

“How is this happening right now?” I mutter under my breath, still feeling sick.

“My favorite daughter just...gone. Along with my mind that grew worse and worse until it was just fractured images in the fissures all over again,” he continues. “Until you came back, and I could feel the balance you were restoring. I was too scared to hope that even you’d accomplished that much of the impossible.”

He disappears before I can say anything else, and I turn around to find my quad just staring at Lamar, who has apparently been eavesdropping, though I know it hasn’t been long.

I get it. It’s weird to have just witnessed that and everyone is trying to avoid looking at me.

I feel weird too.

I turn and walk back toward my room because I need a minute to process all this shit. After all, I’m not superwoman. I’m the anti-fucking-superwoman.

I resent that bitch for being so damn awesome. I bet she doesn't have to deal with shit like this when she has to save the world.

Chapter 13

The second we're all tucked in my room, Lamar takes a seat beside me on the floor as I stare at one of the purple walls.

"I'm incapable of experiencing guilt," I tell him numbly as I swallow the lump in my throat. "I'm a being without a conscience," I go on, feeling a phantom weight pressing into my chest. "So what is this sickening knot that is twisting inside me and making me hate myself so much right now?" I ask as a hot tear rolls down my cheek.

"It's pure, unpersuaded, gut-wrenching regret," he says quietly.

Still dazed and sick, I just slowly nod.

"I *regret* hurting the Devil's feelings," I say aloud, hearing just how ludicrous it truly sounds. "He just tortured my mind. I should have no capacity of compassion for him," I add on a groan, pushing my palms into my eye sockets.

"Everything you've done had to be done. I believe that," he says, kissing my ass in that way that usually annoys me, but I appreciate right at this moment.

"And," he adds, patting my leg that I tug away from his touch, "Lucifer is really good at playing the victim role. He's been doing it since he was kicked out of heaven. Add that in

with his ability to manipulate anything to his benefit, toss in a few masculine tears, and he's reeling you in. So don't feel too bad. Even when getting a nosebleed, there's a fifty-fifty chance it's all bullshit mixed with just enough truth."

I blow out a breath, groaning as I scrub a hand over my face.

"I was thinking the same thing," Kai says as he takes a seat across from me.

The other three take seats on the floor as well, all of us staggered.

Lamar hands me a jar of liquor that reminds me I need to visit a pawn shop...when I'm not so emotionally vulnerable. I take a long sip, tasting popcorn flavor hit my mouth.

I wish I had just *known* how to do that the first time I had this liquor. Or the second.

"Harold-slash-Heratio pretended not to know who I was," I say to the guys.

"You've been in contact with Heratio since your return?" Lamar asks in surprise.

I decide I really don't need to tell him what the Devil said. I'm not sure if it's the truth he was telling me to let me in on a secret, or if it's a lie he was spewing to appeal to my vengeful nature and manipulate me back into his fold.

I take a longer drink of the popcorn liquor, not enjoying any of the answers before me.

"He took us in and guided us, even though he's considered neutral. But I know he's really a balance Elder—at least *now*."

No one has ever said otherwise. And he's only been around since a century before E," Jude adds as I take on the impossible task of mentally sorting facts.

Given what Jude is saying, he clearly thinks everything Lucifer says is utter bullshit, not looking for the hints of truth.

"I certainly had no idea he was Harold the Balance Elder I was wrongly accused of attempting to kill. Though now I can see how I looked so guilty, since I really want to kill him at present," Lamar confesses.

I look back at the guys, seeing them all about as exhausted and overwhelmed as I feel.

"Not now," I say as I stand. "I'm still healing from my test, and I feel *regret* over hurting Lucifer's feelings and making him crazy while I fixed the five of us."

I pause, glancing at all of them.

"I suppose I wronged you worse than—"

When my nose drips black blood, Kai rolls his eyes, and I swallow the words as the next pulse of pain in my head starts up.

"At this point, it's safe to assume there's no way in fucking hell you'd have done any of this if there was any other option," Kai tells me pointedly.

"Unbelievable," I mutter. "Saving your lives didn't earn me trust, but finding out I'm the catalyst to your demise makes things just peachy. You really are psychos."

They don't bat an eye.

“Either way, you were going to die, and us along with you,” Gage says with a shrug. “Only makes sense you’d choose the most balanced option.”

Before I can ask what that means, Ezekiel chimes in. “If you’d died facing Jahl, everyone would have died eventually.”

“Dying an unbalanced death gave you the loophole you needed to come back and bring us all with you,” Jude says quietly, eyes fixed to mine. “Stronger and better.”

“Those nightmares used to be memories,” Gage says with a shudder.

“They are certainly stronger,” Lamar affirms with a nod. “We witnessed that much just in the trials. Even without hell’s power bleeding through their veins...it shouldn’t have been so easy for them.”

“Imagine the power boost we’ll get from visiting Hell’s Black Heart,” Kai says over to Gage. “Could be enough to help her end Jahl.”

Lamar looks confused, but I grin over at Kai.

“You’ll wear your skirts, right? It’ll help keep things from getting so serious,” I add with a grin, my eyes dipping to said skirts that they’re still wearing.

“It’s growing on me,” Gage says as Jude stands and goes digging through my drawers.

They can’t materialize clothing the way I can...

“Could they materialize clothing one time?” I ask Lamar.

“They could do a lot of frivolous things they can’t seem to do anymore,” he states like he’s already observed as much.

Jude curses as he closes the drawer.

“Unless you want to wear something purple, you’re not going to find anything in there. All of Paca’s purple wardrobe has been moved here,” Lamar tells them.

Gage curses the very purple closet across from me. “If we keep walking around in these...whatever we’re wearing—”

“Skirts,” I supply. “Fringed skirts is what I’m actually calling them.”

He gives me a look that borders on hostile exasperation, and I grin. They’re now cute when they’re mad. I’m sure that’s exactly the look they’re going for too, being the Four Horsemen and all; cute is a given.

“I don’t even know what you’re thinking, but I can tell by your smile that it’s ridiculous,” Ezekiel says pointedly at me.

I grin bigger. “Yeah, but now I have an excuse.”

His brow furrows as my eye twitches, the subtle hints of the lingering pain still there in my mind as I try to piece together everything from the overwhelming day, week, month...*however long it’s been*.

“How long have we been down here?” I ask Lamar.

Ezekiel comes to turn my head to face him, crouching in front of me as he inspects my eyes and wipes away some of the evil blood.

It fortunately doesn’t burn him. I don’t think any part of me is capable of harming them.

Well, unless they wake me from one of those terrible nightmares.

“Fifty-two hours is how long you’ve been down here,” Lamar tells me, causing my attention to quickly shift back to him.

“Fucking purple. Just purple. I’m not wearing purple,” I hear Jude griping as another drawer slams shut.

Rolling my eyes, I stand, even as Ezekiel’s lips tighten in silent protest. I’m not sure why he looks worried about me right now. This is the least I’ve hurt in hours.

“How did we even end up in this shit?” Kai asks as he starts trying to figure out how to take his level-up skirt off.

“You’re the Four Horsemen. You were defending the castle. There’s a dress code. Paca’s rules,” Lamar says with a shrug. “I guess you found a missing piece of yourselves during the battle.”

I grin, simply because now I’m utterly fascinated.

Everyone else in the room, sans Lamar, is glaring at me right now.

“So the Spartans?” I ask, feeling a little unexplainably giddy at the fact people are still doing something *I* put into effect.

“That dress code was certainly implemented by you,” Lamar confirms. “If your siblings had something pretty to look at, it drew them out to watch you fight as you led your armies to face off with whatever new, naïve group of rebels thought they could overthrow the castle. Sometimes you even gave people power boosts just so they’d get greedy and attempt such a thing. You do love your destruction.”

He releases a wistful sigh, as though he's taking a moment to be nostalgic right now.

I go phantom, fashion some baggy dude clothes on me, and turn whole. I've had so many level-ups, but making clothes I can shed without them disintegrating is a cool tool to have in my arsenal.

The sweatpants drop to my ankles, and I kick out of them. Ezekiel swipes them before anyone else can, and I start pulling off my new shirt as he quickly undresses.

"You're gay, right? Not into girls too?" Gage asks as Lamar glances over my bare body.

Ezekiel snatches me at my waist and drags me against *his* bare body when Lamar takes too long to answer.

I grin, because they're totally jealous...of a guy in love with my brother.

Doesn't get much better than this. I will so give them hell. Later. After I finish making new clothes and dealing with the current crisis of a hugely consequential decision.

My nose drips another drop of blood as I go phantom again, fashioning more clothes.

Lamar gives them all a lazy grin. "I'm gay," he assures them. "Just curious if she gave up anything physical. Clearly not."

I turn whole again in more clothes, and I act like I'm going to hand the pants to Jude. I pull them back just as he reaches for them and toss them to Gage.

Jude gives me an exhausted look, standing naked in the room. Gage laughs under his breath as he starts removing his skirt.

Lamar doesn't look. Possibly because he knows I'm very territorial. Possibly because he's dedicated to Manella and it would be disrespectful.

The latter of the two seems less likely, since it's still hell. Fear is the only effective motivator for most actions.

The shirt drops to the ground when I go phantom and do it all over again.

I turn whole, standing on top of the shirt, just as Jude goes to pull it out, and he curses as he stumbles forward, his gentle tug not giving him the necessary purchase. I quickly kick it back to Kai behind me, and laugh when Jude stalks off.

"Perfect fit," Gage says from across from me.

"I spent over five years studying your bodies," I remind him as I kick the new pants to Kai.

Ezekiel catches the next shirt and makes a gesture like he's about to toss the shirt to Jude. When Jude puts his hands up to catch, Ezekiel throws it to Gage instead.

I choke back a laugh when Jude just stares in confounding disbelief for a second. Ezekiel and Gage both release a rumble of laughter as Kai snorts.

Jude's lips twitch, and he quickly scrubs a hand over his face and turns so I don't see him accidentally smile. He hates it when he finds me amusing. He's stubborn that way.

I go phantom for the final time and quickly fashion his new attire.

“I was really expecting something ridiculous at this point,” he grumbles when I *finally* let him have the clothes. Then I quickly change into my own wardrobe.

It’s not an angel.

It’s not a devil.

It’s—

“What are you wearing?” Ezekiel asks on a long breath, even as his own grin grows.

The shirt has a picture of my missing crown on it, with a promise of a reward if found *and* returned to me in perfect condition.

Have to be careful with the wording in hell. Even if I didn’t just *know* that, I’d still know it.

Jude is muttering curses as he struggles into the too-tight sweatpants that have a leather lining on the inside.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Why is there *wet* leather in here?” Jude asks, hopping around on one foot as he tries to work his leg all the way in.

“Because I’m evil,” I remind him, drawing a laughing groan from Gage, who is shaking his head. “Literally,” I add with a dark smile.

“Make me something different, for fuck’s sake,” Jude says when he finally gets one leg all the way in, eyes swinging to mine.

“This is for the beetle.”

He huffs a frustrated sound, but I'm surprised when he actually resumes the task of pulling the pants on. And it is definitely a task.

I finally get bored and look away from the train wreck. He's really going to hate me once he starts pulling on that super tight shirt.

"Fuck," I hear him groan from behind me, which just renews my smile as I let my eyes drift over the room, taking in all the things I haven't yet noticed.

"Oh! Jewelry!" I say on a gasp as I dart to the shiny diamond necklace.

"Someone reel her the fuck in before she cuts her face nuzzling that rock," Kai says like he's amused.

But there are so many gems that I can't look at all of them at once when I pull out a drawer.

I fall back as the lights go out, my brain short-circuiting over all the shiny things.

Chapter 14

"We've gone through this fifty times in the past hour. If we have to fight this thing, we need to know what we're going up against. This thing beat a blessed champion. Rafael is just an archangel and he tossed her around like a rag," Jude is snapping. "She fucking fainted because she saw a bunch of gems!"

Why's he gotta bring that shit up?

“My vanity just decided you’re on probation from being my favorite for no less than three days just for that comment,” I state, feeling dizzy.

And no, it’s not because of my short, embarrassing faint.

My nose just keeps dripping blood. I’ve stained the floor, and I’m hiding it.

We really have been at this for hours. Jude has already burst out of that teeny-tiny shirt I fashioned with all his angry Hulk impersonations.

“Take a break,” Lamar says curtly.

“This is our lives we’re discussing,” Jude growls. “Not yours. We’ll take a break when—”

“He’s right,” Ezekiel cuts in, lips thinning when he sees me quickly wipe away the next drop of blood.

“Pay a visit to Hell’s Black Heart. You need the power boost. The more time you spend there, the stronger you’ll grow. It’s how you were strong enough to harness the Horsemen powers, after all. It’s where evil goes to fester,” Lamar continues as he stands. “I’m going to take Paca to her favorite room in hell.”

“It’s not my bedroom?” I ask, perking up at the prospect of something else that’s all mine.

Jude crouches in front of me, where I’m back to sitting beside the bed, and I hear *riiiipp*.

He glares at me when I make a strangled sound in my throat and fight really hard not to laugh.

But the other guys aren’t so generous.

“Been waiting on that for a while. It came a little late. I should have made those pants just a *little* tighter,” I tell him with a slow smile.

He stands while rolling his eyes, and I catch a flash of his ass when he turns around with the new large split right down the center of it.

Lamar pushes a section of the wall, and it begins backing up. Inch by inch, it reveals a large, hidden closet when the door starts moving to the side.

It’s full of men’s clothing.

“That’s been there all along?” I ask incredulously.

“Why are you just *now* showing us that?” Jude asks, looking even more frustrated than usual.

My nose finally stops bleeding, just because I’m so damn entertained.

“I thought it’d be obvious by now,” Lamar says with a careless shrug. “I’m evil too. Most people in hell’s royal circle are.”

As if he’s just schooled the Four Horsemen, he reaches down his hand for mine, and I take it, grinning like a little kid at Christmas when Jude simply exhales and starts actually counting to ten.

Lamar helps me up, and I strut toward the door.

“Spend time there. Manella will tell you how to find us when you’re done,” he says, not giving them time to argue before dragging me along quicker.

Gage grabs me at the waist, ripping me away from Lamar. I'm positive he's going to object to me running off with my brother's boyfriend that we barely know—but that I can surely kill—in case Lamar is secretly plotting against us.

Instead, he kisses me.

Hard.

It surprises me so much that I just lamely stand here for a moment with my eyes wide open. Then I quickly melt against him, kissing him back.

I almost forget that he can't be my favorite. Then I remember the unresolved issue, but continue to kiss him anyway. He doesn't have to be my favorite.

His hands tighten on my waist, pulling me closer as he kisses me stupid, and every bit of pain just fades into nothing. I really should have kissed one of them sooner, because nothing else is so good at distracting me.

Someone knocks at the door, the only thing that has Gage releasing me.

Lamar is quick to answer it.

The sound of shuffling feet precedes three men stepping in and standing off to the side like they're awaiting orders.

"They'll take you to the Black Heart," Lamar says as though he's somehow magically summoned them. "Sorry. They can wait until you're finished."

Gage clears his throat and releases me, walking off while scratching the back of his neck.

Totally weird reaction, but it's been an intense day. The other three are coming out of the closet...literally. Jude is the only one wearing something different.

"I think we're ready," Ezekiel says, glancing over at Gage, who still has his back turned.

"Make sure Chloe knows I'm *The Apocalypse* so you can be my favorite, because I really want that right now," I tell him.

I see him smirk from the side, but he doesn't look over at me.

Weird.

Lamar motions for me to walk out first, meaning that chivalry is still alive even in hell. It makes me feel feminine and dainty, so I happily start out in front of him.

But the three men near the wall immediately drop to their knees and bow before me.

"Royal," they all say in unison, as though they're addressing me.

I arch an eyebrow at Lamar. "I'm called Royal?"

"You're *The Apocalypse*," Kai pops off with a smirk. "Did you think they'd call you *Princess*?"

When worded that way...

"I do have a crown," I point out a little defensively. Looking around like it's going to magically appear, I add in a mutter, "Somewhere."

"Should we tell her?" Kai asks.

“Tell me what?” I chirp, hoping they know where it is. I barely even got to look at the damn thing.

“I think we should,” Gage says, finally facing me again, grinning like Kai.

“I think we should wait,” Jude says with his own smirk.

“Only because she made you look like an idiot,” Ezekiel says while patting Jude’s back. “I vote we tell her.”

“Tell me what?” I ask again.

Gage comes over, and I start to think he’s going to kiss me again, when he grips my hips and lifts me right off the ground like it’s no big deal. Jude could have sent me to my ass if he’d wanted to rip that shirt out from under me earlier.

I file that information away.

He drops me in front of a mirror, and I smooth down a stray red hair. I’m getting used to the red. Though I do miss my darker skin tone that’s slowly fading as well, as though the hair color and skin tone are linked.

Then he pulls up the back of my shirt and turns me around.

I’m confused, until I look back and see what he’s showing me.

All the bastards are grinning. I can see their reflections. Even Lamar is grinning.

The other three dudes are still bowing on the floor.

It takes me three-point-five seconds to understand what’s so amusing.

“That bitch!” I shout when my head ramble finally stops. “She turned my crown into a lower back tattoo?!” I ask in horror.

There’s no mistaking the fact there’s definitely a crown tattoo where a crown tattoo has never been before. And it’s my crown. My pretty crown that I didn’t get to fully examine before it became a lower back tattoo.

“She gifted you Hera’s favorite color of hair, simply because she knows you love driving Hera crazy. And she had to curse it somehow.”

“With my crown?” I ask incredulously.

“You love your crown as much as Hera loves having red hair. The question is, which is more important? Driving Hera crazy or getting back your crown?” Lamar says like he’s so insightful.

“Fucking balance,” Jude says with that fuck-you grin I should have trademarked.

I’m confused when I actually struggle to pick between the two. It should be obvious: *Pick the crown!* But the idea of torturing Hera just gives me an unnatural sense of pleasure.

“That diabolical bitch,” I say on a more appreciative breath, seeing the evil genius conundrum before me and hating Lilith for coming up with it.

“I say to stay ginger and forfeit the crown,” Ezekiel supplies.

My eyes flick to him. “Of course that’s what you’d say.”

He smiles unapologetically before waggling his eyebrows. I'm trying to be annoyed, but it's like his stupid grin makes my grin stupid.

Lamar sighs before touching just my elbow and I feel the tug of a siphon. We land in a familiar hallway. This hall seems to move from place to place, depending on your destination.

Lucifer really is proud of his evil spawn if he's constantly making you walk through the *Hall of Sick Fame* no matter where you're going.

Instead of moving through the hallway, Lamar pushes on the wall, and just like in my bedroom, the wall begins to move.

Dramatic music starts playing as the wall *slowly* slides away, disappearing to the side, and my eyes go wide in my head as I step inside, lost to this amazing room.

There's a big *bom bom bom* sound in the music just as an ethereal light seems to slowly illuminate the room.

"What is this?" I ask as I spin in a slow circle, taking in all the beautiful sights.

There's a Rob Thomas poster on the wall. There's also a huge TV that probably weighs a few tons. Definitely not a flat screen, but not classified as a tube TV either.

Nintendo's Mario and Luigi are proudly slapping five on an entire wall mural. Suede leather furniture is on top of some sort of burgundy carpet. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have their own poster on the wall as well. The carpet so far is my only complaint.

I would have gone with something more user friendly.

Lamar walks by a VCR player to a bookshelf that is filled with VHS tapes stacked nicely and labeled.

“This is your nineties room, though not everything is period accurate. Some things we saw was a bleed-over from the seventies or eighties—such as the lava lamp you coveted so much. It was a birthday present from Lucifer,” Lamar tells me just as I turn on the lava lamp in question.

“We can often recreate the futuristic material things we see, depending on their varying degrees of complexity. Some things may be slightly modified or custom designed to suit your own personal tastes,” he adds.

I take a seat on the *hunter-green* suede couch and glance over at the mauve hot tub in the corner that is built into the ground. Seems counterproductive to have a hot tub in hell.

There’s a Game Boy on the coffee table. A Sega Genesis is in one of the compartments on one of the twin entertainment-stand columns. A Super Nintendo is on the other.

Lamar starts unravelling a cord from around a controller that is hooked to the Super Nintendo.

“I’ll turn it on so you can play,” he says, causing me to groan.

“Okay, but only for a second, because I think I need to start training or something.”

He looks confused as he hands me the controller.

“You’re going to fight him?”

I shrug a shoulder as the TV fires up, and I smile when I see he’s already loaded the game. It’s just waiting for me to

start.

“Of course,” I say distractedly, figuring out how to move this little plumber.

It’s hard to picture a day when people showed this much respect for plumbers—or any working-class men/women. Then I curse when a moving mushroom with eyes kills me.

I have no respect for freaking mushrooms with eyes.

“That was anticlimactic,” I mumble, starting over when it gives me the option.

“Paca, you’re *not* a champion,” Lamar quickly points out.

“If I’m feeling the need to argue with you, then you’ve chosen the wrong choice of words,” I state on autopilot, squashing that eyed-mushroom thingy like a boss this time.

“You’re not a hero,” he amends. “You can’t devote the kind of focus needed to defeat something like this.”

“They seemed so fascinated by my balance and power. I’m assuming I shine in those areas, compared to their champion,” I drone on, learning the mushroom with white polka dots on the red top are good mushrooms.

“Excellent balance,” I mutter in distraction as that mushroom makes me grow.

After a few minutes, this starts feeling so familiar, and I’m sitting on the edge of my seat, moving my arms all around as I press the buttons. I stand and work my arms harder when things get more intense, as though a little swing of my arm is going to get me across that gap in my path.

I just know that gaping hole will kill me if I let Mario fall down it.

“Because you’re a being who is capable of complete, earnest, *impossible* neutrality—despite your wrathful intuition—you are *impossibly* powerful. But there is a balance to even that.”

“Which is what? Being awesome? You’re lacking your usual padded insults to give me any sort of reference point,” I go on, jumping onto the little flag pole like I knew that was the destination all the time.

I slide down like a proper stripper and hop off as I head into the small castle.

The screen blanks and comes up with the first screen I saw. Little Mario shuffles to the—

“They feared if you were ever truly imbalanced, you’d implode in hell. In *hell* you could destroy hell, heaven, and earth if you flipped the switch. Very thoroughly.”

I pause the game and look over at him, but forget what I’m going to say. I resume my task of helping poor Mario along when it doesn’t feel important enough to try to remember.

“But in Purgatory,” he continues, “that is null and void. You’re only so powerful. Still far more powerful than a pure, blessed champion outside of *their* home. But not hell-Royal powerful.”

“Well, I have to fight him in some containment bubble that’s served as his cage for the past however many millennia, because he’d absorb the sins of hell and be virtually unstoppable if I fought him down here.”

I pause the game and we both look at each other for a moment.

“Did I conclude that from the meeting, or did I just *know* that?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “Keep playing. You always thought better when you were playing.”

I don’t need to be told twice to play my video games, it seems, because I’m already sliding down the next stripper pole.

“What’s the goal of this?”

“Save Princess Peach,” he immediately replies.

“Excellent. I’m a rock star at saving ungrateful princesses,” I muse.

He chokes back a sound of amusement, and I grin.

“Tell them I said that, and I’ll have to kill you,” I tell him as I continue my search for this elusive princess, eyes more perceptive now that I have a larger goal.

This game would be better if the plumber would flip off the fuckers he’s cleverly outwitted and show a little attitude when the assholes gang up on him.

“You’re really going to fight Jahl and take them with you?” he asks more seriously.

“I’m only a hero when I’m saving their lives,” I mutter, concentrating on not dying when a mean little fanged plant tries to take Mario’s poor head off.

Despite the conversation at hand, there’s no blood dripping from my nose.

Pausing the game, I look over at Lamar. “You sort of have that Luigi vibe about you. Care to go see a pawn shop about the plumbing with me?”

“Don’t try to make it sound cute. I can’t go there. I’m still on restriction because of false allegations,” Lamar goes on. “All because that phony balance elder-slash-fallen angel knew a shape shifter tried to kill him and still blamed it on me. I think he’s trying to get me into trouble.”

I nod like I agree, and I go to start unplugging the Nintendo.

“What are you doing?” he asks me.

“I need you to carry this. I can’t,” I explain. “You don’t have to go in if you don’t want to.”

He glares at me.

I zap myself topside like it’s the easiest thing to do, landing in the alley beside the pawn shop. In all actuality, I’m *very* surprised how quickly and well I did that.

Someone should pat my back.

Lamar immediately shows up, and he thrusts the Nintendo at my chest.

“Just call if you need me. I can hear everything from out here just fine,” he assures me.

Nodding like that’s acceptable, I head into the pawn shop where Harold immediately looks up from behind the counter. He doesn’t look too surprised to see me here.

“The first time I walked into your shop as a real girl, there was true shock and terror in your eyes. It wasn’t because you

didn't know who I was. It's because you did. And you knew I'd eventually be repaying you a visit, hence the reason you're not bothering to feign surprise today."

He stays seated behind the counter, putting his phone down on the glass top. "I played along, since you pretended not to know me. Much easier to do than to deal with your bratty sense of entitlement when people don't play along," he says a little harshly.

"You're judging me for being *bratty*? You realize you helped kill me, right? I'm the one who should be upset right now, and I am. Very. Especially since—"

"I'm no fool, Paca. I was then, but I'm not now. I was blind to how diabolical you could truly be because it was beyond my noble comprehension. I've been through hell, literally, and worked my way into this position the hardest way possible—all because of you," he bites out.

"You killed me, and you're mad at me for what? Letting you take the opportunity? You clearly betrayed me. I watched the reel," I'm quick to point out as I walk over and put the Nintendo down.

He points his finger at me as his eyes turn almost lethal.

With a snarled upper lip, he says, "I did *help* kill you. For *all* the right reasons. The main one being to prevent you from imploding in hell when your balance inevitably went off kilter from your purely selfish decision—"

"Skip the feud and reasoning—it was still a betrayal. We were friends, weren't we?"

He snorts/groans. “Of course not. Friendship between us was an imbalance—you’re evil and I’m not. Peaceful enemies would have more accurately defined us.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure *I* thought of *you* as a friend, and you lured me out to have—”

“You’re the one who betrayed *everyone*. You wanted to be killed. You purposely allowed us to misinterpret all your actions and motivations, instead of telling us whatever lunatic plan you had prepared. All because you *are* a raving lunatic, *you evil little girl*,” he adds in a very sour, very frustrated tone.

This argument easily worked out in my favor when I ran over it in my head.

He continues on with his rant when I wait too long to speak. “I worked my way up to this spot, and almost immediately, four unknown phenomes show up on my doorstep. Helping them find direction only restored my balance more, you twisted little monster. You set me up to have to take care of your boys as my punishment—you forged an attachment between me and the Four Horsemen, Paca. That’s wrong on so many levels that has cut my soul so many ways now that I know for sure.”

Again, I open my mouth to form an argument, but Harold has more on his chest, apparently. He circles the counter and starts walking toward me.

“Now you’re whining and crying about being killed like the predictable little hell spawn you are,” he adds as he starts pulling various weapons out, setting them on the counter one by one.

“That’s a little rude for an angel to say, don’t you think? Where’s your compassion?” I ask very seriously, eyeing the weapons a little skeptically. “For the record, just so we’re clear, I’m not here to be distracted until you kill me.”

I dart a look behind me, and move to an angle where there’s a mirror in front of me so I can watch my back. He really has no reason to roll his eyes at me right now.

“That’s why we didn’t want Lucifer’s blood in any of you. An eternity of blameless victims who strike at you five times harder, but somehow still truly manage to believe they’re the ones who were wronged the worst.”

“That’s because I *was* wronged,” I dutifully point out.

“It’s because you have no empathy, and you only care about your wrongs when you care about the person you’ve wronged. You play your games, forgoing the cosmic consequences. Lucifer’s blood is toxic that way.”

“You knew they were the Horsemen and didn’t report it. Why?” I ask him as he continues putting guns, bows, and crossbows on the counter.

“I *didn’t* know. At least...not for sure. I often wondered if I was being tested and if they were sent to me under the guise of evil to see how harshly I still judged without my wings,” he says quietly, hesitating as he loads a crossbow. “I didn’t want to believe you were powerful enough to truly do something as impossible as reset their souls.”

Filing that information away.

“Are you going to try to kill me with that? I really didn’t come here to kill you,” I decide to tell him when the weapons

just continue to stack up.

“I know why you’re here. You want revenge against Rafael, and you want to strain my soul to torture me even more for my part that was played in your death.”

It takes the fun out of it when he makes it sound like I’m still the one true bad guy instead of the avenging angel here.

“What do all these have in common?” he asks as he gestures to the counter.

“They’re weapons.”

He nods absently.

“What do you have in common with them?”

“Is this where you tell me I’m not a person but just a weapon, and I shouldn’t have a voice in how I’m used?” I ask him.

“As I said, I was naïve when I was just a noble man. Clawing your way out of Lucifer’s clutches until you’re topside will make you have a deeper understanding about how twisted and calculated the dark minds can work.”

I’m not sure how that’s an answer to my question.

“The problem is, you’re the weapon, the ammunition, and the finger on the trigger...all at once. You’re a weapon at your core. For whatever reason, you’ve consistently confused that to be your nonexistent soul, and you’ve always protected it.”

His eyes cut to me and they narrow.

“So can the *unused* cosmic weapon be killed without a true soul?” he asks like he’s legitimately expecting me to answer a question of that caliber.

“Is this your angel-nice-guy way of calling me an expendable, soulless hell spawn? I have to say, it isn’t very angel-like.”

“You’re not emotionally capable of ever being a selfless hero. You’d never sacrifice yourself to simply save the world. But you *combined* with them may be enough to stop him without pushing that button and making it a null point. At the end of the day, you have a purpose to serve, and regardless of *why* you were created, you were always supposed to be a weapon. Not even you can get out of serving your purpose. You don’t get to destroy the world as much as you can and have a happily ever after. It’s just an illusion.”

I really want to argue that, but I swear, it’s like he’s waited five centuries to ream me. He’s way more prepared for this entire encounter than I am.

I got killed, and he harbors a grudge for some diabolical punishment. Unbelievable. So petty for an angel.

“I was stabbed, powers robbed, left to bleed out—all because Lucifer got his sanity back *just* enough to target me,” he says like he’s figured out Lamar was a patsy.

I gesture to the wall, eyes getting big as I try to silently warn him Lamar is just outside.

“Your cheerleader is too smart to coddle, Paca. By now, he’s already begun piecing things together with the wealth of new knowledge he’s obtained. He doesn’t expect Lucifer to care about him or treat him fairly, so don’t pretend to worry about his feelings when you *have no empathy*.”

He takes a breath and closes his eyes like he's trying to calm himself down.

"Lamar is growing on me," I say with a shrug. "This is not the conversation I wanted to have," I add when my nose starts to bleed. "Can we do this over some plumber fun? You seem like the first person to have real answers that may make sense, even if you do play the victim too much."

I have no idea why everyone insists on glaring at me. It's not just my quad anymore.

"It's neutral territory. I don't know enough about balance to go killing off any of the good guys, even if they've been bad guys to me. Word on the street is that I'm pretty reasonable," I say in my defense to his hesitation.

He snorts a sound of laughter. "You admitting to me you don't understand balance is proof enough you genuinely have no idea what's going on."

"I don't know why I have to prove myself at all. I'm not the one who killed someone," I tell him.

Again, I get glared at.

"Let me rephrase: I'm not the one who killed *someone very important*," I amend. "Now you're forcing me to sound tacky by tooting my apocalyptic horn."

My headache starts to ebb, so I grin at him like I've done something right.

"I'm *forcing* you to sound tacky?" he asks incredulously as he snatches the Nintendo off the counter like he doesn't even have any questions about my request. "You're the tackiest person I know."

“You’re the judgiest person I know,” I volley. “Judged me *to death* already, haven’t you?” I carry on.

I grin when he just shakes his head and kneels, plugging everything up, while acting like he’d rather be absolutely anywhere else. He’d hate me if angels were allowed to have hate in their hearts.

“We beat this game before we talk. Your nose bleeding so much means you’re thinking too hard about all this, and that’s actually really alarming with you topside,” he says as he glances over at me.

“Where would it be safest for me to have an emotional meltdown? Because no one wants me to have an episode in hell either,” I state idly as I take a seat in front of the smallish TV.

“Purgatory. But there’s no electricity there,” he deadpans as he tosses the controller to my lap.

He does something with some wires and extra pieces to make it all fit.

Seems complicated.

He takes the other controller at last and lowers himself to a chair that is no less than seven feet away and at an odd angle.

The second I start playing, there’s an instant pressure lifted from my skull. The plumber thing is sort of doing it for me in a weird way.

“I get the appeal of a hero, but they’re all just as selfish as I am because they don’t really want to die either,” I point out as I help my plumber battle his way to the flag pole. “They’re never expected to sacrifice the ones they love to win a war

that's not even theirs to fight," I add *very* reasonably. "They can't use the excuse that they're evil."

Harold's jaw tics.

"I'm not following your askew version of reasoning. Let's discuss important matters. Without question, the quad's memories of you have been wiped out. Memories of all of it. Their nightmares of Hell's Black Heart gave me so much pause every time I guided them or helped them stay safe. I'm neutral here—not righteous," he says quietly and calmly.

"I don't find you all that righteous even as Heratio, based on what I've seen so far," I dutifully inform him.

He exhales harshly.

"You know it's true, Paca. Regardless of why you were made, you don't get around becoming a weapon. I believe you likely found a way to retrieve your pieces and make yourself, and them, strong enough to kill Jahl without having to detonate."

His eyes meet mine.

"Why else do all this, right?" I ask like it's rhetorical as I curse the little gap that fucks up my virtual plumber's life so close to the pole dance ending.

"You're frivolous, selfish, spoiled, vapid, reasonably insane, and while you may keep a neutral stance on most things, you are still undeniably evil with the blood of Lucifer coursing through your veins."

I pause the game and blink at him a few times.

“This is where you say, *‘but at least you’re pretty,’* like most judgmental men do after trying to make the woman sound like a horrible person,” I’m quick to say.

“Don’t make this a gender thing, you lunatic. I’m saying I don’t expect you to be a hero. You’ve created another way somehow, Paca. Must have. Now that you’ve accomplished the impossible, you need to follow through with whatever ludicrous plan you put into play five centuries ago when you set me up for my fall to catapult this into action—”

His words freeze, and his eyes widen marginally over my shoulder as his mouth falls open.

I glance back, expecting Lamar, and also do a wide-eyed, parted-lips stance when I see a very feral Gage hovering in the back corner with a subtle, eerie glow to his eyes.

“You look really evil right now,” I point out, wondering what the hell has happened in the short time since I left him.

His eyes narrow on Harold, and I clear my throat a few times.

“There’s actually a semi-reasonable explanation as to why I haven’t killed him,” I explain. “Apparently this is all my fault and not his. Please don’t kill him or me.”

Now I’m being glared at again, only this time it’s solely Gage who is doing it. The other three aren’t here, and Harold is frozen in place as Gage steps out in his very unusual black clothing.

“What the hell?” I ask worriedly as I dive toward him, trapping his face between my hands when I see the stubble of a beard leading down to a long, black, scary line on his neck.

“He’s been in Hell’s Black heart. That means he’s started a line to connect to its power,” Harold says quietly from behind me.

Gage slides his arm around my waist, roughly yanking me up against his front as he continues to narrow his eyes at Harold.

“He’s your friend, remember? I punished him by making him like you. Apparently it torments his soul. Don’t give him a reason to hate you now. He has my Nintendo,” I tell the very angry Famine Horseman.

Gage cuts his eyes to me again, eyebrow arching, as his jaw subtly grinds.

“Did you learn anything of value?” he asks with a suspiciously calm tone.

I feel like there’s a trap somewhere.

“Actually, yes. I’ll tell you all about it if you’ll get us back —”

My breath flogs my throat like a volatile assailant in the next instant. My hair blows in my face, and all the colors swirl around us.

It’s the most abrupt a siphoning has ever felt, and I’m spit out in my hell room with Gage still holding onto me.

He looks down with a cold edge to his unusual, *new*, cool blue eyes.

“What the hell happened?” I ask more seriously.

He rolls his new eyes. “Fun fact: an hour in Hell’s Black Heart, even as a guest, tricks the mind and body into believing

it's been a week. Or time works differently there—one or the other. But you can't just get out whenever you want. You have to enter and exit on the fucking hour, and none of your evil family bothered telling us how to tell what hour it is.”

Keeping his face between my hands, I stare him directly in the eye. “Do you want me to kill my daddy for you? Is that what you're asking?”

His eyes roll so far back in his head that I almost worry he's seizing before his eyes flutter shut and he bites down on his fist. A muffled, frustrated sound leaves him.

“Is that a yes?” I ask to be sure.

When his eyes open again, they narrow on me. “Sit down.”

“I'm not sure I like your tone. You're about to scold me for running off without—”

He palms the top of my head and shoves me to the seat in front of him.

“Fine. I'll sit down,” I tell him primly as I cross my arms over my chest, leaning back as I sigh.

He squats in front of me so that we're eye to eye.

“What'd you learn?” he asks without sounding like he wants to throttle me.

My eyes are the ones to narrow this time.

“Why aren't you doing the thing where you try to wring my neck or sulk?” I ask uncertainly. “Where are the others?”

I look around, wondering if they're behind me and about to do something horrible. But...it's just us in here.

His eyes dip to my mouth and come back up to my eyes. “I volunteered to be the one to find you. The others went back to the Black Heart.”

“Too bad you can’t be my favorite, since we’re all alone... but there’s still the matter of the unaddressed *other* woman.”

I drag my finger up his arm, and his eyes follow the motion as I give him a little grin.

His eyes flick back to mine as he lifts an unimpressed eyebrow.

“Well, since I can’t be your favorite, I guess you’ll just have to start talking about all you just learned,” he drawls as he moves in closer.

My gaze drops to his lips as his tongue wets them.

“Such a waste,” I decide aloud, causing his lips to twitch.

Chapter 15

“So why aren’t you mad that I went to see him by myself?” I muse as Gage strips down to his boxers, preparing to change.

I sit back and admire the view, absently tapping my chin as he whispers something into that compass looking thingy on his arm.

“What is that? The escorts wear it too,” I go on.

“It’s not important,” he answers as it vanishes from his arm like it was never there.

I blink a few times.

“Maybe you should repay the favor and share everything you’ve learned now,” I point out with a frown.

“I don’t fully understand the rules down here. I don’t feel any pain from them, so the bond isn’t strained, even with the deceptive time difference,” he adds mildly as he glances toward the door.

Someone knocks and the door swings open. The second I see who it is, I’m off my chair and on my feet.

Lamar gives me a bored look as Chloe appears beside him. My eyes widen as Gage drags me in front of him and kisses my neck.

“By the way, I’m with the Apocalypse now,” Gage tells her as she drops to the ground and bows before me.

I don’t even get to say something

“I already filled her in,” Lamar says in a droll tone as he glances down at his nails. “You’ll have no farther issue.”

Well...that’s anticlimactic.

“I thought I was supposed to get to play cruel games and stuff,” I point out as Chloe crawls away as quickly as she can.

“You left me in an alley, and then I was sent off like an errand boy,” Lamar says like he’s pouting before he turns on his heel and walks off.

Before I can have any sort of comment, Gage’s lips are distracting me, because he’s kissing a trail down the side of my neck very gently.

“I suppose you *can* be my favorite now,” I say as my eyes flutter shut, and I lean back against him.

I expect some sort of witty retort or dry sarcasm. Instead, Gage gently slides his arms around my waist, his touch so surprisingly reverent.

“Why are you being so nice?” I warily decide to ask when he lifts me from the ground and starts carrying me toward the bed.

His lips gingerly brush my forehead like I’m suddenly a fragile little doll instead of the destructive weapon I am.

“The next time you take off to do something you just know you have to do, I want you to come find me and take me with you,” he murmurs as he places me on the bed and comes down on top of me.

Because I’m a bit easy when it comes to the four of them, I go phantom, turn naked underneath him, and slip my fingers through his hair as I pull him down for a kiss.

It’s weird to feel him smile against my lips, only because he so rarely smiles.

The smile disappears when he deepens the kiss, still taking his time, making this feel like it’s all at his leisure. Then he starts kissing down my body with an agonizingly slow pace.

Rough. Dirty. Devilish. That’s all the attention I’ve had from them thus far. Nothing ever as tender as this.

My heart flutters painfully in my chest when he kisses the inside of my palm so reverently, and then he slowly slides his lips back over to my hip. It almost feels like he’s worshipping my body right now, and I’m not exactly sure how I feel about this.

I mean, it has to be trap.

I forget how to think when he puts that mind-numbing mouth *right* where I really want it.

The moan that slips from my lips keeps time with the slow arch of my back. It apparently excites him, because he pretty much gets to work trying to shatter me as thoroughly as he can after that.

He holds me in place even as I try to get away from the powerful, too-intense sensations flooding through my body. He really is the mouth wizard, and I can't even catch my breath from the first orgasm before the second one is tearing through my body.

I cry out in borderline pain with that one, and he rips his mouth away, kissing a trail up my body as I stay a mushy pile of shudders.

My breaths come out in sharp, somewhat embarrassing pants, but I refuse to go phantom and lose all the lingering little sparks of wonderment I'm feeling right now.

I'm almost high on the air around us when he slides inside me so slowly, his lips dragging up my neck as he takes his time.

My eyes screw shut, because it all just feels too good. I don't even realize my nails have bit into his skin until he hisses out a breath, sliding so close to me it almost feels like our questionably-existent souls touch.

He kisses me suddenly, and he groans into my mouth as he continues to take his time with me.

I'm not even sure about everything I'm feeling right now. All I know is that I love the way it feels...as though he's

somehow turned us into one entity for this brief moment as every touch between us gets magnified.

My breath is stolen as his grip tightens, his desperation subtly growing as he breaks the kiss and locks eyes with me. There's almost confusion on his face mixed with frustration.

He roughly shoves a hand in my hair, holding me to him like I'm trying to get away, when I'm only trying to claw closer. I'm on fire from the inside out, and it all burns in the best possible way.

It isn't until I see the mounting desperation in his eyes coupled with the steady intensity of his parted lips that my heart clicks into place. It's like I just know what it is he wants to say but can't...

"I love you too," I whisper, almost surprising myself.

His lips crash to mine, and he collapses to me, hips slamming into me as my heart clicks one more time. The entire room shakes, and a resounding *boom* rushes through the air as all the lights flicker and go dark.

The hell candle wicks relight on their own as Gage stills against me. His head lifts, and our eyes stay calmly locked as the thudding of both our hearts grow louder.

His brow wrinkles, and he opens and closes his mouth a few times. When no words ever come out, he finally dips his head and kisses me again as his fingers lace with mine. He pushes our twined hands up above my head as he starts moving his hips again, already starting all over.

My heart is hurting and happy at the same time. I didn't even understand how badly I needed at least one of them to

love back.

Just as he breaks the kiss to speak, I talk over him. “It’s going to be hard to replace you as my favorite for a while,” I dutifully inform him.

His grin is swift, even as his eyes narrow like he’s agitated how big his smile is. The next kiss feels a little like punishment for making him happy.

He fortunately doesn’t notice the tear that slips down my cheek because of how good it feels to be loved back. I’m pretty sure that makes me sound too much less badass.

Chapter 16

“Why the hell is she glued to you? I’ve pulled her off you at least ten times,” I hear Kai saying from somewhere behind me as a hand lazily traces circles on my hip.

“I’m her current favorite. What did you expect?” I hear Gage drawl.

I’m not sure why I smile. Actually, I know exactly why I smile. Somebody *loooooooves* me!

I snuggle against Gage’s side a little more and breathe him in.

“What the hell did you tell her to make you *that* much of her favorite?” Ezekiel asks like he’s sulking.

Awwww. Are they fighting over me?

I'm not sure how I feel about Hell's Black Heart making them suddenly appreciate me. If they feel gratitude, they're enjoying the wrong Paca. I'll cut them if it's not this new and less-improved version of me they're suddenly adoring.

"It's clear he gave her some random first she really wanted. Stop being whiny dicks about it so I can get some fucking sleep," Jude groans from somewhere close by.

Soft lips brush my forehead, and I snuggle *even closer* to Gage. His arms go around me and hold me to him, and I release a content little sigh.

"Okay, now I'm really fucking curious what's suddenly going on here," Jude says with fresh alertness.

"He loves me," I murmur against Gage's chest.

He huffs out a sound of annoyance as I just grin, but...it's dead silent in the rest of the room.

I peek open an eyelid, wondering what calamity is about to befall us and steal my greatest moment of joy so far. Ezekiel is staring down at the ground, a small frown on his lips and a wrinkle on his brow like he's confused.

I glance over my shoulder to see Jude's eyebrow quirked like he's genuinely baffled by the concept. Dick.

Kai is glaring at Gage like he's a traitor, even as he tries to tug me away from the horseman who's playing tug-of-war to keep me.

"Did you find out anything in the Black Heart about this thing we're supposed to deal with or run from?" I ask them.

Kai glares at me like he's annoyed I'm not budging from Gage's side.

"Not even you're pretty enough to be my favorite right now. Deal with it," I say on a tired sigh.

He throws his hands in the air like I'm frustrating, and I feel Gage's smile against the side of my head.

"We actually learned some about Jahl," Jude says, eyes narrowing on me. "While you ran off to do something reckless."

"She found out useful information," Gage tells him with a dismissive tone.

It's like all the air is sucked out of the room simply because Gage has disagreed with the reprimand in Jude's tone.

Jude's brow furrows like he's agitated, and I kiss Gage's chest while patting it. I'm not sure when I ended up in this soft, satin gown. But it's purple, and purple is clearly my new color.

"This is new," Kai says as his lips purse, not referring to my purple gown as he looks between Gage and me. "I'm not entirely sure how I feel about it."

"Can we discuss the thing I do or don't have a chance at killing?" I ask in deflection before they all get super suspicious and repeat old patterns.

Gage stiffens against me, and everyone clears their throats as they look away.

"We'll have to fight with you to keep you from hitting a desperate point of weaponized detonation, according to

everything we could find. Otherwise, you won't even have a chance at being strong enough," Jude says without looking at me.

"I'm not selfless enough to detonate if all of you are there to die. In other words, I'll have nothing to gain if I'm not saving your lives," I explain to myself, since it's shitty how they want to.

Gage kisses the top of my head, and Kai slides over to put his head against my hip, stretching out and getting comfortable on us since I can't be pulled away.

Ezekiel stays unusually quiet, still frowning down at the ground.

"Any idea what this thing even looks like?" I ask when no one bothers to say more. "We've seen a lot of purgatory and haven't stumbled across it yet."

"It's in a different section inaccessible by anyone not at least near royal level," Gage says on a harsh exhale.

"We have no idea what it looks like, but we were told there was some pieces of footage from the last battle that didn't end well for the chosen champion," Jude goes on.

My eyes drift back to Ezekiel, since he's not acting right. Gage darts a worried look toward him as well.

"We haven't seen it yet," Kai adds, dragging my hand down to his lips to kiss it. "Let me be the favorite for a little while. He's getting way too much attention and it's annoying me."

I smile to myself.

“I bet it looks like a unicorn,” I state very seriously as I sit up.

They all blink at me. “Yeah. I’m sure that’s exactly what it looks like,” Jude states flatly.

I slip over Gage and walk over to Ezekiel before I drop to his lap.

He startles and puts an arm around me like he’s snapping out of a trance before he gives me his attention through strain.

“If this is about another woman, I should warn you that I’m feeling a little bit crazy today,” I warn him.

He kisses me before I can stop him, and I let him since he looks so pitiful right now. What the hell was in the Black Heart?

I kiss him back simply because...I’m a sucker for all four of the assholes.

Breaking the kiss, he drops his head to my shoulder, exhaling like he’s somewhat relieved, for whatever reason. No one says anything as I play with his hair and try to silently soothe whatever problems are going on inside him right now.

“But seriously, a unicorn makes perfect sense. Who would expect this horrifying power of destruction we’re expected to face to look anything less than like a unicorn?” I go on.

Ezekiel snorts against my shoulder, and Jude groans.

“She’s doing the thing where she’s ridiculous,” Jude gripes as he covers his eyes with his arm and yawns.

“We’re not saying we’re agreeing to fight this or allow you to fight this yet,” Kai continues, giving me a pointed look.

“I’m the one with a crown,” I remind him.

“No...you’re the one with a lower back tattoo,” Ezekiel drawls.

“And to think I was pitying you for being pathetic over here,” I grumble, struggling to get up.

I feel the bastard’s smile against my neck as he keeps me trapped to him.

“Why does it have to be a unicorn?” Gage asks like he’s reluctant to do so...but just can’t help himself because he’s a bit of a masochist.

I quit struggling and give him all my attention, even as Ezekiel keeps me strapped to his lap.

“Because it’d be the perfect balance. Who expects something that shits rainbows to be the end of the world? Unicorns only make sense if they’re evil...”

I wait a minute to let that sink in before giving them a conspiratorial nod.

“Her nose isn’t bleeding, but I still think she’s serious,” Kai says like he’s genuinely horrified.

“I am serious. How do you not see the genius in the balance?” I argue just before someone knocks at the door again.

We all look over as Lamar steps inside, holding a small compass that could fit in the palm of a child’s hand.

He gives me a miffed look before stating, “Your errand boy has returned to bring what your horsemen demanded,” he says

before dumping the compass into Jude's hand and walking away.

"What's that?" I ask as Jude starts twisting dials on the compass thingy that's not really a compass thingy.

"This is what sort of recordings could be taken of the battle all those centuries ago. They said it was shit, so don't get your hopes up," he tells me distractedly.

With a very tired tone, I answer, "There's really not a whole lot about any of this that helps me get my hopes up, so I think that's just redundant to request at this point."

Ezekiel lets me stand when something starts flashing on the wall, and Gage goes to blow out the candles as the distorted, mostly static-coated reel plays out. The compass is acting like a projector of sorts as the roar of sound gets louder.

It takes me a second to realize the *roar* of sound is an actual, horrifying, steady roar of...something I really, truly, and honestly don't want to fight.

Oh, I am so not fearless. Just the sound it makes is terrifying me.

It's like howler monkeys crawled up a gorilla's ass and had a dinosaur baby that fucked a radioactive Godzilla...and had an even worse baby. If any of that makes sense.

Chills spread all over me, and my heartbeat ratchets up. I'm a big, pathetic phony, because I am so not fearless. I'm not fearless at all.

If I had a mommy, I'd run and hide behind her skirt right now.

My eyes narrow on the shadow that turns into a billowing, black fog and drives down on something just as white flashes and the screen scrambles again.

A scream tears through the room, and I leap so high up in the air that I embarrass myself.

Red eyes glow in the fog for only the briefest of seconds, and I suck in a breath when I realize it's not a fog at all. It's the evil I'm supposed to fight.

Another scream tears through before the screen disappears and scrambles, turning into white noise on a continuous loop.

We all just stare at the static for a quiet, palpable moment.

“What the hell was that?” I demand very seriously.

Without hesitation, Jude steps in behind me and lowers his head next to mine, staring with me at the static.

“Not a fucking unicorn,” he deadpans.

“Terrible time to adopt a sense of humor,” I say with a shaky voice. On the next breath, I add, “Someone call the angel who killed me. If we're going to do this, he's going to have to help.”

“Why the hell would you want his help?” Gage snaps.

I shrug a shoulder. “He kicked my ass and he trained that champion. You do the math, Einstein.”

No one argues for a second.

“If you can't do this easily, we don't do this at all,” Jude says without moving from behind me.

“Careful, Death. You almost sound like you care,” I drawl as my head tries to work out any possible way to sound badass right now instead of a scared little real girl.

I didn’t have these sorts of problems when *Ghost* was my dream world.

“We’re starting to sound like the punchline to a bad joke,” I point out as I groan and turn around. “The Four Horsemen and *The* Apocalypse walk into Purgatory to save the world because they’re selfish brats who want to live long and prosper.”

Jude picks up his bo staff and gives it a lazy twirl before casting me a dry look. “You’re a lot of fucking work for a girlfriend,” he says like he’s put out.

“Agreed. You’re still stuck with me, though,” I tell him as I move to the door.

They all filter out before me, talking like they’re unafraid of what comes next. I turn around and lean against the wall as my nose starts steadily dripping black and my hands shake.

There’s no way they can go in there with me if I can’t figure out how to kill it without detonating. And there’s no way I’m leaving that thing alive to kill them.

My chin wobbles for a second as I suck up the tears and clear my throat, and I wipe away the blood from my nose before I follow them out.

I guess it’s time to finally learn to be a real badass.

I just wish I remembered how I used to do it.

End of Book 3

[BONUS SCENE](#)

KAI

There's a single moment in a man's life when he realizes just how insanely tethered to a particularly maddening woman he is. That moment came for me when I thought she'd died the first time.

I thought that was bad enough.

But as that big fucking monster shoots out of the ground, jaws wide as it swallows her whole, I freeze in sheer terror for the first time in my remembered existence.

Jude slams into the invisible barrier as the monster shoots out of the ground completely.

It isn't until I hear a roar of pain and see the side of the worm-like beast's side being pounded open by a shock of power that I feel even from here, that I find the ability to move again.

Paca flings herself out, and a cold wash of relief slithers through my body as my right hand trembles just barely. I swallow the lump in my throat as quietly as I can, because I really don't want anyone knowing just how hardcore I fucking panicked.

I scrub a hand over my face, as Ezekiel doubles over and exhales harshly.

We all straighten as Paca clears the goop away from her face enough to look over at us immediately.

She pairs one of her is-this-really-happening-to-me-right-now looks with a careless shrug that understates the torture this woman puts us through without even fucking realizing the power she has over us.

Jude's fists are so tight that I can tell it's taking all he has not to explode. You'd think he's the embodiment of wrath instead of her. Gage is staring like he's ready to tie her to the fucking bed and punish her for being so vulnerable without us.

That's not such a bad idea.

"Clearly, someone forgot to tell it I'm *The Apocalypse*," she says like this is just a casual evening and she doesn't realize the severity of the entire situation. "I've been gone a while, as you're aware."

"I think she deliberately tries to drive us insane," Gage grinds out quietly.

"No, she's taking this as seriously as she knows how to," Ezekiel says in a tone barely above a whisper. "In case you haven't noticed, none of the heirs take things very seriously at all."

"They all play their fucking games," Jude bites out. "Her included, even though she doesn't realize it half the time."

Before I can make out the bickering going between Rafael and Lucifer again, a light flashes so brightly that it's blinding. A sick knot tugs at my stomach when I realize we're being forcibly removed.

We all four stagger forward in an empty, pure white room. Jude spins, twirling his scythe as he turns and looks around. Ezekiel lifts his staff and taps on one of the walls.

“What the actual fucking hell is going on right now?” I snap as I kick at the wall closest to me.

There aren't any doors or windows. There isn't any furniture. It's just an empty, white room that is designed to withstand the Four Horsemen and their tantrums.

“Paca is there without us now,” Gage says so quietly that I almost don't hear it.

I'm not really sure what happens next. I've kicked the wall a hundred times in less than a minute and it hasn't budged. Yet he punches it one hard time, and a hole slices through it.

Ezekiel goes over to it to slash at the hole, and the two of them work on tunneling a way out.

Jude leaps through the hole the second it's big enough, and I twirl my triton as I follow behind Ezekiel and Gage, trying to keep my calm. But the blood in my veins is boiling, and all I can think about is getting us back to Paca.

“They wouldn't kill her,” I say as if I'm talking myself into believing that, as we stealthily make our way down the seemingly endless white corridor.

Before anyone can have an opinion, the heavy patter of footsteps come racing toward us at charging speeds.

“Please return to your holding room,” a voice says from around us as the footsteps start approaching from the other side as well.

Jude smirks.

Fucking hell. This is going to get messy.

I twirl my triton just as Gage's dark grin emerges, and Ezekiel spins to turn around just as I do.

"Sorry, but our somewhat insane girlfriend gets herself into a lot of fucking trouble when we're not around," I tell the unfortunate souls who become visible as they continue to approach, spears aimed directly at us.

They look like old-school friars in their brown, hooded robes and twine belts.

It's the only warning they get, because Jude lunges at the same time Gage does, both of them taking opposite sides in their attacks.

I jump in behind Jude, as Ezekiel goes to back up Gage.

Twirling my triton, I send out a shock of power that unleashes some satisfying, morbid screams. However...it's nothing compared to whatever in the hell Jude unleashes.

I stumble back away from the pulsing power as his eyes go solid black, his jaw ticking as a dark, twisted smile forms on his lips. Ah, shit. What's wrong with him?

The friars on the front row have wide eyes seconds before they're obliterated, and Jude swings his scythe again, and again, and again, downing countless others all on his own.

The walls around us begin to tremble, as someone barks more orders for us to go back to containment.

I glance back over my shoulder to see Gage leveling the lines as fiercely as Jude, while Ezekiel plows through the strays. There aren't any strays for me.

All mine have been slain.

The walls around us shake more violently this time, pitching me to the side so hard a grunt is slammed out of me. That pisses me right the hell off.

“Someone leave something for me to fucking kill!” I snap.

A flash of light strikes through the hall, once again forcibly removing us, and we stumble into hell’s motherfucking bowels. At least I think that’s where we’re at.

Between the bubbling hellfire lava and putrid stench of death in the unfamiliar grounds, it’s a logical deduction.

“I guess we were fucking up the balance, which means we’re about to have hell company to reset it,” Jude grinds out seconds before bodies all suddenly begin leaping over the stream of hellfire lava, their camouflage dropping as the cracked, stone-like creatures with long, pointed tails charge us.

“That’s it. I’m out,” I state as I turn and walk away from this shit. “You guys can handle this one on your own.”

I’m not messing with anything in the damn bowels. Creatures that hell finds to be its shit? Fuck that racket.

“This is really starting to piss me off,” Gage bites out.

I glance back as he twirls the sword in his hand. He spins suddenly, and we’re all driven backwards by the pulse of power that explodes from him.

Bodies wither and screams abruptly collapse, when they all burst into pebbles that crash to the ground and begin to rattle.

“We can’t get to her if we can’t siphon,” I remind them as I start walking again. “The best thing we can do is find a way to lie low until—”

We're ripped out of hell's bowels in the next instant, and we're spit back out into a gray plume of dust and debris, as my spine stiffens.

Lucifer's back is to us as he and everyone else in attendance stare ahead. I cut my gaze to the dust storm just as the air swirls and clears, and it's all I can do to remain upright when I see Paca.

Bile rises to my throat when I take in the deep bruises and swollen wounds. One of her eyes has been sealed shut with the swelling, and she's covered in singed fabric that has burned against her own black, acidic blood.

Her hands go to her mouth as tears immediately start leaking down her face, and I see her wobble on her feet as her eyes fix to Ezekiel.

"Forgive me," Lucifer says.

Paca uses a blood-smeared hand to grab Ezekiel by the back of the neck and draw him to her. A pang of envy hits me when she nuzzles him like she's desperate for his attention.

I bristle, wondering why in the hell I wish she was leaning on me while standing so brokenly before us.

I hear Jude swallowing hard from behind me, and I glance back to see the muscle jumping along his jaw as he cuts a lethal gaze to Rafael. Gage is glaring at the angel with the same intensity, grip tightening on his sword.

I stop myself over and over from taking Paca away from Ezekiel so I can inspect her for myself.

"An illusion?" she asks quietly, her voice sounding clogged and fractured.

I battle myself harder to stay in place. I can't get jealous. Yet...it doesn't really feel like envy either, if I'm being honest. I can't imagine any other reason why I'd like to rip her away from here and keep her to myself for a few hours while she licks her damn pitiful fucking wounds.

This is killing me, and I don't even fully understand why.

"They now know for sure," Lucifer tells her. "You'll heal faster in hell than in Purgatory. You'll heal faster in Purgatory than topside. We'll talk when your emotions don't leave you unreasonable."

I don't even care that he blinks out of sight. All I want to do is drag Paca to hell so she can start healing as soon as possible.

Jude barely stops himself from charging the angel, when Rafael and Paca exchange a look.

Everyone outside of our bond vanishes, and Paca cries out as her legs give out the second they're gone...like she was just waiting for privacy to finally drop. It's now I realize how hard she was working to stay on her feet, because Ezekiel has to catch her and lower her the rest of the way to the ground.

I start toward her and stop myself again, since it's clear it's him she wants.

Just based on what I've gathered, it looks like Lucifer fucked with her head, and something big went down with Ezekiel in this illusion she mentioned.

Games. All fucking games.

All I can do is look over the exposed flesh on her torso and work like hell not to react to all the dark discoloring and

ignore the small whimpers she's struggling to stifle.

She loses some of the war with her emotions, muffling her sobs the best she can when suppressing them gets too pressing.

It takes a very concentrated amount of effort to resist the urge to rip her from Ezekiel's arms. When we all gravitate toward her a few steps, I realize I'm not the only one suffering with this struggle.

She truly has no idea the power she holds over us, and none of us are about to fucking tell her. We'd never hear the end of it.

"I'm still mad at you, but you're my favorite just because you're not really dead," she says so brokenly.

It tells us enough about what was going on while we were fighting our way back, and I want to kill Lucifer myself. She went over the edge of a firefall, ready to die with Gage. I can only imagine how crazy the damn girl went if they made her think E was dead.

"I'm sick of the games. Someone needs to tell us what the fuck is going on," Jude bites out as Ezekiel lifts Paca from the ground.

I watch with more longing than I care to admit, because I find myself wishing the fucker had made it look like I had died. I want to be the one comforting her right now, giving her solace and security.

That...pisses me off to no end. Comfort's not exactly my usual gig, and I wouldn't even know how the hell to tackle something like that.

Instead of doing that, I go on high alert, ready to kill any-fucking-thing that even tries to move in her direction. I train my eyes on the horizon, waiting for whatever comes next.

I'll be damned if they touch her again.

It's time to pay Hell's Black Heart a visit. I'll face the nightmares we've all quietly been avoiding.

I won't ever feel this helpless again.

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