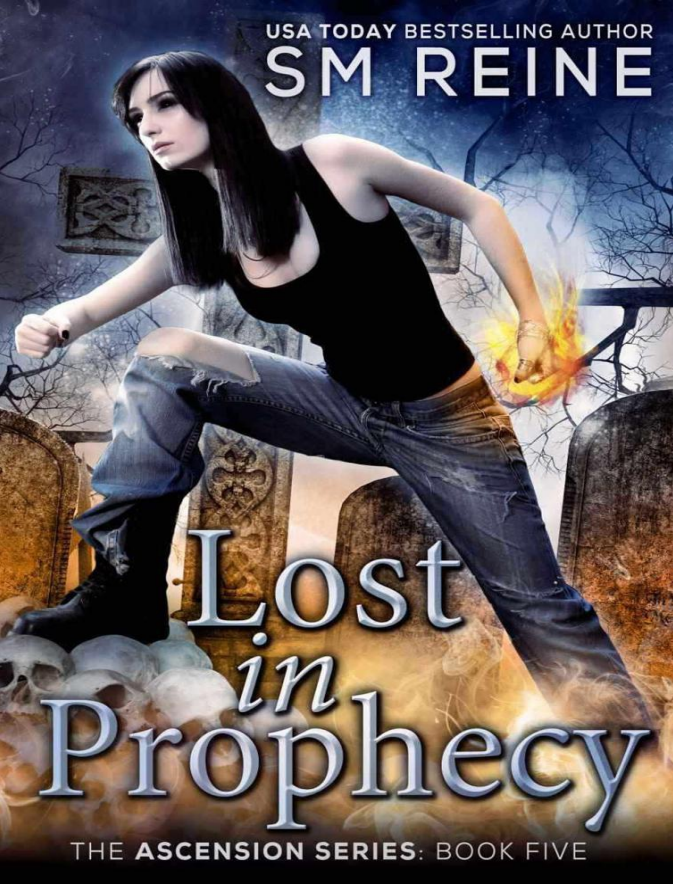


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SM REINE



# Lost *in* Prophecy

THE ASCENSION SERIES: BOOK FIVE

# Contents

[Lost in Prophecy](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Dear Reader

Lost in Prophecy  
The Ascension Series - Book  
Five

SM Reine  
Copyright © 2014 Red Iris  
Books

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

This book is sold DRM-free so that it can be enjoyed in any way the reader sees fit. Please keep all links and attributions intact when sharing. All rights reserved.

Text and cover art copyright © SM Reine 2014

Published by Red Iris Books  
1180 Selmi Drive, Suite 102  
Reno, NV 89512

# THE ASCENSION SERIES

*Reading Order:*

Sacrificed in Shadow

Oaths of Blood

Ruled by Steel

Caged in Bone

Lost in Prophecy

Torn by Fury (*Summer 2014*)

Want to know the instant I  
have a new book out?

[Sign up for my new release  
email alerts!](#)

## **About Lost in Prophecy**

Elise Kavanagh is too busy liberating slaves in the City of Dis to worry about what's happening on Earth. She hasn't even noticed that more than three thousand people have gone missing—not until an anonymous client hires her organization, The Hunting Club, to rescue them. The man asking for help doesn't

seem to exist. But the trail of clues is too strange to ignore, and she finds herself caught in the investigation.

Werewolf Alpha Rylie Gresham is absorbed in troubles of her own. The pack is disobeying her, and the cult camped out in Northgate seems to be the source of the problem. Her mate, Abel, has resolved to fix it one way or another—even if it means



going over Rylie's head.

Through secrets, lies, and assassination attempts, Elise and Rylie find that they have a new enemy in common. And what it takes to prevail might mean shattering the universe...

**THE CHILD WAS** playing outside when Heaven began to fall.

Marion was sitting in a meadow lush with ice melt. It had been an unusually warm winter, and the foothills were flooding; the fresh growth was taller than her nearly four-year-old body, sheltering her in slender, swaying grass and wildflowers. She smiled widely at a dandelion gone to seed. The wind tugged white puffs away from the flower and sent them drifting into the sky.

She tracked the seeds' ascent toward the clouds. The gray sky was

beginning to churn. Pale blue light, the same color as Marion's eyes, flashed in the depths of a silent storm.

Even Marion knew that this could only mean trouble. Soon Maman would call her inside. Soon it would be time for Maman and Marion to run again.

But Marion wasn't ready for playtime to end.

She got up, swatting clumps of dirt off of her skirt. She was wearing bloomers that made her dress stick out. Everything was lacy and ruffled and satin-pink. Her wild brown curls had started the day in braids, but now hung clumped around her shoulders with spring blossoms dotting the tangles.

Marion glanced over her shoulder

at the silent, lonely cabin hiding in the shadows under the trees. Maman hadn't noticed the sky changing yet, but she would soon.

So the girl ran.

She leaped through the grass and ducked into another copse of trees where she wouldn't be seen. Caterpillars inched down damp tree bark. Dew-damp spider webs hung, suspended, between the branches. Some of the dandelion seeds had been caught.

Beyond the canopy, the sky was flashing harder, faster. Marion grabbed a low branch and braced her foot against the trunk, careful not to smash any caterpillars. She kicked and dragged herself into the tree to watch.

Clouds fell in clumps to bare a jagged white slice across the gray sky. Ash swirled from the gash like snow, and she caught it in her palm.

Marion smelled it. Stuck out her tongue for a taste.

Funny. It sort of tasted like apple juice.

She slithered out of the branches as the wind blew harder, gusting ash and cloud debris over the mountains. She still didn't return to the quiet cabin. She emerged from the copse on the opposite side of the trees, racing into the last moments of sunlight with her arms wide open.

A shadow passed over her.

The child stopped and looked up at

the newcomer, who was not her mother, as she had expected. Her smile faded, and she hooked a finger in the corner of her mouth, dragging her lip down to bare square white teeth.

“Hello, Marion,” said the man.

She had never met him before. She felt shy. Marion’s head dropped, and she wiggled her big toe into the damp soil.

“*Bonjour*,” the girl said. She didn’t speak English.

He didn’t seem troubled by the language barrier. “You know who I am, don’t you?”

She nodded. Marion understood what he was saying.

He extended a hand toward her. His skin was warm brown, and he wore a

thick iron bracelet around his wrist. “Are you ready to come with me, Marion?”

She looked at his hand. She looked at his face. It was the first time that they had met. His features were unrecognizable. But she saw beyond his eyes to what hid within, and what was on his insides was as familiar to her as the sunshine. He was like a puppet. His coarse black hair, round features, and honest brown eyes were only a decoy concealing the hand of the puppeteer within.

Marion had been seeing him in her dreams for weeks.

“*Ouais*,” she said. “*Je suis prête*.”

When he smiled, it crinkled the

corners of his eyes pleasantly. For a moment she thought his irises were the same color as hers. But that soon faded. She rested her hand in his, and his fingers curled around hers.

They disappeared as Marion's mother began calling her name.

## **FOUR MONTHS LATER.**

“Lock the gates!”

The cry rose from the opposite shore of the Amniosium, carried on humid air to Cornelius's ears. He sought out the source of the shouting and spotted Rowland, a skeletal nightmare draped in linen and bones, waving his arms wildly over his head.

“What?” Cornelius shouted back at



him. They had more than a quarter mile of roiling fluid between them. A bubble swelled and popped. Black steam momentarily obscured their view of one another.

*“Lock the damn gates!”*

The only part Cornelius understood was “gates,” but that was all he needed. That, and the panic in Rowland’s twisted face.

He scrambled up the face of the rotten hillside. The Amniosium was nestled in a decaying pit at the literal heart of Malebolge, and Cornelius had to dig his hands into the fatty tissue to get enough traction to pull himself out.

It was a painfully difficult climb to the top, where the gates stood

unguarded. Cornelius wheezed as he struggled higher.

Nightmares had been dying and rebirthing in the Amniosium in record numbers, so Cornelius had left the gates open to accommodate the sometimes dozens of newly born demons wafting from the pits daily. The safest place in Hell was that pit within Malebolge's chest cavity, since few outsiders seldom had cause or courage to venture there. In all of Cornelius's centuries as birth attendant, he had never dealt with an attack, or even the threat of one. It seemed silly to secure the gates.

Yet Rowland was not a paranoid creature. He was the very spirit of the fear of falling, the fear of tumbling and

striking the earth and having one's bones pulverized by the sudden stop. He, like all nightmares, reveled in terror.

If Rowland was truly afraid, there was reason to fear.

Cornelius lifted himself onto the breastbone. A spiked barrier rimmed the chest's borehole and jutted toward the roof of the cavern containing the city. Beyond the spikes, the cracked and spread ribs of Malebolge formed a series of arches sheltering the mass of the city. The buildings below looked like oozing warts grown from the meat of the cadaver.

Today, those warts were seething. They were twenty, thirty, fifty stories high in places, and they were covered in

activity. Demons poured from the windows and scrambled down toward the streets of bone.

Those crowds were climbing, ultimately, toward the borehole.

*Close the gates, indeed.*

Cornelius seized the open gate and heaved with all his strength, teeth gritted, bones creaking. The metal was heavy but not beyond his ability to lift. Unfortunately, something white and hard had grown around the gate since he opened it, ossifying into a solid mass.

It wouldn't budge.

The masses were approaching, scrambling up the ribs. Shouts filled the fetid air of Malebolge.

Cornelius took several steps back,

whipped the hatchet off his belt. "Damnation above and below!" He hated to injure Malebolge. He always felt like the damn cadaver that formed the city might sit up and slap him down.

He hacked and sawed at the gate. Bone chipped away. When he began to cut into the flesh, the ground underneath him groaned, rolled, trembled.

But the gate was free. It wobbled where it had held firm moments earlier.

He tossed the hatchet aside, braced both hands against the metal, and shoved.

The leading edge of demons crested the hill carrying cudgels and blades. They were screaming obscenities in *vo-ani*, the infernal tongue. Cornelius heard

enough to know that they were shrieking of an attack.

Not just any attack, but an invasion from a higher level.

An army had, apparently, descended from the City of Dis.

The residents of Malebolge had feared such a movement ever since the coup in Dis resulted in a new administration in the Palace. A powerful demon had risen from seemingly nowhere to seize control, and her radical ideas rankled at every demon's sense of tradition, honor, and chaos.

Unfortunately, she also seemed wily enough to avoid a well-deserved ousting. She had been occupying the Palace for more than half a human year

now. Worse, she had the strength to force some of the most ancient Houses to bow to her unconscionable demands.

Once the Father had taken Dis, it had been a matter of when she would attempt to force Malebolge to kiss her feet—not if.

Tension had been rising for months. There had been threats from small insurgent groups and requests for protection sent to Coccytus. None of the nobility had risen to take charge of Malebolge's security. Even The Dark Man had only moved to secure his home, closing it to all travelers.

Now the brewing fear had given way to this.

The Father had arrived, and

Malebolge was rioting.

The gate screeched as Cornelius shoved it. It was more than five meters wide and stiff with age; even with strength unbound by the limitations of muscles, he struggled to close it.

Demons pounded toward him, feet squishing in the rot over the breastbone.

He forced the gate into place. Cornelius fumbled with the lock, dropped it, and then clicked it shut. Ancient warlock wards blossomed around him with a crimson glow, fortifying the iron fence encircling the borehole.

The rioters slammed into the other side. Flesh sizzled. They shrieked at the contact.



“Get away!” Cornelius roared, brandishing the hatchet. “Do you hear me? I will sever the fingers of those stupid enough to reach for me!”

A megaira gripped the gate in both of her hands. It must have burned her—he could smell cooking meat and the serpents dangling from her skull thrashed—but her eyes were crazed. She didn’t care. “If you shelter the invaders, we will starve you and shove the unforgiving light of day right up your ass!”

“I shelter none but the young of Malebolge.” The Amniosium was the only place where nightmares could incubate; they had no breeding alternatives. He and Rowland were their

sole protectors.

“But the army is within!”

“I have seen no such army.” Cornelius waved his arms. “Go, run! Find somewhere else to vent your furies!”

The megaira’s hiss was lost underneath the shouts of the other demons surrounding her. They were a thrashing mass of limbs. Weapons slammed into the iron bars. Even as the wards burned them, they struggled to break through.

His entire body hummed with sweet fear as he slipped toward the borehole again, riding high on the mob’s panic. The taste of a demon was not as satisfying as that of a human, but mortals

were rare in Malebolge; he enjoyed his thrills where he could get them.

On his way down the slope, smoke flashed in the corner of his vision.

Cornelius was not initially worried by the sight of it. The death of so many nightmares meant the rebirth of an almost equal number; he believed that glimpse of smoke to be another birth and nothing more. The wards were impenetrable, though. That soul would simply have to wait until the mob subsided to be released.

Climbing down to the Amniosium, he approached the brink of the pit, letting the fluid lap at his toes. It was pure, liquid fear cradled within a vat of bone. Every atom of sludge was a living

creature. Truly, it was a single living creature—all nightmares sprouted from the same root. Even Cornelius had.

“We are well,” he called across the Amniosium to Rowland. “The gates are closed!”

Rowland didn’t *look* well. He was still shouting and flailing his bony arms. Cornelius couldn’t hear him, but the other nightmare seemed to be pointing at the hillside.

Cornelius turned and found with a sickening wash of disappointment that they had been invaded, but not by the army the rioters had feared. Not even close.

It was a pair of females.

They looked similar enough that

they could have been sisters. Both were pale-skinned, black-haired and -eyed, and beautiful by mortal standards. Both wore the livery of the Palace of Dis's new administration: leather body armor with red darts at the hips and shoulders. One of them was slight of figure and carried a whip coiled around one wrist, while the other stood as though she were ten feet tall with a holster under her arm.

When they spotted Cornelius, the second woman drew her handgun.

He stopped in mid-step, though he was entirely unconcerned by the unspoken threat. A gun couldn't do anything to him.

"It's a nightmare," said the one with the whip, addressing her cohort.

The speaker's body armor was unzipped to her navel, baring ample swells of cleavage. Clearly a succubus. Dull creatures obsessed with pleasures of the flesh. "Birth attendant, I think."

The other woman lowered her sidearm. Her eyes had bled to black, from her pupils all the way to the edge of the sclera. "Okay, birth attendant. I want you to pull a nightmare out of the pit for me."

"No," Cornelius said, punctuating it with a yawn.

"Let's try it this way: Pull a nightmare out of the pit for me, or I will end your miserable existence."

He remained unconcerned. The rioters above were far more a threat than

these two scouts, and he had thwarted the chaff of Malebolge easily enough. He'd expected worse from the Father's invading forces. "You intend to end me with what weapon, exactly?"

She responded by advancing on him until they stood nose-to-nose. She was not tall—she only came to his shoulder—but her power butted against his, surging and swelling and curving to surround him.

He ached at the force of it. Cornelius wavered, sinking to one knee in the mire.

But this was his domain. The place where he had originally spawned and now reigned as protector. He would not be cowed by an idiot with a gun, of all

things.

Cornelius pushed back with all his will. Nightmare thrall usually wouldn't work on other demons, but here, near the bottom of the borehole, standing on the brink of the Amniosium, he could have struck fear deep into the heart of a dumb rock if he wanted to.

This woman was *far* dumber than a rock for facing him here.

He thrust the power into her belly and watched hungrily for the fear to overtake her. Cornelius made images dance through her mind: the idea of burning to death, the choke of cloying smoke, the way that flesh peeled and melted from the immense heat. He summoned the images of fires more vast



and terrifying than any that burned in Hell or on Earth, and he made his opponent see it all.

The woman's eyebrows knitted. Lines bracketed either side of her mouth as she frowned, marring the smooth perfection of her skin. He felt a dent in her defenses and pushed at it, preparing to enter her mind to conjure darker fears.

Soon, the weeping would begin. And, soon after that, the begging.

Cornelius grinned.

But the woman flicked her hand, dismissing the images.

His thrall fragmented. Shriveled.

"Are you done?" she asked, and she shoved his power back at him.

The fires licked at his mind,

consuming him with dreadful, immense heat. Worse, she had somehow changed the flavor of his fears, coloring them with images of the burning pits of Dis. She summoned the images as though she had deep, intimate knowledge of those fires, where many mortal souls burned.

Through it all he saw her eyes, black and all-consuming.

“No,” he whimpered. “Please.”

He could feel the fires. They had never burned him before, but now he was smothering, scorching, *melting*...

“Do you obey the Father?” Her voice broke through the illusion, making his bones vibrate.

Only then did he realize that he had made a horrible mistake.

It was *her*.

Cornelius had come face-to-face with the woman who had almost singlehandedly toppled Dis. Who had slaughtered both Abraxas and Aquiel, ancient and noble demons, in order to take their Palace. The woman who had forbidden slavery of mortals, enforcing her insane laws with cunning that few could comprehend. She was so very strong—much stronger than he had expected to see from someone naïve enough to carry a handgun into Hell.

He did not obey the Father. He had not sworn allegiance to her. But he wasn't foolish enough to defy a demon-god to her face. Not if he expected to survive.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, crossing his arms over his chest, forming the X that was her icon.

Her gloved hand rested on his forehead. The touch was light, but it made him tremble. She could have probably plucked the brain from his skull with as little effort as she had dismissed his thrall. “I have no interest in dispensing forgiveness. I just want a nightmare dredged from the pits.”

“It’s not possible. They emerge of their own volition when they’re ready.”

“This one is ready,” the Father said. “I’ll make her ready, dammit.”

The sound of footsteps slapping against the ground drew his attention to the shore of the pit.

Cornelius realized Rowland was attacking only a split-second before the other nightmare hurtled out of the mist, screaming a battle cry. He held a cleaver over his head.

“Rowland, no!”

The Father moved swiftly. She jerked a black box out of her boot. Her thumb depressed the button on the side. She drove it into Rowland’s gut.

Blue lightning arced over his breastbone, wrapping him in wicked fingers of light.

His cleaver sank into her shoulder—a final act of revenge.

She had brought electricity to the Amniosium.

Hot        tears        streaked        down

Cornelius's cheeks.

The Father ignored him, swearing under her breath. She reached back to touch the injury. "Dammit, Neuma!"

Her succubus companion reached up to jerk the blade free. Sludgy amber blood oozed down the Father's shoulder. "It's okay, doll. He didn't cut deep, and it's only steel. You'll be okay."

"I know," the Father said. "But the bleeding—I can't afford that, not if I end up having to use the runes."

"It's okay. It'll be okay." It sounded as though Neuma were trying to convince herself.

Cornelius barely registered the conversation the women were having above him. He stared at the place

Rowland had been standing. The tang of electricity lingered in the air.

The Father had used a mortal weapon to kill a nightmare. Now Rowland's essence wisped down the hill, melding with the bubbling vat that cradled the monoentity of his brethren.

He would be back. The nightmares always came back. But it wouldn't be the same, this new life—rebirth changed a creature.

Though Cornelius didn't consider himself sentimental, his heart clenched at the idea that he had lost his long-time companion. "How dare you, Father?" he whispered.

"I am a vengeful god," she said dryly. She licked her own blood off the

fingers of her gloves. The wound had already closed. “He attacked me and got what he deserved. The nightmare I want back—she didn’t deserve this. Will you help me retrieve her from the vat?”

“It’s impossible,” Cornelius said.

Neuma paced, twisting the whip in her fists. “He might be right. I don’t know, doll. Maybe this was a bad idea.”

The Father was glaring hard at the Amniosium as Rowland settled into it, making the surface of the fluid roil anew, unsettling the balance. His death was one more of too many.

“It’s calling to me,” the Father said.

Neuma stopped pacing. “What do you mean, calling to you?”

“I’m going in to get her.”



“Elise, wait!”

But the Father didn't listen to her companion. She handed the gun and the Taser to Neuma, unzipped her leather body armor, and stepped out of it. She stripped off her underwear as well. The near-flawless body underneath was lean and lightly muscled. A long scar glistened on the inside of one forearm and a tattoo marked the same palm.

She stood on the brink of the vat wearing nothing but a gold ring, hair blown out of her face by Malebolge's wheezing winds.

“What are you doing?” Cornelius asked, struggling to his feet.

She swan-dived into the Amniosium and vanished.

**Neuma braced herself** for terror as Elise plunged into the pit of seething nightmares.

The instant her pale toes disappeared, slipping under the surface with barely a ripple, her protective aura vanished, too. Neuma was only a half-succubus, meaning that the other half of her was human. She was susceptible to most of the same things humans were. That included nightmare thrall.

And now she was alone in the place where nightmares were born.

She clenched her fist around the handle of the whip as terror clawed up the back of her skull, gaining traction on her mind.

“No!” shouted the birthing attendant, flinging a hand at the ripple left behind by Elise’s dive. He stumbled for the pit.

Neuma introduced the braided end of the whip to his ankles with a snap of her wrist. It lashed around him. She jerked him off of his feet, and he gave an extremely satisfying grunt as he hit the ground.

“Don’t you dare screw with her,” Neuma said, planting a boot on his chest.

He gazed up at her with desperate eyes. “She will unbalance everything. She could destroy the Amniosium.” His supplication was gratifying. He didn’t know that Neuma was a flickering candle in comparison to Elise’s bonfire,

and he feared her even as his fear sucked the breath out of her lungs.

Neuma did well enough in the City of Dis, but Malebolge was much wilder. To the locals, half-blooded Gray were no better than mortals. As long as nobody realized what she was—or, more precisely, what she wasn't—she enjoyed some vicarious benefits as Elise's right hand. Demons seemed to regard them as nearly equal.

She couldn't show the fear. She had to remain in control.

Disturbing mental images penetrated her resolve. She thought of dark rooms that smelled of feces and a woman screaming shrilly. A woman who needed her, a woman who Neuma

simultaneously wished would die and hoped would never leave her.

*It's just the thrall.* She pushed it away.

“Please,” the birth attendant said, drawing her attention to him again. “Malebolge is already struggling. The pit’s status is...tenuous.”

Neuma leaned her weight harder on him, digging her spiked heel into his spongy flesh. “Shut your face. It’s done. She’s in there. Just gotta wait for her to come out on her own now.”

And wait they did.

She stood on the birth attendant for several minutes without any sign of Elise within the pit. Not so much as an air bubble broke the surface. The entire

time, Neuma struggled against the choking fear, overwhelmed by horrible thoughts that pushed back when she tried to dismiss them.

It didn't help that she could hear the rioters outside the gate. Elise had made the mistake of phasing them into the market, claiming that nobody would recognize them, or at least, that nobody would care.

She had been wrong. Everyone had known who they were. One glance at the livery and everything had gone fucking insane.

Dis wasn't happy to have Elise residing in the Palace, but Malebolge was furious she even dared to exist.

It wouldn't matter soon. Bringing

Malebolge to heel wasn't on the to-do list—not with so much left to do in Dis. Once they had what they wanted from the Amniosium, Neuma and Elise could phase away and forget this hideous, stinking place existed.

Elise just needed to come out now. If she didn't, then how would Neuma get back to Dis?

“Please come out,” Neuma whispered, trying not to follow her spiraling thoughts down to their dark conclusion—the idea that Elise might never return.

“There!” said the nightmare suddenly.

Elise's head broke the surface. Her hair was plastered to her cheeks,

forehead, shoulders; the primordial soup of nightmares drizzled from the tip of her nose.

Neuma darted to the edge, heart fluttering wildly, but stopped on the brink.

Another handful of staggering steps, and Elise's chest emerged. A head rested against her breasts.

Not a head—a skull.

“Babe,” Neuma whimpered.

Step by torturous step, Elise rose from the pit. A body dangled in her arms, little more than a collection of bones and connective tissue, lacking enough flesh to be obviously male or female—barely even humanoid. The bones looked to be molding, but Neuma



knew it was the growth of new flesh.

The sight cracked Neuma's heart in half. She wanted to plunge into the surf to help, but didn't dare. Elise had the power of the father of all demons woven into the fiber of her being. Neuma was just a really ambitious bartender. She wasn't sure she'd survive the skinny-dip.

She grabbed Elise the instant that she reached the edge of the pit. "That was insane!"

Elise collapsed to her knees, holding the pieces of the nightmare to her heart. "I'm going to drop her," she said, voice ragged. "Help me."

Neuma quickly moved to take the fragile bones of the nightmare into her

own arms.

The nightmare exhaled. Her eyelids peeled open. White-filmed eyes gazed blindly above. The tongue moved inside her mouth, but without real lips, she could form no words. She only groaned.

The nightmare was alive. For the love of all that was holy—she was *aware*.

“You cruel bastards,” said the nightmare on the ground a few feet away. He stared at them in horror.

Neuma ignored him. “Babe,” she whispered again. Tears stung her eyes as she pressed a kiss to the top of the exposed skull. The bone was strangely cold against her lips. “I got you. I won’t let you go again. I got you.” She repeated

it under her breath like a prayer.

“Come on.” Elise wrapped her arm around Neuma’s shoulders. “Let’s get Jerica back to the Palace.”

**THEY TOOK WHAT** remained of Jerica to feed upon Elise's enemies.

Elise set Jerica carefully inside an iron cage padded by blankets. They were a thoughtful gesture from Neuma, but not entirely useful. Compared to having one's body reduced to ichor and forced to reform cell by cell, lying on a hard surface was probably negligibly painful. Worse, Jerica's filmy, still-forming skin was sticking to the cloth, and it tore the fragile tissue when Elise tried to adjust her.

"You'll be okay soon," Neuma

whispered, wiggling her fingers through the bars to touch Jerica's knuckles.

The nightmare didn't reply.

Elise seized a chain as wide as her forearms and hooked it to the center of the cage. Then she heaved her weight on the opposite end, using a pulley to jerk the cage into the air. It swayed over their heads.

She pushed Jerica's cage out over the dungeons—a series of warded rooms with no roofs, allowing Elise to watch the misery of her prisoners like a scientist looking upon rats in a maze.

For months now, Elise had been going from House to House in the City of Dis to demand fealty. Most demons had ignored her. Others had laughed. And

she had allowed most of them to get away with that...on her first visit. She was not quite as understanding on the second visit, especially if the Householders started fighting back.

Those assholes got tossed in the dungeons. It wasn't the most diplomatic response, but it was extremely satisfying.

Seeing the bourgeois of Hell forced to live in sparsely furnished cells hadn't lost its entertainment factor. They had nothing but hard beds and a few pages of fiend-skin paper so that they could write to their Houses of origin. The latter wasn't a gesture of sympathy so much as practicality; Houses needed to be run, even when their leaders were holding

unwilling court in the Palace.

“Do you think it’ll take long?” Neuma asked, clinging to Elise’s arm. “Jerica’s healing, I mean.”

Elise lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “No way to tell.”

Few of the prisoners had human blood in them, so they would be the only ones susceptible to Jerica’s thrall. Those prisoners were about to have a few very bad weeks. Starving, newborn nightmares were hungry creatures. Jerica wouldn’t be able to take it easy on them even if she wanted to.

Neuma and Elise stood on the mezzanine in silence, watching Jerica shudder. Below, the prisoners were beginning to react to the presence of a

nightmare feeding off of them. Or, to be more precise, the woman who had brought the nightmare.

Shouted threats echoed through the hollow chamber.

“I will rape your children’s eye sockets for what you’ve done to me, you dumb bitch!” That was Davithon from the House of Courevore.

And from a lamia in the back corner of the dungeon: “You will regret this! Release me now and your death will be swift!”

Others were trying to bribe her for their freedom, and a few even begged, but the threats were far more prevalent. None of them were saying what she wanted to hear: “I will release my



human slaves and agree to abide by your laws.”

Was that really so hard?

Elise was tempted to just kill the lot of them, communicating with demons in the way that she had learned as a girl-child. She didn't need compliance if they were dead. She could crack their skulls and their battlements and free the mortals that way, too.

But what a pain in the ass *that* would be. The Houses wouldn't run themselves, and Elise sure as heck wasn't taking on that much responsibility. She just wanted these assholes to get their shit together and obey her. If she left the city's governing structure largely untouched, Dis would

continue to run after she achieved her goals and returned to Earth.

Elise was increasingly doubtful such a day would ever come.

She leaned over the banister. “Listen,” she said. She barely had to raise her voice for the word to carry throughout the entire room. Whoever had designed the dungeon had done great with the acoustics. It had been carved directly into the igneous rock deep underneath the Palace, and the faceted walls multiplied every sound a dozen times. Unfortunately, after capturing so many prisoners, the noise could get cacophonous.

Such as when all of them started screaming and roaring in response to

Elise's voice.

She waited until they quieted down again, counting to ten inside her head. And then twenty. And then thirty. Eventually, they fell quiet.

Davithon was the nearest of them. He was an ugly little demon that dressed as a fop, wearing a curled wig and a white domino mask. A black tongue lashed from his fanged mouth. He had no legs and hovered a few feet above the floor, arms stretched above him—trying to reach her, but unable to pass the invisible roof on his cell.

Face to face, he was a little scary. From above, his clawing was laughable.

“You can all earn your freedom by releasing the slaves and swearing

fealty,” Elise said, looking specifically at Davithon. His House alone had nineteen slaves. “Let me know when you’ve changed your minds.”

She backed away from the edge as they all resumed gnashing their teeth.

Whatever.

Neuma was standing back a few feet, gazing up at Jerica. She didn’t seem to have heard Elise’s latest attempts at negotiation, which were about as effective as all her previous attempts.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Elise said. “Gerard’s waiting.”

“I’d like to stay,” Neuma said. “I’m half-human. Jerica can feed on me, too.”

“Do you think that she would want you to sacrifice your mental health for

her rebirth?”

“Doesn’t matter all that much to me. She needs it. I’ll give it to her.”

Elise didn’t like that. It wasn’t that Neuma was the only person that Elise currently used to feed her own demonic hungers—she just didn’t like the thought of Neuma being forced to relive her worst nightmares over and over. It would break her long before Jerica became strong.

“Don’t martyr yourself,” Elise said.

Neuma’s eyes glistened. “Love is sacrifice.”

The words corkscrewed right into Elise’s belly. Her jaw hardened.

She nodded once, lips sealed against further arguments, and Neuma

pulled up a folding chair to sit at the edge of the mezzanine. The half-succubus could just barely reach the edge of Jerica's cage if she reached out. She hooked one long finger in the bar and managed a trembling smile at the nightmare's shivering bones.

Elise left without looking back at them, but the image of the two together was permanently burned into the backs of her eyes.

**Gerard met Elise** in the hallway outside her rooms. She wasn't sure how he knew that she had returned from Malebolge, but he always seemed to know where everyone was in the Palace at any given moment. For a human, Gerard pulled off

the illusion of omnipresence pretty well.

“We caught him,” he announced, unable to contain a wide grin.

Elise didn’t smile back, but dark satisfaction uncurled in her heart. “Finally.”

She changed directions and Gerard fell into step beside her. He wore her livery, though he had stripped off the jacket and wore a Black Parade t-shirt instead, which matched the leather boots surprisingly well.

“Where have you taken Gremory?” Elise asked.

“We’ve got him in the interrogation room. It’s the only place that the wards are strong enough. Plus, the chains are designed for his breed.”

Gerard had done well, as always. She didn't have to force her smile of gratitude.

He held open the doors to the courtyard, allowing Elise to exit first. The Palace of Dis had never been busier. A new market had sprung up within the walls, trading goods brought down from Earth, and it had become the primary source of supplies for the Palace's human residents. And she had a lot of residents to care for now. Of the thousand or so slaves that she had rescued, a full third of them had remained to help.

The survivors weren't even half of the creatures living in the Palace, though. Elise had begun allowing certain



demons to live within the battlements. She trusted few members of Belphegor's army—*her* army—and kept most of them outside her defenses, where they wouldn't be able to easily stage a coup; instead, she had taken in the artisans and servants, the lowest of the low who served with gratitude.

These demon additions to her staff had stalls in the new market, too. Products made from human byproducts weren't permitted, but there were an impressive number of handcrafted tools and trinkets made from Dis's more natural resources: blown glass, stone cookware, harpy wool blankets.

When Hell wasn't murderous, it could be downright beautiful.

A hush fell over the market as Elise passed through the stalls, heading toward the interrogation room. She had been spending so much time with the army outside the walls that people freaked out when they saw her within the Palace. Neuma said it was because they admired her; Gerard claimed it was fear.

Neither of those were pleasant possibilities.

By the time she reached the ladder into the interrogation room, her face was fixed into a severe frown and tension was knotted between her shoulders. The nearby walkways were filling with people, all eager to watch.

The interrogation room was a suspended platform surrounded by

magical walls that allowed spectators to watch the proceedings within. It used to be where the Inquisitor plied his trade—a role occupied by Elise's father in the previous administration, the irony of which did not escape her—but now it was the best place to torture high-profile prisoners.

The wards were inviolable. And everyone could see exactly how merciful Elise was toward those who didn't obey the Father.

Every time she went in there, it was like being on stage again. Elise hadn't performed in years, not since she and James had advertised their fledgling dance studio by participating in competitions. She had never been a fan

of the attention, but James had thrived on it.

She couldn't hide behind a dance partner anymore. Elise was a soloist now, and with a blade rather than high-heeled shoes and a fixed smile.

The corner of her mouth quirked at what James would have thought of Elise's latest performances.

She climbed hand-over-hand into the interrogation room. Gremory was supervised by a group of human guards and a single gibborim. He was so large that he had to crouch to fit under the arched roof. Elise wished she had seen how he managed to get into the room in the first place.

The prisoner was chained on his

knees with his arms above his head. His scale armor had been stripped away, leaving his muscular, human-like body bared to the harsh air of Dis. His skin was bone-white and translucent. Red veins gripped his ribs and crawled down his thighs.

“Father,” Gremory said, “what a pleasure to meet you.”

Elise didn't bother replying.

Gremory had been Belphegor's praetor when he still possessed the army. They were also the same type of demon, although Gremory was much weaker. That didn't mean much. Considering Belphegor's power, it would have been hard for anyone to match him.

“We found him trying to lead one of your centuria away,” Gerard explained, taking position beside the gibborim. “The twenty-sixth.”

Elise lifted an eyebrow. It wasn’t surprising that Gremory had been trying to undermine her, but the twenty-sixth had been camping right by the gates—a dangerous place for a dissident to appear. “Were they leaving willingly?”

“It seems so. He was trying to transport them to the House of Volac.”

That House wasn’t allied with her yet, but she did have its daughter, Sallosa, as centurion of another century. More dissent within the ranks. “Send men to watch the thirtieth century—the one that Sallosa is commanding.

Reassign the twenty-sixth to the wasteland perimeter. Kill the ones that resist.”

“Sure we shouldn’t kill them all?”

Gerard asked.

Tempting. But Elise couldn’t kill every single demon that didn’t like her. Besides, she’d needed to move more forces into the hostile wastelands anyway. The forces she sent to patrol there kept going missing. Might as well put the centuries that disobeyed at risk.

“You heard my order,” Elise said.

Gerard sent one of his men out to take care of the twenty-sixth centuria. The trap door opened and slammed shut again.

Elise held out her hand. Without

asking, Gerard gave her a knife.

Gremory's eyes tracked the motion of the blade. There was no fear in his eyes. Elise would have to see if she could change that attitude.

“What’s at the House of Volac? Is that where you were going to meet Belphegor?”

The answer came from him easily. No threatening required. “He’s not there. I was merely planning to run an errand for him.”

“Then where is he?” she asked, circling Gremory.

“You already know that I won’t tell you. Attempt to torture me.”

He sounded so calm about it.

Elise’s eyes flicked up to the



walkways ringing the room. Half of the Palace was watching. She needed to handle this as she did all things—swiftly, and without bullshit.

She stepped close to Gremory. “This isn’t going to end well,” she muttered. “We don’t need to do it like this. It’s a waste of time.”

“However long you waste attempting to beat information out of me is entirely within your control, Father.” A lazy smirk curved over his lips, and it was unsettling on a face so similar to Belphegor’s. Belphegor didn’t smile. Not like that. “There’s an alternative way to reach my master, you know. Let me go. I’ll arrange the meeting.”

Belphegor had offered to teach her

to perform warlock magic. He was the only surviving demon that knew the archaic skill now that Abraxas was dead.

Elise hadn't taken him up on the offer. She still didn't know why Belphegor regarded her as an ally, and, frankly, she didn't want to know. There would be a price for that knowledge, and Elise wasn't going to pay it.

She dug the knife into Gremory's chest.

At least, she attempted to dig it into his chest. The blade deflected from his skin, grating as though he were made of stone.

When she struck again a second time, harder than before, the blade

simply shattered.

Gremory was still smirking.

Elise slipped the hilt of the broken knife into Gerard's hand, careful not to let the spectators see that it had failed.

“What's your backup plan?” Gremory asked casually, as if he were one of the guards ringing the room rather than the prisoner.

Gerard barked a laugh. “You think that was her primary plan? You really thought she was going to try to *stab* you?” He said it loudly, grandly, playing to the audience. They all laughed. Of course they all knew how hard Gremory was. Of course the Father knew better than to hope she could damage him physically.

She couldn't falter when people were watching. She couldn't have doubts.

Gerard was right, though. She had already suspected that torturing Gremory wouldn't be possible.

Elise paused to gather herself, eyes closed, taking a deep breath. *This is just another performance.* She was about to go on stage to compete for a regional title. She only had to dance for a board of harsh judges and walk away with the prize. The fact that her dance partner of the day was in chains and the only accompaniment was the pounding of her heart didn't change the fact that it was just another performance.

It would have been easier with

James beside her.

She opened her eyes and turned to face the spectators. With her teeth, she tugged on each finger of her left-hand glove, loosening it. Then she peeled it away.

Gasps and hushed whispers spread over the walkways.

Her hand was covered in fiery orange runes that crawled over her knuckles, slithered between her fingers, orbited the joint of her thumb.

Infernal runes.

Elise lowered her arm and turned back to Gremory before the spectators could see that the runes were flickering. Not the flicker of fire, but the flicker of failing power. Every time the symbols

darkened, pain lanced to her elbow.

She didn't let it show on her face.

“Do you recognize this?” she asked, curling her fist around the magic, concealing the weakening runes from his view. Flames licked between her fingers.

Doubt had crept into Gremory's features. He pulled on his chains, as if testing their strength. “Impossible.”

“Tell me where to find Belphegor.”

After a beat, he said, “No.”

She wasn't going to ask him again.

Elise took off her warding ring, letting the full sense of magic settle over her. With her opposite hand, she gripped his throat. “I am the Father,” she said, loud enough for everyone to hear her.

“Behold.”

*Time to do the tango.*

She let a word of power roll off of her tongue.

It spilled from her core, striking the air like a tuning fork rapped against stone. The tone was almost right. A little sharp.

The rune under her thumb flared.

Fire washed over Gremory. He radiated bonfire heat, veins burning bright red.

His head fell back and he screamed.

It was burning him—actually hurting a demon like Belphegor—so Elise didn’t let go. But she felt the wrongness in the spell. It was flickering

harder. Her bones were shaking. The burn was creeping up her arm, lashing back against the wielder.

If she held it, she would be reduced to ash.

She gritted her teeth and pushed hard with all her willpower, trying to shove the magic into him.

Gremory's eyes opened again. He glared at her.

"No," he repeated.

His will was weaker than hers, but he wasn't the one draining himself by using untested, hacked-together warlock magic.

She pushed, and Gremory pushed back.

The runes fizzled out. Her hand



went blank.

“Shit,” Elise said.

With a roar, Gremory wrenched his arms down. The chains had been weakened by Elise’s faulty magic, too—they snapped.

His fist seemed to come from nowhere.

The blow sent Elise flying. Her back smacked into the wall, and she bounced off onto the floor.

Gremory was laughing as the humans fired on him with human guns. The bullets didn’t touch him.

And the spectators were watching every moment of it.

Elise had just fallen on a grand jeté.  
*Have to recover.*

The gibborim threw himself on top of Gremory, and they wrestled, rolling across the tiled floor with a rain of meaty slaps and grunts. Her guard didn't stand a chance against the prisoner. But the distraction gave her an instant to pull out her failsafe.

She wrenched off her other glove.

The ethereal runes blazed to life, making her entire body shake, blanking out her vision so that all she could see were green shapes when she blinked. This magic had been waiting for her for weeks. She hadn't dared use it—not when it weakened her so much.

Now Gremory was slamming the gibborim's head into the floor, and the gibborim wasn't fighting back. Gremory

got to his feet and turned to face Elise again.

She unleashed the ethereal runes.

Lightning lanced to Gremory, engulfing him in brilliant, burning light. It hurt. She was screaming. But it was so much more powerful than the warlock spell had been, and it was her only chance to kill him. There was no point containing something like Gremory for long.

The spectators shrieked with pain. Many were demons, and just as susceptible to ethereal light as Elise.

She didn't stop to see if they were smart enough to run. She threw all of her strength into the spells, roaring as the magic ripped through her to consume

Gremory.

He didn't have any of Belphegor's anti-magic defenses. He fell.

Elise stood over him for a full minute—about thirty seconds longer than she needed to—and kept pouring the rune magic into him, lighting up the interrogation room and the courtyard with nuclear white. She could actually watch as her skin faded away and the bones appeared underneath. But she kept electrocuting Gremory until he stopped moving, stopped breathing, until he was nothing but charcoal at her feet.

Then there was nothing left in her. The magic cut off.

She staggered, arms clutching her stomach. Hunger roared through her

body.

“Elise!” Gerard moved to catch her.

She regained her footing and shoved him away. “Don’t,” she snarled. Just being near him made her hungrier. The heartbeats of her human guards made her salivate. Her body pulsed in time with their flowing blood.

“You killed him,” said another guard, Aniruddha. “But he could have told us where Belphegor was.”

Elise couldn’t respond. She stumbled toward the trap door.

“He wasn’t going to talk,” Gerard said from behind her. He still sounded confident. Unbothered. His trust in Elise was unaffected. “Send a cleaning crew

up here. We'll fertilize the flesh gardens with Gremory's ashes."

She wrenched open the exit and took a last glance around. The walkways had mostly cleared out, but not entirely. There were witnesses to Elise's failure. Word would spread.

Elise had finished her dance, and the judges had awarded her a row of zeroes.

**Onoskelis's desk** in the Great Library was unoccupied.

"Where is she?" Elise snarled, whirling on the other librarian.

Paimon squinted at her through gold-rimmed spectacles that magnified his eyes. "I take it that something of

interest has happened?”

Elise thrust her bare hand at him. “The warlock magic failed. *That’s* what happened.”

Paimon slid his spectacles to the tip of his nose and studied her with cool indifference. The rune had burned into her skin, leaving the flesh blistered. Using the ethereal magic had drained her too much to heal it.

In order to replenish her stores she was going to have to feed again, even though she had fed barely two days earlier. In the meantime, her stomach was a painful pit and every mortal she had passed on the way to the library had looked like meat to her.

Elise had promised herself that she

wouldn't end up like this again.

“I don't know what's become of Onoskelis,” Paimon said in the smoothest *vo-ani* that Elise had ever heard. His voice was melted butter. “The fact that she has gone missing would suggest that she's no longer needed.”

Clenching her hand into a fist again made the blisters stretch, but the ache helped her focus on his words rather than the beat of his heart. “No longer needed? Where, in the library? In service to the fucking Palace administration?”

“There's no need for hysterics.”

Elise wasn't hysterical. She was furious.



With a sweep of her arms, she sent Paimon's papers scattering over the floor, then slammed her knuckles into his bare desk hard enough to dent the wood. Another shock of pain. It was good.

"The information she gave me wasn't enough," Elise said, enunciating each syllable. "I looked weak. I was forced to drain myself to kill the prisoner. Onoskelis *failed* me."

Annoyance pinched Paimon's lips together. "Really, now." He slid out of his chair and landed on the ground. Standing, he was barely tall enough to reach Elise's hips. He waddled to the nearest papers and began gathering them. "Did she teach you warlock magic?"

"No. She gave me a book." A book

that Elise had accidentally set on fire while testing the runes. It was now a charred pile of papers in her room.

“An instruction manual?”

“Not exactly,” Elise said. There may have been instructions, but she never would have known. She couldn’t read the language the book was written in. It wasn’t *vo-ani*. She had tried casting the infernal runes in the appendix the same way that she cast ethereal runes, assuming that the processes had to be similar.

Apparently not similar enough.

“You failed to make use of a gift from Onoskelis, and you’re blaming it on her,” Paimon said.

Elise quivered with rage and

hunger. “She said she would help me.”

“Did she?”

Now Elise understood what he was getting at, and it just made her angrier. No, Onoskelis hadn't said she would help Elise. The librarian had been about as impressed by Elise's demands as Paimon, and had given her the book mostly as a way to get her out of the Great Library.

He already knew this. He was only asking the questions to piss her off.

Or to prove a point.

Elise helped him gather the papers she had shoved to the floor. She moved more quickly than he did, and she had collected most of the mess within a couple of minutes. She set them on the

desk.

By the time she spoke again, she was calmer. “It’s not normal for the librarians to vanish, is it?”

“Sometimes,” Paimon said.

“When will they be back?”

“They won’t. Not in this genesis.”

Elise sat in front of the desk.

“Genesis?”

Paimon scrambled to get back into his chair—a graceless movement that involved a lot of wild kicking. Comfortable on his cushion once more, he began sorting his papers. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “I will be here as long as you need me. I will keep the Library in order.”

Big job for a small toad. The

Library occupied most of an entire tower, and it was filled with hundreds of shelves of ancient texts and scrolls. There were also more shelves underground, below the crystal floor—Elise had no idea how many. Onoskelis had made it clear that nobody was allowed down there. Even the woman currently in charge.

“I’m going to lose control of the Palace if I don’t figure out warlock magic,” Elise said.

Paimon licked his thumb with a skinny tongue, shuffling through the corners of a few pages, as if to make sure they were in order. “The administration changes frequently.”

And apparently he didn’t care who

was in charge. Onoskelis had usually seemed to be of a similar opinion. Sometimes, though, Elise had thought—or at least hoped—that the enigmatic librarian supported her. Stupid hopes. She hadn't supported Elise enough to continue staffing the library, much less help her find the information she needed.

“Then maybe you can point me in the direction of more helpful books,” Elise said through her teeth, trying to speak as nicely as possible. “There must be something.”

He knuckled his spectacles, pushing them in front of his beady eyes again. “I will think about it.”

Elise dug her fingernails into her kneecaps.

“Thank you,” she bit out.

She moved to stand, but Paimon spoke. “Onoskelis was working in the lower stacks before her departure. She left quite a few of the books in the study room.” A knobby finger pointed toward one of the higher floors. “It will be a nuisance to sort them myself. I’m not sure I’ll get around to it today.” His lipless mouth curved at the corners. “Tomorrow, perhaps.” And then he returned his attention to his papers.

**The door to** the study room was locked. Fortunately, Elise’s back was inked with the marks required to unlock every single door in the Palace. She only had to jiggle the handle to open it.

There was a cheap torchiere just inside the study room. Elise didn't need to check to know it wouldn't be plugged in to anything. It still turned on when she twisted the knob on its side.

Gold light illuminated a cramped room with almost every inch of floor space occupied by tables. The last time that Elise had been in there, she had found Onoskelis restoring old scrolls. The room had been tidy aside from the tools required for the task.

Now the room was filled with towers of books.

Elise edged in sideways. Her hip bumped a stack and sent the top half sliding to the ground. She took care not to step on anything as she squeezed



between the tables.

This kind of disorder was sacrilege to the Palace librarians. Onoskelis never would have pulled out so many books at once, never would have stacked them so precariously, never would have allowed important books to sit unattended. Paimon must have been lying. This had to be the work of someone else.

She flipped open the cover of a nearby book. Her heart sped.

Its title page had a warlock rune on it.

Elise fanned through the pages, her excitement quickly turning to dread. The entire book was written in that language she didn't recognize, just like the last one, and its wealth of runes was useless

to her.

She tossed the book aside and picked up another. It was the same.

Onoskelis *had* supported Elise. The librarian had left everything she needed to learn warlock magic within her grasp.

But she couldn't read a single page of it.

Elise dropped onto the stool, cradling her head in her hands. She shut her eyes against the hunger migraine clamped on her skull. She didn't have time to study all of these books—not with the army to organize and Houses to bring to heel.

She'd have to ask Gerard to find a demon that could read that strange, archaic language. She didn't doubt he'd

be happy to add that to his lengthy to-do list. He could place it solidly at the bottom, below all the more life-threatening items at the top.

No big deal.

Elise opened her eyes and realized that there was a yellow sticky note attached to the book right in front of her nose.

Surprise washed over Elise. It was an actual sticky note, the kind she could have bought at Office Depot, with writing on it that looked like it might have come from an ordinary ballpoint pen.

She peeled it off the cover, tilting it toward the light so she could read it.

“Hi Elise. Check your email. -B”

# Three

**THE WEREWOLF KNEELING** in front of Rylie didn't deserve even a second of her attention. Abel was ready to rip his fucking head off and drop kick it down the waterfall. The pack could play volleyball with it in the lake below.

But Rylie was more than patient. She actually looked sympathetic.

“Tell me how it happened,” she said.

Abel couldn't help himself. “He was an irresponsible fuckwad, that's how it happened.”

Rylie shot him an admonishing

look, although the hint of a smile tugged at her mouth. He would never stop loving the fact that she smiled at him like that. “Thanks, Abel.”

“I wasn’t irresponsible,” Felton said. He didn’t look as nervous as he should have. He was on his knees with his head appropriately bowed, so his posture was as submissive as possible. But there wasn’t fear in him.

None of the werewolves feared Rylie, and they should have.

Abel was fixing to do something about that.

“Let me guess,” Abel growled. “You were with this—this Scion, this former slave—and you were getting all hot and heavy, and your teeth just

*accidentally* ripped into her shoulder.”

The flush of embarrassment that poured off of Felton said that Abel was close to the truth. “That’s not how it—”

“Then what? Did you get mad at her? Did you attack her, show her who’s boss?”

“No!” Felton’s eyes flashed. He made the mistake of meeting Abel’s gaze, and he looked pissed. Not submissive.

The Alpha rage took him. In two steps, Abel reached the end of the stage and leaped off, slamming into the werewolf. He shoved Felton’s head to the ground.

Abel half-expected Rylie to yell at him for it, but she didn’t.

“You ruined that Scion’s life,” Abel said, pressing his fingertips into Felton’s scalp. A human head wasn’t that much differently sized from a melon. Abel had crushed melons in his fist before. Just a quick squeeze, and *crack*—juice everywhere. “You couldn’t have hurt her much worse if you’d tossed her back down into Hell.”

Felton’s face was ruddy. The answer came squeezing out of him. “Deepali asked me to do it.”

“Wait.”

Rylie’s voice cut straight through Abel’s fury. He looked up at her. She had moved to stand on the edge of the stage. She was draped in a white dress that fell to her ankles straight down from

her bust, and her blond hair was brushed straight. With blossoms woven into her hair, Rylie looked more like a benevolent goddess of the forest than a werewolf Alpha capable of ripping apart her enemies with her teeth.

“She asked me,” Felton said again. He sounded more urgent now that he had Rylie’s attention. “We talked about it for weeks and I agreed. It wasn’t my idea, it wasn’t an accident—”

Abel pushed harder. “You did it on *purpose*?”

“Let him up,” Rylie said.

“You heard what he said. He admitted to changing someone deliberately!”

“I know,” she said softly.



Reluctantly, Abel released Felton. The side of his face was caked in mud now.

“I love her,” Felton said, kneeling in front of Rylie again, giving her an imploring look. Abel stood behind him, fuming quietly. “I thought you’d understand, of all people.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Abel asked.

Rylie didn’t tell him to be quiet. Her glance spoke volumes. “Why would Deepali ask you to change her into a werewolf, Felton?”

“So we could be together. Here, at the sanctuary. Always. And because—well, when things crawl out of Hell, the werewolves are the only ones strong

enough to stand against them. I mentioned that we were stretched too thin to watch the fissure all the time. She asked me to change her so that there'd be one more wolf to stand guard." Felton hung his head in embarrassment. "Mostly the love thing."

This time, the anger clenching in Abel's gut was mixed with shame. The pack had noticed that they were too weak to properly guard Earth from Hell. Felton had taken the matter into his own hands to change that. It was the ultimate gesture of disrespect.

"Stand up," Rylie said.

Felton did. She clasped one of his hands in both of hers. "I love her," he repeated. Now more confident. Certain

he was going to get away with it.

“If you love her, you wouldn’t subject her to the change. Abel is right. It’s an awful experience. You’ve changed her life permanently, and not for the better.”

“It’s not awful with you in charge,” Felton said. “It doesn’t hurt. Not like it used to.”

“I’m in charge?” Rylie squeezed his hand. “Funny for you to mention that, Felton. Because I don’t make a lot of rules, but the one I’ve always been firm about is that werewolves need to die out. We aren’t reproducing.”

“You made Summer.”

Abel took a step toward him before getting control of himself. His hands

ached to be wrapped around that werewolf's throat.

“If you don't obey me, I'm not going to be Alpha anymore,” Rylie said, her voice still soft, so very gentle. “It's that easy. One guy disobeys my only laws, and others start doing the same thing. Soon nobody obeys, and I'm not Alpha. You know what happens when I'm not Alpha?” He didn't answer. “I can't make the change easier on you. It will be painful for you *and* for Deepali. For the entire pack.”

Felton pulled his hand free. Rylie allowed it.

“Maybe the problem is that you need to change your rules,” he said. “Deepali's not the only one who wants

to be changed.”

“The rules can’t change,” Rylie said. “But even if they did, you still disobeyed. I can’t allow that.”

“Me neither.” Abel cracked his knuckles.

Felton paled. Stuttered. “If you kick us out, we—we’ll just join another pack.”

“There is no other pack,” Abel said.

Felton turned on him. “Levi said —”

“Levi? *Levi?*”

That explained everything. Levi was an asshole, and he’d hated Rylie ever since they were in high school. Surviving the end of the world hadn’t

changed him. Joining the murderous cult known as the Apple hadn't changed him, either. He was still an asshole that wanted to be Alpha and thought he could pull it off by being a giant dick.

"Nobody's leaving the pack," Rylie said.

Felton sucked in a breath. "I'm not?"

"Can't leave the pack if you're dead," Abel muttered.

"I'm not going to punish a mistake you made out of love." Her smile was melty-warm, like cookies spreading on a baking sheet in the oven. Pure comfort. "I'll talk to Deepali. If she really consented, we'll figure out a way to make her fit with the pack. But I can't

have you changing anyone else. I also can't have you telling other people that it's okay."

"I won't," he said, still watching Abel. It was a promise made out of fear, not in response to Rylie's mercy.

Abel was serious about killing him. Felton knew it, even if Rylie didn't.

"This isn't going to be the last time we talk, Felton," she said. "I can tell that you and I are going to be talking a lot in the next few months as Deepali changes. If I can't make you see reason, maybe the pain she suffers will put some sense into you."

"It won't hurt," Felton repeated. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

"Are you fucking stupid?" Abel

asked. “Have you heard *anything* Rylie just said? You changed Deepali against Alpha law. You know what that means?”

Felton clearly didn't. His eyes flicked between Abel and Rylie, looking for salvation that wasn't coming.

“Deepali's change is still going to hurt,” Rylie said. “That's what it means. I won't be able to control her until three months have passed and the transitory stage is over. She'll have to go through it all like we did.”

“How do you know?” Felton asked.

*Because you're not the first idiot to go and bite a Scion.*

“Please tell Deepali I want to talk to her,” Rylie said. “The moon is coming soon. I should prepare her for it as much



as I can.”

Felton couldn't seem to leave fast enough. He tripped over his own feet heading down the hill again.

As soon as he was gone, Rylie sighed, hugging her arms tightly around her ribcage, as if something hurt her. Abel clambered onto the stage. Pulled her against his chest.

It was a nice day—late spring with the first warmth of summer. The trees were filled with blossoms and ripening fruit. Snowmelt made the waterfall churn and the river flow. He could hear the roar from where they stood. But even though it was warm, Rylie was trembling in his arms.

“It's only going to keep getting

worse,” Abel said.

She buried her face against him. “I know.”

The last werewolf to bite a Scion hadn’t been as lucky as Felton. Rylie and Abel hadn’t found out about it until they were too late to help—the new werewolf had already killed his maker, Toshiko. Worse, Rylie hadn’t been able to control Toshiko’s offspring, who had been only two months into the change and incredibly vicious. Abel had been forced to kill him, too.

That had been in February, just a couple of months earlier. So recently that the pain of losing Toshiko was still raw.

Two dead bodies. One difficult

lesson to learn.

Deepali was at risk of doing the same, and Abel could feel in his bones that this was still just the beginning of trouble.

“You shoulda let me kill him,” Abel said.

She traced her fingers along the line of his belt, tickling the skin just underneath his shirt. “I don’t want to be that kind of Alpha. I don’t want everyone to be afraid of us.” She sighed again. “Besides, we can’t just *kill* people. It’s scary that the idea even occurred to me.”

“Your instincts are telling you how we should do this. You’re Alpha. You’re smarter than you think. Listen to the wolf.”

“My wolf also thinks that eating innocent people is a good idea.”

“Yeah, well, maybe your wolf knows something we don’t.”

Rylie squeezed him once and let go. The spring was making her blossom like the trees; she was bronzed from working in the sunshine. Even worried, she seemed to glow.

“I can’t let the pack reproduce,” she said, “but I don’t know how to stop them, if so many Scions want to join us.”

“Kill them,” Abel said. “Or just kill Levi. He’s the one that’s putting the ideas in their heads.”

“You’re right about that—not the killing, but the fact that it’s Levi.” Her mouth twisted. “If only we could get him

out of Northgate...”

Levi Riese had been in residence at St. Philomene’s Cathedral since Christmas, and it was obvious that he didn’t have plans to leave. At least, not until Rylie agreed to talk to him about the Apple’s so-called “demands.”

There was no chance that Rylie and Abel were going to concede anything to the Apple. And Levi wasn’t going anywhere until they listened.

That standoff had lasted four months now.

“You’re thinking about talking with him, aren’t you?” Abel asked.

Rylie threw her hands into the air. “What else am I supposed to do? And if you say ‘kill them,’ I will bite you.”

He snagged her by the wrist, pulling her back to him. “Promise?” She giggled.

A voice echoed through the trees. “I like the stage.”

The sound of a newcomer’s voice made Abel instinctively step away from Rylie, positioning himself between her and the approaching threat.

A woman shuffled up the road. She wore combat boots and ripped jeans, a leather jacket, and a gun at her hip. She skirted the inner edge of the shadow, careful not to touch sunlight, and kept her hands tucked under her arms so that little skin was exposed.

Elise Kavanagh.

The sight of her didn’t make Abel’s

caution abate. His hackles lifted.

But he couldn't hold Rylie back. She pushed him aside and beamed down at Elise. "I got the idea from you. From the throne room in Dis."

"You've been to the throne room?" Elise asked, jerking the lapels of her jacket around her face.

"Neuma took me there."

"I like it," she said again. "Smart move. Makes you look more authoritative."

Rylie glowed at the praise, even as Abel felt a growl brewing in his chest. He didn't want or need the demon's approval. "Thanks, Elise. So what's up? Should we start prepping for another homecoming?"

Elise looked surprised. “No. No homecoming this week. I’ve been... busy.”

*No homecoming “this week?”* Could she really be so self-absorbed that she didn’t realize how long it had been since they sent more humans home through the fissure? “It’s been months,” Abel said. “I’m thinking maybe you’re enjoying being queen of Hell so much, you don’t care about letting the mortals out anymore.”

Rylie touched his bicep. “Could we have a few minutes?”

“With her? Alone?” He didn’t like the sound of it. When Elise showed up, Rylie had a habit of getting into dumb shit.



“Please.” Rylie stretched up onto her toes. Planted a kiss on his chin. “I’ll be here when you come back. Promise.”

There wasn’t anything else he could ask for. Lots he *wanted* to ask for, definitely, but nothing reasonable.

“I should be down with the pack anyway,” Abel muttered.

“Thank you,” Rylie said, and she kissed him again.

The girl didn’t need authority. Not with Abel. A smile and a kiss was all it took for her to bend him to her will.

That wasn’t going to work on the rest of the pack. Sooner or later, Rylie was going to have to come to terms with the fact she couldn’t be Alpha by being nice all the damn time.

Once that happened, Abel would be ready.

**Rylie waited until** Abel was gone to hug Elise. She knew that Elise didn't like it, but she did it anyway—just a brief gesture, another silent reminder that Rylie didn't blame her for Seth. Elise patted her on the back awkwardly.

“You look good,” Elise said.

Rylie tugged on her dress self-consciously, pulling it loose around her stomach. “Thank you.” She wished that she could return the compliment, but Elise didn't look good. She looked as sickly as she had while hunting for James and Abel. “I'm just happy that winter's finally going away. I thought it

was never going to end.”

A ghost of a smile touched Elise’s eyes. “You could have vacationed in the Palace. It’s always warm there.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for next year,” Rylie said. It was nicer than saying “not a chance in Hell, literally.”

“So why do you need somewhere to hold court?” Elise asked, jerking her thumb at the stage. “I thought all the wolves did whatever the Alpha ordered.”

Rylie sat on the edge of the stage with a sigh, fiddling with the hem of her dress. “So did I.”

“Problems with the masses?”

“You could say that.” She wasn’t sure she should tell Elise that the

werewolf pack was trying to grow. Rylie had promised herself—and the Office of Preternatural Affairs—that, as Alpha, she wouldn't allow more people to become werewolves. Elise wouldn't care about the promise. But werewolves were one of the few creatures that could actually hurt a demon like Elise, and she *would* care about that part.

“Should I send up some forces to help you hold the fissure?” Elise asked.

“It's not that kind of trouble.” *Not yet, anyway.* “More like...growing pains.”

Elise hopped up to sit beside Rylie on the edge of the stage. “Within your ability to control?” The way she swung her feet, she looked young and ordinary.

Not at all the queen of Hell.

“I hope so. How are you handling troublemakers in Dis?” Rylie asked.

“I kill them as publicly as possible to send a message to my enemies.”

Rylie winced. Maybe Elise wasn't the best person to talk to when it came to ruling without fear.

“Is that the only way to keep people under control? Threat of death? Really?”

“In Hell, yes. Here?” Elise shrugged. “You'll have to figure that out.”

Rylie hung her head, focusing hard on the lace detailing on her skirt. “The Apple's still in Northgate.”

“If they're causing trouble, get rid of them.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It could be,” Elise said. “You and I have a lot of bullshit to deal with, Rylie. Don’t waste time on anything you don’t need to.”

A thought occurred to Rylie. She felt guilty that it was talk of “bullshit” that had reminded her. “What are you doing next month on the thirtieth?”

“The thirtieth?”

“Yeah. Of May.”

Elise frowned. “What’s today’s date?”

“April seventeenth,” Rylie said patiently.

It was hard to keep track of time in Dis. Time flowed differently between Earth and Hell. It used to reliably be that

one day in Hell was one week on Earth, but the fissure had changed things. Now it varied depending on which way the wind blew or the way the planet rotated or... Rylie wasn't sure, but it was no surprise that Elise had lost track.

“Hmm. I’m thinking I’ll be knee-deep in demon gibs on the thirtieth.” Elise shrugged. “Not that I have plans. Just saying, it seems pretty likely.”

Rylie smothered a giggle. When had she become the kind of woman that could laugh at the idea of slaughtering demons? Probably about the same time that she had become the kind of woman that considered killing Felton to keep her pack in line.

Sobering thought.

“Nash and Summer are getting married on the thirtieth,” she said. “You’re invited.”

Elise gave her a blank look. “I’m... invited. To a wedding.”

“Yep. We’re not mailing invitations, sorry. We need the paper too much. But you are definitely invited to the wedding of Summer Gresham and Nashriel Adamson on May thirtieth, starting at five o’clock in the evening, right here.” Rylie spread her hands out to indicate the stage. “Food after, of course. Nothing fancy. Just slabs of cow, probably—the werewolf special.”

“Nashriel Adamson.” The corner of Elise’s mouth twitched. “Don’t tell me Summer’s taking that last name.”



“She’s pretty happy to be a Gresham.”

“Good,” she said, pulling one knee to her chest and hugging it. “Good.”

She didn’t sound enthusiastic.

Rylie patted Elise’s hand. “You don’t have to come. I know you’re probably not the wedding type. I just wanted you to know that you’re welcome if you want to, or if you get bored or something.”

“I can’t imagine Nash wants me there.”

“Probably not,” Rylie admitted. “But he can suck it up. Summer says it’s okay.”

She expected Elise to refuse, but the demon just said, “I’ll think about it.”

Elise jumped off the stage, brushing off the butt of her jeans. The sunlight was dimming. She looked a little stronger, not quite as withdrawn and trembling.

“If you’re not here for homecoming, then what do you need? Just felt like talking?” Rylie asked.

“Actually, I have to ask a favor,” Elise said. “Can I borrow a computer? I need to check my email.”

**SUMMER AND NASH'S** cottage was unoccupied, but the fans in the server room were still roaring. The generator hummed steadily as it supplied power to two long rows of racks. Rylie flipped on the light switch and stood aside, allowing Elise to enter.

“Summer’s the only one with reliable power and network access. You can use her main workstation over there. I know she won’t mind.”

Summer might not, but would Nash? Elise could feel his energy all over the cottage even though neither was

home.

“Where are they?” Elise asked, shucking her jacket and tossing it on the back of Summer’s chair.

Rylie’s cheeks turned pink. “Pre-honeymooning. Nash is flying Summer pretty much anywhere she asks right now. We don’t get a lot of updates, but I think they’re probably kind of...busy.”

Point taken. Elise juggled the mouse and the monitor came to life.

“Thank you,” she said pointedly.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” Rylie said. “Watch out for the cat.” She backed out of the room and shutting the door behind her.

It took a minute for Elise to familiarize herself with Summer’s

computer. She was a Linux user. The program icons were at the bottom of the screen instead of under a menu, like Elise was used to.

She hadn't been sitting down for five minutes when a heavy weight materialized in her lap. Elise didn't even look down. She could tell by the hefty weight and tickle of fur that it was Sir Lumpy, Summer Gresham's hideous cat.

She logged into her email as Sir Lumpy nuzzled her wrist, smearing drool over her glove. It had been a long time since Elise had checked her messages. Most of it was from before the Breaking. She didn't pay any attention to the old messages—they were mostly spam or newsletters from Original Sin, a

whorehouse in Las Vegas that Neuma had owned before the Breaking.

The most recent email—the only recent message—was from McIntyre.

“Don’t know if you check this anymore. We’ve got a case, came through the normal channels from an American number. Missing persons. Anonymous client sent me a list of names. Money’s already been wired to us. Everything’s there. Figured you’d want to know.”

Elise pushed the chair back and stared at the wall above Summer’s computer monitor.

The email was phrased too casually, considering the contents. It irritated Elise. Some things called for a

little more panic than McIntyre's usual no-fucks-given attitude.

Of course, he couldn't have adequately conveyed the strangeness of the situation even if the text had been all-caps, underlined twice, and concluded with a dozen exclamation marks.

The case had come through "normal channels"—meaning that someone had left a message on McIntyre's anonymous voicemail—but most of America no longer had reliable electricity. That meant no phones, and no computers to access the Hunting Club's website in order to find their phone number in the first place.

That also meant no banks for wiring money.

McIntyre was right. Elise did want to know what the fuck was going on. She wanted to know very badly.

In her return email, she said, “I’ll look into it. Have Anthony contact the Northgate pack so they can send him down to Hell for me. I’m going to want him on this one.” She hadn’t heard from her friend and fellow kopis Anthony Morales in months, but she needed him on Hunting Club cases.

Elise sent her response before skimming the names, which McIntyre had attached to his original email. She didn’t recognize any of the ones that she read. And there were many. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. She scrolled through quickly, but the document seemed



endless.

These missing persons could have populated an entire city.

She clicked the button to print the names, and a clattering across Summer's server room drew Elise's attention to an old HP Inkjet stashed in the corner. Sir Lumpy leaped off of her lap, startled by the noise.

Elise got up and studied the first page as subsequent portions of the list printed. There didn't appear to be any slant toward male or female, nor any predominant race. They may as well have been randomly selected from the phone book.

The first question would be how these people had disappeared, and

when. Many people had gone “missing” during The Breaking. Many more had died in riots, while others had been slaughtered by the infernal forces that clawed their way to Earth. Still more had been abducted for slavery in Hell—the same booming slave trade that Elise had been trying to end for months.

She doubted that it was coincidence that someone would have gone out of their way to send her agency, the Hunting Club, this list of names.

“How did you contact me?” she muttered, tracing a finger along the email header. There was no way that the anonymous person emailing them could have gotten into Hell and left a sticky note for her. He must have somehow

asked one of her people to leave the message, although Elise had no clue who the enigmatic “B” could be.

A man spoke behind Elise, loud enough for her to hear it over the printer.

“Hey there.”

For a moment she thought it was James, even though it didn’t sound like him. Hope did strange things to a woman’s sense of hearing.

But that faintly accented drawl didn’t belong to her aspis. It belonged to another man that she had expected to never see again.

She turned to find Lincoln Marshall standing in the doorway to Summer’s cottage.

His hips were hugged by torn,

dirtied jeans with tattered hems that looked like they had been worn through a tornado. There was a gun holstered at his right hip. His hair actually touched his ears. The scruffiness suited his chiseled features.

At the sight of him, Elise momentarily forgot how to breathe. The memory of having him torture her was too fresh. Too raw.

She was torn between wanting to kick his face in and wanting to tear his jeans off.

“Lincoln,” she said, setting down the list.

He tipped his cowboy hat back with a knuckle. It was dusty, well-beaten leather, bleached to paleness on top by

sunlight. “Guess I’m probably not anyone you were hoping you’d see again.” He shut the door before Sir Lumpy could escape. The cat tangled around his ankles, pretending that he had never intended to exit in the first place.

“Hope and expectation aren’t the same thing. What are you doing here?”

“Gerard contacted me. I’d already been thinking of heading this way when I got his letter, though. I seem to be... well, look.” He spread his hands wide. The skin on his palms glowed a very faint shade of red, as though coals had been embedded between the metacarpals.

That wasn’t normal for him. That wasn’t normal for *any* human.

“What is that?” Elise asked.

“I’ve got my suspicions, but I hoped you’d be able to tell me.”

She had her suspicions, too.

This was the grandson of Bain Marshall, the man honored by the statue in Northgate. A man with demon blood in his veins and relatives that could perform magic, making him as much of a potential warlock as Elise was, if he ever manifested the abilities of half-demon Gray.

A man whose hands now looked to be glowing with internal fire.

“Who let you in?” she asked. Lincoln wasn’t welcome in the sanctuary. He had tried to slaughter the werewolves with silver bullets, and the

pack didn't really care that he'd been under infernal influence.

"I let myself in. The magic wall around the sanctuary doesn't seem to be working," Lincoln said. "And I saw you walking here with Rylie, so I just followed you."

"I don't want you here," Elise said. "Leave. Now."

Surprise flashed over his eyes. "Gerard said you needed me."

When Elise had last spoken to Lincoln, he had refused to help her run the Palace. He loved God and feared his infernal heritage. He didn't want anything to do with her, or Hell, or warlock magic.

She hadn't been in a hurry to argue

with him. It wasn't his fault that he had driven a spear through her gut and tortured her with electricity, but it was hard to separate him from what he had done under demonic possession. Even though he was still the handsome cop she'd stalked like a hawk circling a field mouse, her instincts also registered him as an enemy.

At some point, Elise really wanted a man in her life that wasn't so fucking complicated.

"I don't want you," she said again, more firmly than before.

"I don't have anywhere to go. The world isn't the way it was before I got possessed. It's—it's all ruined, Elise. And I have dreams. I can't get away



from the dreams.” He took her wrists. His hands burned hot. “Sometimes, when I wake up from those dreams, my bedroom is burning. I’m setting fires in my sleep.” His eyelid twitched. “It’s happened, Elise.”

Lincoln had feared the day his infernal powers would wake up. It was the reason he had worked for James. He had been desperate for salvation.

Now James was gone, and Lincoln didn’t look at Elise like she was the Devil anymore.

Now *she* was his salvation.

She turned his palms up to look at them. His skin danced with inner magic.

*Dammit, Gerard.* He was too fucking good at his job. He had seen

how Elise was struggling to figure out warlock magic and located someone else to work on it for her. It was a good idea. A great idea, actually. At least, it would have been if the warlock had been anyone but Deputy Lincoln Marshall, who deserved to be free of all of this.

Elise didn't want to be Lincoln's salvation.

Even though he might be hers.

She took a long look at his face, carved in lines of fear and exhaustion. Her initial impression of him had been wrong. He wasn't the same pious deputy that she had met the previous year, and his soul wouldn't magically heal if she pushed him away. He hadn't been better

off when Elise had left him to his own devices.

And Elise was surprised to realize that she had missed him.

One week working together—just one very long, very dark week—and Lincoln had left an imprint that hadn't faded. Lincoln and his slices of cherry pie for breakfast.

Her hands slid in his grip until their fingers twined. Some tiny warm place inside of her liked that. She decided to blame it on Eve. "I'm not going to turn you away if you want help."

"You're the least of the evils left to me." He gripped her hands tighter. "I've remembered some of what she did while she had me. I'm not gonna let those

memories torture me—I'm determined to right those wrongs. I'm gonna prove that I'm better than the demon, even if I've got demon blood."

The printer was done. She gathered the papers—a hefty stack that had nearly emptied Summer's tray—and jammed them into the inner pocket of her jacket.

"Don't worry, Lincoln," Elise said, heading for the door. "You have nothing to prove to me."

**Gerard was inspecting** the thirtieth century when Elise rejoined him. They had moved this part of the army to the Butchers' District, close to places an insurgent group had been spotted. The rebels had been attacking supply lines,

committing acts of arson, that kind of thing. The thirtieth should have been able to suppress it.

But they hadn't. Another warehouse had been burned down earlier that week.

It might have been coincidence that Sallosa, daughter of the House of Volac, had failed to protect supplies at the same time that Gremory was leading another centuria to her House, but Elise doubted it.

“What happened to the warehouse? Did Sallosa do it on purpose?” Elise asked when Gerard met her in the lobby of Sallosa's apartment building. This part of the district resembled Columbia in architectural design; the high rise was brightly colored, with elegant lines and

high fencing surrounding the exterior.

“Hard to say,” he said. “The centurion is saying everything I want to hear. They’re patrolling the neighborhood in shifts that last one day on Earth, swapping out teams so they’re always fresh, covering all the right ground.” Gerard showed her the rudimentary map that he had drawn of the district. Sallosa, the centurion, had added lines to indicate patrol routes. It looked comprehensive.

“Then how did we lose another warehouse?” Elise asked.

“That’s the question I can’t seem to get answered.”

She massaged her temples, fighting back a growing headache. She had

forced herself to eat food and sleep before going topside to check her email, but ordinary mortal methods of replenishment weren't enough to hold back her growing hunger. She needed to feed. Really feed.

“We were already low on food for the troops,” Elise said quietly, too quiet for any of Gerard's guards to hear. He needed an entire squad to watch his back these days. The residents of Dis recognized him now, and he wasn't popular. “If we lose another one...”

“I know,” Gerard said.

She was tempted to just kill the entire century. Slaughtering them was the likely outcome anyway—Elise was already prepared to believe that Sallosa

had been conspiring with Gremory. And that would reduce their need for supplies by a hundred heads.

Except that the House of Volac was one of Dis's oldest families. Killing Sallosa would mean that Volac would never release the one hundred and seventy-six mortal slaves kenneled on her property. Volac also owned all of the flesh farms in the city—the only way to grow food without slaughtering humans—and her House was critical to Elise's plan for a murder-free Dis.

If Volac was allied with Belphegor, Elise had bigger problems than a lost warehouse. The whole city might starve.

That meant she couldn't kill



Sallosa. She needed to win her over.

Easier said than done.

“I’ll talk to the centurion. But first...” She gave Gerard the stack of paper that she had printed from Summer’s computer. “I want you to disseminate this list of names among the former slaves. If anyone recognizes a name on it, I want them sent to me immediately.”

Gerard rubbed a thumb along his eyebrow as he took a quick look over the list. “Lots of names.”

“Yes. Thousands.”

“Who are they?”

“That’s what I need to know,” Elise said. “I suspect they might be humans that were brought down to Hell for

slavery, food, or..." Maybe something worse. Demons were creative. "Just make sure everyone reads the list."

"Consider it done, ma'am," Gerard said.

She took a step toward the stairs, and then paused. "Why did you contact Lincoln without asking me?"

His eyes widened. "Neuma asked me to do it. I thought it came from you."

So it hadn't been a stroke of Gerard's brilliance after all. "Forget about it." She'd ask Neuma about it later, when she wasn't preoccupied.

He swept a hand toward the stairs. "Want to talk with Sallosa?"

There were few things that Elise wanted to do less right at that moment.

“Lead the way.”

The centurion had taken the entire top floor of the building as her quarters. Her furniture all looked like Walmart specials—a couple of fake potted plants, a tacky leather sofa, that kind of thing.

Sallosa herself didn't suit the setting. She was a full head taller than Elise, ripped with muscle, red-skinned, and hooved. She looked elegant in a linen shift. A pile of plate armor had been arranged on the floor nearby by a servant, who was tying the back of Sallosa's dress.

“Father,” Sallosa said, bowing briefly. Her servant kneeled to place the shin guards over her furry legs. “To what do I owe the honor of your visit?”

“The warehouse. I need to know how the insurgents burned it when I’ve ordered double patrols around all supply stores.”

“I’ve already spoken to Gerard,” Sallosa said.

Elise had left him outside the door with his squad, just in case it got ugly with Sallosa. She didn’t want to have to worry about accidentally devouring the wrong people. “I want to hear it from your mouth.”

Sallosa spat. “Waste of my time.”

“Tell me.”

She huffed as the servant wrapped a heavy belt around her waist, strapping the cuisses into place. “As I told Gerard, the insurgents have simply become more

cunning. We have patrolled as ordered. My men are doing exactly as they should. How they slipped past us remains a mystery, but it's not because of a flaw in methodology on my part."

Elise disagreed. However the supplies had been lost, it most definitely was Sallosa's fault. The scent of a lie rolled off of her.

"We caught Gremory attempting to take a centuria to the House of Volac," Elise said. "Do you know if Belphegor's been in contact with your family?"

Sallosa had the nerve to look offended. "I've no idea what you're talking about. Belphegor and the House of Volac haven't been allied since Aquiel ruled the Palace. We have major

philosophical differences.”

The headache throbbed in Elise’s temples. “Whatever he’s offered you guys, let me counter it. I can do better. Is he giving you more farmland? Artifacts? Slaves?”

“You offend me,” Sallosa hissed.

So much for trying to win her over.

Elise couldn’t focus through the pain stabbing into her skull over and over. She needed someone smarter, someone charming, someone who could figure out what Sallosa wanted and promise it to her. Someone like James.

Since that wasn’t going to happen, Elise would just have to deal with what she had. Not charm, but brutality. “I’m going to remove your century from this

part of the city. I've sent the twenty-sixth into the wastelands, and I want you to accompany them."

"The wastelands?" Sallosa scoffed. "You can't send us into the wastelands."

"Afraid?" Elise asked.

"You insult me. You insult my family and my honor."

Sallosa wasn't done talking, but Elise was done listening. Her head was throbbing double time now. She wasn't sure she'd be able to make it all the way back to the Palace to feed if she didn't head back soon.

"The wastelands," she said firmly. End of subject.

The door behind her opened.

Elise didn't turn quickly enough.

Metal prongs dug into her back. Electricity followed an instant later.

It coursed through her body, blanking her mind, crowding her vision with stars. Her teeth felt like they were about to pop free of her skull. And her hands—she could see the bones through her skin.

Sallosa moved swiftly, drawing her flamberge. “It was never about those fucking supplies. It was about getting you alone, away from the Palace.”

And she shoved the blade through Elise’s chest.

At another time, when she hadn’t been forced to resort to using ethereal magic, a little electricity and a sword to the heart would have barely staggered



her.

She was already hungry. Weak.

Elise fell under Sallosa, out of mind, riding on a flaming ocean of agony.

She heard something wet and meaty. Her corporeal body jerked. Sallosa was stabbing her, trying to pulverize her organs, doing her damndest to kill a demon that couldn't die.

It wasn't working, but it didn't feel good, either.

Elise's muscles burned as her skin faded away. She was peeling inside out. Losing her body.

As she faded, her warding ring fell from her shriveled hand. Clattered to the

floor. Her mind opened wide.

*Elise...*

She glimpsed a mirrored hall, wooden floors. The black and white keys of a piano. Long fingers poised to play.

James's presence brushed against her skull. It was a bad time for the fissure's currents to open enough for them to make contact through the bond. *Don't look*, she told him.

Of course he pushed against her harder, trying to see. *Why?*

*Trust me. Don't.*

Then she let herself go.

Elise relinquished her physical form, succumbing to the shadows.

She filled the room with herself—

not deliberately, but because she was incapable of doing anything else. Elise was the flood. She occupied every inch of air and light and drew it within her.

Elise felt her incorporeal form being sucked deeper into Hell. She was too weak to remain in Dis, and if she didn't act fast, she was going to fall into Hell's darker pits. Maybe to Malebolge, where nightmares were formed. Maybe somewhere else she hadn't yet seen.

Maybe nowhere at all.

No. Elise railed against it. Fought to stay in the room.

But she was weak. She couldn't fight for long.

*Sallosa nearly killed me.*

The fury gave her enough strength

to wrap around the centurion of the thirtieth century, slither down her throat, and engulf her body in darkness. Sallosa tried to scream, but choked on the smoke.

She kept growing. She seized Sallosa's servant.

Once they were tangled inside of Elise, she inhaled.

For the briefest moment, Elise could feel the other demons writhing, silently screaming their anger. Then Sallosa and her servant died within her body and went limp.

Eating them was almost as good as devouring mortal life—not quite, but almost. It was enough for her to draw her body in on itself, withdrawing her

tendrils from the corners of the room, allowing the hazy red light of the desert to reappear. With concentration, she reformed her limbs, and then her core.

Her hands flew to her breast. The first stab wound wasn't gone. Sludgy amber blood oozed down her stomach.

"Fuck," Elise whispered, lifting her eyes to the room.

Sallosa's bloodied sword was at her feet on top of a pile of plate armor. There was no hint of any bodies. She had consumed every last atom of them. Still not enough to heal herself.

Elise pulled her clothes back on, shoving the warding ring into place before James could try to look in on her again. She winced at every movement.

Blood began seeping through her shirt.

The assassination attempt had done much more damage than it should have. She couldn't let anyone see her like this: truly wounded, unable to heal.

People were screaming out in the hallway. The sound settled over her slowly, taking almost a full minute to penetrate her consciousness after the haze of darkness.

Those were mortal screams. An attack.

Seizing Sallosa's abandoned sword, Elise pressed her fist against her chest wound to stem the flow of blood and flung the apartment's door wide open.

Gerard and his squad were

cornered by members of Sallosa's century in the hallway outside. Two were dead. Elise's livery was smeared with cherry-red blood.

Rebellion.

Sallosa's soldiers turned at the sound of the door opening, but before anyone could so much as look at her, Elise was smoke again. Sallosa had primarily controlled lesser demons—nothing that could fight back against her. She filled herself with their blood. She consumed their flesh. It was good, but not enough.

There was other blood in the hall. Sweeter blood.

*Mortal* blood.

Elise reached for the source, so

very hungry, still starving for energy.

“Hey!” Gerard kicked at her as she snaked around his calf. “Watch it!”

His voice woke her up. These were her allies. She couldn’t eat them.

But they smelled so *good*.

She reformed into her corporeal form before the temptation could overtake her. Elise had devoured half the century in a few swift gestures, leaving the mortals standing agape. And she noticed, with no small amount of nausea, that she had sucked away the dead bodies of her guards, too.

Gerard reached for her. “Jeez, Elise, you okay?”

She looked down. Her shirt was drenched in her own blood.



The weight of consuming so many demons sickened her. She swayed on her feet. “Take me back to the Palace, Gerard,” Elise groaned. “But don’t—don’t let anyone see.”

Then she fell.

**NORTHGATE HAD NEVER** really recovered from the fall of Shamain. The wind had been strong enough to knock over half of the buildings downtown, and there wasn't enough scrap left to rebuild. It wasn't the postcard town it used to be back when Abel and Rylie had first selected it as the location of their new werewolf sanctuary.

Worse, it was still occupied by the Apple. Their barricades stood strong around the statue of Bain Marshall. They'd added more fencing around the town's perimeter, too.

They couldn't rebuild the homes that had been lost, but they could add more fucking security to a town in the middle of mountainous nowhere that didn't even belong to them.

Not that Abel was bitter or anything.

He shifted back into his human form just outside town, hanging back under the cover of trees. He skirted along the perimeter to watch the Apple's patrols through the fence.

The cultists had stopped pretending to be the Union. They still drove the SUVs and carried the matte black guns, but they wore normal clothes. It was impossible to tell the difference between the Apple and the Scions. Or maybe

there wasn't a difference anymore. They'd been coexisting in Northgate for so long that the lines separating them had become awful hazy.

Abel walked along the fence until he reached the backside of St. Philomene's Cathedral. Pretty grand name for a ramshackle old church. The cross on its spire had been blown off during the fall of Shamain, and someone had thoughtfully jammed the base into the ground so that it stood like a sign by the front door.

Closing his eyes, Abel inhaled deeply, scenting all the layered odors new and old. He could smell Isaiah, the witch that used to live in St. Philomene's, but that was one of the old

smells. Isaiah had refused to work with the Apple and returned to Dis.

Levi Riese's smell was a lot more recent.

Abel became aware of someone joining him and knew by the scent that it was his son, Abram. In a lot of ways, Abram smelled like Seth used to, always haloed by the tang of gun oil and leather. Seemed like he had been smelling more and more like that ever since Uncle Seth kicked the bucket, too.

“Surprised to see you in town,” Abram said, ever the man of minimal words.

Abel narrowed his eyes at the cathedral. He could see motion through the windows. Probably Levi walking

around with some of his lackeys, plotting more cultish evil. Something to do with treating Heaven like a piñata or mixing up a special batch of Kool-Aid or something. “We’ve gotta do something about these people.”

“I agree.”

He turned to his son in surprise. “You do?”

“Yes,” Abram said, cracking his knuckles. “They’ve overstayed their welcome.” There was a threat in his rumbling baritone. He definitely looked a hell of a lot more threatening than Seth ever had. He was a big guy, Abram Gresham, and not a real emotional one. The stony-faced look made it impossible to tell what he was thinking, so it was

easy to imagine he was plotting murder.

Abel approved.

“Rylie’s not going to want us to do anything.”

“Is that a problem?” Abram asked.

“Nope. Just telling you, Mama’s not gonna be happy when she finds out what we’re doing.” Abel hadn’t decided what they were going to do yet, exactly, but he knew that it was going to be something that Rylie didn’t like. Something violent. Something that would show the entire pack, the Apple, and the Scions who the real Alphas were.

“We’re not killing anyone,” Abram said.

“Not if there’s a better way.” He needed plausible deniability to keep

Rylie from booting his ass to the couch. “I’m not ruling it out, though. Especially if they try to kill me first. ‘Course, the Apple has already tried to kill me more than once or twice. Maybe it’s already fair game.”

Abram didn’t argue. “We’ll see.”

It was starting to drizzle. Rain pattered on the leaves above them. Abel’s skin was still hot from the change back from wolf to man, so it didn’t chill him, but Abram zipped his jacket shut.

Hunting was always harder when it rained. It washed away the scents. Made it tougher to distinguish old and new.

Could make it more fun, too.

The door to the church opened and a young man stepped out. He was thin,



bronzed by frequent runs through the wilderness in nothing but his skin. He was already shirtless and unbuckling his pants.

Abel felt a growl rising in his chest. That curly-haired fucker was Levi—the would-be Alpha himself. He was about to change into his wolf form, judging by the striptease.

He'd be vulnerable while shifting, but Abel would have to move fast to use that advantage. He took two steps before Abram caught him.

“I'll take care of Levi,” Abram said.

Abel frowned. “You sure? He's big game.”

“Not that big.”

That was fine. The open door of the church had wafted the smell of even bigger game out into the forest—the scent of the woman, a strawberry-blond witch, who shouldn't have been in town. Stephanie Whyte had returned to Half Moon Bay weeks ago.

Yet she was back again. And she, as high priestess in charge of this branch of the Apple, was the biggest game of all.

“Fine,” Abel said. “I’ll see what I can do about the others.”

Abram nodded once and melted into the forest, disappearing as smoothly as any one of the wolves. Though he couldn't change into an animal, he still had a few tricks of his own. He'd need a

lot of them if he thought he could get Levi out of the way. It'd been a long time since a Wilder had needed to hunt a werewolf, and it had never been easy.

Almost made Abel warm with fatherly pride to think of his son putting a bullet in that wolf's skull.

The cathedral's door shut again. He hadn't seen who'd closed it. Stephanie must have still been inside, but now she didn't have her pet dog.

The fence was twelve feet tall and topped with barbed wire, but that wasn't anything to deter a determined Alpha. Abel jumped up, grabbed a branch, hauled himself into the top of a tree. He leaped over to the other side without even scraping himself.

He landed in wet grass that squished underneath him.

And then he heard a very distinctive *click*, like the hammer on a gun being cocked.

Exactly like the hammer on a gun, actually.

Abel froze.

The smell of silver followed that sound a moment later. Its distinctively sour stench burned in his sinuses. Whoever had come up behind him was prepared.

“Turn around,” said a man. “Slowly.”

Abel twisted, tension coiled in his muscles. It was Seth’s former best friend, Yasir. He was a tough-looking

guy with scarred skin and thick eyebrows. He'd only gotten tougher in the last few years. That said a lot, considering the former Marine hadn't ever been marshmallowy soft.

Stephanie Whyte stood beyond him with a disapproving frown, arms folded. It pissed Abel off to realize she wasn't even armed. Couldn't do the dirty work herself.

"We have these fences up for a reason," Stephanie said.

He tried to say, "Can't imagine why." All that came out was a growl. He was pulling a Rylie, on the verge of shapeshifting.

"Yes, fascinating, thank you," Stephanie said. "I take it you didn't

come here to open discussions as Levi requested.” He couldn’t manage an articulate response, and he wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of growling again. She arched an eyebrow. “Well, best to make lemonade. Darling, could you please bring the Alpha into the cathedral? It’s obviously time that he and I had a talk.”

**The Apple’s stench** was all over St. Philomene’s Cathedral, with all their guns and body armor and rubber and artifice. Abel couldn’t help but curl his lip at it.

He was in the belly of the enemy. Even if it looked like a pretty nice church.

Until occupation by the Apple, St. Philomene's had been used by the Scions as a home base, so it had been filled with equipment to the rafters. Now it had been converted into a home. There were couches and a coffee table in the nave. The pillows had Bekah Riese written all over them—Levi's sister loved things all bright and fluffy. It was a little rustic, very mismatched, and not exactly what Abel would have expected from an evil cult.

Stephanie sat on one of the couches, moving gingerly, as though in pain. "Can I get you anything?" she asked Abel, gesturing to the opposite couch to indicate that he should sit.

He didn't move. "You can have

your husband get the gun out of my back.”

“Yasir, if you don’t mind,” Stephanie said. The man lowered his gun, but didn’t holster it. “Now, would you please sit?”

“Awfully nice of you to ask, considering you’ve got me kidnapped,” Abel said.

Amusement touched her eyes. “Kidnapped?”

“Uh, yeah. Held at gunpoint.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Abel. You’re not being held captive. If you don’t want to be here, then go. We won’t stop you.”

“Fine,” he said. “Maybe I will.”

He walked out the front door of the cathedral, moving briskly, shoulders and



neck tense. He expected Yasir to fire on him at any moment.

There was no gunshot. No attempt to stop him at all.

Abel was all the way down the stairs and two steps from the road by the time he realized Stephanie and Yasir really weren't going to follow. He turned back to the cathedral, gaping at the front door. Rain collected in the gutters and drizzled off the corners of the roof.

“What the hell?” he asked the front of the building.

That wasn't how the Apple worked. They weren't friendly. They didn't let people just *leave*.

He hesitated.

Then he climbed the stairs, pushed open the door, and went back inside.

Stephanie and Yasir hadn't moved. Damn the woman—she still looked like she was quietly laughing at him.

Stiffly, Abel stood beside the other couch.

“You want clothes?” Yasir asked. “I’ve got a couple things that might fit you.” There was kindness in the way he spoke. Gun aside, this was the guy who had been best man at Seth’s doomed wedding.

Abel glanced down at himself. He’d forgotten that he was still naked. It was easy to forget, hanging out in the sanctuary—lots of the werewolves didn’t ever bother getting dressed, so

long as the weather was good. “No. I’m fine.”

Yasir tossed a blanket at him anyway.

“What are you doing here, doc?” Abel asked, chucking the blanket over the back of the couch without even looking at it.

Stephanie registered mild surprise. “She hasn’t told you?”

“Told me what?” Abel asked. “Who are you talking about?”

The doctor smoothed her features. “Hmm. Well, I’m here to check on Levi and the status of the fissure.”

“It’s still open,” he said. “Thanks for the visit. See you later.”

“Yes, I didn’t think you would have

any interest in my agenda. We won't waste time discussing it. That's not why Levi has had an open invitation for you and Rylie to come speak to him—which has been roundly ignored, I'll note. However, I believe you might be interested in learning more about your brother's agenda.” She lifted an eyebrow. “Cain, that is. The last person to attempt to lead the Apple on a crusade.”

Anger rippled through Abel. “Don't want to talk about him, either. I want to talk about you people leaving here.”

“Please, Abel,” Stephanie said. “Be reasonable.”

“I'm feeling real fucking reasonable just by keeping my teeth

away from your throats right now.”

Yasir lifted the gun again, aiming it squarely at Abel’s face. The Alpha coiled. Prepared to launch.

Stephanie shoved herself to her feet. “Stop it. Both of you. We’re all friends here.”

Friends? *Friends?*

“Your friend here just about ripped Heaven out of the sky and dumped it on my town!” Abel snapped.

“That wasn’t what we intended to do,” Yasir said. “It would have gone better if Seth’d been here, like we expected. All we were trying to do was fix the fissure. Cut off Hell.”

“And cut off the only route to getting all the human slaves out of Hell

while you're at it." Abel shocked himself with how fiercely he said it.

He hadn't started out a fan of Elise and Rylie's plan to save the humans in Hell. Abel had thought all those people were as good as dead anyway. But they'd saved hundreds of people now, and Abel would have been a cold bastard not to know how much good they were doing. He'd seen the gratitude in the eyes of the Scions himself.

"I'll have to beg to differ on the intent of that bridge," Stephanie said. "Again, I'm not going to try to change your mind about that. We need to talk about Cain and the Apple. That's all I want."

"Fine," Abel said without relaxing.

“Talk.”

Stephanie sighed. Lowered herself to the couch again. “You’ll recall that my father, Scott Whyte, betrayed the pack a couple of years ago because of Cain’s demands.” She pulled a blanket across her lap and smoothed it over her thighs. “I was angry. We all were, at the time. I couldn’t understand how he could have aligned himself with a cult that stood in direct opposition to our family’s best interests—a cult that hurt people.”

“Because he was a fucking weasel.”

“Hmm. Well, that may have been a factor. Scott wasn’t without his flaws. However, when he originally joined the

Apple, it was not within Cain's control. Your brother was a smart man. A man with a vision. He stumbled upon the cult, discovered it lacked leadership, and took charge to pursue his own goals."

"Killing Seth and me for revenge, and then making a million more werewolves," Abel said.

"Fortunate that he never got that far."

"Levi wants to make more werewolves, too."

Stephanie lifted a finger. "Hold on to that thought. Cain's time manipulating the Apple was...unfortunate. Prior to his interference, it was an old, noble organization of witches loyal to Adam, the First Man. That's what my father



joined. That's what I've joined, along with Levi Riese and much of the Half Moon Bay Coven." She sighed. "Bekah continues to refuse to become involved."

He'd never pegged the girl for being that smart. Guess there were a few brain cells hiding behind her curly hair and obsessive need for the sink to be empty of dirty dishes. "Are we done now?" Abel asked. "I thought we weren't pretending that I cared what you want."

"Yes. I suppose I'm done with that." Stephanie patted the couch beside her. "Come here."

Yasir's eyes sharpened. "Steph..."

"It's fine. Please, Abel."

He didn't budge.

“I won’t bite you,” Stephanie said. “Not that I’d be able to penetrate your thick hide if I attempted it.”

“I’m not Seth. I don’t heel when I’m told.”

“No. You’re not Seth.” She massaged her temples. Exhaustion shadowed her eyes. “As I said before, I understand you have no interest in what I hope to accomplish with the Apple. I’m not James Faulkner. I won’t try to convince you otherwise. I consider your family to be friends of mine, though, and I want you to understand one thing.” Stephanie spread her hands in front of her, a gesture of honesty. “Everything I do is in the interests of the greater good, and I will do nothing that endangers your

pack.”

“Is Levi on the same page?”

“More or less,” Stephanie said.

“Tell him to stop fucking with my wolves. He’s giving us problems.”

“I’ll pass along the message.”

That was a lot more than Abel had expected to get out of the conversation. It made him suspicious. *Very* suspicious. “What have Cain and Levi got in common?”

The fact he’d made that connection seemed to please Stephanie. She smiled. “Cain was psychopathic, but he was nevertheless a visionary. In his own way, I believe that he did want to save the world. Had he not been so absorbed in personal vendettas, things might have

been different.”

Maybe so many people wouldn't have turned up dead.

Maybe Abel and Rylie wouldn't have lost their kids' childhood to the Haven.

Maybe they wouldn't have ended up in the sanctuary, tangled up with Elise Kavanagh, and maybe Seth wouldn't be a hunk of rock in a mausoleum.

Hard to see it as pragmatically as Stephanie did.

“More werewolves won't save the world,” Abel said.

“No?” Stephanie brushed a lock of graying hair behind her ear, tucking it in her bun. “There's good reason for werewolves to be fruitful and multiply.

If you're ever interested in hearing the reasoning behind Levi's apparent madness, you'll know who to talk to."

Abel had drifted closer to her while she talked, and he hadn't even noticed. Now he was within arm's reach. She rested her hand on his elbow. When he didn't pull away, her gaze warmed fractionally.

"I cared for Rylie through her first pregnancy. I helped Seth study for classes when he was planning to become a doctor. My father helped raise your children, and he died trying to make things right with the Greshams. When I say 'your family,' Abel, I hope you realize that I regard myself as part of your family, too. The Whytes, the

Rieses, the Greshams—we are all family.”

“Tell that to your dick of a half-brother,” Abel said.

Stephanie chuckled softly. “I’ll add that as a postscript to your other loving messages.”

He stepped away from her, toward the door. “So we’re settled on this. Levi’s gonna back off the wolves. You’re not going to keep fucking up our shit.”

“I’ll ask Levi to back off for now, and our intent is definitely not to ‘fuck up shit.’”

While the demands were still working, he might as well keep pushing it. “You’ll get out of Northgate, too.”

“To be honest, I don’t want to be in Northgate. It’s Levi’s choice to remain. I don’t fully understand why—that’s another reason that I’m visiting. Again, I’ll talk to him about that. That said, I hope that you’ll find our presence turns out to be beneficial. I only ask that you give us a chance to prove ourselves.” Her lips turned into a frown. “And maybe stop ignoring our diplomat?”

Levi? A fucking *diplomat*?

Stephanie had her hand extended like she wanted to shake—like she thought they had just reached some kind of agreement.

*Yeah, right.*

Abel slammed through the doors of the church, heading into the rain.

This time, he didn't go back.

**Abram didn't need** to be a werewolf to track like they did. He'd spent his youth tussling with a twin sister that could shapeshift into a wolf twice his size, so he'd had to learn a few tricks in order to keep up with her.

Once you started thinking like a wolf, it was easy to figure out the paths they would take through the forest. They always moved downwind of their prey. They were confined to the forest floor, preferring to weave between obstacles rather than leap them. Abram couldn't keep up when he took their routes. They were too fast, too graceful, too small.

He didn't take their paths. He



figured out where the wolf would be next, and he cut his own route.

Seth had taught him to move swiftly and quietly. The trick wasn't to shoot for silence—it was to make himself sound like the forest's natural movements. To brush the branches the way the wind did. To beat his feet like the hoofs of deer. To rustle bushes in time with the river's flow. When he ran like that, he always felt like he was still close to Seth, like the werewolf hunter was right behind him. Watching him. Guiding him.

He wondered if Seth would have had an easier time keeping up with Levi. Where Levi was concerned, Abram was always just a little too slow.

He caught signs of the werewolf's

path outside the sanctuary, but within the warded barrier. Tufts of honey-gold fur were stuck to a tree. Abram touched it lightly as he passed, giving himself a physical connection to Levi's passage as his eyes followed the disturbed bushes higher into the mountains.

Without any climbing equipment, Abram leaped onto the short cliff, scaling it with the strength of his arms. It made his journey a few feet shorter. As soon as he hit the top, he spotted a flash between the trees ahead.

Levi.

Abram broke into a run, fading into the trees, following the wind.

The wolf was moving slow. He was shifting back into his human form,

many miles away from Northgate, a very long walk from even the sanctuary.

Abram began spotting shed fur among the pine needles, then a fine spray of blood. Even the werewolves that could change at will—like Levi—had to go through breaking bones and ripping flesh to exchange shapes. They healed instantly, but it left a distinctive trail. Marks that anyone could have followed.

As though Levi wanted to be found.

He caught up with him a few moments later, but Abram hung back behind a tree, watching Levi change. He was vulnerable in these seconds when fur gave way to tanned flesh. When his fangs were falling out to be replaced by dull human teeth. When the ache of the

change was all-consuming.

Abram could have planted a bullet in Levi's skull and the wolf never would be able to stop him.

Levi stood among the bushes, muscles rippling. The long lines of his shoulders curved down to his ribs, where ridged muscle formed a vee to his Adonis belt. Honey-gold curls, the same color as the hair on his head—the same color as the fur of his wolf—trailed from his navel to his thighs. He waxed everywhere else. There was nothing to conceal his tattoo of a large bleeding apple encircled by emerald leaves.

His face tipped back, gazing up at the night sky. Rain dripped from the trees onto his cheeks. He didn't flinch.

Abram moved swiftly. He shoved Levi into a tree, pinned him with the weight of his body, and pushed his gun into the back of his head. His opposite hand dug into Levi's tricep.

"You're dead," Abram said.

Levi was breathing hard, pinned against tree bark, not even struggling to fight back. "Looks like it."

Abram holstered his gun. He hadn't taken the safety off.

He buried his face in Levi's hair, inhaling the familiar scent of his curls. He smelled musky. Like Gran's herb garden. A leather cord was wrapped around his neck, hanging a silver pentacle over his heart—the enchanted token that allowed him to transform in

between moons like an Alpha did, even though Levi was otherwise an entirely normal werewolf.

After a moment, Abram stepped back. “If I were Abel, I could have killed you when you were changing.”

“If you were Abel, I wouldn’t have come out here to change,” Levi said. “Would I?”

“You need to be more careful.”

“You need to worry less.”

Abram folded his arms over his chest. Maybe that was true. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had accused him of being too emotional, though. “Thought you should know—Abel’s planning something to do with you and the Apple. He’s been watching

you. Knowing him, whatever he does, it's going to be bad."

Levi snorted. "Knowing him, whatever he does, it's going to be ham-fisted and ineffectual. That's a guy that thinks with his gun instead of his brain. I'm not even sure he can fit anything in there, his skull's so thick."

Abram supposed he should have been offended. He was Abel's son, after all, and fifty percent of his genetics came from that thick-skulled asshole. But he didn't exactly disagree. "He's smart enough to know that you've been talking with the pack."

"If he had any idea what I've been doing, he'd have already tried to kill me. He doesn't know as much as you think.

Relax.” Levi sat next to him, their arms pressed together. “Anyway, I have a plan. I’m going to execute it soon. Abel won’t know what hit him.”

“Tell me,” Abram said.

“What if I tell you and you warn Rylie it’s coming?”

Abram gave him a blank look. Levi knew where his affiliations rested, and it wasn’t with a werewolf pack that was run by his father.

Levi returned the look, giving an exaggerated slant to his brow, turning his mouth into a severe frown. “What’s caveman face mean this time? You pissed? Annoyed? Thinking about *Game of Thrones*? Use words.”

Abram pushed away from him and



glanced around the forest. His senses, unfortunately, weren't as good as a wolf's—there was no way to tell if anyone was nearby. He had to trust that Levi would warn him if someone were approaching. “There's no point fighting Rylie and Abel. You should leave Northgate.”

“So you are a double agent,” Levi said, sounding bored, investigating his fingernails.

“I'll come with you.”

“Oh.” And then, “Huh.”

“I hate it here. I hate the fissure. I hate...struggling.”

“Everywhere's going to be a struggle until we end the war.” Levi tugged on one of Abram's belt loops,

dragging him back to the tree stump. “This is where I’m needed, and this is where the werewolves need to be, for at least a couple more days. That means the Apple’s got to be here too. We can’t leave.” He smiled, and it wasn’t one of his mean, I-hate-your-parents smiles, but something genuine. “Nice thought, though.”

“You can’t win a direct fight against Abel,” Abram said.

“Wow. That’s some confidence right there.”

“It’s the truth. You’re too weak.”

“I don’t need to be stronger if I’m smarter,” Levi said. “Which I am. I also don’t need to be stronger if I have most of the pack on my side...which I do.”

That was news to Abram. “Most?”

“Twenty-two of them. The Fergusons, Pia, Felton and Deepali, all their friends—I’ve been talking to them at the cathedral when they come to Northgate for patrols. Not to mention quite a few of the Scions. They’ve thrown in with me.” After a pause, he added, “They’ve thrown in with *us*, Abram. When it comes time to make the change in command, they’ll stand with me. I’m pretty sure they won’t be the only ones, either. The others will see sense once it’s put right in front of them.”

It had been becoming increasingly obvious that the pack wasn’t big enough. The Scions weren’t strong enough to

guard the fissure—not against kibbeths and nightmares and anything else that might come through.

Worse, food wasn't easy to get for humans. The farms outside Northgate required a lot of work for minimal yield, since the soil seemed to have gone acidic near the fissure. Rabbits and deer had been flourishing in the mountains in the absence of hunters, though. Easy to eat if you were a wolf. Harder if you needed to hunt them down with a gun, skin them, and cook the meat.

The fissure needed better guards. The pack needed to grow. It was an easy solution.

No matter what Rylie and Abel thought.

“You’re planning to take a stand,” Abram said.

“Soon. Yeah.” Levi brushed his hand over Abram’s arm, rolling the hem of his sleeve between his fingertips.

“Are you going to stand with me?”

“You’re an asshole.”

“You like it.”

“Not particularly. But I don’t have to like you to agree with you.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” Levi said. “I’m awesome.”

There was definitely something about him. Something magnetic. He may not have been Alpha—yet—but he insisted that would change once he had the allegiance of most werewolves, and from what Abram had seen of Levi’s

force of personality, he believed it. Rylie and Abel weren't leaders. Levi was a dictator waiting to happen. Smart, tough, practical. He'd be good for the werewolves.

And the werewolves definitely needed him.

"I'll stand with you," Abram said.

Levi kissed Abram fiercely, gripping the back of his head hard to hold him tight. He had to stretch up on his toes to reach him. Abram didn't bend down to help—their relationship wasn't one of give and take, but push and shove.

Abram tried not to give into Levi like he always did. But his hands found their way to the other man's back anyway. He gripped him almost as hard.

Levi was frustrating, difficult—  
forbidden.

He used his grip to free himself from the werewolf and take a step back.

“One condition,” Abram said, breathing hard. “I’m only standing with you as long as it doesn’t hurt Rylie.”

Levi’s eyes narrowed, mouth twisting with distaste. “She’s no better than Abel. Maybe even worse.”

Abram gave him a blank look. That was his only requirement—that his mother was unharmed. Levi wouldn’t understand. He hated most of his family, begrudged them their affiliations with the Apple, even when he had ended up joining the organization himself. But Levi didn’t need to understand why

Rylie was so important to Abram. He just had to agree.

“Okay,” Levi said. “Rylie’s not hurt. That’s fine. How about Abel?”

Abram didn’t even hesitate. “Abel’s made his bed. He’s fair game.”



**ELISE BATHED IN** her rooms, alone and in silence. She had moved her guards out of the antechamber and into the hallway, putting walls between their beating hearts and her thirsting mouth. Keeping temptation out of reach.

Outside in the courtyard, Sallosa's surviving attendants were being publicly executed and their heads mounted on the battlements. Elise wasn't going to fuck around with the House of Volac anymore. If they were on Belphegor's side, then so be it. She'd find someone else to run the flesh farms.

Normally Elise would have performed the executions herself, but she couldn't let anyone see her until her wounds healed. She settled for enjoying the muffled sounds of their screaming through her windows.

Meanwhile, she hid, she licked her wounds, she tried not to lose her temper more than usual.

It wasn't easy, but a hot bath helped.

Clean water was a luxury in the City of Dis. She was the only one who had access to potable water for anything aside from cooking or drinking. Selfish, maybe, but she had taken on a job with so many downsides that she didn't see any reason to deny herself one of the few

benefits.

She'd had the water carried to her rooms by her guards. It was heated with steam piped from within the ground below the tower, making it almost as hot as a kettle set to boil.

It felt incredible.

Ace snuffled along the edge of the bathtub, interested in the scent of her soap. She lifted a dripping hand. He shied back from the gesture. Ace still remembered being hit as a puppy, and he didn't like hands. "Sorry," she murmured as he slunk away.

Elise sponged her chest gently, dabbing around the edges of the stab wound. It had bruised—a strange sight on her skin. The breastbone was closing

in on itself, but the skin was not, and she could see all the way down to glistening white through the cut, especially now that the flow of blood had slowed.

Sallosa's flamberge had done a lot of very real damage to her. "The fucker," she muttered, grimacing as she rolled the sponge down to the small of her back, feeling the tender spot where she had been Tasered. Sallosa had been prepared.

Worse, the only place that they could have gotten a Taser that functioned in Hell was by stealing one from the Palace.

One more worry to pile on top of the avalanche of others.

Ace turned a few circles by the

door before curling up with his tail over his nose. He would protect her while she relaxed. If anyone broke into her rooms, she could trust that he would bite them long before they attacked her in the bath. She couldn't trust the demons of Hell, but she could trust in Ace's ill temper.

She held her breath and slipped under the surface of the bath, letting it fill her ears, mute the world, and encase her in weightless warmth.

The soap made her bathwater nearly opaque, allowing her to see only the vaguest outlines of her belly, thighs, and feet. It wasn't as murky as the Amniosium in Malebolge. It also didn't adhere to her the way that fluid had.

There had been so many voices

inside the pit of nightmares. So many lives and memories. It had rolled down her sinuses, tasting of meat gone foul, a slurry of bodies and bones and souls.

Elise had felt elbows and feet brush her as she swam through it. There had been other things in the Amniosium. Semi-solid things. They hadn't attacked, or even deliberately approached her—they had simply existed. Drifting. Pieces of a whole without individual consciousness, sharing only in the slow, aimless thoughts of the monoentity.

She'd found Jerica near the bottom.

Jerica hadn't been turning corporeal yet. She'd been little more than a drop in an ocean. Even so, Elise had picked her out easily; her

consciousness was distinctive enough that she only had to follow it down.

Until the moment that she dived into the Amniosium, Elise hadn't known what to do, yet she hadn't felt any doubt when she reached Jerica. She had simply reached out and grabbed her. Not with her hands, but with her mind.

Jerica had immediately begun to regrow.

Eve had done something similar to give consciousness to her angelic offspring. She had plucked souls out of the vast fabric of time and willed their bodies into existence.

While Elise sought out Jerica among her fellow pre-born nightmares, she had glimpsed something exhilarating.

Something that was beautiful and breathtaking and wondrous, even in the blackest heart of Hell where terror was brewed. Something that reminded her of another lifetime, when her sole job had been to birth souls rather than to shatter them.

In the pit, Elise had glimpsed new life.

She pushed her hands against the tub's tile floor, shoving her head out of the water, drawing in a breath of oxygen that she didn't need.

Neuma was crouched by the door, petting Ace's flank as she fed him scraps of meat. The dog's tail thumped against the floor. Apparently, hands were okay when they were filled with food.



Traitorous canine, thinking with his stomach rather than his usual deep mistrust of anyone vaguely human-shaped.

On another day, with the severity of her wounds, Elise would have immediately fallen on Neuma to feed herself. Now she studied the half-succubus with a critical eye. Neuma looked wan and tired, though it might have been that she was wearing less makeup than usual. Her heart beat as strongly as always. The sound of her blood roared in Elise's ears.

“Jerica?” Elise asked.

“I had to take a break.” Her voice was light, but her smile failed before it touched her eyes. “I’ll be fine soon.”

Elise was hungry. So very hungry. Her chest ached, her bones were tired. But she smoothed the wet hair back from her face and said, “Get in here.”

Neuma edged away from Ace before standing up, careful not to alarm him, and began to strip. Pieces of her costume fell to the floor as she approached. She unclasped the metal fingers of her bra, slipped it down her arms. She tugged the pins from her hair so that it swung free. She stepped out of her shoes. There were faint indentations on her breasts and hips where steel had dug into her.

She dipped into the water. The bath was large enough that they could have both swum laps without touching each

other, but Neuma settled between Elise's legs and leaned back.

Elise squeezed out the sponge, dampened it again, rubbed it over Neuma's shoulders.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Neuma asked. It came out like a purr. An invitation.

But she was shaking even though the water was over a hundred degrees and her beating heart was a little too fast. Darkness veiled her mind. She had stepped away from Jerica's feeding, but the nightmares had followed.

"Not tonight," Elise said, wrapping her arm around Neuma's shoulders to wash her chest.

The half-succubus melted against

her, submerged in the water all the way to her clavicle. She draped one leg over Elise's. "I can tell you're hungry."

"Then we'll bathe, we'll sleep, and I'll have the kitchens send breakfast."

"You? Eat? Like, actual food?"

"No," Elise said. "*You* eat. And then I'll feed."

"I'm all right, doll," Neuma said.

Elise didn't bother arguing with her. It was so obviously untrue. Neuma may have faked it well, but there was no concealing her brain signals. She was awash with stress. Exhaustion.

"How's Lincoln?" Neuma asked when Elise remained silent. "Better yet, *where* is Lincoln, if you're so hungry?"

He was in the Great Library with a

pair of witches, Aniruddha and Isaiah, to try to figure out Onoskelis's books. She didn't know how he was doing. She didn't care all that much at the moment. But Neuma's question ignited a spark in Elise's skull. "You summoned him to the Palace to be my food, didn't you?"

"Can't always be me."

"But Lincoln's Gray, like you. Not ideal food."

"I didn't know that when I summoned him." Neuma snuggled against her, giving a contented sigh. "Always seemed to work fine for us, though."

"Why Lincoln? Why not push one of the human guards at me?"

"You're lonely without your aspis."

I hate to see my girl lonely. After everything you said about Lincoln, he seemed like a good second choice, aside from the psychotic nightmare possession thing. But hey, everyone's got baggage.”

Neuma wasn't just trying to find new food for Elise. She was playing matchmaker.

From anyone else, it would have been annoying. But this was the woman who had followed Elise into Hell with barely a thought, sacrificed her girlfriend to the war, and offered herself up as food the instant that Elise needed it. At this point, she was willing to let Neuma commit virtually any sin.

“I'm not lonely.” Elise brushed Neuma's hair over her shoulder and

kissed the side of her neck. Neuma gave a happy sigh.

“You’re sweet,” she said, “but it’s not the same, and you know it.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Nobody is as good as James. Nobody.”

She gently bit Neuma’s shoulder. Very gently. She didn’t even draw blood.

Nobody was the same as James. That was true, and probably for the best. The world only needed one James fucking Faulkner.

He was her aspis. He would always be different to Elise. But he also came with guilt, and, to use Neuma’s word, baggage. Enough baggage to fill a

fleet of freight ships. Just because Elise only wanted one person didn't mean that he was what she needed.

Neuma was good to Elise. She was easy to be around, easy food, immensely loyal. Better than James in every way that mattered.

"I'm not lonely," Elise said again, biting a little harder. She couldn't help it. Her canine drew a thin line of blood, dark against Neuma's pale skin, and she sucked it away. Neuma groaned deep in her throat.

The blood of a half-demon really wasn't as filling as a human's, and it tasted especially thin tonight. Jerica's influence was all too obvious. Neuma didn't have much of anything left over.



“You just need someone else now,” Neuma said a little more firmly, even as she stroked her hands along the outside of Elise’s thighs.

“You’re breaking up with me, aren’t you?” She said it lightly, trying to make it sound like a joke, even though the idea was worrying. They had never really been in a relationship. Friends with benefits, not committed.

Neuma didn’t owe her anything. But Elise had gotten used to not having to worry about food.

“I’m only breaking up with you for now,” Neuma said. “Jerica needs me a lot more.”

“Jerica’s not the ruler of Hell.”

“You don’t get to be with me

‘cause you’re important. I feed you because we’re friends, is all. But... Jerica’s special.”

She was at that. If she hadn’t been, Elise never would have retrieved her from Malebolge. Elise rested her chin on the top of Neuma’s head, closing her eyes and sighing.

“Feed on Lincoln,” Neuma murmured. “Make him yours. Let him fill up the empty places.”

It was a tempting thought. And if Elise didn’t have anyone else to feed on...

She watched Neuma’s blood trickle down her skin and fog the surface of the bath. She was tempted to lick it again, drink deep, take what little Neuma had

remaining and make it her own.

But she didn't. Neuma had asked to stop, so they were done. Elise owed that much to her.

The fact that Elise was holding back in more ways than one didn't escape Neuma. She slid her hand along the surface of the water, making the soap swirl. "Thank you."

Elise resumed washing her in silence.

**Something was amiss** in the Palace.

Elise slipped out of bed silently, careful not to disturb Neuma and Ace. The half-succubus was snoring lightly—blissfully unconscious. Elise had struggled to fall asleep and then drifted

for a fitful hour, caught in dreams of amniotic fluid and skeletons wrapped in tissue paper skin. She wasn't sure if the dreams were hers or Neuma's. Either way, she wasn't resting.

She stood in front of the windows with a crimson robe hanging open around her body, bone-dry after her bath. Water evaporated almost immediately in Hell's dry atmosphere.

The city outside looked as unrestful as Elise felt. The courtyard crawled with workers cleaning up after the executions. Fresh heads were mounted on the spiked bridges between towers—a sight that gave her little satisfaction, but would definitely send a clear message to the House of Volac.

Beyond the battlements, factories were working overtime to supply her legions, belching smoke in thick plumes that rendered the skyline of the outer districts invisible. She could make out faint movement in the nearest streets. Probably her army patrolling. It was difficult to tell, since nighttime clung to the city like mold on rotting meat.

The difference between day and night had become more distinguished over the last few months, thanks to the fissure that allowed Earth to leak into Hell. In daytime, the light was almost violet. Now, after the sun had fallen topside, it was darker than dark.

It was normal for Dis's nights to be unsettled. Most of its residents preferred

the shadows.

Elise still felt strange, as if she were missing something.

She stared hard at the shapes of the buildings outside. Had any of them changed or gone missing? The city seemed to evolve when her back was turned.

Behind her, Neuma rolled over, hugged a pillow tightly to her chest, sighed in her sleep.

Elise stepped away from the window and hung her robe on a hook. She dressed herself for work: the leather slacks, ass-kicking boots, a holster for Seth's Beretta.

She sidled out of the room, opening the door only a crack so that the

lamplight wouldn't disturb Neuma. The woman had been so exhausted that she had fallen asleep in the bath. Elise had been forced to carry her to bed, which was exactly the kind of sympathetic gesture that she couldn't let anyone see her perform. As far as anyone knew, Elise and Neuma spent all their private time whipping and biting and beating each other like most demons, and that was a useful perception to maintain.

Her entire life had become a show. Public executions. Heads on spikes. Tossing dissidents into the dungeons. Elise missed being able to drink coffee while relaxing in sweatpants without worrying if anyone would perceive it as weakness.

Something new on her desk caught her eye as she headed for the antechamber.

She had ordered her guards to stay out of her room, yet someone had given her a long, narrow box with a piece of folded paper on top of it. Elise hadn't heard anyone come in. Ace hadn't even barked, and he barked at everything.

Elise flipped the paper open.

The text on the page had been printed off of a computer. For a moment, she thought that it was a page from her list—the one that McIntyre had sent her—but the font was different and the paper was yellowing with age.

It was definitely a list of names, though.



*Another* list of names.

Elise jerked the dagger out of her boot then pushed the paper off of the box so that she could open it. When she saw what was inside, her heart stopped beating.

The obsidian falchion.

**Elise rammed the** point of the falchion into the librarian's desk, spearing the center of a paper. The two witches working on decrypting Onoskelis's books, Aniruddha and Isaiah, were accustomed to Elise's temper—they only flinched and leaned back in their chairs.

Lincoln wasn't used to her, and she watched his adrenaline spike like TNT exploding in his skull. He put a hand on

his gun but didn't draw.

She pointed at the sword. "What the fuck is this, Lincoln?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Aniruddha. Isaiah. Leave."

Isaiah grabbed the other witch's sleeve and hauled him out of the Great Library. The door echoed when it slammed behind them.

Lincoln remained on his side of the desk, and Elise on hers. She glared at him, waiting for him to explain, and he stared back with the look of a man who had been cornered by a tiger escaped from the zoo.

"I found this in my bedroom," Elise finally said.

“Isn’t that...” He took his hat off and squinted at the falchion. “That’s *your* sword, isn’t it?”

“It used to be. But I got rid of it. There is no way that it could have returned to me unless someone put it there.” Elise sidestepped, edging around the chair. Lincoln moved at the same time, keeping the desk between them, hand still on his gun.

“What makes you think it was be me?”

“Because I tossed this sword into a flaming chasm in the wastelands while you were still possessed by a nightmare. It somehow reappeared on Earth after you were exorcised. Now it’s come back to Hell at the same time that you

did.”

Redness climbed up his neck and jaw, flushing his cheeks. “You don’t think I’m still possessed.” His hands pulsed bright orange as though filled with fire.

“I don’t know what to think,” Elise said. But after a beat, she added, “No. I don’t think you’re possessed. I don’t feel any of that inside of you, and you’re not demonstrating the signs.”

“I’m not planting swords in your rooms.”

She shook the paper at him. “What about this list? Are these more missing people?”

“How would I know? Calm your tits, woman. You’re acting insane.”

*Calm your tits?*

Elise phased across the library before Lincoln could run, shoving him against an empty desk. He twisted free. Swung a fist at her. She caught his wrist and used it as leverage to bend his elbow the wrong way—not far enough to break, but enough to make him pay attention.

She shoved the paper into his chest.

“Read the list,” Elise said.

“I told you, I didn’t put it there!”

“Read it.”

She allowed him to shove her away. He snatched the paper out of her hand. “Damn it, Elise. I came down here to help. What’s wrong with you?”

She clenched her jaw and waited.

Without Elise taking up the other end of the argument, Lincoln reluctantly scanned the page, rubbing a hand over his jaw. Coarse blond hair was beginning to grow around his mouth.

She watched as the muscles in his face went slack and his mind whited out with shock.

“Tell me,” Elise said.

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“You do know. I can tell.” She could also tell that he hadn’t seen the list before—he was much too surprised when he read it.

“The thing is...I do recognize these names,” Lincoln said with no small hint of reluctance. “These folks are from Two Rivers.”

“Two Rivers?”

“Small town down in Georgia.” He paused, considering what he said. “Well, guess it’s *up there*, now.” He pointed toward the sky. “Clayton Gregg...he’s the mayor. Stuck around, decided to go down with the ship after the fissure opened. The name underneath is his wife’s. Lisa Gregg.”

Elise’s fist crumpled the edge of the paper. “When were you in Two Rivers?”

“Not even a month ago,” Lincoln said.

Had they gone missing since then? And what did the people of Two Rivers have to do with her falchion?

Easy way to find out.

**Elise phased and** reformed into her corporeal body, setting Lincoln beside her. He hit the ground on hands and knees. Vomit splattered on the pavement.

She studied the surrounding street as he emptied his stomach, polite enough not to watch him do what most mortals did when being carried between dimensions.

Two Rivers, Georgia was a ghost town, but it looked nothing like the other ghost towns that Elise had seen in post-Breaking America. The downtown district was old and preserved. Lots of antique shops, a few restaurants, not a lot of broken windows. It was far enough from the fissure that the trees and



grass were still alive.

*Why is it empty?*

Lincoln sat back on his heels, wiping his mouth clean. "Gone." He coughed. Spit. Spoke again. "Everyone's gone."

"What do you mean?"

"When I visited, there were hundreds of people living and working around here." He nodded to a breakfast place advertising chicken and waffles on the corner. "Madge was still opening every morning." Lincoln's gaze swept up the street. "They had meetings in the town hall almost every day."

And now there was trash blowing down the street, tangling between the wheels of parked, uninhabited cars. The

breeze smelled like blossoms. Elise stepped up to the side of the road and looked at the creek on the other side. It was still running with clean water.

No reason for people to have disappeared. It was, by all accounts, still a very beautiful little town.

Elise headed for town hall. The doors were propped open. A chalkboard outside read, “Mayor Gregg talks utility power, 3pm on the 14th of April.” What date had Rylie said it was? The seventeenth? Someone had been there to change the sign just a few days earlier.

Lincoln pushed past her, heading inside. “Hello? Clayton? Lisa?”

Nobody responded to his calls. Lincoln crossed himself, shut his eyes,

whispered a prayer.

She clenched her jaw to keep herself from telling him what a waste of time that was. When he turned back to face her, worry lined his face. His prayers hadn't comforted him at all. "They were here. This was their base of operations, so to speak."

Elise stepped into the hall, pushed the door to the ladies' room open. Empty. She checked the men's bathroom too, and found nothing but foggy mirrors and dry sinks.

There were offices in the back. She passed the unmarked doors and approached one with another sign outside. This one read "Mayor Gregg, Office Hours: 8am to 6pm." It had the

same handwriting as the one on the front steps.

Lincoln pushed past her, entering first.

“Clayton?”

The room was unoccupied. Mayor Gregg’s office looked like it had been abandoned in the middle of a workday; his shutters were opened to allow cloudy daylight to penetrate the gloom, and his desk was covered in papers.

There were chalkboards and whiteboards positioned around the room, each covered with addresses, names, and phone numbers. Mayor Gregg had obviously been making a big push at keeping track of everyone in Two Rivers and organizing them to

recover.

An area rug muffled Elise's steps as she crossed the room slowly, skimming the shadows for signs of intruders. She didn't sense anything behind the chairs, under the desks, or in the closets—the office felt as hollow as the rest of the town.

Elise wiped her thumb along a word written on a whiteboard in marker. It came off easily. The ink hadn't been there long enough to dry. “Do you know what's missing, Deputy?”

Lincoln didn't respond with the obvious answer, and it made her like him better for it. “A struggle.”

“When demons abduct humans, they don't do it quietly. There are portals in

Dis that can rip people across the dimensions and drop them in the Screaming Forest, but that's messy. I'd expect to see broken furniture. Blood."

"Bodies of people who didn't let themselves be taken," Lincoln said grimly.

"That too." She watched him from the corner of her eye. How much did he remember of his time being possessed by one of the most important demons in Dis?

A hint of mirth flashed over his mouth. "I always take you on the best dates, don't I? First chewed-up bodies in the morgue, now towns where the entire population's gone missing."

"Keeps the relationship thrilling,"

Elise said. “Lincoln, why were you in Two Rivers, Georgia?”

“Because I kept thinking about it.” He rubbed his temples hard. “I’d never been here before, but the names kept coming to me. Two Rivers, Georgia. Portola, California. Nissa Falls, Maine. I figured it was something that I did when I was...out of it. When *she* had me.” He meant Judy, the innocuously named nightmare demon that had possessed him. “If she had these towns on her mind, I figured she was doing something for Abraxas here. So I went looking for answers.”

Elise thought that she could guess the questions. Why was his demon heritage manifesting now? What had he

done while possessed? Why had the demon that ruled him been interested in nowhere towns like Two Rivers?

“Did you find what you were looking for?” she asked.

“No. But I found good Christians. Great people. People who didn’t recognize me, so I know I hadn’t been here before.” Lincoln flipped the light switch by the door. Nothing happened. “They had power here, sometimes. In the middle of the day, and an hour after sundown.”

A strange smell itched in Elise’s nose. It reminded her of burned hair.

She bent down to look at the lamp on Mayor Gregg’s desk. The bulb was black on the inside, filaments broken. He



hadn't lost power. His bulb had blown.

A quick check of the other lights showed her more of the same. There was no struggle, and yet all of Mayor Gregg's light bulbs had exploded, most likely at the same time.

It didn't look like a demon abduction at all.

While Elise was standing on the chair to look at the light hanging from the ceiling, she noticed a strange smear behind one of the chalkboards. She pushed it aside.

There was a single bloody handprint on the paneling behind it.

Lincoln spanned his fingers over it. His hand was glowing again, highlighting the bones through his flesh.

“Dainty. Looks like a woman’s.”

Elise searched the room with new eyes, looking for something that could have inflicted a bloody wound. She pushed the rest of the chalkboards aside, shifted Mayor Gregg’s desk, and peered behind the curtains. Nothing.

All that left was the area rug.

Elise grabbed the edge, whipped it aside.

Lincoln crouched to examine the floor underneath. He scrubbed his forefinger on the line between two boards.

“Look at this,” he said, lifting his hand.

There was coppery, flaky powder on his skin. Elise knew it was blood by

the way it made her hungry body recoil. Blood was good—blood was life—but old, wasted blood was offensive to her senses.

Dizziness struck her at the sight of it, and she pressed a hand to her forehead, taking a deep breath to steady herself.

“You okay?” Lincoln asked.

“I’m just...hungry.”

His eyes darkened. Elise hadn’t been drinking blood to feed herself when they’d last been together, but she had offered to open his veins for much more carnal reasons. He had been as repulsed by it as he had been aroused. Nothing had changed.

His blood pressure rose. He looked

away, back down at the floor, but not before she saw the warmth on his cheeks. “I’m hungry, too,” he said, surprising her.

“When did you last eat? I expected Aniruddha to make sure that the kitchens were serving you.”

“I don’t mean like that,” Lincoln said. “I’m not craving food.” He clenched his fist and the red glow brightened. “I don’t know what I’m craving, but whatever it is can’t be eaten.”

It was her turn for her heart to accelerate. “Demon hungers,” Elise said. He didn’t respond, but she could tell that was what he was thinking by the way he flinched. The idea of feeding

together—drawing on Lincoln’s energies as he drew on hers, the same way she did with Neuma—was far too appealing.

What kind of demon blood was in the Marshall heritage? He was handsome, but he didn’t look anything like an incubus; most of them resembled Yatam, the demon that had given Elise her powers. He couldn’t have been a nightmare, either.

“I keep thinking that you taste good,” Lincoln muttered without looking at her. “I’m...drawn to you, somehow. Mostly when you get pissed. I want to be close when you’re mad at me.” He blew a breath out of his lips. “I liked it when you attacked me in the library.”

Surprise blossomed within her,

warming her deep in her belly. “You want to feed on my anger. You must be a megaira.”

His throat worked. “I don’t even know what those are.” After a beat, he said, “Snake heads. Like Medusa. Never mind—I remember them from when I was possessed.”

“You probably won’t grow snakes,” Elise said. “If physical changes manifest in part-demon Gray, it’s during puberty. Your changes will only be in power.”

It didn’t look like the idea comforted him. He rubbed his fingertips along the floor again, clearing his throat. “Someone tried to clean this up. There are sponge marks.”

She bent close to the floor. Sniffed. In addition to the sour smell of wasted blood, she picked up the scent of lemon pine.

Demons didn't clean their murder scenes.

"Witches, maybe," she mused aloud, shoving her hands in her pockets so that Lincoln wouldn't see that they were shaking. She was even hungrier now that she knew that Lincoln was unconsciously feeding off of her bad temper. She wanted to return the favor.

"What's that about witches?"

"This might be a witch behavior. They're known for cleaning up the scenes of their crimes. They'll return to a site after the fact and wash away any

indication of a ritual, murder, or... whatever else they might have done.” Witches were almost as creative as demons when the situation called for it.

“Do you sense magic?” Lincoln asked. His blood pressure was dropping again. The mention of crimes and murders didn’t faze him. This was his element—being on the scene of an investigation. Even Elise couldn’t shake him up enough to change that.

She would have to take off her warding ring to be sensitive enough to detect magic here. Since she was on Earth, taking off the ring would give James a direct route into her mind. Elise didn’t want James to see whom she was spending time with.



“No,” she said. “I don’t sense any magic.”

Elise lifted the phone’s receiver on Mayor Gregg’s desk. To her surprise, she got a dial tone. The artificial sound was painfully loud in the house’s silence.

“The mayor was trying to get everything back online,” Lincoln said. “He was doing a fine job. A damn fine job.” Past tense. He was already convinced that everyone was dead.

Nothing that Elise saw suggested otherwise.

She sat on the edge of the desk and dialed the only phone number she had memorized. It rang twice before McIntyre answered. “Hey,” he said.

““Sup?”

Anyone else would have had questions about Elise's whereabouts for the last several months, but not McIntyre. The sound of his voice was almost as good for her mood as a hot bath. “I need anything you can find about our anonymous benefactor.”

“Already looked him up. Haven't found anything. The email he used leads back along a trail of empty email addresses that doesn't go anywhere. Same with the bank account.”

“What about tracing his IP address?” Elise asked.

“There wasn't one in the header info.”

“Proxy?”

“Nope. Just...missing. Wasn’t the only thing missing. The whole trail was weird.” McIntyre sighed, like he dreaded having to say anything else. “The bank account that deposited the money—it had gotten three thousand and sixty-two microdeposits in one hour before it transferred to us.”

“Three thousand...”

“You’re not going to guess who owns the accounts.” Without even a pause for her to answer, he said, “The missing people. Three thousand and sixty-two of them, anyway.”

Chilly frisson settled over Elise’s shoulders. She gripped the handset harder and said, “I don’t like any of this.”

“Me neither. I’d return the money and take you off the case, but...”

“Yeah,” Elise said. She wasn’t going to be able to drop it now, but she was going to need help. It had been a big enough mess before impossible bank account activity and people washing away crime scenes. “What’s Anthony’s ETA?”

“He doesn’t have one. I haven’t been able to reach him.”

Tendrils of fear sneaked into her heart. Not the kind of fear that a nightmare demon evoked, but the fear of realizing she had missed something—maybe something big.

Anthony would never have gone so long without contacting McIntyre or

Elise.

“You didn’t tell me that,” she said, trying not to make it sound accusatory and failing. How could one of their trio go missing without the other two realizing it?

“Until I saw your email, I thought he was with you. Guess not.” McIntyre’s voice shook with frustration. He’d come to the same conclusion that she had.

She swallowed hard before speaking. “Is he on the list, Lucas?”

A moment of silence followed the question.

A very *long* moment of silence.

“No,” McIntyre said.

Anthony had been with her for years. Before she had been a demon,

before he had known that he was a kopis, back when the world was normal and good things sometimes happened. He was the one who had pulled her body from Lake Tahoe when she was resurrected as a demon. He had stood at the gates of Heaven to wait for her return after killing Adam. He had remained her friend and confidant when she had nobody else to trust—nobody but McIntyre.

For all she knew, he had been missing for months.

“We need him,” she said, forcing herself to uncurl her fingers from the phone before she shattered it.

“I’ll put out the word.”

“Good. I’m going to come see you

in a few hours.”

A grunt. “See you soon.”

She dropped the phone in its cradle.

Lincoln was leaning against the wall, watching her with his arms folded. “What’s the next move?”

A pressure headache was building in her skull and the wound on her chest was aching again. Elise stood slowly, and just the change in posture made her dizzy again.

“I don’t know,” she said, rubbing her forehead. “I need to think.”

Anthony gone missing. Assassination attempts in Dis. Wounds Elise wasn’t healing. Thousands of missing people. Thousands more slaves

that still needed to be liberated. Neuma and Jerica. Lincoln. *James*.

*What's the next move?*

"I'm taking you back to the Great Library to continue working with Isaiah and Aniruddha," Elise said. Whatever came next, she could handle alone. She needed him where he was more useful. Where he could be helping Elise learn to cast the magic she needed to be strong enough to kill all her enemies.

"What? You can't cut me out of this. I'm not going back."

"This isn't a debate."

"The demon knew something was going to happen in Two Rivers," Lincoln said, tapping his forehead with a knuckle. "Your answers—my answers—"



are in here somewhere, and that means you need me to investigate, not read books.”

“I need you learning to be a warlock, Lincoln,” Elise said. “I won’t be able to do anything for these people if you don’t. And, frankly, if you’re starting to manifest megaira powers, you’re too unreliable to be on the road with me.”

“But...this is why I’m here.” His fists shook with frustration. “This must be it.”

“You’re here because Gerard asked you to help me.”

“Do you think so?” Lincoln asked. “Do you honestly think it’s that easy? Because if one of your guys contacted me right before you stumbled across

trouble with something Judy was doing—well, that'd be one big coincidence, Kavanagh, and I don't know that I believe in coincidences. Do you?"

The obsidian falchion was a reminder of exactly how many coincidences were in her life.

She still wanted Lincoln safe in the library, where she wouldn't lose him the way she had lost Anthony.

"Brace yourself," Elise said.

He tensed, anticipating being phased again. But before she released her physical form, the bloody handprint on the wall caught her eye. On impulse, she bent down and licked it.

Lincoln sucked a breath in through his teeth.

Elise traced her tongue over her lips, pondering the flavor of the old blood. It had been there for at least three days. It was still heady with power. She could taste ice water and pine and the musk of fur.

Werewolf blood.

# Seven

**IT WAS RAINING** hard in Northgate, but the precipitation didn't quite reach the streets surrounding the fissure; it evaporated into steam before hitting the pavement.

Rylie walked briskly through the storm, hood pulled over her head to protect herself. She tried not to look down into Hell. It was bad enough that she couldn't tune out the scents—the melting human flesh, the burnt charcoal, the factories and smelters.

There seemed to be more Scions guarding the bridge than usual. A small

crowd had gathered on the lawn surrounding the statue of Bain Marshall, most of them armed and all of them whispering.

Disturbance in the fissure? Rylie wasn't sure that she wanted to know badly enough to stop. She hadn't told anyone that she was going to be in Northgate, and she preferred to get back to the sanctuary without anyone catching on.

The wind picked up as she passed the edge of the bridge, carrying the scent of werewolves to her. It wasn't just Scions talking over by Bain Marshall. Some of the pack were there, too. People who would be likely to report back to Abel.

Rylie quickened her pace.

As she passed, a woman unhitched herself from one of the bridge's pylons and moved to walk alongside Rylie. Elise appeared to be unbothered by the rain. She didn't even look like she was wet. Maybe she, like the fissure, repelled Earth's natural weather.

A thrill of fear raced through Rylie. "What are you doing here again?" she asked without stopping. She liked Elise, she really did, but two visits in such a short period of time couldn't be a good thing.

"We need to talk," Elise said.

Rylie glanced over her shoulder at the road leading to St. Philomene's, and all of the people who were now

blocking that route. How much had Elise seen? Did she know who Rylie had just been visiting?

“I’m on my way back to the sanctuary. I have to make sure that everything’s coming together for dinner. I can’t really talk right now.”

“Tough shit. This is more important than dinner. Are you missing any werewolves?”

“What do you mean?”

Elise’s voice sharpened. “What do you think I mean? Has anyone in your pack left or disappeared?”

Heat crept up Rylie’s cheeks. She had assumed that Elise had somehow learned about the problem with the other werewolves wanting to change the

Scions into monsters just like them. “Everyone’s still in the sanctuary and Northgate, tripping over each other every time we turn around. We could use a few of them disappearing, actually, just to make it a little easier to breathe.”

Elise didn’t smile. Her hard look made Rylie’s intestines just about shrivel up on themselves.

“How many werewolves exist outside of the pack?” Elise asked.

“I don’t think—I mean, I’m not sure. Not many. There shouldn’t be any at all, but I can’t guarantee that all of them sought me out when I got called to become Alpha.”

“There’s at least one. I found werewolf blood today.”



Rylie's eyes widened. "In Hell?"

"Close. Two Rivers, Georgia."

She gnawed on her bottom lip, considering. That blood couldn't have come from one of her wolves. The last werewolf they had brought into the pack was Katja, and she had been forcibly infected with the curse by a demon. That meant that there must have been a stray werewolf in Dis at some point—someone that could have performed the bite, and later escaped to make more.

But no werewolves had climbed out of Dis using the bridge. If there were any wolves in Hell, they were still down there.

"I don't have any reason to think there's a werewolf in Georgia," Rylie

said.

“Well, I do. I want you to give me a werewolf,” Elise said.

“*Give* you a werewolf?”

“Someone with a good nose to help me investigate problems I’m having, including this smear of werewolf blood in Georgia.”

“Someone to take down to Hell, you mean,” Rylie said.

“Eventually, yes.”

Rylie tried to imagine a werewolf living in Dis. That place had been haunting her ever since the fissure ripped open and bared the dark city lurking beyond. The fact that she had now been there personally—twice—didn’t change how much it frightened

her. If anything, experiencing everything in intimate detail had made it so much worse.

The hands that grew out of the ground. The smell of melting human flesh. The obsidian *everything*.

It was nothing like Gray Mountain, where werewolves had originated from, and where the pack belonged. They were creatures of the earth and trees. They needed the moon to thrive.

They didn't belong in that alien wasteland below.

"Please don't ask for this," Rylie said. Elise opened her mouth, but she pushed on. "I want to help. You know I want to help. You've done so much for us. But werewolves in Hell—we'd

waste away. I can't ask anyone to do that."

"If you won't command it, then put out a request for volunteers."

Someone would definitely volunteer if Rylie asked. The werewolves were becoming bolder ever since Abel had last stirred them to fight against the nightmares—much bolder than Rylie was comfortable with.

These people had come to her looking for guidance. An Alpha to take care of them. In the last few years, she believed they had become family more than friends. But the stress of being in the pack, and the stress of the Breaking, had started to turn these normal people hard.

It scared her sometimes.

“I could ask for volunteers,” she said reluctantly. Elise didn’t seem to hear the response. She stiffened, pushing Rylie behind her. “What’s wrong?”

“We have company.”

Company came in the form of a woman with strawberry-blond hair twisted in an elegant bun. Rylie had been so distressed by the idea of sending a werewolf down to Hell that she hadn’t noticed the doctor approaching on the road from St. Philomene’s Cathedral. “I must say, it’s interesting seeing the two of you together.” Stephanie Whyte twirled the umbrella on her shoulder, making the tangle of vines printed on the inside swirl. She smelled of latex,

antiseptic, silicone. “You don’t seem like the likeliest of friends.”

Levi was standing behind her, half-concealed by the parasol. He hung back with hands in his pockets and looked annoyed. Considering how frequently he looked like that, it might have just been his normal face. Rylie wasn’t sure.

Elise jerked a knife out of her boot. She flipped it so that the hilt was cradled in her palm, blade pointing up. Throwing position. “Hi, Stephanie.”

“Hello again. How’s James doing?”

“He isn’t dead.” Her tone could have turned the rain to snow. “How’s the cult life treating you?”

A thin smile from Stephanie.

“Business as usual, I suppose. I was told that you don’t typically visit Northgate. Levi said that he hasn’t seen you visit even once during his tenure as informal mayor.”

A laugh slipped out of Rylie before she could stop herself. “Mayor? Levi Riese? Are you kidding?”

He glowered at her, but didn’t rise to take the bait. He never missed out on a chance to argue with Rylie. She wondered if he was sick.

“Nobody else has been helping here lately,” Stephanie said. She spoke a little loudly, as though trying to keep attention on herself. “Who’s been feeding the Scions? Who’s been organizing recovery efforts in the

outlying farms? And where have you been, Elise?"

"She doesn't take care of Northgate. I do," Rylie said.

"Not lately, you haven't."

"Levi took the cathedral. He drove Isaiah, and many of the others that led the Scions, back into Hell."

"You didn't exactly fight him on it, did you?" Stephanie asked. "I'm not accusing you of anything, Rylie. I know you're...preoccupied." Her eyes were gentle, but her mouth was a hard line. "Levi's doing his best here. You should be cooperating with him. The two of you could make all of our lives easier." Her gaze cut to Elise. "*Much* easier."

Elise's fist tightened on the dagger,



leather glove creaking.

But it was Rylie who stepped forward. “Abel told me what you said to him. If this is your idea of being more cooperative, I don’t want to see what it’s like when you start making trouble.”

Elise circled Stephanie slowly. When she got close to Levi, he took a quick step back, moving with werewolf speed. Staying out of reach. “What do you know about the House of Volac, Doctor?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Stephanie said.

“How about the obsidian falchion? How about three thousand missing people? Or Two Rivers, Georgia?”

“Whatever you think I know, you’re

wrong,” Stephanie said. “I’m surprised, Elise. I won’t pretend we’ve ever been friends, but I think you know me better than this. Tell me—how much do you think I have to do with the affairs of Hell?”

Elise cracked her knuckles. “None,” she conceded. “None whatsoever.”

“Thank you.”

The Scions collected on the other side of the bridge had noticed their conversation. They drew nearer to watch the women talk. The weight of their gazes made the hair on the back of Rylie’s neck prickle.

“If you’re having trouble in Hell, Elise, perhaps you should return there

and never come back,” Stephanie said. “We’ll figure out a way to close this fissure sooner or later. We’re drawing close to a solution now. You can be walled off in your Palace, play queen all you like, and leave Earth to its own devices. You’ve meddled enough.”

“What’s your solution?” Elise asked. “Going to pull more pieces of Shamain out of Heaven? Going to kill more people in a ritual that summons a nightmare from Hell? Which one of the Apple’s greatest hits are you going to repeat?”

Stephanie stopped spinning the umbrella. It shadowed her eyes from the flames of the fissure, allowing the dancing orange light to play over her

lips. “You can’t begin to guess what we’re doing.”

“Whatever it is, I’m going to stop you.” Elise said it matter-of-factly. Rylie wished she could have that kind of mulish confidence that Elise and Levi had. It would have made it so much easier to drive the Apple out of her town.

Except that Levi wasn’t flashing his usual confidence around. He didn’t even have a hint of swagger. It was almost like he was trying to melt into the background unnoticed.

“Rylie, what do you know about Elise?” Stephanie asked, interrupting her thoughts. “Do you know why she’s called the Godslayer?”

“Yes,” Rylie said. It wasn’t hard to guess. That was a pretty descriptive title. But James Faulkner had given her and Abel quite a few of the gritty details, too—more than Rylie honestly wanted to know.

“So you know that she assassinated Adam, the First Man. You’re aware that she was involved with a lengthy conspiracy to imprison our Lord.”

That was a weirdly loaded question. Like the fact that Rylie knew about that implicated her in some way, too. She didn’t like the way that the doctor was looking at her at all. She especially didn’t like the fact that Stephanie was talking loud enough for others to hear them, like she was trying

to attract attention.

Rylie dragged her bottom lip between her teeth. “Why are you doing this, Stephanie?”

“Elise Kavanagh is dangerous,” she said gently. “I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“I can take care of myself.” Rylie tried to keep her voice down, but it was too late for that to help. Stephanie wasn’t trying to be quiet. She was trying to make a show.

“I’m sure you can, where most things are concerned, but Elise is not ‘most things.’ She is a demon now. She is a traitor to the human race. She is at the crux of all of Earth’s ills.”

The werewolves and the Scions

were watching. For once, there was none of the usual awe that they seemed to have for Elise and Rylie. Their expressions were distinctly judgmental.

Rylie looked at each of them in turn. It was easy to tell which ones Levi had been talking to. She could smell his soap on them, see his swagger reflected in the way they stood. He had been marking his territory and she hadn't even noticed.

Felton stood in the back, hands clasped with Deepali. Their eyes were the most judgmental of all. Maybe Abel had been right—Rylie's compassion hadn't accomplished anything.

"Elise is our ally," Rylie said loud enough for everyone to hear. "Everything

about Adam, and—and, I don't know, conspiracies—all of that is rumor. None of us know anything about that. What we do know is that Elise Kavanagh is responsible for every single human that has come out of the fissure. All of the Scions would be dead or enslaved without her. Every single one of them. She's a friend of the pack, and we're friends of hers." Rylie mustered all the Alpha strength that she could and focused it in her glare toward Stephanie. "The Apple has caused the pack nothing but trouble, and they are our enemies."

Murmurs spread through the crowd.

"It's too bad that you feel that way." Stephanie spoke blandly, but Rylie could see the hurt in her eyes, and



the sight made her cringe inwardly.

It was too late to take the words back. Rylie squared her shoulders, stood strong. “Northgate belongs to the werewolf pack. I think Levi has overstayed his welcome. If anyone has a problem with that, they can take it up with me at the sanctuary. That goes for all of you.”

The Scions shifted on their feet. Felton turned and left, taking Deepali with him.

Not exactly the rousing show of support Rylie had been hoping for.

Levi was grinning. He didn't need to say a single word and he still made Rylie's stomach twist with nausea.

She picked a pack member out of

the crowd—Paetrick—and focused on him, tuning out all the mutters of dissent. “Elise needs a werewolf volunteer to investigate a crime. Someone to assist her in finding missing people. I hope someone can repay her for everything she’s done for the pack by helping out.”

But nobody stepped forward.

Elise glanced at her wrist, checking her watch. “I’ll be back in a few hours for my wolf. Spread the word.” She gave a final, hard look at Stephanie. “Goodbye.”

She evaporated into smoke.

**The air surrounding** the farm outside Valenciennes smelled faintly of rain, though the starry sky was clear. There

was no fissure in France, no smoke spewing from Hell to clog the air, and not even a glimpse of a shattered Heaven.

In rural France, far from the nearest Union outpost, the world almost seemed...normal.

Elise felt her shoulders unknot as she approached the farmhouse and heard voices pouring from the windows. They were high pitched, shrieky, and ear shattering—the kind of noises that Elise never thought she would have been happy to hear.

The front door opened before she could knock.

“Aunt Elise!”

Two small tornadoes slammed into

her legs. She was prepared for it, but it still staggered her.

The McIntyre girls, Dana and Deborah, and grown since the last time that Elise had seen them. Both of them looked to be several inches taller. The kids were blond, though not as blond as they had been before, losing that baby-fine hair that had been bleached by Las Vegas sunlight. One of them had hair that was faintly pink from old dye.

Leticia appeared in the doorway behind them. She was thinning out, too. Usually a big-hipped woman with a generous belly roll, the witch now looked shrunken in her baggy clothes. Food just wasn't as cheap or convenient as it had been before the Breaking. Not

with most of America's farms decimated. It was hitting everyone hard, even those who had safely escaped.

"Heya," Leticia said, giving Elise a one-armed hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Good to see you."

"And you." Elise had been missing the McIntyres. Life wasn't the same without spending long weekends at their single wide outside Las Vegas, even though she had thought more than once that she hated having the kids climbing all over her for hours on end. They were already glued to her thighs and she barely had the urge to kick them back into the house. She even felt herself smiling.

"Lucas is already working in the

living room. Go on in and find him. Hey! Give Aunt Elise some breathing room!” Leticia grabbed her kids by the collars and shooed them back inside where it was warm and light.

Elise followed more slowly, closing the door behind her and glancing out the windows before drawing the curtains. The McIntyres were living in a house that had belonged to Elise’s mother’s family. She was relatively confident that the wards were strong enough to hold out everything but the most determined and powerful attackers. The problem was that the only things likely to attack Elise would be both determined and powerful.

Dana and Deb thundered up the

narrow stairs to the second floor, making the house creak. “I get to do the braids this time!” That was the older girl.

“No! I do braids!” The younger one. It was getting harder to tell their voices apart.

Leticia gave Elise an apologetic grin. “Does this mean it’s beer o’clock?”

“It’s always beer o’clock when your children are involved,” Elise said.

“We have Leffe. It’s a pale ale. I’ll grab a couple for you and Lucas.”

She disappeared down into the small pantry under the kitchen, and Elise headed into the living room.

The living room had been seized by McIntyre for use as an office. He had

boxes of papers everywhere, a few laptops plugged into one sagging American-to-European outlet converter, and guns scattered over the coffee table. He hadn't been locking them up as much since Deb had hit two years old and proven that she knew all the basic rules of gun safety—treat them like they're always loaded, don't point at anything you don't want to die, that kind of thing. Dana, for her part, was already a better shot than most adults. Probably better than Elise. It was safer to have the guns on hand for an unexpected attack than hide them from the girls anyway.

McIntyre came in and grabbed a pair of assault rifles off the table, barely glancing at Elise. “Hey,” he grunted.



“Hey,” she said.

He moved most of the weapons onto a folding table he'd set up under a window and tossed a stack of paper onto the remaining space. It looked like at least two or three reams of printer paper.

“More names,” McIntyre said.

She grabbed the top sheet. “Missing people?”

“Yep. Got another email. The list just keeps growing.”

She swallowed around a hard lump in her throat, putting the page back down. “Anthony?”

“Still no mention of him. Not on the lists, and not with my contacts.”

Elise wasn't sure if that was good

news or not. It would have been one thing if he was dead—a bad thing, sure, but at least it would be *something*. Something to avenge. Something to grieve.

Leticia returned, dodging Dana and Deb as the two crashed through the doorway at the same time.

“If you don’t stop shrieking, girls, I am going to rip out your vocal chords and feed them to the crocodiles,” McIntyre said.

“*Daddy.*” Dana rolled her eyes. “There are no crocodiles in *France.*”

Elise took the Leffe from Leticia gratefully. The first two bottles were already uncapped.

“Sure there are,” McIntyre said.

“French crocodiles are the worst, and they’re gonna eat you. So shut your mouths.” There was no real heat in his voice. He was too distracted by searching for another power cord for the laptop that he had brought in with him.

Elise sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the couch, glaring at another laptop’s monitor. She tuned out the activity behind her—two little girls fighting over a comb and box of rubber bands—and tossed back a swig of Leffe as she began scrolling through the names.

“I don’t understand,” Elise said, her voice quiet under the shrieks of arguing children. “How is it possible that these people have been going

missing for years in such large numbers and nobody has noticed?"

McIntyre dragged a chair over to join her, plopping his girth down on the seat. Leticia had lost weight, but he'd bulked up, and not much of it muscle. His thighs draped over either side of the seat now. "People go missing all the time. A couple here, few more there. Easy not to notice."

A small hand grabbed Elise's hair and jerked. "Hey!" she snapped over her shoulder. "Gentle!"

"Sorry, Aunt Elise," Dana said, sounding truly contrite. More sharply, she added, "Deb! Gentle with her hair!"

"I braid it," Deb announced.

It felt like hyenas were attacking

Elise's skull, but if she could ignore the ache of the wound still carved into her chest, she could surely ignore a couple of kids playing with her hair.

She was going to need a lot more beer, though.

"I'm working with Lincoln Marshall again," she said loudly enough that McIntyre could hear her over his daughters.

"Deputy Pretty Boy? How's that going for you?"

"It's interesting. Let's put it that way. He led me to an entire town of people gone missing, so we believe that Abraxas and Aquiel are somehow involved." Elise ran a quick search on his list for the names of the mayor and

his wife from Two Rivers. She didn't find it. "Is this list complete?"

"I haven't put all the new names in yet." He grabbed the top two inches of the printed version and shoved it at her. "These just showed up this morning."

"Showed up?"

"In an envelope on my front door."

The hairs on the back of Elise's neck stood on end, and it wasn't because the rest of her hair was being yanked. "Someone got through the wards."

"But didn't attack," McIntyre said. "Just dropped off the list."

"How the fuck did someone get through the wards?"

"Aunt Elise!" Deb cried. "*Bad words!*"

She gave McIntyre a flat look, and he shrugged. “Them’s the rules. You gotta pay up.” He snorted into his Leffe and took another sip. “If I do, you sure as hockey pucks do.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she muttered under her breath, patting down her pockets. She didn’t have any spare change to put in the Bad Words Jar. She did, however, have two of Neuma’s steel hair clips in her pocket. She shoved them at the younger girl. “Here. Take those and shut up.”

The distraction worked. The kids started fighting over the pretty jewelry.

“Leticia says that the wards didn’t register intruders this morning. Nobody crossed through since our last trip to the

grocery store,” McIntyre said. “Been almost two weeks.”

Elise’s hands froze on the list that she had been flipping through. “Are you sure you’re alone on the property?”

“Searched it a dozen times over.”

Her eyes fell on the names of the missing people from Two Rivers. McIntyre must have gotten the names at the same time that she had.

Her head suddenly jerked to the side. Hard. A sticky fist had just jammed one of Neuma’s clips into place over her ear. It pinched against her scalp. “I had a single page of these names show up in the Palace today.” Elise lifted her eyebrows at McIntyre. “Along with my obsidian falchion.”



He rubbed his whiskers. The lines of his hands were caked with gun oil. “Gotta say, Elise...”

“I don’t like it, either.”

“This isn’t some demon shit.”

“I don’t know what else it could be.” Who could have retrieved her falchion from the pits of Hell? Perhaps more importantly, who would have cause to return it to her?

And who the fuck could leave a list of names in France and Hell on the same day?

Elise set the newest part of the list back on the table. She couldn’t lean very far forward; the girls were now braiding her hair in earnest and wouldn’t relinquish their grips. “I want you to pull

every single one of these names that begins with the letter B, whether first name or last. I also want you to correlate all the names to potential geographic locations.”

“Gonna take a while. I don’t have a lot of power.” He swept a hand at his collection of ancient, mismatched laptops. “What you see is what I’ve got.”

“Then you better start soon. I might be able to connect you with a werewolf computer wizard who can give you extra CPUs.” Assuming that Summer and Nash ever returned from their pre-honeymoon, anyway.

“You sure we want to?” McIntyre sat back in his chair. “I mean, someone’s

painting big red arrows for us. Someone wants us to find these people, or whatever's killed these people. Someone that's got powers we've never run into before." He tongued his labret plug, shaking his head slowly. "Whatever those arrows are pointing at, I dunno if we want to find out."

"But Anthony..." Elise said.

"He's not on the list."

"He didn't just vanish, either." Not Anthony. He would never have gone down without a fight. She didn't want to believe he could have gone down at all.

Her head jerked to the side again.

"Hey!" she barked, twisting to look at the girls seated on the couch behind her.

Deb pulled desperately on the end of one braid that she had gotten knotted around a hair tie. “It’s stuck!”

Elise flicked her wrist, and a knife appeared in her hand. The look she gave the kids would have made any adult shit their pants and run. The girls were not impressed. They kept pulling on her battered braid.

“Don’t stab my kids, Kavanagh,” McIntyre said, squinting at the laptop.

“If I haven’t stabbed them before, I’m not going to do it now.” Elise cut the rubber band off the bottom of her hair, taking more than a few strands along with it.

“No!” Deb protested.

“Use the bands without the metal

joiners,” Leticia called from the kitchen. “Even demon hair tangles.”

Dana delicately pulled a few of the braids together, sliding a bow around the end. “You look pretty, Aunt Elise.”

Elise moved to cut the bow off, too, but McIntyre’s glare stopped her. She clenched her jaw and lowered the knife.

She drained her beer.

“When I finish your geographic location thing, I’m gonna cross-reference this with police databases for missing people,” McIntyre said. His second chin wobbled when he shook his head. “I think this is big, Elise. Biggest case we’ve ever done.”

Leticia came into the room again. Instead of more Leffe, she had a cell

phone and a stack of freshly printed pages. “Here you go,” she said. McIntyre had already printed all of the B names for Elise. “This phone is magicked so that it won’t short circuit in Hell, but you’ll still have to be on Earth to make calls. No satellites or cell towers in Dis, you know.”

It was a crappy flip phone with a tiny screen and rubber padding around the edges. Looked like the kids had been decorating it. There were pink pony stickers on the back.

“Thanks,” Elise said dryly, pocketing it.

She stood, ignoring the wails of complaint from the kids.

“I’ll call as soon as I get a lead on

Anthony,” McIntyre said, hauling Deb into his lap. The girl had added a few bows to her own hair, as well. It stuck out in five different directions. “Watch out for yourself, Kavanagh.”

She rubbed her aching chest through her shirt. “I’ll try.”

# Eight

**MERE HOURS HAD** passed since Elise dropped Lincoln off in the Palace of Dis, and when she returned, Gerard was still disposing of the bodies of Sallosa's attendants. She could smell blood within the large bucket he carried.

She peered into the mouth of the bucket. There was nothing inside but a meaty sludge.

"I see you've got the grinder working again," Elise said.

Gerard heaved the bucket over a low iron fence and set it on the ground before climbing in after it. The hands



within the Palace's flesh gardens seemed to sense the presence of the puréed bodies, reaching toward it with straining fingers.

“Just needed a little elbow grease,” he said, and he tipped the bucket.

The slurry of blood, meat, and fat sloughed over the hands. The fingers trembled. Elise thought she could sense an inaudible sigh of relief.

He slopped the rest down the rows, tapped the bucket until it was empty, and then climbed back onto the other side.

“The House of Volac,” Elise said.

“Already on it. They caught wind of the executions. Volac herself has requested a meeting with you. An amiable one, she says. Feel free to bring

as many guards as you want and all that.”

“I just killed her daughter and all her attendants.”

“This is Hell,” Gerard said. “That’s kind of like sending flowers before a first date.” He set the bucket outside the door to the kitchens without going inside. When Elise moved to head for the gates, he stepped in front of her, blocking her path. “Did you eat since the thing with Gremory?”

Elise set her jaw. “Yes.” It was true. She had devoured several of Sallosa’s centuria, which had restored a lot of the energy lost in casting ethereal magic, if not quite enough to heal her.

“You sure? With all due respect,

ma'am, you're not looking good. I'll follow you down into the maw of the Coccytus if you want. You know that. But if we're going to do that, I want to follow you when you're already at your best."

"You're not coming with me to the House of Volac. I need you and Neuma to remain inside the Palace." Gerard and Neuma were both bound to the Palace's magic, just like Elise. At least one of them had to be within it at all times.

"I don't want my men following you if you can't protect them, either," Gerard said.

"Neuma's not available to feed me properly."

"There are a lot of guys around

here that would work as good substitutes. You're in charge. You can just order it. Anyone you want."

She thought of Lincoln—Lincoln in a hot shower, their slippery bodies intertwined; Lincoln plunging an electrified spear between her ribs and dragging her through town as she screamed.

"When is the meeting with Volac?" she asked.

He rubbed a hand down his face. Sighed. "Earliest possible convenience."

Elise continued toward the gate.

"Also, the deputy's having fits in the Great Library," Gerard said, hurrying to keep up with her.

“Apparently he’s pissed about having babysitters. He wants free rein of the Palace. Isaiah’s not having much fun trying to get the guy to focus, either.”

*When it rains...* “Fuck the both of them,” Elise said. That was all the stamina she could muster to deal with their bullshit for the time being. Rylie, Stephanie, and the McIntyre kids had worn the very last of her patience thin. “Mobilize my personal guards. We’re going to the House of Volac now.”

**Felicity whipped out** her Taser and zapped the steward. They had jacked up the power source so that it could discharge all at once, and the force of it blasted the demon off his feet and

slammed him hard against the wall.

Nikolaj fell, bleeding.

“Get him out of here!” Elise shouted.

Edwin grabbed the wounded guard by the collar and hauled him out the door.

Elise moved to follow, but Volac’s hand shot out and seized her arm. She hadn’t realized that she was even within the demon’s reach. “Don’t be in such a rush to leave,” Volac said. “You simply *must* stay for dinner.”

Elise tried to wrench free, but the demon was too strong. Instead she tried to phase away, diffusing into the shadowy corners of the room.

Her flesh held firm.

She'd run into only one demon that could do that before—keep her from phasing, forcing her to remain in her human form—and that had been Aquiel, the demon prince of nightmares and another of Belphegor's allies. Must have been a talent the whole hierarchy had.

Bad talent for Elise's sake.

The rusted points of Volac's fangs buried into the meat of Elise's bicep. Pain flamed up her shoulder, down to her fingertips, clawed at her heart.

She screamed as she ripped free of Volac, leaving ragged slivers of flesh behind in the demon's mouth. The demon's tongue lashed over her own face, tasting Elise's amber blood. A strange gleam filled Volac's eyes.

“Delicious.”

“Get down!” Felicity shouted.

Elise hugged her arm to her body and leaped out of the way. A half-second later, the guard opened fire on Volac.

The bullets didn’t even hit. They vanished in midair.

Volac rose from the fainting couch. There were no legs under her voluminous skirts. Silk swirled around her as the room darkened, turning her into the core of a black hole.

Her arm lashed out again. It extended, unbound by physical limitations of bone, and her hand closed around Felicity’s throat.

With a jerk, she beheaded the guard.



Volac's power slammed into Elise. Her energy was so much larger than it should have been. It was like the large-chested woman with nails in her gums was only a hand puppet for an even larger demon—one that Elise could sense, but not see.

The weight of her aura smashed into Elise. She had thought that the nightmare on the shore of the Amniosium was surprisingly strong, but it was nothing compared to Volac. Her power was out of this world. Elise felt herself bending under it.

Clenching her fists, Elise bared her teeth and pushed back.

They clashed, demon against demon, slamming into each other like

two nuclear warheads. The walls of the sunroom ripped away around them. Glass shattered, showering into Elise's hair, slicing into her arms. Volac's wig was flung into the wind, baring a head underneath with no skull, skin wrapped around a pulsing brain.

Elise stood strong against the tides of energy that Volac shoved at her, and the energy hurricaned around them harder.

But, slowly, Elise was worn down.

She staggered, trying to concentrate all of her energy on smashing Volac into nothingness. If she could just peel away into darkness, she could consume the demon—devour her physical form, make it part of herself. But Volac's grip was

too tight. Elise's powers weren't enough.

Elise didn't have any ethereal runes left. She didn't have any infernal runes, either. She had no magic left to help her stand up against the power of one of Dis's oldest Houses.

So Elise ran.

She wrenched herself away from Volac, breaking the eye contact. It was harder than it should have been.

Her boots pounded against the wooden floors as she rushed through the antechamber, echoing hollowly within the facade of Volac's plantation home. Wood cracked behind her. All that priceless Earth mahogany shattered as though smashed by a wrecking ball,

peppering the back of Elise's jacket, pelting her head.

"Please, don't leave," Volac cackled. "I so seldom entertain visitors!"

Elise launched off the stairs just as the entire house boomed behind her, making the ground shudder. It sounded like it was imploding under the weight of Volac's power and the demon didn't even care.

She was closing in.

The truck was waiting outside the gates, beyond Volac's soul-linked wards, where, hopefully, it would still work.

She put all her energy into her legs, pumping her fists, hair streaming behind

her as she ran. The path trembled under her feet. Stone began to crack. Volac was chewing through the earth in her pursuit.

Elise shot through the gate. Azis held the back door of the truck open. She was relieved to see that he was still alive and had returned to the pickup first. She wasn't sure she would have been able to wait for him if he had still been in the slave quarters.

She leaped in. Nikolaj was on the floor of the truck, breathing shallow, heart slowing. Felicity's body was gone. And Azis didn't seem to have recovered a single slave.

Too late to worry about that now.  
“Fucking floor it!” Elise shouted.

Edwin slammed his foot onto the gas, whipping the pickup into a one-eighty. They kicked up a cloud of dust behind them as they drove back toward the city.

Elise twisted in the seat, watching the gates recede in the rear window.

Volac hadn't followed. She was trapped within the invisible walls of her own wards. But Elise could see the size of the true demon now—a shadow larger than even Aquiel. She was crouched on those wasted fields with multiple heads, a thrashing tail, and a body of dense smoke. The woman's body wasn't even a hand puppet. More like a finger puppet.

Even as they drove away, Elise

could hear Volac continue to cackle over her victory and the Father's failure.

**GERARD MET THEM** at the gates of the Palace of Dis. Elise shoved her bloody jacket into his hands and staggered inside.

“That good, huh?” he asked.

“I’ve had worse meetings with Householders, but not many. Get me a list of every demon in Belphegor’s hierarchy. I need to know how many helpful assholes out there are supporting my administration.”

“Consider it done,” he said.

“Anyone recognize the names on the list of missing people yet?”



“Not yet.”

She muttered a few curses under her breath. It didn't help anything to swear, but it made her feel better. Not many other things were doing that at the moment.

Elise stripped her shirt off over her head and tossed it aside, too. Gerard scooped it up as he followed her through the courtyard. She knew that wearing only her tank top and sports bra wouldn't adequately conceal the wound on her chest, but she didn't care. Anything to get the stink of the House of Volac off of her. She couldn't stand how much her shirt reeked of that demon.

“Why are you following me?” she snapped at Gerard. “There's shit to get

done. Go.”

“Wait,” Azis said, rushing to catch up with them. “We need to talk about the slave quarters.”

The reminder of her failure rankled. “What about them? You didn’t get any volunteers to leave with us. End of story.”

“There was nobody there to volunteer.”

Elise stopped. Faced him. “Dead?”

“Gone,” Azis said.

Gerard shook his head. “I tracked down the auction records for slaves sold to the House of Volac. There were almost two hundred, and she didn’t sell any of them. Not while Aquiel’s administration was here, and not since.”

“They weren’t there,” Azis said, firmer than before. “The slave quarters were unoccupied. No clothes, no signs of waste, or even any kind of food or water. There hasn’t been anyone there for weeks.”

“Missing,” Elise said softly.

What the fuck had Volac done?

As if reading her mind, Azis handed Elise a scroll. It was covered in a table filled with tiny handwriting—names, dates, and ages. Elise’s heart sped. “What is this?”

“Ledger of slaves that Volac sold. I found it in the manor while you were still talking to her. I believe that she cut a deal under the table without notifying the Palace.”

Volac's scribe had written down all of the slaves' names. Why? Demons didn't typically record the names of the people that they bought and sold. Gender, ages, and the physical condition in which they were acquired—yes. But names were meaningless to them.

Elise flipped through to the end. All of them were listed as having been sold to the same House.

“Which House has the ‘CV’ mark?” she asked.

“Can't tell you off the top of my head,” Gerard said. “I'll have to cross-reference it with auction records.” He held out a hand to take them, but Elise tucked the scroll into her pocket.

“I'll check myself,” Elise said. She

needed to check Lincoln's progress on the warlock spells anyway. "Thank you, Azis."

**All of the** lights in the Great Library were off except for a single desk lamp. Lincoln sat alone within its glow, surrounded by papers, a notepad in his lap. With a mere thought, Elise darted through the shadows to arrive at his side. An awkward, misshapen rune was drawn on his pad of paper, and it barely resembled the warlock rune in Onoskelis's book. Deputy Lincoln Marshall was good at investigating. His art skills left much to be desired.

He must have seen her coming, but he didn't acknowledge her. He was

glaring down at his hands and their dull red glow.

Elise set a covered tray in front of Lincoln. He looked at it, and then at her, nonplussed. “What’s wrong with your hair?”

She drew her dagger and checked her reflection in the blade. One of the braids that Deb and Dana had made was so knotted that it stuck out from her skull. Neither her guards nor Volac had thought to tell her how ridiculous she looked. No wonder that damn demon had been giggling so much.

Muttering curses, she ripped the rubber band away and finger-combed the tangles out. “Don’t ask.”

“You went investigating without

me, and went to a shitty hair salon while you were at it,” Lincoln said.

She swallowed down her anger. He hadn’t been at the House of Volac with her. He hadn’t seen Felicia and Nikolaj die, didn’t know how miserable her day had been. And if she tried to tell him that, it would only fuel his argument that she should have let him help her.

Maybe he would even be right.

“Just open the damn tray,” Elise said.

“What is it?”

“An apology.”

That got his attention. He lifted the metal dome off of the tray. Underneath, there was a small pie with a crust that had been carefully folded and imprinted

with tines of a fork. Baked cherry filling peeked through the slices decorating the center.

A smile spread over Lincoln's lips. "Cherry pie? Here?"

"It was a special order. Don't get used to it." She took a napkin and fork from the inner pocket of her jacket and handed them to him.

"Looks good," Lincoln said. He kicked the chair next to him, pushing it away from the desk. His smile was lazy and almost boyish, a little of that country charm finally peeking through. "You're not going to make me eat it alone, are you?"

"I still don't like pie," she said, but she could feel herself weakening.



“Yeah, yeah. Sit down.”

Elise glanced around the library. They were alone. Nobody to see if she sat down for pie, nobody to judge her as weak.

She grabbed a box of records she'd had Paimon collect before sitting down with Lincoln. He put the first bite into his mouth. His eyes dropped closed. Satisfaction radiated from every inch of him, both inside his skull and in the fibers of his muscles. Shoulders that looked like they had been knotted for months relaxed. And the dopamine—Elise had gotten good at recognizing dopamine. He was happy.

Amazing what just a single bite of food could do to a man.

“Your cooks are good,” Lincoln said.

She lifted a stack of papers out of her box. “They’ve been used to serving a master that would kill them if they didn’t cook well.” She smiled thinly. “I’m slightly more tolerable than the last demons in charge were.”

“Only slightly. Have a bite.”

“No.”

“Come on, you know you like it.”

“I like watching your reaction when you eat,” Elise said. It was true. She loved seeing the pleasure centers of his brain activating with the second and third bites he took. The man was nearly ecstatic.

She shuffled through the pages in

search of the “CV” House label that marked Volac’s scroll.

“I haven’t had pie since I got exorcised,” Lincoln admitted as he stuffed more into his mouth. “Can’t get a good milkshake these days, either. Not a lot of electricity topside, which means not enough refrigeration to keep ice cream cold.”

“Topside” was a word that demons used to indicate Earth. It was strange hearing it in Lincoln’s drawl. If he didn’t realize how odd it was for that word to be in his vocabulary, she wasn’t going to point it out. “You won’t find milkshakes in Hell. Sorry. Canned cherries, sure. I’m also told that pie dough is easy. But you wouldn’t want to have anything

made out of the kind of milk you get here.”

Lincoln's eyes went distant, like he was remembering something. He set down the fork. Sat back in his chair. “I know. I remember that.” So much for his relaxation—he was tense all over again. “When I was possessed... Nightmares don't like to eat cherry pie.”

Elise was very familiar with the food offered by street vendors in Dis. She didn't indulge in the human flesh kebabs or organ meat candies, even though she suspected she would find them more satisfying than what the kitchens were producing under her orders. She planned on doing away with all trade in human flesh. It wouldn't do

for her to satisfy her cravings on something she was trying to make illegal.

“Don’t think about it,” Elise said, setting aside several pages from her box. The House of Abraxas had been buying nearly every slave that passed through Hell for years, and his mark was on everything. No “CV.”

Lincoln gazed at her, thoughts flickering over his mind and vanishing just as quickly. “Is it that easy for you? Is that how you don’t let the sins drive you insane? You just don’t think about them?”

“Generally, no. I don’t.” She shrugged. “I don’t think of them as sins anyway. We all do what we must to

survive.”

He prodded the filling of the pie disconsolately. “Doesn’t matter if you don’t think of this all as sinful. It’s still wrong, and God knows it.” He ran his tongue over his teeth, as if trying to get an awful taste out of his mouth. “Or worse—God has forgotten me.”

God had never known that Lincoln existed, and a dead god had no memories to forget. She opened her mouth to tell him that. Then she shut it again.

Elise had come to understand that people often didn’t want to hear the truth. Men like Lincoln already knew the truth deep in their hearts, so what they really wanted was childish reassurance.

Half-truths and outright deceits to help them sleep at night.

She couldn't give him that, but she didn't need to tell him the truth about Adam, either.

"You can't change what you did in the past," Elise said. "You can only move forward."

Lincoln nodded, poking at his pie with the fork. "Guess you're right."

She flipped through the last page from Paimon's box. The CV logo was nowhere to be found in her papers.

"Damn," she sighed.

"Having trouble?"

"The House of Volac sold a couple hundred slaves under my nose. I can't figure out who took them, but I think it

has to do with the missing people on Earth.”

He perked up at that. “You think everyone might be in Hell? Including the folks from Two Rivers?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“What can I do to help?” Lincoln asked.

“You’re already working on it.” Elise grabbed the notebook out of his lap and ran her fingers over the mark he’d been drawing. There was no power in the drawings. Even with Isaiah’s help, he wasn’t making any progress toward casting warlock magic.

She set his papers aside, put the box of records on the floor, and turned to give him her full attention. “I can’t win



against these demons right now, Lincoln. They're as strong as I am, but they all have lifetimes of knowledge to back up that strength. I need an edge. I need something they don't have." She tapped the rune on the page. "I need this."

"I can't do 'this,'" he said.

"You won't if you don't let Isaiah and Aniruddha help you. Cooperate with them. They're good at what they do."

Lincoln pushed the plate away from himself. "They want me to embrace my inner demon."

"And?"

"I might already be damned for what I did when I was possessed. I want to make it right, not make it worse."

"You can be a demon without being

evil.”

His expression said that he didn't agree with that. He probably thought she was evil, too. A very tempting evil, but still evil.

How could Elise convince him otherwise? She didn't even know where to begin. It hadn't been a fight for her to embrace her demon—she'd had no choice in the matter, and there was no point lamenting what couldn't be changed.

*James would understand him.* The traitorous thought rose from nowhere, unbidden.

“Work with Isaiah,” Elise said. It came out harsher than she intended. “We don't have time for crises of faith and

morals.”

Lincoln didn't seem to hear what she had said. He was staring at her very intently, leaning toward her. “I think that I remember you,” he said. “When I was possessed. You were there.”

Yes, she had been there. She had been so much “there” that he had gotten inside of her guts and made her scream. “Toward the end,” Elise said in a measured tone. “You spent several weeks under the influence before I found you.”

“You beat the shit out of me. I remember that, too.”

“I was trying to restrain the nightmare so that I could exorcise you,” Elise said. “I had little choice. In any

case, you returned the favor pretty thoroughly.”

He spread his hand over her stomach, touching the place that he had speared her with an electrified weapon. His hand was glowing faintly again and his skin was as hot as the ground in Hell. It heated her through her shirt and raised goosebumps on her shoulders.

“Seems like I messed you up pretty good,” Lincoln said. “Is that why you’re not as friendly as you used to be?”

She had been hoping he wouldn’t remember that. He was right, though—it was hard to be as “friendly” with someone who had driven a blade through her stomach. Elise rested her hand over his. “Don’t worry about it. I fed. I

healed.”

“You fed,” he echoed. His eyes dropped to her lips. “Do you still like blood?”

“Like” seemed like such a petty, insignificant word. She needed it. Thirsted for it. Relied on its strength, warm and dripping and sticky.

But she only said, “Yes.” He was leaning so close now. There were only a few inches between them, and Elise knew it wouldn’t take much to bridge that distance. “Are you still hungry?”

His gaze dropped to her lips. “What do you mean?”

“In Two Rivers. You said you were hungry.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m still hungry.”

The kind of need that couldn't be satiated by cherry pie.

“Me too,” Elise said.

Neuma had summoned him to feed her. She was hungry, he was hungry. It seemed like an easy solution.

At least, it should have been.

His lips brushed over hers, lingering. Probing. He tasted sweet and earthy at the same time. He tasted like someone who belonged in a small town like Northgate, so very human, so very *normal*—not at all like a demon. There was something unsettlingly sour about the flavor of the pie on his lips. Maybe the canned cherries had been sitting around for too long.

Lincoln cupped the back of her

neck to deepen the kiss, but Elise pulled back. The taste of sweetened cherries remained on her tongue.

Confusion creased his brow. “What’s wrong? Before I got possessed, you and me... I know I didn’t dream that.”

It felt like it had been years since they had taken that shower together, naked and slippery in the steaming water. Elise knew now that it had been the first time she had unwittingly fed like a succubus did—not by eating her enemies whole, but by drinking sexual energy through her body.

“You didn’t dream it,” she said, curling her fingers in the neck of his shirt, sliding her fingernail up to his

pulse point. His heart was thumping hard and steady. It sounded like the promise of strength to her.

“I guess I don’t expect we should be picking up where we left off before I got possessed,” Lincoln said. “It’s been a while. Things have changed. I hurt you.”

Where *had* they left off? Elise had enjoyed her week with him, whatever it was worth. Going to morgues and murder scenes together had been better than most of her other dating experiences. But she had never been all that interested in having anything with him other than sex.

Neuma had other ideas. Maybe Lincoln did, too.



And maybe both of them were smarter than Elise.

“I just stopped you because you need to know that I can feed off of sex, like a succubus,” she said. “It’s a very recent discovery. I’m not sure I can fuck without feeding, though.”

She expected him to look angry. James had been angry. But Lincoln’s pulse only accelerated, his eyes heated, and electrical signals sparked within his skull. “I thought... So it’s not just blood.”

“No. It’s not just blood.”

He rolled the thoughts over in his mind. His hormones had gone wild, like an ocean in a winter storm. He understood why Elise was warning him

that she couldn't have sex without feeding. He understood that it was an offer, and now he was contemplating the implications. Wondering, maybe, if it was something a good Christian man should do with a demon in Hell.

Without speaking, he cut into his pie with the fork and lifted it. He held it in front of her lips, letting her smell the aroma of it.

Lincoln watched closely as she opened her mouth to take the bite.

Elise still didn't like the pie. It tasted terrible. But that didn't matter—she still enjoyed what the sight of her eating it did to him.

He dropped the fork. His hands cupped her face and he kissed her hard,

much harder than before. Hard enough that she might have bruised if she had been human.

She didn't stop him this time. She hooked her hands behind his neck, locking him into place. The hunger in her swelled to consume her. His passion was building, shifting the flow of blood and hormones within his body, but the need that filled her was entirely different. It made her stomach cramp. Her heart pounded.

Elise pushed up the hem of his shirt, tracing her fingers over the bricks of his abs, no longer quite as defined as she remembered them. Goosebumps lifted in the wake of her touch.

“Lord help me,” Lincoln said in a

husky voice. “How does it work? Feeding you? What do I—how do we do that?” He wasn’t going to argue with her. He must have thought it was damnation, and he was still going to let her do it.

Her fingers inched to the hem of the leather trousers, which were just a little too loose on him. “You don’t need to do anything special,” she murmured into his throat, nipping his pulse point gently. “Just everything that comes to you naturally.” Very naturally—she cupped his erection through his pants, sliding her palm along the shaft. His abs clenched. He trembled.

His hand burned a path underneath her shirt, shoving up the hem to bare her stomach, cupping her breast through her

bra.

And then his hand froze. He jerked back.

“Elise?”

Lincoln lifted his fingers between them. They were slicked with amber fluid.

She looked down. The wound over her heart had opened anew, spilling blood straight from her heart, soaking through her shirt.

“Motherfucker,” she breathed.

As soon as she saw the damage, the pain slammed into her. It unfurled from her stomach and sent barbs through her veins.

She tried to stand and found that her legs wouldn't support her. She lost her

footing, hit the ground.

Elise wasn't strong enough to stand. She barely managed to roll over.

She stared toward the distant roof of the Great Library. It was even taller than she remembered. The stacks seemed to be swirling around her. Her tongue swelled in her mouth, heavy and stiff. She tasted something sour. It wasn't the cherries.

Lincoln's face loomed. "Elise?"

She could barely hear him. She struggled to speak. "Poison," she said, but he already knew. She could see it coming over him, too, slower than it had hit her, but no less powerfully. He swayed on his hands and knees. His face turned red. His eyes glazed over.

Lincoln had the presence of mind to fall beside her instead of on top of her. He gasped for air, clutched at his throat. “It burns,” he rasped.

Her stomach clenched, heaved. Bile rolled over her tongue. She vomited.

Elise pitched into darkness.

**ELISE DRAGGED HERSELF** toward consciousness. She could hear voices. She followed them out of the darkness into the light. “The chef’s gone. No idea where he went.”

“How can you just lose a cook? He was mortal. He couldn’t go far outside the walls and expect to survive.”

“Not unless he had help.”

A familiar man spoke. “Nobody has exited through the gates since she came back from the House of Volac. There’s no other way he could have escaped.” That was Gerard.



“Outta my way.” Neuma.

Elise tried to lift her head, but she felt heavy. Her bones hurt.

Cool hands brushed over her jaw. She peeled her eyes open to see Neuma sitting beside her. When Elise attempted to speak, her body clenched and bile surged in her throat again.

“I got a bucket,” Neuma said.

Elise rolled over. Half of the vomit managed to hit the bucket. The other half splattered onto the floor.

She groaned as she emptied her stomach. It burned in her throat, the wound in her chest, made heat prick at her eyes. And what came out of her mouth didn't look like stomach acid. It was black and chunky.

“Bleeding,” Elise gasped.

“Don’t worry,” Neuma said, rubbing her back. “Some of it’s mine. I fed you while you were unconscious. Just get it all out.”

She didn’t have the choice to do anything else. She heaved again, and this time, she managed to get everything in the bucket. Elise flopped onto her pillows, wiping at her mouth. Her entire body ached as if with fever. “What the fuck?”

“Here.” Neuma lifted her wrist. She had punctured the skin with a dagger—just a tiny cut that flowed freely.

Elise latched on and drank, swallowing it down in long gulps. The warmth of it soothed her burning throat.

She didn't realize exactly how hungry she had been until she began to drink, but once she did, she couldn't seem to stop. She sucked hard on Neuma's wrist.

"There you go," Neuma murmured. "Just a little more... Okay. That's good." It took all of Elise's willpower to release her, but she had gotten good at respecting Neuma's boundaries over time. She wrenched free. Fell back with a gasp. "Better?" Neuma slid a magicked ring onto her thumb again. The bleeding immediately slowed.

Elise opened her mouth to say, "Yes." Her stomach lifted into her throat.

She spewed blood into the bucket again.

When she was done, she felt a little better—good enough to look around, at least.

They were in her bedroom at the tower. Through her bleary eyes, Elise could see Gerard and Isaiah caught in a tense conversation at the door. She couldn't hear what they were saying. The sound of their hearts thundered too loudly in her ears.

“The pie was poisoned with some kind of metal,” Neuma said. “They’re trying to find the asshole that did it.”

Elise’s head was pounding. She struggled to think. “What kind of metal is poisonous?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“Bet you it was mined at the House

of Volac.”

“It’s not your problem right now,” Neuma said, smoothing her hand over Elise’s forehead. “Focus on getting stronger first. Vengeance later.”

She pushed Neuma’s arm aside and sat up. It made the room whirl around her. “Where’s Lincoln? Is he okay?”

The direction of Neuma’s gaze answered the question for her. Elise looked to the opposite side of her vast bed. Deputy Lincoln Marshall was unconscious on top of the sheets, sweat drenching his forehead, chest rising and falling rapidly. His eyes were still closed.

“He hasn’t woken up yet,” Neuma said. “I don’t know what to do.”

The bed sheets were wet and sticky with Elise's vomit. She kicked them off and crawled over to Lincoln's side of the bed.

She pressed her hand to his chest and stared into his skull. He was sickly, fading, even as she felt herself returning to normal. Lincoln was a much less powerful demon than she was. Half-mortal. What barely gave her heartburn could kill him.

"Who did this to us?" Elise asked. She surprised herself with the heat in her voice.

"They're still searching for the cook that baked the pie. Whatever did this to you, someone put it there on purpose."

Another assassination attempt, and Lincoln was collateral damage.

Anger clenched in her heart. Poison was such an affront to her pride. A weasel way of trying to kill someone. There was no way to fight back against that—nothing to stab, nothing to shoot.

Neuma was still speaking. “I don’t know what to feed Lincoln. He didn’t respond to blood. Then Isaiah tried to heal him with magic, but that didn’t work either, and he’s the strongest witch in the Palace. We don’t got anyone better.” She said it so gently, like she was breaking bad news to Elise. The worst kind of news.

She was telling Elise that she thought Lincoln was still going to die.

Elise wasn't going to let that happen.

She closed her eyes, took off her warding ring, and reached out to the only person she knew that could help.

*Where are you?* she thought, turning her thoughts inward.

Even though her eyelids were shut, she could see as though her eyes were open. She saw another world. An empty kitchen, windows that were fogged with ash, the faint orange light of fading sunlight. Someone had been cooking, judging by the faintest odor of gas. Candles burned on the countertop, casting flickering shadows on the walls.

It took James so long to respond that she almost thought that he hadn't



heard her, even though she felt the brush of his mind against hers.

*James, where are you?* she repeated, louder this time, pushing her consciousness against his.

No, he had heard—he was only shocked that she had reached out to him.

His voice in her mind was touched with sadness.

*I'm home, Elise.*

**Rylie awoke to** the sound of pounding. At first she thought that she was hearing the churning of machinery in Dis, and she was alert instantly. Her heart jackhammered.

She didn't manage to get out of bed before the fists crashed through her front

door.

Abel was on his feet in an instant, sending the sheets to the floor. He had been sleeping naked. His skin was slicked with sweat. “Wait here,” he said, golden eyes flashing in the darkness.

He crossed the bedroom in three strides, flung open the bedroom door, and launched into the living room.

“Abel, wait!” she gasped.

She tripped on the way out of bed, ankles tangled in the blankets. She hit the floor on all fours.

From her vantage point, she watched her mate fighting the intruders. They were silhouetted by floodlights outside. Those security lights hadn’t

been turned on lately, since Elise had been protecting the fissure from the other side, but someone had positioned them outside her cottage and fired up the generators.

*This is it*, she realized with a wash of a chill. *This is the end*.

She wasn't sure how she knew it, but she did.

Abel fell with a roar, pinned to the ground by several figures Rylie didn't recognize—three men, all of them smelling like wolves. A fourth stepped around them and made a beeline for Rylie.

Levi Riese strode into the bedroom. The sight of him made her heart stop, but she wasn't surprised. Not

really. Some part of her had known that this had been coming since Felton had confessed to biting Deepali at Levi's urging.

"Come on." He grabbed her by the elbow, hauling her to her feet. His fingers dug into her flesh painfully.

She jerked out of his grasp. "Don't touch me!"

He reached for her again. Rylie balled her hand into a fist and swung. She wasn't used to punching—biting and tearing, yes, but striking like a human, no—but she was still Alpha, with all of the werewolf strength that bestowed upon her. Her knuckles connected with his jaw. The force of it was enough to send him sailing across the room, back

smashing against the wall.

Felton entered. He managed to dodge Rylie's second, clumsier swing, and tackled her onto the bed.

He was heavy and hot on top of her. He seized her wrists, shoved them down next to her head. His weight straddling her chest pinned her in place.

Rylie's wolf surged within, sweeping over her with fury. This was one of her pack, a submissive, and he had attacked her. There was only one way to handle such an attack: quickly, decisively, and messily, making sure that no other wolf would be stupid enough to repeat his sin.

Abel was shouting in the other room. Bones popped and ground as he

shifted. Her wolf wanted to join him.

She could feel the massive, furry body waiting to overtake her, like the wolf's flank was rubbing against the inside of her ribcage. Her fingernails had already fallen out. Blood slicked the sheets as she struggled against Felton's grip, trying to bring her new claws to bear. Just a few more seconds, and she would have werewolf jaws, too—perfect to rip out Felton's throat.

Her spine ached, threatening to extend into a tail.

*No. I can't change.*

It was hard to think rationally while flooded with adrenaline, listening to her mate's yelps as other werewolves beat at him. She could smell silver—they had

come armed to restrain Abel.

But she couldn't change. She needed to calm herself down. Needed to hang onto her human form, no matter how much it hurt her to do it.

She could tell by Levi's smirk that he knew Rylie wasn't going to change.

"Your sister will never forgive you for this," Rylie said. She wasn't sure he could understand her. Half of her teeth had already become wolf-like, and it made her lisp strangely.

Levi shrugged. "Bekah's never been all that interested in pack politics."

"Is that all this is? Politics?"

"That, and I just don't like you." He turned, raised his voice. "She's over here!"

A pair of men came into the room. They were wearing Union black and they carried silver chains. Rylie's heart felt like it was going to explode out of her chest.

"Don't use those on me," she said.

"Do you hear this?" Felton scoffed.

"She's *begging*. Some Alpha."

"Shut the fuck up," Levi said, cuffing him with a hard swipe. He knocked the werewolf off of Rylie. Even without Felton's weight on her chest, she couldn't seem to breathe. "We don't have to use the chains if you come nicely."

"Where are we going?"

His eyes glimmered. "Northgate."

She hesitated a second too long.



They moved to restrain her, and Rylie jerked out of reach.

“I’ll come,” Rylie said. She couldn’t fight them anyway—not unless she succumbed to the Alpha wolf’s brutal rage. And if she did that, then she would never be able to hang onto her human skin. She would lose control. She would shapeshift.

And then she would kill every single one of these people.

Rylie wouldn’t do it. She stood, and when Levi grabbed her arm, she didn’t try to break free.

Her gut twisted at the sight of Abel in the living room. He had gone down hard, and now his animal body was bound in chains. He was a huge,

majestic beast with sleek black fur, almost more of a bear than a wolf. They had muzzled him and locked it with silver. His eyes were glazed with pain.

“Take that off of him,” Rylie said.

Levi ignored the command, shoving her out the door.

There was an SUV waiting. The back door was already open. Even chained with silver, it took four men to toss Abel into the cargo compartment.

“Get in the backseat,” Levi said.

Rylie obeyed quietly. They had Abel—she didn’t have any other choice.

The sounds of a fight hadn’t gone unnoticed. The door to the cottage across the street opened, and Trevin stumbled out, hiking sweatpants over his hips. The

instant he saw Levi, anger flamed in his eyes.

“What do you think you’re doing, dude?”

“Stay out of this, Trevin,” Levi said. “My problem isn’t with you.”

Crystal shoved out of the cottage behind him. Her jaw dropped open. “Oh my *God*. Is this a takeover?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Rylie, change me!”

Only Alpha werewolves could change on command, but they could also force other werewolves to transform in between moons. If Rylie made Trevin and Crystal shapeshift, then the Apple would attack them, too. The cult had come with silver chains. Who said that they hadn’t also brought silver bullets?

How determined was Levi to get rid of Rylie and Abel?

Rylie couldn't allow her pack to get hurt in this. There was a peaceful resolution here, somehow, somewhere—Levi wasn't a great guy, but he wasn't a madman, either. He was just an egomaniac with a grudge.

But even though she hadn't reached out with her power to change Crystal and Trevin, both of their skins began to ripple.

Apparently, the silver chains hadn't knocked Abel out hard enough to keep him from using his Alpha powers on them.

“No!” Rylie cried. “Don't!”

Abel had never been as good at

changing the werewolves as Rylie was. He didn't do it quickly or painlessly. Tonight, though, he practically wrenched the wolves out of Crystal and Trevin, like he ripped open their human flesh and tossed it aside.

In a torrent of blood and fur, the two of them changed.

Levi shoved Rylie into the back of the SUV and slammed the door behind her.

She twisted to watch her wolves attack the members of the Apple. Crystal was brutal. Fast. Downright *mean*. She snapped her jaws shut on the leg of the nearest man and twisted her head, severing the limb at the knee.

Another man lifted a gun, aiming it

at Crystal's head.

A shriek tore from Rylie. "*No!*"

But Levi gunned the engine of the SUV, tearing down the road. He turned a corner before Rylie could see what had happened to Crystal.

Her stomach clenched. She was going to be sick. Rylie clapped both hands over her mouth.

It took a few minutes to gain enough control to speak. "Abel told me that he talked to Stephanie. She promised to ask you to stop messing around with my wolves."

Levi didn't look back, focusing on the sliver of road they could see through the headlights. "She did talk to me. I ignored her. Stephanie might be in

charge of the Apple, but she's no werewolf. She has nothing to do with pack matters."

"This isn't just some pack matter, Levi," Rylie said. She leaned to touch his shoulder in the front seat. "You know you've always been welcome in the sanctuary. We're not enemies."

He elbowed her away. "Don't touch me."

"Don't hurt my wolves."

Levi's eyes were reflected in the rearview mirror, glaring at her. "Your wolves? The ones that you've mismanaged and gotten killed at the mouth of Hell?"

"My wolves," Rylie whispered. They had always been her wolves,

always would be. She was Alpha. Nothing Levi did would change that.

Right?

**Levi parked the** SUV right in front of the statue of Bain Marshall, inside the barricades that the Apple had erected. Storm clouds roiled overhead, concealing the gash to Shamain that hadn't quite healed.

He jumped out. Pulled Rylie into the wind with him. They were right against the edge of the fissure.

“Why here?” she asked, pressing her whipping hair against her shoulders with both hands.

The question answered itself. There was a crowd gathering, even bigger than



the one Rylie had seen around the fissure earlier. People had come out to see what Levi was going to do to the Alphas.

Levi hauled Abel out of the back of the SUV. He had shifted back to human within the chains so that the muzzle hung loosely around his neck. Bright red burns crisscrossed his skin, leaving blisters where they had dug into him. Levi dropped Abel on the lawn then shoved Rylie to the ground beside him.

She didn't think twice before unhooking the chains. They sizzled against her fingers, but she bit back a cry as she released Abel and pulled him onto his knees. The sight of the wounds made her want to cry.

"I can't change," Abel groaned

against the top of her head, gripping her shoulders tightly. “The silver. You have to do it.”

He wanted her to shapeshift and kill Levi.

She bit her bottom lip. She *wanted* to change and protect Abel, but...she couldn't. And it had nothing to do with silver.

Rylie glared up at Levi through the blaze of firelight. Hell reflected on him, casting his features in stark shadows. “What’s the point of this? What do you possibly think you can accomplish?”

“Join my pack,” Levi said.

“*What?*”

“I’m Alpha now. Swear to join my pack now, while everyone is watching,

and I'll let you both stay."

*His pack?*

Rylie's eyes swept over the clearing. The number of witnesses was growing. She had initially assumed that the people watching them were members of the Apple that had never left Northgate, but then the wind shifted, carrying their scent to her. She smelled pine trees and cold stone. Open air dotted by starlight. Old cabins, rotting wood, wet soil.

This was the pack. Over twenty of them, at a quick count.

More than half of Rylie's werewolves were standing with Levi.

This wasn't just Levi taking over. This was an organized revolt.

There were so many familiar faces standing behind him. Some people who had been with her for years—people who had faced down the Union on Gray Mountain the night that she became Alpha in the first place. But they weren't there to defend her. They were there to throw in their lots with Levi.

Levi, who was willing to bite more people and turn them into werewolves.

Levi, who was a member of the same cult that had made Rylie's life a living hell.

Her eyes burned, and it wasn't with the pain of transformation. She swallowed down tears. She had given everything for the pack, even the things she never thought she could give. Not

just money and the time required to build the sanctuary, but her life. The lives of her children. The lives of friends, like Toshiko, and even Seth himself.

All for the pack.

“Have I been that bad?” she whispered.

Levi’s brow creased. “You’re not a leader, Gresham. You never have been. You’re just some dumb kid that survived getting bitten.” He thumped his chest with his fist. “I’ll be able to make the pack a force to be reckoned with.”

Rylie would have given him the ability to be Alpha if she could have. If it meant that she and Abel could live without being bothered—fine. She had been willing to let Elise exorcise her to

reach that end.

Having it taken from her felt so different from giving it up willingly. It hurt.

She looked at each member of her pack in turn. Cassie had been a resident of the California coven's werewolf sanctuary. Sanjana had been at her wedding with Seth. Antwan had helped Rylie fix the fences at the Gresham ranch after the bad snowstorm in 2012.

Not just friends, but family, too. Rylie caught sight of Abram over Levi's shoulder. He was on the outermost edge of the lawn, almost to the street. His expression was inscrutable in the night.

What would Levi do if Abram attacked? Her son couldn't defend Rylie

against an entire mutinous werewolf pack.

She caught Abram's eye and stood up. "Run," she whispered, hoping that he would read her lips. "Get out of here."

"We're not joining your pack," Abel said, struggling to stand beside her.

Levi's fingernails had been replaced by claws. The bones in his face shifted under the skin, popping faintly. "You don't have any choice, Wilder. There's nowhere else for you to go."

"All you assholes want Levi in charge of the pack? Whatever. We'll go to Hell," Abel said loudly enough for everyone to hear him. "Moon's in three days, asshole. You ready for it?"

*Hell?* Rylie gaped at him. "Abel,

we can't—”

“Okay,” Levi said. “If you’re happy to turn tail, then go to Hell. Get out of here.”

Abel pulled Rylie hard against his side as he walked up to the edge of the bridge. She gazed up at him in silent questioning. There was no trace of doubt in his face. Abel was, in his own way, an immovable force of nature—something that used to terrify her. The twisted left side of his scarred face didn’t bother her anymore. But the hardness she saw in his eyes...that frightened her.

It reminded her of the man who had once hunted her, threatened to kill her. He was back.



And for some reason, he was retreating.

“Abel?” she whispered.

“Trust me,” he said.

She did trust him. She trusted him with everything.

Rylie glanced back at Levi. He looked so damn smug. She swallowed down her pride and asked, “Will you feed Sir Lumpy until Summer comes back for him? Please?”

“Yeah,” Levi said. “I can do that.” Even he wasn’t so much of an asshole that he would let the cat starve.

Rylie stepped over the edge of the fissure with Abel, leaving the pack and the Earth behind.

**Smoke consumed Rylie.** She gagged on it hard enough that she slipped to her knees, her only anchor Abel's strong arm trapped between her hands. She had been fighting the urge to vomit ever since she had seen Crystal and Trevin shifting on the mountain. Now she lost the battle. Everything she had eaten the day before spilled out of her.

Abel jerked her to her feet again. "Don't stop moving."

She cupped her hand under her mouth, trying not to get sick all over her clothes. Throwing up didn't make her feel any better. The illness had taken root deep in her soul.

Sand blasted her skin, exposed by the long white nightgown she had been

sleeping in. The healing fever swept over her again and again, struggling to heal her as Dis inflicted damage.

The judgmental faces of her pack haunted her. She could see them in the shape of the smoke as Abel dragged her down the crystal bridge.

“They left us,” she choked out, hot tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Fuck them,” Abel said. His voice was quickly going hoarse as his throat dried out in Dis’s climate. “Fuck every last one of them.”

The wind blew harder, clearing the smoke long enough for Rylie to see the bridge stretching down to the tower and the city beyond. Dis was huge, sprawling, and just as frightening as

Rylie remembered. The jagged black mountains looked sharper, meaner, like Levi's teeth when he was in his wolf form.

There were people advancing toward them from the bottom of the bridge. The guards had spotted their approach and were moving to intercept.

Abel tensed under her hands. "Don't hurt them," Rylie said, digging her fingernails into his skin. "These are Elise's people."

"Elise's people? That looks a hell of a lot like the bitch herself."

She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked again. He was right—Elise was leading a group of men wearing black leather body armor up the bridge,

and she was in full battle gear herself, with Seth's gun at her hip and her hair cinched into a tight knot.

Rylie blinked, and Elise was suddenly standing in front of her. She had crossed the last several thousand yards faster than a heartbeat.

"What happened?" Elise asked, brow furrowing. "What are you doing here?"

"Levi Riese," Abel growled.

Her upper lip curled. She almost looked like a wolf herself. But when she spoke, her voice was surprisingly gentle. "Good to see you survived."

"He took the pack," Rylie said, blinking away her tears, trying to calm herself. "No, he didn't take the pack—

they just went with him. They didn't want us in charge of them anymore."

"And you let them kick you out?" Elise asked. "You're an Alpha werewolf. You're telling me you couldn't just change and kill them?"

"Never thought I would agree with *you*," Abel muttered.

"I could have changed, yes," Rylie said, staring at her feet.

"So why didn't you? Because you didn't want to hurt anyone? Are you that idealistic?"

Her throat worked as she swallowed. "You wouldn't understand."

"Fuck," Elise said with heat. She glared up at the fissure, still just a few hundred feet above them, as if trying to

decide what to do. “I can’t deal with this bullshit right now. I’m going to have the guards escort you into the Palace to wait for me.”

“Where are you going?” Abel asked sharply.

Elise shot him a look, but addressed her guards. “You heard me. Get the Alphas into the Palace. Somewhere secure. And if anyone tries to approach them, assume that it’s an assassin and kill on sight.”

Rylie’s jaw dropped. “An assassin?”

“The Palace isn’t secure anymore,” Elise said. “Don’t eat anything.”

And with that, she dissolved into smoke and darted through the fissure.

**Neuma paced alongside** Elise's bed, chewing on her lacquered fingernail. She knew she was going to ruin a perfectly good manicure, but she couldn't bring herself to stop. Not while Isaiah and Aniruddha were casting magic to try to save Lincoln's life.

She could watch him fading, even now. He'd looked so strong and healthy when she'd spotted him throwing tantrums in the library earlier. Complaints aside, Lincoln had smelled amazing. Definitely her kind of lunch. And exactly the kind of pain in the ass that Elise needed to keep her in check.

Now he was weak. Frail.

Dying.



Neuma had watched more than a few men spiral toward death as she fucked the life out of them. She knew what a man looked like when he was past the point of no return. Lincoln wasn't there yet, but he was approaching fast.

Aniruddha and Isaiah were arguing in quiet voices. The kind of hushed tone people took on in a funeral parlor.

“Healing magic is hard enough on Earth,” Isaiah was saying. “I managed to heal a headache once down here, but there’s a difference between an herbal analgesic and trying to keep someone’s heart from failing.”

“I don’t think it’s his heart,” Aniruddha said. He was calmer, more

confident, but no less grim.

“But if we can keep his heart beating, we can keep blood flowing to his brain...last long enough for Elise to come back...”

Neuma tuned them out and increased her pacing range to the bedroom door and back. Her heels rapped loudly against the tile. Too loudly, considering a man was dying. Didn't seem polite to be stomping around like that when he was on the brink of shuffling off his mortal coil. She kicked her shoes off and nudged them under the bed.

Shouts rose from beyond the bedroom wall.

The door slammed open, bouncing

off of the wall. Azis and Gerard strode inside, dragging another man between them. He was wearing a linen apron and his face had been beaten into a bloody pulp.

Neuma stopped pacing. “The chef who made the pie?”

Gerard tossed him to her feet. “The one and only. We found him trying to get down into the dungeons.”

He hadn’t escaped out the gates because he had been trying to hide in the dungeons. Not real bright. Even if he’d gotten down there, he would have found himself caught in Jerica’s thrall. “I don’t recognize this guy.”

“He’s not a former slave,” Gerard said. “I don’t recognize him, either.” He

shoved the man's shoulder, hard.  
“Where'd you come from?”

The man trembled, staring around Elise's quarters as though he had never seen the likes of them before. Her room was intimidating, just like anywhere else in the Palace—high buttresses, iron decorations, windows overlooking the city. Anyone who had spent any significant time in the Palace shouldn't have been surprised by it.

“Well, getting this one to talk will be real easy,” Neuma said, jerking a spike out of her hair so that it tumbled around her shoulders. She held the point near his frightened, bulging eye. Sweat poured down his face. “At least I can torture you humans the normal way—by

plucking your eyeball out, just like scoopin' melon balls for a Halloween party."

"I'll tell you anything," he said. "God, please just don't hurt me."

Neuma huffed. "You're not even trying." Kind of disappointing. She had a lot of frustration she would be happy to work out on him. "Who are you?"

"My name..." He swallowed hard. "My name's Jacobi Nowacki."

That meant nothing to her. She rolled the hairpin in her hand as she paced around him, skimming the energies that arced over his mind. Fear and desire were pretty similar, physically speaking. He wasn't putting on a show to make himself look

harmless. He was exactly as terrified as he looked—on the verge of losing bladder control, in fact.

Not much of an assassin.

“What did you put in that pie, lover boy?” Neuma asked, trailing her fingers through his hair. He didn’t have much. The top of his head was shiny and bald. She scraped his scalp with her fingernails.

He cringed. “I don’t know. It was given to me. I didn’t even think it was dangerous. There’s more in my pocket...”

Neuma took a quick step back. Anything that could kill Lincoln would kill her just as quickly.

Gerard patted Jacobi down and

came up with a vial the size of his thumb. Fine black powder was collected at the bottom. “Gunpowder?” He moved to uncork it.

“Don’t do that!” Aniruddha crossed the room in three strides and snatched it out of his hand. “It reeks of magic and it almost killed Elise Kavanagh. You don’t want to let that out.”

*Magic, huh?* That might mean a warlock. “Who gave this to you?” Neuma demanded. “Was it Belphegor?”

Jacobi’s panicked eyes flicked between her and Gerard. “What? Who’s Belphegor?”

“Who gave the vial to you?” Neuma asked again.

He hesitated.

She jabbed the silver spike into the muscle of his shoulder. Jacobi jerked back with a cry. “Levi!” he said. “Levi Riese gave it to me!”

She had been prepared to hear virtually any name from his lips in that moment—maybe even a friend of hers, someone living within the Palace that she and Elise trusted. How else would Sallosa have gotten a bespelled Taser? Who would have let in Jacobi in the first place?

But Levi’s name meant nothing to her.

Apparently she was the only one who didn’t recognize it. Isaiah gasped audibly. The other men exchanged dark looks.



“Levi Riese? Are you sure?” Isaiah asked. He yanked down the neck of Jacobi’s shirt. There was a tattoo of a bleeding apple over his heart.

“He only passed it on to me. He said it was a present for the Father, coming from someone else. I don’t know whom. That’s all the information I have!”

“Who’s Levi?” Neuma asked.

Jacobi cringed away from her as she trailed the point of the pin over his chest.

“He’s a werewolf in Northgate,” Isaiah said. “He’s with the Apple. He’s the reason I left St. Philomene’s.”

That was all she needed to know. Neuma turned to Gerard. “Send some

guys to Earth,” she said. “I’m thinking the werewolf Alphas need protection.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Gerard said. “They’re already here.”

**ELISE DESCENDED UPON** Reno, Nevada two hours before sunrise, unafraid of being caught by sunlight. It had been a long time since the sun had risen on Reno. Fledgling nightmares swarmed in the darkness, blotting out even the faintest rays of moonlight.

Once, Elise had treasured the small-town feel of Reno. It had been known as the Biggest Little City, and the slogan had been apt.

Nothing that she had enjoyed about the city remained—none of the trucks that served authentic slow-cooked

*cabeza* burritos, the Art Town activities that once filled the nights with music, the food festivals and farmer's markets and classic car shows. Even the Truckee, once her favorite jogging location, had been dammed near the source and now ran dry.

It hadn't used to be like this, all wrecked cars and empty streets and burned-out buildings. It had been awake and alive, a twenty-four seven city.

She materialized a couple of blocks away from her destination and took the time to walk the rest of the way, skirting along the edge of the dry river underneath trees that had been bare for years. The once-grassy Idlewild Park was an empty dirt lot with rotten,

collapsed playground equipment. A swing hung by a single chain, swaying in the wind.

A familiar brick building rose out of the darkness a couple of blocks away. Its front door was already standing open. The sign on the lawn still said “Motion and Dance,” but it was dark.

The strains of piano drew her into the dance hall. The reflection of a pale-skinned, dark-haired woman followed her along the mirrors as she approached the lone piano in the corner.

The man who played it had his head bowed over the keys, eyes closed, fingers sliding up and down the ivory with smooth grace. He played a complex tune of rising and falling chords as

though he had three hands instead of two. His feet pumped the pedals, easily transitioning the nonsense scales between emotions. Angry and harsh. Wistful and bitter. Sweet and sad.

Elise stopped beside the piano. Without looking up, James transitioned the scales to a morose, down-tempo version of “Für Elise.”

His little joke. Acknowledging her presence without actually acknowledging her. Giving a nod to a time long past that Elise had moved beyond, but James hadn’t.

“This is pathetic,” Elise said.

He didn’t stop playing. The tune swelled. She had never heard him play the song like this before—in fact, she

had never heard *anyone* play the song like this before, with so much meaning behind the melody.

Elise clenched her jaw. She didn't like the way the music dragged at her heart with razorblades.

He stopped playing.

"I need your help," she said in the fading echo of the strings that followed.

James finally lifted his head to look at her. Gone was the black hair and olive skin. His features were smooth and ageless, as though he were an effigy to the man she had known sculpted in marble. Combined with his pale, haunted eyes, the whiteness of his hair made him look old at first glance, but his face didn't have a single wrinkle.

He touched one key. And then another. Two became four became eight. Slowly, James began to play “Orpheus in the Underworld” as though it were a funeral dirge.

She drummed her fingernails on her arm, annoyance tightening like a corkscrew in the back of her neck. “I’m not Eurydice.”

“You want me to follow you into Hell.” His voice was hoarse. It sounded like it had been a long time since he’d had reason to speak.

“Yes,” Elise said. “I want you to follow me into Hell. I want you to help me save lives. Something that I thought we had a mutual interest in.”

“We’ve never agreed on the means,



or whether the end justifies them.”

She clenched her jaw. Unclenched it. Forced herself to relax. It was obvious that James thought the means justified the end. He had manipulated a murderous cult, cut a deal with Abraxas, and tried to hold Elise captive in order to achieve his end.

His problem wasn't with ruthlessness. His problem was the fact that Elise was still a demon and doing demon things in a world filled with other demons very much like her.

Angels didn't think much of lesser creatures like demons or humans, and James was very much angelic Gray. Elise didn't expect him to prove himself better than his base natures—but she had

hoped he would.

Apparently, she had hoped naïvely.

“It’s about Lincoln,” she said.

“Lincoln Marshall?”

She didn’t like the way James said that name. “No, Abraham Lincoln.”

“I’m surprised our noble former president ended up in Hell.”

Funny. So very funny. “Lincoln’s been poisoned. My witches can’t heal him. He’ll die if you don’t help me.”

“Help you? You mean, help *him*,” James said.

“Us,” she said.

James played on, leaning into the music, rocking gently from side to side with the beat.

“It’s not just Lincoln. People have

been taken. A lot of people. Entire towns are disappearing under my nose. I'm not strong enough to save them—not without magic. My librarians left me everything I need to learn how to cast warlock magic, but it's impossible for me to decipher alone.”

“Very well.” He finished the verse of “Orpheus” with a dark flourish of sharps and flats. He pushed back the bench and stood.

Elise had forgotten how tall he was. He had never struck her as a particularly large man when they lived together; outside the dance hall, he was soft-spoken, with a quick wit that belied his size. The lofty grace of angels had been passed down his line, and the

height along with it.

It had been months since Elise walked among angels, and she wasn't used to feeling small.

He gazed down at her with pale, penetrating eyes. Elise couldn't resist glancing down to see if his wrist had healed where she had bitten him—*mangled* him—with her teeth, and she wasn't sure if she was disappointed to see that there was no scar.

If she had taken off her warding ring, she could have looked into his mind to see what he was thinking about her. But she didn't need to. She knew James's regrets and self-hatred and longing all too well.

“Have you been here since the fight

at the Shamain gate?" Elise asked. It came out softer than she intended.

"Not the entire time. I've traveled a bit. You might say I've been doing some soul-searching."

"Trying to figure out how much of your coven's sworn oaths to the Apple, you mean."

"I haven't spoken to my coven at all."

That was a surprise. Elise had expected James to be regrouping, figuring out new ways to achieve his goals. "Eden?"

"Paradise is lost. I don't know what remains of me now. With no way to reach Nathaniel and the Origin, and without you...I don't know what I want

anymore.” He rubbed his hand over his eyes. “Sometimes I feel like you’re haunting me.” His voice had become so quiet that the words didn’t echo in the empty dance hall.

Elise’s eyebrow lifted. “Then maybe you should stop hanging out in haunted houses.” She held out her hand. “Come with me to Hell. Lincoln doesn’t deserve to die—especially not when the assassination attempt was meant for me.”

His gaze sharpened. “Who’s trying to kill you?”

“Who isn’t?” she asked.

James contemplated her outstretched hand. “I’m not sure if this is a good idea, Elise.”

“It’s not like you’re leaving anything behind. Is it?” When he didn’t respond, she said, “Think about having open access to the Great Library. Thousands of books you’ve never read before. Hundreds about warlock magic, which almost nobody knows how to cast. All of it for you—after you save Lincoln.”

He hesitated for another moment then laced his fingers with hers. The leather of his gloves creaked as their hands curled around each other.

“You don’t need to bribe me,” James said. “You know I’ll do anything for you.”

Her chest hurt, and it wasn’t just because she’d had a blade plunged

through her breastbone. “You promised to stop lying to me.”

“Elise...”

She didn’t want to hear what else he had to say.

They phased.

**Night had fallen** when Elise and James returned to the Palace of Dis, casting the city in violet-tinged twilight. Elise set down on a bridge connecting two of the towers. The view of her domain was best from there.

James released her hand to reflexively grab at the railing. “Lord,” he breathed. The word was sucked away by the wind. He ducked his head to shield himself from it.



Through the bond, she could tell that he felt like he had been tossed into the kitchen grinder. She stood beside him, untouched, and watched him struggle to breathe in detached silence.

They didn't have much time to get back to Lincoln, but she couldn't make herself pull James inside. Not yet.

He had been the one to teach her to perform. How to make herself look more impressive, more graceful, more intimidating. Now it was her turn to show him what she had learned.

More than that, she wanted to show him what she had accomplished without an ounce of his help.

“What do you think?” Elise asked.

He shielded his eyes and followed

her gaze to the new tower and the crystal bridge arcing up to the fissure. Only the few hundred feet nearest to them were visible. The rest faded into smoke and shadow.

James turned to take in the entirety of the Palace, the city beyond the battlements, the army camped out on the street. Firelight dotted the streets. Dark spires formed sharp silhouettes along the horizon, and the wasteland was a stripe of distant yellow just beyond. From there, they could see all the way up Mount Anathema to the House of Abraxas, and all the way down to the edge of the House of Volac's vast farmlands.

It was more than just a little awe-

inspiring, and it was more or less hers.

“Let’s go inside,” James said, voice raw and rasping.

It wasn’t the reaction she had hoped for, although she wasn’t entirely sure what that would have been, either.

She glided to the archway.

Once they were inside, James leaned against the inner wall to collect himself. “What was the point of that?”

She gave him a blank look. “I’m staying in the former judge’s rooms. They’re this way.”

He followed her up the spiral staircase, through the antechamber, and into her bedroom. Lincoln rested on top of her black silk sheets, surrounded by the iron ribs of her bed frame.

Isaiah stood when she came in. He had a few witches' implements spread on the floor beside the bed—some bowls of herbs, a couple of crystals, an empty vial. "How is he?" Elise asked.

"The deputy's not waking up, but..." Isaiah rubbed his hands together nervously. His knuckles were so dry that they were bleeding. "I want to say he's stable. I'm just not certain." The sight of James had his blood pressure shooting through the roof. Isaiah wasn't much of a witch compared to James—nobody was—but he knew enough to tell when someone with incredible power had just entered the room.

"Isaiah, this is Orpheus," she said. "Orpheus, Isaiah." She didn't want

Isaiah spreading James's name around the Palace. The fewer people that knew she had dragged her aspis into Hell, the better.

“Nice to meet you, Isaiah,” James said.

The other witch didn't look like he agreed. He edged away from them and the bed. “Elise, we've found the would-be assassin. He had this on him.” He handed a vial to her. Magic sparked inside when she shook it.

James was hovering beside the edge of the bed, gazing down at Lincoln. The deputy was still drenched in sweat, even though he had been stripped to his boxers. Elise hadn't seen him naked since his return to the Palace. He looked

so diminished in comparison to the strong, muscular body he used to have. Even the glow in his hands was fading now. It barely even flickered.

“That’s new,” James remarked.

“I think he’s manifesting megaira powers.” Elise pocketed the vial of powder before he could see it.

“He said that Levi Riese gave it to him.”

That werewolf bastard with the Apple? One more reason to kill him, as if she needed another. “Where’s the assassin now, Isaiah?”

“Dungeons. With Neuma.”

Neuma and Jerica. Elise would be surprised if the assassin was in a chatting mood by the time they were

done with him. “Move him to the cells underneath the court. Keep him alive until I can talk to him.”

Isaiah nodded, abandoned his ritual space, and scurried from the room.

James peeled a glove off of one hand, exposing lightning-blue runes slithering between his fingers. A sigh of envy escaped Elise. She didn’t miss how much the magic had hurt her, but she missed the power.

“What happened to him?” James asked.

“He was poisoned. Can you help him?”

James flexed his hand. “I’ll do my best.” He brushed his fingers over the other man’s forehead.

He didn't speak a single word of power, but several. The runes lifted from the back of his wrist and crawled across Lincoln's skin.

Ethereal magic was always just a little bit off when it was cast in Hell—just a little bit dimmer, as if distorted through a tinted window. But James's magic still radiated. Every single spell hummed with a different tone. Taken together, it was a symphony that touched the invisible fibers woven throughout the room, the Palace, all of Hell, and beyond. The magic stretched to the fissure. Elise wouldn't have been surprised if James's spells reached all the way to Heaven.

Color faded into Lincoln's cheeks.



His chest began rising and falling with heavier breaths. White-blue runes slipped down his cheekbones, raced onto his chest, grew to encompass his entire body.

For a moment, he glowed.

Then the symphony of magic was simply gone. James grabbed his glove and stepped back.

Elise watched Lincoln for signs of rousing. He was still unconscious. “What happened?”

“I can’t cure it,” James said. Her heart twisted. “The poison has already penetrated his marrow. What did you say he consumed?”

“We still don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I wasn’t aware that there was anything that presented such a threat to demons.”

Elise rubbed her stomach. She still ached from the poison herself. “Neither was I. How long does he have?”

“I’m not sure. The poison is reacting with his demon blood, and that is what will eventually catalyze and kill him.” James hesitated. She could almost see him performing the mental math. “He might have days.”

She pushed a lock of hair off his forehead. “After we exorcised him, I asked if he wanted to come to Hell with me. He didn’t. Lincoln just wanted to have a normal life without demons and angels and witches in it.” She glanced at

James. “Sound familiar?”

Elise and James had tried to retire so many years ago that it was practically another lifetime. But neither of them had forgotten. She didn’t think either of them had stopped wishing they could quit, either.

James massaged his forehead. “Nobody gets out of this anymore, Elise.”

“He should have.” If it hadn’t been for James, Lincoln might not have been caught up in it in the first place. “Will he wake up?”

“He could, but his energy has been drained,” James said. “I doubt he’ll be fully rested before...”

He fell silent. Elise could still hear

the unspoken words.

*He won't wake up before the poison kills him.*

Elise sank to the bed beside Lincoln, pulled his hand into her lap. "I can feed him."

"Feed him? How?"

She closed her eyes. It wasn't hard to find anger within herself—she didn't even need to dig very deep. Anger smoldered inside of her. She was constantly on edge, always two seconds away from shattering her veneer of calm.

Usually she fought it, but now, she fed into it.

Elise thought of the three thousand missing people and the brutality of a broken world that wouldn't allow

innocents to live in peace. She thought of the obsidian falchion in the chest in her bedroom—and what she had done to Seth with that blade.

She thought of all the Houses that refused to comply with her. Davithon, the demon in her dungeons, threatening her rather than listening to reason, forcing her to keep him confined. Volac's steward driving a blade into Nikolaj's back.

James's betrayal, and the fact that Elise couldn't seem to push him away despite it.

Her shoulders trembled. Her cheeks burned. She pushed all of that anger, the hate and frustration and exhaustion, toward the place where her

hands joined with Lincoln's.

*Take it. Take it all.*

It wasn't like being drained. It was more like ramming the point of a dagger into a light socket. Elise's energy scraped out of her in piercing lines and bled into Lincoln.

She faded, and he improved.

Her anger only intensified under his megaira influence, knotting in her stomach until it was too much, until she thought she might be sick.

Images flashed through her faster and faster. Adam in the garden, after He had gone insane. Eve's eggs pulverized by Nashriel. Adam wrenching Metaraon's head off of his shoulders.

Elise's heart pounded. Her

fingernails dug into Lincoln's wrist.

His hand twitched on hers.

She wrenched free of him and stood, putting distance between them.

Her heart was hurting again. She peeled the neck of her shirt away from her chest to investigate the wound. Unsurprisingly, she was dribbling blood again. Lincoln must have fed deeper than she realized. She was getting better at moderating her own hungers, but he was still new to this, and too sickly to be the one to break away.

"What's wrong?" James asked.

"Nothing," she said, tugging her shirt back into place.

"You're wounded."

She ignored him and sat beside

Lincoln again. The deputy was stirring.

Lincoln's eyes opened. "God?" he whispered, trying to focus on her.

Elise smiled. "You almost had me worried, Deputy."

When he recognized her voice, he relaxed back against the pillow. "Elise. What happened to me?"

The door whispered shut behind them. Elise glanced over her shoulder. James had left the room, and the space he had been standing looked so very empty.

She put him out of her mind.

"You tell me." Elise offered him the vial. "This was found on the body of the man that tried to assassinate us. I don't recognize the substance. I hoped



that you would.”

He extended a hand. Elise dropped it into his palm. Instantly, his blood pressure spiked. “It’s Aquiel’s. He’s trying to fucking kill us.”

“Aquiel’s dead. He’s not giving anything to anyone.”

“But this looks like anathema powder,” Lincoln said. “This is mined from the mountain underneath the House of Abraxas.”

She remembered seeing all the stone discarded from the House of Abraxas mines, but she had assumed that it was waste, without any purpose. She frowned. “Why would stone from under Mount Anathema be poisonous to us?”

“It’s poisonous to all demons.”

Lincoln gave a short, mirthless laugh. “Guess I’m demon enough for it to work on me now, aren’t I?”

“But *why*?”

“I don’t know. It’s not that black rock that the House is built on—this comes from deeper, down in the depths of the mountain. When I was possessed, I helped Aquiel coordinate its purchase from Abraxas.” He shook the vial gently. “See the way it shimmers? You can’t mistake it. It’s been activated by someone who can do magic. Belphegor used to do it, but human witches could, too.”

“How have I never heard of this before?” Elise asked.

“Because it’s a huge secret.”

Lincoln rubbed his forehead, as if trying to push the memories into the forefront of his mind. “Even the librarians didn’t have a clue. Only Aquiel, Abraxas, and Belphegor knew how to make it.” He grimaced. “And me.”

“Then how the fuck did a werewolf get it? It was given to the assassin by a guy named Levi Riese.”

Lincoln sat up. “The Apple. Shit.”

“You know them?”

“The nightmare that possessed me did. We need to get to Northgate,” he said. “We need to get there *now*.”

**The werewolves had** been in their beast forms for hours now, even though the full moon was several nights away. It wasn’t

easy to be trapped within the wolf shape for so long—the smaller of them, Trevin, had passed out. Crystal stood guard over him. She snapped at Levi's hands every time he tried to step closer. Wolf or not, she recognized the man that had just kicked their Alpha out of the sanctuary.

Levi circled them. Abram could tell that he was acutely aware of his audience by the way that he swaggered, how he held his shoulders, tipped his chin. Almost all of the pack was gathered in Northgate to watch him, and he was trying to look impressive.

Abram sat at Bain Marshall's feet, elbows resting on his knees. He didn't want to look impressive. Most folks probably hadn't even noticed him there

yet, and that was just fine with him.

“Change them back,” Felton said. He stood alongside Levi, the staunchest supporter of the change in leadership. It wasn’t much of a show of support. He was a little shrimp of a man, and it never failed to surprise Abram that the guy turned into a wolf instead of a weasel.

“They’re loyal to Rylie,” Levi said. “I think they should stay as wolves until they learn to be obedient to me.” He made it sound convincing. The pack probably didn’t detect the falter in his tone. But Abram did.

Levi couldn’t change them back.

It wasn’t a surprise. Abram had never thought that Levi was any kind of match in power for either of his parents.

Rylie sucked at being Alpha, but she was still an impressive werewolf. Levi wasn't.

“You said that you're an Alpha,” Felton said. “Why can't you change them back?”

“You told me that Abel couldn't change you at first, Felton,” Deepali said. She had a soft, musical voice that carried well; her whisper was audible throughout the entire town square. “He had to learn to do it, too.”

“Rylie always had the power.” That was Paetrick. He hadn't taken well to the news that Levi was in charge now. Three Scions had guns trained on him to keep him from trying to attack again.

“Rylie's not your Alpha anymore,”

Levi snapped. “She ran away to Hell at the first chance, and she’s gone now. All right? I can change Trevin and Crystal back; I just don’t want to.” He clenched his fist around the silver pentacle hanging over his chest.

“You snuck up on her in the middle of the night,” Paetrick said, bolder now. “That’s a real fucking brave way to take someone down.”

Levi’s upper lip curled in a snarl. “She didn’t even try to defend herself. If she can’t protect her home from invasion, then how can you expect her to protect the pack?”

He walked too close to Crystal. She lunged, snapping her jaw shut on his wrist. Levi slammed his knee into the

side of her head. She fell with a yelp and didn't get up again.

Shaking his arm, he sent blood splattering to the grass. She had stripped the skin off of half of his forearm. Levi didn't even flinch at it.

He looked brutal and strong within the ring of spotlights. It made his blood cherry red and his skin golden.

Levi definitely inspired a lot more confidence than Rylie did. He just needed to get their trust.

Abram pushed to his feet, and the pack fell silent. They'd definitely been too distracted by Levi's show to realize he was there. Once he was standing, though, he was impossible to miss.

"The pack needs to be stronger to



survive,” Abram said. “It will be stronger with Levi in charge.” He so seldom spoke up in front of the others that it felt strange to do it now, but the private look of gratitude Levi shot him was worth the effort.

It took several long seconds for someone to find the will to speak.

Surprisingly, it was Felton. “But you’re Rylie’s kid.”

“Yes,” Abram said. “I’m Rylie and Abel’s son.”

“That should tell you something,” Levi said.

“What, that the Alphas bred a faggot?” Paetrick scoffed.

“Who fucking cares if they did?” Levi spread his arms wide. “I think you

just want any excuse to fight. That's fine. I'll take any of you. Whatever it takes to convince you all that I'm strong enough."

Nobody moved forward—not even Paetrick.

When nobody challenged him, he strolled over to the statue of Bain Marshall, climbing onto the steps underneath his feet so that he would be tall enough for everyone to see.

"I'm meaner than Rylie. I'll also be fairer, smarter, and more decisive. The fact is that we're weak right now in a very cruel world, and if we want to survive, then hiding out in the mountains isn't going to cut it. We'll just waste away. Do you want to roll over and die? Or do you want to take the fight to our

enemies?”

He pointed at the fissure.

“They imprisoned you. Enslaved you. Killed your friends and loved ones, turned you into food, leather, or labor, and shattered America. It’s not enough to trust that Elise Kavanagh will do the right thing. She’s a demon. The Godslayer. When she’s done taking charge of Hell, she’ll turn to Earth and Heaven next. We need to prepare ourselves for war.” Levi gave a long, dramatic pause. “We need to make more werewolves.”

“Monsters,” Tyrone protested.

“Soldiers,” Levi said. “I didn’t become a werewolf by choice. This was forced on me, as it was for many of you,

and I was angry about it for a long time. It wasn't until recently that I realized this is a gift. That we're meant to use these abilities for good. We need to spread this gift around and take back our world." His eyes swept over the pack. "And I know where we can find allies to help us."

That wasn't something that he had mentioned before. Abram frowned. "Allies?"

Levi didn't listen to him. "We're not going to be in this war alone. The demons are much too numerous for us to take, even if we triple the size of the pack. But I've brokered a deal that will give us the upper hand."

"How are you going to triple the

size of the pack if you can't even control our changes?" Felton asked. "The moon's coming, man. We don't have much time."

"We'll go somewhere without a moon," Levi said. "Somewhere where we can find a lot of people willing to be changed into werewolves. We'll train, regroup, and come back to take the Palace."

Abram grabbed Levi's arm, jerking him back under the shadow of the statue. "You didn't tell me anything about this. Take the Palace? What are you talking about?"

Levi opened his mouth to respond.

The spotlights exploded, showering sparks everywhere.

Abram reflexively pushed Levi to the ground, shielding him with his body. By the time they hit the grass, just a heartbeat after the lights went out, the generators in the square had gone dead. All mechanical sounds faded.

The wind picked up, blasting through the square, rattling through the barricades. It was loud enough to muffle the pack's shouts.

"Stay down!" Abram yelled, pushing Levi onto the grass as he drew his gun.

But the werewolf didn't stay down. He also didn't look worried.

"No, wait," Levi said. "It's okay."

Brilliant white light flooded the square. It wasn't coming from the

spotlights—it was far too bright and silvery-blue. It cast harsh shadows on Levi's grinning face.

He had been expecting this.

Nash Adamson descended, wings flared wide, downy white feathers whipping around him in the torrential wind. He landed on top of the silent generator. The light from his wings faded fractionally, just enough for Abram to see that he was wearing one of his usual business suits, probably made by some ridiculously expensive Italian tailors.

The wind didn't slow when his light dimmed. He lifted a hand to shield his face from the wind.

Nash's voice echoed over them.

“Run!”

Apparently, Levi hadn't expected *that*. He shoved Abram aside and got to his feet.

“You're not Azrael,” Levi said. He didn't recognize Nash. He hadn't been around the pack enough to know who their lone feathered member was.

“Run, you idiot, before it's too late,” Nash said. “Go, all of you! As fast as you can! Go!”

Lightning arced over the sky—not a flash of it, like normal lightning, but a circular flare that pulsed above the center of Northgate. It was brighter than Nash, brighter than all the spotlights combined, brighter than even the sunlight.



As the light grew, so did the wind. It vortexed around the town square.

Paetrick broke free of his Scion guards and dashed at Levi, plowing into him, knocking him to the grass. They struggled against each other.

Turned out that Levi really was stronger—he dropped the other werewolf with a single hard punch.

Nash jumped off the generator and gripped Abram's arm. "Where are Rylie and Abel?" he yelled over the wind.

"Gone," he shouted back.

"Lucky thing," Nash said. "We have to go before they open the road!"

"Why? What's going on?"

Levi jumped on Nash, seized him by the shoulders, and flung him across

the lawn. Werewolves were strong and angel bones were hollow. Nash went soaring. He smashed against the wall of the bank, and Abram couldn't see well enough through the brightening light to tell if he was okay.

The wind suddenly vanished.

Everything hung suspended in the middle of the air. Deepali had been falling, pushed by another werewolf—she froze halfway down, arms outstretched, shock on her face. The trash that had been blowing around the grass stopped in an instant. Abram was sluggish, struggling against the weight of the air.

It was like life had been put on pause.

The lightning above them had become a single, huge rune suspended in the sky. It shined down on them. Dust motes sparkled in the air.

Distantly, Abram remembered Summer watching science fiction movies with alien abductions, and he wondered if they were about to be taken by extraterrestrials.

He suspected it was much, much worse than that.

“I was going to tell you,” Levi said, clutching Abram’s arms. His fingers were tight even though he moved slowly, too. “You’ll see, though. I think you’re going to like this. I know how much you miss Haven, and this is even better.”

Dread suffused Abram. “Levi, what

have you done?"

"I'm saving the pack," he said. "I'm saving the world."

And then there was nothing but light, and Northgate was gone.

**ELISE APPEARED IN** Northgate with a stirring of wind. She braced herself to be shot by the Apple, who she knew to be guarding the bridge now.

Yet not a single gun fired.

Nobody was at the top of the bridge, in fact. Half of the barricades had been knocked over, letting her see beyond them to the surrounding streets. The windows on the nearest buildings were shattered. All of the lights were off. The generators had failed.

She phased past the statue of Lincoln's grandfather and appeared

beside the nearest generator. From that vantage point, she could see the building that used to be Poppy's Diner. There wasn't a single sign of life. Not so much as a whisper of a voice or a heartbeat.

Elise traced a finger over one of the indicator lights on the side of the generator. The bulb inside was no larger than her thumbnail, but she could see that the filament had burned out, just like the bulbs in Mayor Gregg's office in Two Rivers.

Flipping the switches on the side didn't do anything.

Faint worry began creeping into her heart.

She pushed into an old consignment shop. All the racks and shelves had been

removed, the clothing repurposed by the Scions, and nothing remained but an empty room covered in a fine layer of ash from the fissure. She didn't go far inside. She only checked the light bulb within the doorframe. Also burned out.

She stretched her senses to their utmost, trying to feel the nearest life. There were other towns just a few miles from Northgate and farms in between—farms that the Scions had repopulated. She sensed a few faint lives, too small to be human. Probably squirrels and songbirds. But no werewolves.

To the west, nearer St. Philomene's Cathedral, Elise felt the faintest hint of magic brush against her mind. She erupted into shadow, darting across the

distance to close in on that faint hint of human life.

A young woman was unconscious on the lawn outside the cathedral. Judging by the gun she had dropped, she had been a Scion. Elise rolled her gently over onto her back and pushed the brown hair out of her eyes. She didn't recognize this woman—she wasn't sure if that was a relief or not—but her pulse was strong and steady.

She was also visibly pregnant.

“Elise!” Stephanie stumbled out of the church. The instant she crossed the wards, her heartbeat became audible. She had been hiding behind magic that was strong enough to prevent even Elise from detecting her.



Elise stood to face her head-on. “How many survivors are there inside the church?”

“Just me,” Stephanie said. She was washed out, hands trembling, her strawberry blond hair fallen loose from the bun. “It was Levi.”

She was really starting to hate that guy.

“*What* was Levi?” she asked, enunciating each syllable very carefully.

“I don’t know. I’m still not sure. It was loud, whatever it was, and so horribly sudden. There had been so many people around—people who were arguing about the pack, and what to do with those who remained loyal to Rylie, refusing to obey Levi’s new role as

Alpha.”

“And?”

“And then I heard a chime,” Stephanie said. She began trembling harder. Her hands knotted in the hem of her sweater. “I had been alone in Father Night’s office. I emerged to find the source of the noise and everyone was gone. Everyone but Thea and me.” She indicated the Scion with a nod.

“Gone,” Elise said.

“Vanished without a trace.” She kneeled beside the woman on the lawn and checked her pulse. Her brow relaxed when she felt a heartbeat. Stephanie turned an imploring face toward Elise. “I know you hate us, but you have to do something about this.”

Funny how Stephanie was happy to see Elise now that her life might depend on her presence.

“Where has Levi been staying?” Elise asked.

**Stephanie led her** to the trailers behind the cathedral. Levi had been staying in Father Night’s former home, and now Elise studied the living room with a critical eye. There was no sign of a struggle. Everything looked to be where it belonged—every single piece of old, battered furniture.

Same as in Two Rivers.

Father Night’s influence was still everywhere. The shelves were filled with knickknacks he had gathered during

his time as a roving exorcist, several of which she recognized. Their paths had crossed more than once when she had still been human.

Elise felt a smile creep over her when she spotted the bundle of twigs from a case that she had worked on with Father Night. She plucked it off the shelf and pocketed it.

“Don’t touch that,” Stephanie said. “That doesn’t belong to you.”

Elise ignored her, opening the door to the bedroom. The overwhelming smell of pot smoke blasted her in the face.

Clothes were scattered haphazardly across the floor. Elise picked up a pair of jeans. They looked much too large to

belong to Levi. The belt was still in the loops, heavy and thick, like a utility belt. More function than fashion. She tossed them aside.

“What are you hoping to find?” Stephanie asked. “That is to say, what should I help you search for?”

Elise mulled over the question as she picked through the attached bathroom. Levi had two razors. Two different types of aftershave. Only one kind of shampoo. Two sticks of deodorant. It seemed that Levi had a male roommate living with him.

“Anathema powder,” Elise finally said. “It’s black and about as coarse as pepper. It may or may not be haloed with magic. It will be in a glass vessel. If you

do find something like that and see that it's touched with magic, don't open it—that means it's already been activated.”

Elise went through the drawers while Stephanie searched the closet. In their silence, she heard a soft, rhythmic sound—a strange noise that would have easily been drowned out by the sound of the rain. And once Elise heard this small heartbeat coming from within Stephanie's womb, she realized that the doctor's stomach was swollen. She was smaller than the woman unconscious on the lawn, still capable of hiding it with loose clothing.

“They left behind the pregnant women.” Elise said it as the realization came upon her.

Stephanie's hand jumped to her stomach, a reflexive gesture of self-defense. "How did you...?" Her eyes narrowed. "Ah. I suppose I can imagine."

A headache throbbed in Elise's temples. The sheer irresponsibility of it. The idea that anyone would willingly bring new life into this horrible, shattered world.

Yet whatever Levi had done, it had spared the pregnant women.

Demons wouldn't have cared about that.

"Have you seen Levi speaking with anyone unusual lately?" Elise asked, shaking the contents of one drawer onto the floor. There was nothing inside but

socks, underwear, and a couple of knives.

“I haven’t seen him much at all,” Stephanie admitted. “I’ve been in California since Shamain fell. He hasn’t been updating me on Northgate’s progress as frequently as I’d requested, and that was part of the reason I came back. I needed to know what he’s been doing.”

“What was the rest of the reason you came back?” Elise asked.

“It’s a personal matter.”

“Anything to do with the pregnancy?”

“In a manner of speaking. As I said, it’s personal.”

There was nothing in Levi’s



drawers. She abandoned them in a pile and moved to his bed.

Elise flipped his mattress over with a hard shove, exposing boxes underneath. Most of them were Bankers Boxes. She ignored those and zeroed in on a small wooden chest. It was secured with a golden lock, but it snapped easily under her fingers.

She opened it and recoiled at the contents. Levi had two more vials of anathema powder, not yet magically active.

There were also three empty vials alongside the two filled ones.

The inside of the lid was engraved with a House seal that she recognized. It was a bleeding heart encircled by spiky

rays of fire. That was one of the Houses that she had been trying to force into relinquishing its slaves. Davithon wore that image etched into the breast of his House livery.

But this bleeding heart, unlike the others she had seen, was stamped with the letters “CV”—just like Volac’s bill of sale for her slaves.

“Courevore,” Elise whispered to herself. “That’s what CV means. This is from the House of Courevore.”

Her mind whirled with the implications of it.

Levi Riese had tried to poison her using something that Davithon had given him, and Davithon was currently imprisoned within Elise’s dungeon.

How in all of the seven Hells had Levi managed to get in touch with an imprisoned demon?

And if Davithon was making thousands of people disappear, why would he spare the pregnant women?

**Lincoln Marshall** had seen better days. He was on his feet, but walking slowly enough that James thought he might fall over at any moment. James was trying to follow him and growing impatient.

“I can get there myself,” James said.

“She said to stick with you,” Lincoln said. “I’m sticking with you.”

Excellent. So Elise had assigned a sickly guard to make sure James didn’t

get into trouble in the Palace. It was terribly optimistic of her—James was fairly confident that breathing hard enough on Lincoln would have made him fall over.

Still, he remained a step behind Lincoln, following him down the tower to the Great Library. The door leading inside was two stories tall and decorated with leering faces carved into the frame that seemed to watch James as he approached.

Lincoln leaned all his weight into the door to open it, and James stepped through.

They emerged on the top floor, looking down to the bottom of the tower. The Great Library was a wondrous thing

to behold. James warmed at the sight of so many books. He could feel the passion and inspiration that had been poured into the pages. The intellectual energy was heady. Addicting.

“We’ve been working over here,” Lincoln said, limping down the spiral staircase.

He barely reached one of the desks on the crystal floor before falling into its chair. Lincoln sat back with his eyes shut and hands clutching his stomach.

James’s gaze swept over the table. Over a hundred books had been stacked on the desk. Someone had been taking notes and even attempting to draw runes—pathetic attempts that didn’t glimmer with even the faintest hints of magic.

“Where did all of these books come from?” James asked. “Who selected them?”

“Elise said that one of the librarians pulled them out for her.”

But the library was empty. None of the staff were anywhere in sight.

Although James had never been to the library before—his brief time incarcerated in the dungeons hadn’t given him an opportunity to visit—he’d read about how it functioned. The librarians in the Great Library had a reputation for having their own agenda. They’d been written about in hundreds of history books, always as enigmatic figures that didn’t seem to serve any master—especially not the current

administration. They probably hadn't picked the books out at Elise's request.

There must have been something that they wanted Elise to have.

James began flipping them over to look at the spines and covers, immediately discarding each.

"What are you looking for?" Lincoln asked.

He didn't respond. Truth be told, James wasn't certain. Each of the books had been written in an ancient form of *vo-ani*, the infernal tongue, but he read it well enough to know that all of them were about warlock magic. They would be interesting to study later. But there was nothing special about them, nothing different, nothing...noteworthy.

James was looking for a book that didn't fit with the others.

He found it buried underneath a stack of tomes on fire magic. It was bound in wood rather than leather. The cover image had been delicately etched, not stamped or burned. The swirling, abstract illustration reminded him of something organic. He flicked the cover open with his thumb and studied the first page. The pictographic language was only vaguely similar to *vo-ani*, although it was looping and cursive-like rather than jagged.

That was because this book wasn't written in the infernal language. It was written in an angelic alphabet.

He spread his fingers over the page



and let his eyes fall closed, seeing the book with his heart instead of his eyes. The energy was distinctly ethereal. Incredibly ancient. But he felt a twinge of pain at touching it, too. The book remembered sadness.

How had the Palace of Dis gotten a book from the ethereal library? It had burned millennia ago. Every single book should have been lost.

Every book except this one.

“They left this for me,” James whispered. Elise never would have known what to do with it. They must have somehow known that he was coming—but how?

“What did you say?” Lincoln asked. James tucked the book into his

pocket. "If there's any cure for anathema powder, it will be in the library somewhere. You should sit here while I search."

"Not a chance." Lincoln tried to stand, but getting to his feet made his face pale, and he sat back down.

"Stay," James said.

"You don't order me around. I'm not your lackey anymore."

He'd been spending too much time around Elise. He was starting to sound like her.

"I'll be nearby," James said.

He climbed up into the stacks, searching for a catalog and finding none. The shelves weren't even labeled. He couldn't tell how the texts and scrolls

were organized. Few had authors listed, and those that did weren't arranged by author name anyway.

If the librarians had any method of organization, it was one that he couldn't begin to understand.

James glanced over the railing to make sure Lincoln was still at the desk and then opened the ethereal text. He pressed his nose into the spine, inhaling deeply. The scent brought to mind rolling, grassy fields, ripe autumn apples, and blossoming flowers.

He also smelled a faint hint of smoke.

"What do you want me to know?" he murmured, cradling it in one hand as he turned the pages. He had never seen

the ancient ethereal language before and couldn't read it.

And yet, as he turned the pages, he began to pick up words here and there. Things like “eternity” and “genesis” and “apotheosis.”

Some part of James, locked away deep inside, could read the text.

By the time he flipped to the center of the book, he was reading entire paragraphs.

It wasn't a book on ethereal magic. Instead, it was talking about the universe on a macro level—the fibers that held everything together, connecting all living creatures to one another. It was talking about shared energy. Reanimation.

Reincarnation.

“James?” Lincoln was calling.

He snapped the book shut. Tucked it back into his pocket. His heart was beating quickly. “What do you want?” James asked, leaning over the railing again.

Lincoln glared up at him with suspicion in his eyes. “You got quiet.”

Irritation crept over him. “Yes, I’m searching. Do you need me to check in with you every few seconds? Would you find that reassuring?”

“I’m supposed to be keeping an eye on you,” Lincoln said. “I take my job seriously.”

James grabbed a couple of books that looked like they were vaguely related to mining and minerals within

Hell and carried them down to the desk. Lincoln was waiting for him, watching critically as James set the books on the corner of the desk. Lincoln picked one up.

*“Artistic Utilization of Igneous Stone in the Palace,”* he read aloud. One of his eyebrows lifted. “Are you even trying?”

“You’re welcome to find your own cure,” James said.

“You never planned to fix me, did you?” he asked. “You can’t even do it.” It didn’t sound like he meant the anathema powder.

James felt exhaustion creeping over him. He had made a lot of promises when he still believed he was going to

be able to reach Eden. The promise that he would “fix” Lincoln of his demon heritage was hardly the most notable of them. He didn’t have the energy to deal with the deputy’s animosity.

When he replied, he couldn’t keep the hard edge out of his voice. “I’m your only chance at living past the next week. If I were you, I would speak with a little more respect.”

“I wouldn’t be like this if you hadn’t taken advantage of me and ruined my life in the first place,” Lincoln said.

Yes, he’d definitely been spending too much time with Elise.

How long had Lincoln and Elise been together in the Palace of Dis now anyway? She hadn’t hesitated to feed

him with her own energies when he had been unconscious, and the way that she had smiled to see him wake up... They seemed to have become terribly close.

James took the seat across from Lincoln. He could feel the corner of the ethereal book digging into his hip. “If our lives hadn’t intersected, you never would have met Elise, either.”

He gave a disbelieving laugh. “It’d be worth it,” Lincoln said.

Distaste twisted James’s mouth. For all that fate, angels, and the White Ash Coven had pushed James and Elise together, he didn’t regret a moment of it. He would rather have lived a thousand miserable lives alongside her than a single life alone.



However long Lincoln had been in the Palace with Elise—hours or weeks or years—he didn't deserve the time he had spent with her.

James grabbed one of the books. "Nothing will ever be normal for you again," he said, unable to keep the sharp edge out of his voice. "The sooner you embrace that, the less disappointing you'll find life. Whatever remains of it."

The doors swung open, and a man strode into the library radiating anxiety. He stopped a few steps away from them. It was one of the human guards—the one that Elise had called Azis.

"She's back," Azis said.

**The dungeons were emptier than they**

should have been. Elise glared down at the stalls underneath Jerica's cage and found that almost a full half of them were empty, and those that remained occupied were silent. No more threats and catcalls greeted her. Just the powerful, overbearing silence of fear.

“What happened, Gerard?” she asked.

“They’ve been dying,” he said, leaning against the wall, picking at his fingernails with a knife. “All the half-humans have been dropping. One or two a day for the last couple days. We’ve been feeding them and they don’t seem to be sick, so I don’t know what’s up.” He sounded casual about it, but there was a tremor in his voice and gnarled fingers.

Elise thought she knew what was killing her prisoners. It was the same thing making her normally fearless praetor quiver with fear. Her eyes flicked up toward the bottom of the cage swaying over the dungeon. She couldn't see Jerica from this angle, but she suspected that the nightmare was going to look very different the next time Elise saw her. Jerica must have been very well fed. She had been drinking the half-humans to death.

Davithon of the House of Courevore wasn't half-human, so Elise decided to worry about the surviving Gray later. A handful of their lives weren't worth Jerica's.

"I'm going down," Elise said.

“Guard the hall.”

Gratitude flashed over Gerard’s grizzled face. “Will do.”

He stepped out the double doors. Before they swung shut, another man stepped through. Lincoln had shrunk even since Elise had issued leather body armor to him, and the slacks hung low on his hips. His skin was gray.

“James?” she asked.

“He wanted to stay and read books. Azis is watching him.”

Good enough. The library was probably where he would be most useful anyway, whether to find a cure for anathema powder or puzzle out warlock magic. “Help Gerard guard the door.”

“No,” Lincoln said.

She didn't bother arguing with him. They climbed down the ladder into the dungeons together. "Levi Riese has been in contact with one of my prisoners," Elise explained as she moved down the rungs, hand over hand, boots clanging against the metal. "That prisoner seems to have supplied him with the poison."

"How?"

"I couldn't ask," she said, dropping to the floor. "Everyone in Northgate has gone missing."

Lincoln landed beside her, even paler than before. "You mean like Two Rivers?"

"Just like Two Rivers. This is all connected, deputy, and I would love to find out how." She strode down the

hallway to the door sealing Davithon's cell. "What would you say if I told you that the pregnant women didn't go missing like the others?"

Lincoln frowned deeply. "I'd say that doesn't sound like something demons would do."

"Ring any bells?"

He rubbed a hand over his jaw, staring at his feet as he searched his thoughts. Elise could actually see him digging deep in memory and finding nothing. "I don't get it."

"Would you like answers?"

"Never wanted anything more in my life."

Elise touched the lock on the cell. It swung open.

The smell of rot rolled out of the open door, slapping her in the face. She cursed under her breath as she stepped inside.

Davithon was dead, and he had passed away violently.

His corpse was contorted in bed, face frozen into a mask of pain. His eyes had sunken deep into his skull. His lips were puckered around bloodstained teeth. His stomach had caved in underneath his ribs, clearly visible under his crushed velvet suit, which looked like it had been eaten away by his sweat. Dried vomit tinged with ichor pooled on the floor underneath.

She stepped forward to get a closer look at the body.

“Careful,” Lincoln said, grabbing her arm.

She tilted her head to the side and saw a faint glimmer of magic in the bile. “Good eye,” Elise said. “He ate anathema powder.”

“Looks like it.” Lincoln wiped his hand over his forehead. He was suddenly sweating. “Jesus. That’s what it looks like. That’s how I’m going to die.”

If Elise had any words of comfort for him, she couldn’t think of them under the sudden crush of disappointment.

Davithon would have known how Levi had gotten the poison, who in the Palace was involved with the conspiracy, and maybe even where all of



the missing people were going.

But he was dead, taking her answers with him.

*“Fuck!”*

She whirled and smashed her fist into the wall. The stone cracked under her knuckles, crumbling to dust.

“We just need someone else from his House, right?” Lincoln asked, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. Jerica’s fear was hitting him. “We just need another guy from the House of Courevore.”

Except that there was nobody else from the House of Courevore. Elise had killed Courevore himself years ago when he had possessed a man on Earth, and they’d always been one of Dis’s

smallest Houses. All that remained were fiends and slaves.

Nobody who would know anything useful.

“Elise.” A rasping voice echoed over the dungeons. She turned, looking for who had spoken to her, but the cell was empty. It didn’t sound like any of her prisoners, either. “Up here.”

Elise tipped her head back. Jerica’s cage was swaying. She could just make out bony, humanlike fingers curled around the bars, and a pale face peering down through the darkness.

“Let me out,” Jerica whispered. “I might know what you need.”

# Thirteen

**“I DON’T THINK** I’ve ever seen him before.”

Elise circled Rylie, watching her watch Jacobi Nowacki through the window of his cell. “Think harder.”

The cells concealed underneath the court were stiflingly hot—much stuffier than the dungeons where Jerica had been feeding. But they were as safe as any location in the Palace could be, unreachable for all but Elise’s trusted inner circle. The wards had been replaced after James broke out a few years earlier, and the stone fortified, so

it may have been the safest place in the Palace.

It was the best way to make sure that nobody reached Jacobi Nowacki for further conspiracy. It was also the best place to lock up a pair of Alpha werewolves that required protection.

Not that Rylie and Abel seemed all that thrilled about being kept in a prison cell.

Rylie shook her head. "I'm sorry. I never got to know Levi all that well. I really don't recognize him."

"Fine." Elise stepped aside so that Rylie could return to her makeshift bedroom.

The staff had dragged furniture downstairs to make it as comfortable as

possible for their visitors. They had a bed, a couch, and even a desk that had once belonged to Judge Abraxas. Neuma had also hung a large painting of demons silhouetted against the fires of Hell on one wall. It wasn't the most comforting decoration, but better than most art in the Palace, and better than bare stone walls.

There was still no mistaking the room for anything but a windowless prison cell. Abel seemed incredibly annoyed to be in it, pacing from one wall to the other as if measuring its length with his footsteps.

When Rylie and Elise returned, he immediately pulled his mate to him. He had come into Hell naked and his condition hadn't changed. That didn't

seem to bother him or Rylie.

*Werewolves*, Elise thought with no small hint of annoyance.

“You smell like Northgate,” Abel said. “Did you kill Levi yet?”

“I didn’t get a chance. Every single person in town has gone missing without a trace. Everyone except Stephanie Whyte.” Elise couldn’t think of any other way to say it. Better to be blunt and get it over with.

“They left?” Rylie asked.

“I have reason to suspect they were taken. Thousands of people have been going missing. I think Levi, the Apple, and the pack are just the latest of the disappearances.”

Panic and shock washed over

Rylie. “Abram.”

“He’s not dumb,” Abel said. “He would have left after we were kicked out. He wouldn’t have stuck around.”

“We don’t know that,” Rylie said, anxiety mounting in her voice. “What if he stayed to try to fight for us? What if he was there when they got taken to—” She cut off. Her eyebrows furrowed. “Where did they go? Who took them?”

“Aliens,” Abel guessed.

Elise felt the corner of her mouth twitch. There wasn’t a hint of worry in him. Rylie was horrified by the idea of everyone going missing, but her mate definitely was not. “Levi Riese is responsible for a recent attempt on my life. I think that the demon who gave him

the poison is also making people disappear.”

Rylie’s distress spiked. She dragged her bottom lip between her teeth, hands clutching her heart. “Levi wouldn’t do that.”

Lincoln edged into the cell, carrying a bundle of leather. “Gerard sent me down with these for the werewolf Alphas. We’re pretty sure they should fit you. Most of the staff isn’t so...big.”

Abel didn’t move to take the clothes from him. “What the fuck are you doing down here? You’re not possessed again, are you?”

The deputy tossed everything onto the couch. “I’m in full possession of my



faculties, for your information.” Elise didn’t even need to be able to read his signals to know that he was pissed. A little bit of the Southern drawl had slipped into his voice, like it always did when he was mad.

“Growl at each other later,” Elise said. “Get dressed, Rylie. You have to go back to Earth.”

Abel lifted a couple pieces of leather. It was the same body armor Elise’s guards wore. “I’m not wearing your stupid uniform.”

“We don’t have enough street clothes to spare them for you. It’s either that or you keep walking around naked. Fine by me, but the winds of Dis aren’t much fun for mortal flesh, and the bridge

to the fissure is long,” Elise said.

Rylie picked up a pair of trousers. “Thank you,” she mumbled, pulling them on underneath her nightgown. “Why are we rushing back to Earth? Do you think you know where everyone went?” The real question was unspoken, but obvious in her tone. *Do you know where my son is?*

“I have a lead on the disappearances. Lincoln and I are going to search a site in Hell. You, however, are going to take Northgate from Stephanie, and this time, you’re going to fucking keep it.”

Rylie’s cheeks burned. “I see.”

“Don’t bother rushing to haul the pack’s asses back to Northgate,” Abel

said. He followed Rylie's example and hiked a pair of leather pants up his hips. "The Levi problem will take care of itself in a couple of days."

"What do you mean?" Elise asked.

"Levi's not an Alpha. You can't just pass the title around like—I don't know, being king or president or whatever. It's bigger than that." He smiled unpleasantly, stretching the scars around his mouth. "Full moon's coming. You know what's going to happen when a whole pack of werewolves without an Alpha shapeshifts together?"

Elise thought she could imagine it. The werewolves were docile under Rylie's control, but that wasn't normal behavior. She'd been mauled by a

werewolf when she was a child. She knew firsthand how brutal they could be.

Abel nodded at her expression. “Like I said. Wherever they are, the Levi problem won’t be a problem soon.”

“That’s why you just left, isn’t it?” Rylie asked, gazing up at Abel with horror. “Because you knew they’d just kill each other.”

Abel shrugged. “The assholes ditched us. Seems fair.”

Elise felt a hint of a smile creep over her lips. “The only problem is that they might be with more than three thousand other missing people.”

“Well, if you get a chance to conveniently leave the Apple and Levi somewhere alone with the pack...”

Abel's grin broadened. "Just saying."

"Simple. Elegant," Elise said. "I like it."

"It'd be a bloodbath," Rylie whispered.

That seemed fitting, considering that Elise and Lincoln had spent hours vomiting blood from Levi's poison.

Lincoln wasn't quite so pragmatic. "We can't let the pack tear itself apart and take the Apple down with it. First of all, we wouldn't get the chance to question them."

A shame, but not necessarily a problem. "And?" Elise prompted.

"And it's wrong," Lincoln said. "There's got to be a better way. We can bring these people to justice without

being barbaric.”

“I don’t know how much you traveled in America during the last few months, Linc, but there’s no justice left in the world. It shattered with the fissure to Hell.”

“The world gone lawless doesn’t justify cruelty,” Lincoln said. “What we do in times like these is what sets us apart from evil. If you think you’re not a sinner, Elise, then you can’t make a sinner’s choices.” He gestured at the painting of the demons on Rylie and Abel’s wall. “You’ve got a Palace. I saw your dungeons. There’s a court, right? Guards? Pull together a jury, find a judge, seek out justice—handle this like civilized, Christian human beings.”

Appreciation flushed Rylie's mind. Somehow, it didn't surprise Elise that the Christian thing resonated with her. "He's right," Rylie said. "We don't have to handle this like demons would. We're not evil."

Elise rolled her eyes. "I can't believe I'm listening to this."

"Even God flooded the Earth when humans acted like giant fucking dicks," Abel said.

"I won't let the pack tear itself apart if there are innocents in danger," Elise said. "Happy?"

Rylie nodded, but she didn't look happy.

"Gerard said he'd have a contingent of guards ready to escort the

Alphas in about an hour,” Lincoln said, heading for the door. “Make sure you’re at the top of the tower before then.”

“We don’t need guards,” Abel said, pulling a jacket on over his bare shoulders. “Wasn’t it one of your people that just tried to kill you guys in the first place? I’m not letting any of them at my back.”

“Guards or not—I don’t care. It’s up to you. Get to Northgate,” Elise said. She caught Rylie’s eye. “You’ll keep it this time, right?”

Rylie bit her lip and nodded again.

Not the most inspiring response, but Elise didn’t have time to try to shake some confidence into the kid. She moved to follow Lincoln.



Rylie caught her arm, stopping her. “If you find out that Abram is with them...whatever else you do, make sure that he escapes,” she whispered urgently, pleading in her eyes. “Don’t leave him at the mercy of Levi. Don’t let the pack bite him.”

Elise’s heart fractured. She kept her expression blank. “I’ll do my best to bring him home safely if he’s with the abductees.”

“Thank you,” Rylie said. “I know he’s an adult, and a kopis, and...” She dragged her bottom lip between her teeth. Her mind was awash with pain, and even her posture made it look like she had been physically injured. “He’s still my baby.”

Nathaniel's face flashed through Elise's mind. She pushed it away.

"He's not the only loved one gone missing," Elise said. She surprised herself with how gently she said it. "My friend Anthony is gone, too. I don't plan on letting the werewolf pack go wild. Okay?"

Rylie finally looked comforted. She released Elise's arm.

Elise headed into the hall with Lincoln and headed up the iron stairs. "So where are we going?" he asked once they were out of earshot from Rylie and Abel.

Elise rubbed her upper arms, even though she wasn't cold. She felt heavy with Rylie's sadness. Eve's sadness.

The loss of Abram. Ridiculous. She needed to shake free of it all. “We’re going to the House of Volac. I think there’s something in the canyon on her property.”

“There are wards on all the Houses,” Lincoln said. “She’s not going to let us in.”

“But Volac is in my hierarchy, and I’m at the top now,” Elise said. “The wards won’t keep me out. We just have to make sure that she doesn’t see us coming.”

**The City of Dis** was peaceful from above. She used to drift over Dis every day while avoiding daylight on Earth, and she’d watched so many horrible

things happen to the humans within the city—slaves dragged to butcher shops, skinned in the streets, and cooked for food.

Elise's legions had changed the face of the districts, shifting chaos into order. Humans outside the Houses were as safe as she could make them. Some free men even dared to walk alone, without escorts.

It almost seemed to make all the trouble worth it.

She flitted to the outskirts of town and felt a buzz of warmth as she slipped through Volac's wards. Elise set down at the bottom of the canyon. Lincoln staggered, gasping for air, clawing at his throat.

She touched his arm. “Breathe, Deputy.”

It took him too long to catch his breath—much longer than it usually took her allies—and when he did, he still looked too pale. “I’m fine,” he rasped.

He wasn’t fine, and if James didn’t find a cure for him, he wasn’t going to be fine ever again.

“Good,” Elise said, thumping him on the back. “Where are we going?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Davithon’s memories sent me here. He was working with Aquiel, so he probably worked with you.”

Lincoln looked around the canyon. Its walls were surprisingly smooth, almost as though they had been carved

out by water, although Elise imagined that it must have been something more like magma. The stone had been compressed into layers of alternating rust-brown and orange.

A winding path led deeper into the canyon, narrow and steep. That was where Lincoln headed.

“Remember something?” she asked.

“No,” Lincoln said. “Yes.” He groaned and rubbed at his temples. “Yeah, this definitely looks familiar.”

Their footfalls echoed in the distance, bouncing off of the curved stone. The bloody sky was only visible in a sliver high above their heads, split by a single bolt of gray-blue that Elise didn't dare look at for long.

She walked briskly, eyes open wide, watching the shadows for a sign of Volac's near-invisible mass. She was looking so hard for a threat that she didn't notice when her companion stopped.

"Wait," Lincoln said. "In here."

He had paused in front of a narrow opening in the cliff. It was only four feet tall, and it vanished into darkness.

"What's in there?" Elise asked.

Lincoln shrugged helplessly. "I don't know."

She stooped and walked inside.

The passage constricted around them as they walked deeper, squeezing until Elise's shoulders were too broad to fit. She turned to an angle. Watched

Lincoln following her, face pale in the darkness, feeling his way along the walls with arms outstretched.

They kept walking, and it kept constricting.

“Lincoln,” she began.

“It ends,” he said. “I know it ends.”

It did.

Elise squeezed through a slit that was barely large enough for her to sidle through, and then she was *there*, and she understood instantly that it was the place that they had been looking for.

The cavern under the flesh farms was broad and vast, made from the same clay-colored stone that looked like it had been hollowed out by water. Ancient stalactites hung from the roof. And



among those rocky crags dangled bare human feet, some limp, some twitching, all of them far too high to be within Elise's reach.

They really were directly underneath the flesh farms.

But as horrifying as the feet hanging from the rock were, Elise still couldn't tear her gaze from what was below them.

For a moment, Elise thought that the hole was filled with water, but what she saw on the other side wasn't the bottom of a pool. She saw distant fires and dark shapes that gave her a sense of immense scale.

They were standing on the brink of a portal.

“There’s another road down here that goes through the flesh farms,” Lincoln said, jerking his chin toward the opposite side of the portal. “That path’s a lot bigger, but it’s exposed. You couldn’t reach it without Volac knowing about it.”

Elise squinted at the portal. On the other side, she could make out something that looked like a long, curved tibia. It was so distorted that she had a difficult time determining its scale. Her eyes traveled over a jagged ridge below the tibia, trying to decide if she was looking at small rocks or something else like... buildings?

It was a skyline.

And that bone was definitely large.

She was looking at one of the legs of Malebolge.

Heat washed over her as she realized what it meant.

The two dimensions shouldn't have been connected so seamlessly—certainly not at the bottom of a canyon at the back of the House of Volac. There were approved pathways between the worlds—portals that the Palace controlled—but this was a gaping hole big enough for Aquiel to have dropped through without scraping his elbows.

Abraxas hadn't just been tearing open fissures between Dis and Earth. He had torn open a fissure between Dis and Malebolge, as well.

"I remember this," Lincoln said.

“I’ve been here before.” His eyes unfocused, lost in memory. “I was escorting people. There must have been...dozens of them. They were human.”

“This is how they’ve been getting the slaves out of Dis without being detected,” Elise said, gazing down into the shimmering pool. “They haven’t been killing them or passing them through portals. They’ve been marching them.”

It was equally feasible that humans could have been transported directly from Earth to Malebolge, too. There shouldn’t have been any portals there, either, but at this point, nothing that Abraxas had done could surprise her.

“But why Malebolge?” Lincoln

asked.

She searched her memories of retrieving Jerica. She hadn't seen any signs of unusual industry within the mass of the cadaver—nothing that was unusual for Hell, anyway. She wouldn't even know where to begin looking for something new or different. Until Elise had traveled down the borehole, she had never been in Malebolge.

But she knew someone who had.

**ELISE FOUND JAMES** sitting on a bridge between two towers with his legs dangling over the side and his arms wrapped around the railing. He wore the veils that several of Elise's guards chose to wear while patrolling the barricades, though they looked much stranger hanging over the shoulders of his white cotton shirt than they did over leather.

She dropped beside him, letting her feet hang over the edge like his. Even though she knew that she couldn't be killed by a fall—she could phase into

shadow long before hitting the ground—it still made her stomach twist to look all the way down at the courtyard so far below them, at the city stretched beyond the walls, and feel the wind making the towers sway gently. She was just one snapped cable away from a very long fall.

He didn't acknowledge her presence. He only glared at Dis. The curve of his nose and mouth were faintly visible through the veils, so she could tell that he was frowning.

“I need you to come with me to Malebolge,” Elise said. “I need you to be my guide through the city.”

His pale eyes seemed to glow from within the shadows of the shroud.

“Okay.”

Elise waited for him to say something else. To threaten her, set conditions, or make an ultimatum. But James turned back to the courtyard, blue light of the fissure reflecting on his irises, and ignored her.

“We leave in two hours,” she said.

“Okay.”

His hand was resting on the bridge between them. It would be so easy to move her own hand two inches to the left, brushing her skin against his, opening the bond between them.

Elise folded her hands in her lap.

“What about Lincoln’s cure?”

He gave some thought to the question, hands tightening on the



bridge's railing. "The reason that angels are so much stronger than demons is that there are fewer of them," James said. "There are millions of demons. Perhaps billions of them. Each time one dies, the rest are strengthened infinitesimally."

She frowned. "That's not true."

"No?"

"The strength of demons versus angels was determined by the Treaty of Dis. They decided angels should get more power because they were fewer in number, but it's not like if you killed every angel but one, the survivor would have near-infinite strength."

"That's what they said, isn't it?"

She could tell a rhetorical question when she heard one. "You think that all

demons get their strength from a sole, finite power base.”

“We know that nightmares do. You’ve seen it yourself. Who’s to say that it’s not like that to some degree for all demons?”

“History.”

James made a noncommittal noise. “The entire universe is bound together by invisible fibers. It’s how we cast magic. It’s how men with precognition see the future. It’s how kopides and aspides connect their lives to one another.” The wind blew harder, like an invisible hand lifting the veils over his forehead, momentarily baring his eyebrows. His hair was white again. He didn’t seem to bother with his glamor

when Elise was around.

“What does this have to do with Lincoln?”

“Everything. This might be the way to cure him.”

The fact that he was telling her that rather than acting on it didn't make it sound like the solution would be a positive one. “Will it kill him?”

“Possibly,” James said. “He's already a dead man if I do nothing, so I don't see how that matters.”

He was probably right. “Then do it. Heal him.”

“You don't know what you're asking me to do yet. There are some things worse than dying.”

She swallowed hard. Sitting next to

James without touching him, knowing what he had done to her yet being unable to push him out of her mind and life—that was, in its own way, far worse than dying. “I know.”

He finally looked at her. His white-blue eyes seemed to cut right through her skin to the core of her thoughts underneath. With a single finger, he tugged down the edge of his veils, baring his jaw, the white stubble, his strangely ageless features. With all of his illusions cast aside, he didn't look any more human than she did. Not anymore.

“The anathema powder seems to affect a demon's tie to this greater pool of energy,” James said. “It's poisoning his very life force. Unfortunately, I don't

believe that there's any way to reverse the effects of the anathema powder now that it has catalyzed."

"So the only cure is death."

"Or cutting him off from the source. If he weren't a demon, he wouldn't be poisoned."

"That's useless to us," Elise said.

"Not necessarily." James sighed. "I've been developing a new kind of magic ever since Shamain fell."

Of course he had.

"Something more powerful than ethereal magic," Elise said. "Something that will let you into Eden."

"No. That's not the goal."

"But it could be a side effect."

He looked pained. "If I'm not

searching for greater power, then what am I doing, Elise? What else is there?"

He could be fighting the war that Elise was, trying to save people from bondage in Hell. Or he could be helping the werewolf pack fight off the Apple. He could be healing people that were wounded on Earth, trying help the good people of Two Rivers restore utility power, or any of a thousand other completely noble causes.

The fact was that James didn't care about anyone other than himself anymore. There were no noble causes when nobody mattered.

"Okay. Fine. What have you learned to do?" she asked.

"To make a long story short, I'm

trying to manipulate the aforementioned threads directly. Trying to learn the language of the universe so that I can become fluent and speak new realities, so to speak. I haven't accomplished it yet," he admitted. "However, I think that I might be able to sever Lincoln from the core of infernal power." The one that Elise seriously doubted even existed. "If it does what I think, the effects would be threefold: the anathema powder would no longer sicken him, a huge amount of energy would be released in the severance, and—"

"Lincoln wouldn't be a demon anymore," Elise said.

"His physical attributes wouldn't change, but he wouldn't have any of the

other problems. None of the hungers, or any of the powers, weaknesses, or potential longevity.”

“So...mortal.”

“He would be effectively human again, yes.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of a solution, considering that you haven’t been able to cast that kind of magic before.”

“I was missing information before,” James said.

“And you aren’t now?”

He stood, offering a hand to help her up. “Let me show you. We should discuss this somewhere private, where we won’t be overheard.”

Elise got to her feet without



touching him.

“My rooms will work,” she said.

**They walked through** the halls of the Palace together, Elise leading the way and James at her back. Everyone they passed bowed when they saw her. She nodded back at them.

A mixture of amusement and irritation radiated from James behind her. He thought it was funny that she had vassals.

She couldn't wait to see how amusing he found her army.

Neuma wasn't in the rooms when they arrived, and most of her belongings were gone, too. She hadn't wasted any time in moving out and moving on. Elise

stepped aside to let James in, shutting the door behind them and locking it.

He walked to the windows and looked out at the Palace as he unwound the veils. The crimson light from outside made him seem to glow. “You can’t even see where I blew a hole into the battlements anymore,” he remarked.

“They had it repaired before I took charge. Good thing, too. I wouldn’t have the time or resources to do it myself.”

“My apologies. If I’d known that you were going to be taking charge of the evil Hell-castle that imprisoned me, I might have tried to be more delicate about escaping.” He didn’t bother trying to conceal his disapproval, and Elise didn’t bother rising to take the bait.

“You said you were going to show me something.”

James tossed the veils onto her couch and produced a book from his pocket. “This was among the books on Lincoln’s desk.”

Elise turned it over in her hands. “This is ethereal.”

“Indeed it is. From the library.” He didn’t mean the Great Library.

Elise’s eyes fell shut. She could remember the library in Eden through Eve’s memories, beginning from the time they had broken ground on it, through the construction, and all the way to completion. It had put Dis’s library to shame. Instead of being a single tower, it had been a grand, sprawling compound

of solariums and studies, filled with trees growing through the foundations.

She didn't remember it burning. That had happened shortly after Eve's murder. But Elise knew that it had burned, and that no books had survived.

Except this one, apparently.

Elise fanned through the pages. She couldn't read any of them. "This is the missing information?"

"It verifies everything that I'd only suspected. The singular source of power for all angels, demons, and humans. The threads that tie it all together." James flipped to a page in the back without removing it from her hands. "In this chapter, it says how to manipulate it. Specifically, how to sever someone

from that source of power.”

She would have to take his word for it. “So you can do this to Lincoln.”

“I believe so.”

Elise shut the book, rubbing her thumb over the engraved cover. It tingled with the memory of ethereal magic. “How do you know it won’t just kill him?”

“I don’t,” James said.

She pushed it back into his hands. “If he wants you to do it, then you have my blessing. Now can you do something about this?” She spread either side of her jacket, pulled down the neck of her shirt. The wound from Sallosa’s blade was still raw. James sucked in a hard breath.

“How did that happen?” He took his reading glasses from the pocket of his shirt and put them on to look closer.

“A daughter of the House of Volac tried to assassinate me.”

“With what, exactly? What could have left so much damage?”

She opened a chest sitting beside her couch, revealing Sallosa’s flamberge. Elise didn’t withdraw it. She didn’t plan on touching it ever again, if possible.

James wasn’t nearly as cautious. He lifted it from the velvet, one hand on the hilt, blade balanced on his fingers. He gazed along its glistening length. It caught the torchlight and reflected a gold slash across his eyes.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Yes, this will help.”

“With what?”

“Don’t you see it?” James stepped back from Elise, swinging it in a wide, graceful arc with a flick of his wrist. He’d never been as good with swords as she was, but she’d taught him a thing or two. When the blade caught the light, it seemed to shimmer with fire. “This blade is enchanted. House of Volac, you said? I don’t think they have the knowledge to forge such a thing.”

Elise didn’t have the faintest clue. Volac was clever and powerful. Who knew what she could do? “Maybe they don’t have the knowledge anymore, but I’d expect a weapon like that to be

passed down over the years.”

“That House has always been occupied by farmers.” He grimaced. “One of the few that grows new flesh from cadavers for use as leather and food. Quite a, uh, talent, if that’s what you want to call it, and certainly skilled in those respects. Generals and soldiers? Never. Smiths? Even less likely. Nobody within their family made this. It was sold to them by someone who knows how to craft warlock magic.”

“Or gifted to them,” Elise said.

“Thinking of anyone in particular?”

Belphegor would have been the obvious suspect, except that he didn’t seem to want her dead. “No. I don’t know.”



“Well, if we can access the House’s financial records, we can determine if they could afford such a sword, and if so, who sold it. There should be copies in the Palace.”

“I doubt it. The House of Volac has been hiding and falsifying records.”

He made a thoughtful noise, rubbing his chin. “Alternatively, I might be able to trace the magic to its root. I don’t need to know how to replicate it to deconstruct it.” He set the flamberge down again, continuing to mutter about records, spells, and tracking magic.

Elise had missed this. James Faulkner, with all his arcane knowledge, and the ease and clarity with which he knew how to find the things that he

didn't yet know. He was the reason that she had lacked.

She hated herself for being so happy to have him puzzling over that damn flamberge.

“That might lead me back to the enemy most intent on killing me this week, but in the meantime, it doesn't fix this.” Elise pointed at the neck of her shirt again.

James reached for her. She took a quick step back.

“I was just going to try to heal you,” he said.

She clenched her fists. “You don't need to touch me for that.”

“Actually...”

He moved toward her again, and

Elise stiffened, but didn't try to escape. He traced a gloved finger along the edge of the wound. "It looks painful," he said softly.

It was. But Elise could no longer remember a time when her heart hadn't ached, wound or not, so it didn't seem to matter all that much anymore.

James removed his glove, revealing the blue symbols slithering over the back of his hand and between his fingers. It was a runic language in which Elise had become fluent; she could see that he was prepared to cast several impressive trans-dimensional and warding spells. He urged one onto the tip of his forefinger. It was brighter than the others—a healing rune.

She braced herself for it to hurt. It was ethereal magic, after all. Angel magic didn't play nicely with demon flesh.

But she wasn't prepared for exactly how much it would hurt.

White-hot shock jolted through her. Elise's teeth ached, her bones shook, and her skin felt like it caught fire. She wrenched away from him with a cry. "Hey!"

Startled, James drew his hand back. "Damn."

"Damn" was right. Elise's heart was pounding, forcing fresh amber blood through the unhealed wound. The sludge dribbled down her chest.

She braced a hand on the back of

her couch, gritting her teeth as the pain kept building. His magic crawled over her like spiders with needles for legs. “What the fuck was that?”

“A healing spell,” James said, looking around the room. “Paper—I need paper.”

Elise pointed at the door to her office. He retrieved a pad of paper and stick of charcoal and returned, pulling her to the couch.

Once she was seated, he shoved the paper into her hands.

“Draw,” he said.

“What?”

“Draw a warlock rune for healing.”

She had seen a lot of runes in Onoskelis’s books, but hadn’t known

what any of them meant. The only way she had been able to craft runes to torture Gremory was by testing them first to see what they did. None of them had healed.

“You’ll have to be more specific.” Her hand shook as she wrapped it around the charcoal pencil. Every beat of her heart felt like a fresh stab wound.

He ripped a page off of the notepad. “Follow my lead.”

Even though James had only hours to study the books in the library, he drew a rune with confidence. Not a looping, graceful ethereal rune, but a hard-edged mess of spikes. A warlock rune.

As he drew, he said a word, harsh and bitter sounding. It must have been a

word of power, but he was ethereal Gray; he couldn't speak words in ancient *vo-ani* the way a demon could have. Elise had no idea what he was saying. Her instinctive understanding of the infernal tongue didn't extend to its archaic form.

When she repeated it, he shook his head.

"Harsher," he said. "More in the back of your throat."

"It feels like someone's sawing through my breastbone," Elise said through gritted teeth. It had been hard enough to cast warlock magic the first time, when she had been well fed and uninjured.

"Try it. Please."

Elise repeated the word, trying to mimic Onoskelis's accent. This time she felt it punch through her gut, making her skin warm. Orange magic flared on the page. The rune caught fire.

Yelping, she tossed the notebook to the floor.

The rune hung in the air, waiting for her.

"Take it," James said, his eyes bright with more than just a reflection of the flames.

Heart thudding, Elise reached out and cupped the fire.

It didn't burn. The rune crept onto her hand and settled into her skin with a familiar feeling—similar to the ethereal runes, but without the pain. It was like



slipping into a hot bath with Neuma. It melted her muscles and drove away the pain of being touched by James's attempt at a healing spell.

She had cast a warlock spell. Again. But this one wasn't flickering like her last attempts. It was bright and strong.

Elise didn't need any further instruction to activate it. She didn't even need to speak. With a thought, the rune flared again, gushing smoke over her flesh.

Her chest throbbed. She pulled down the neck of her shirt to see what was happening, and found the skin on her breast puckering, drawing in on itself. The bleeding slowed. The bone

underneath disappeared from view and the bruises faded.

James watched intently, smiling faintly. “Yes,” he said. “Excellent.”

The pain vanished. Elise wiped away the blood, and the skin underneath was untouched.

She had done it. She had cast her first successful warlock rune.

Elise would be unstoppable.

Her moment of excitement quickly faded to a more typical, pragmatic kind of worry. “Why did your spell hurt me so much? I’ve cast hundreds of ethereal runes before.”

“That’s probably why. It’s like an allergy. The first time an individual is stung by a bee, they may not react. The

third or fourth sting can kill with anaphylactic shock. You've grown more sensitive to it." James took her hand, rubbing his thumb over the lingering warmth where the rune had been momentarily positioned. "I noticed that the second warlock rune I cast started to hurt."

"You've been casting warlock magic?"

"While I was in the library and you were roaming elsewhere, yes. It wasn't too difficult to figure out. Warlock magic is shockingly similar to magecrafting. And it seems that I can cast it with some effort by drawing off of your strength in much the same way you can cast ethereal magic with my help."

“That would have been great to know earlier,” Elise said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “I just did.”

But if she had known earlier, she could have cast warlock spells before going to the House of Volac. Now the army was already mobilizing, Gerard was preparing her personal guard, and they had no time to delay.

But she still knew how to do it now. She could cast magic without killing herself again.

*The possibilities...*

“Thanks,” Elise said. “We’ll need to do more work on this.”

His eyes creased at the corners in a

millimeter smile. “Yes. We will.”  
Special emphasis on “we.”

He was still holding her hand, and Elise didn't try to pull away from him. She was hungry again. Her healing spell had soothed the pain of the ethereal magic, but she had fed Lincoln earlier, and Neuma wasn't offering up her blood for the time being.

But James was here. His blood tasted best of all. There was more than an hour until Elise intended to leave for the House of Volac.

The fact that she hadn't pulled away hadn't gone unnoticed by James. “What's between you and Lincoln?” he asked, brushing his thumb over her bottom lip.

Between Elise and Lincoln? Lust, mostly. Maybe some shade of friendship. A sense of responsibility over for his safety. Hunger.

“Why?” she asked.

His thumb stilled at the center of her lip where it was fullest, hand cupping her jaw. “You know why.”

“I don’t owe anything to you. I don’t belong to you. Even if you tried to lock me in a cage so you could keep me like some pet.”

“We belong to each other. More permanent than marriage, more fatal than —”

“Don’t,” Elise said.

“Lincoln Marshall doesn’t love you.”

“I wouldn’t want him to.”

James dipped his head to hers. The brush of his lips was almost enough to unravel everything—her resolve, her anger, even her very skin.

“I’ll heal him for you,” James said, the words breezing over her lips. His hands crept into her hair. His fingers tangled in the hair at the nape of her neck. “But I won’t remain in the Palace and study in that library if it means watching you fall in love with another man. Watching you with Anthony and Malcolm very nearly killed me. I can’t do that again.”

“I never loved either of them,” she said.

Not the way he meant, anyway. But

Elise was beginning to understand that love came in many forms—even for her, even before Eve had taken up residence in her soul. She had loved them as friends and brothers. Still loved Anthony, in fact. Enough that she would plunge into Malebolge to search for him among the missing souls without hesitation.

But they weren't James. Nobody was James.

She closed her eyes, rested her forehead against his. "You've done too much to me. I can't forgive you." She hesitated, warring with herself, then pushed on. "But if you're going to stay in the Palace with me, then we could still..."



Elise didn't finish the sentence.  
She didn't need to.

He kissed her hard, letting his months or years or centuries of loneliness into it, pushing her against the back of the couch. Elise wrapped her arms around his neck, digging her fingers into his back through his shirt. She wanted to shred it with her fingernails. Expose his skin.

He tasted like forbidden fruit that Elise had sampled too many times. She could lose herself to him, lose herself to the maddening promises his lips made that James would not keep, and the intense pleasure of their united bodies. It would have been enough to drive a weaker woman to addiction, but far

more destructive than any drug.

James broke away for air, but she followed, catching his lips again instantly. She wanted to consume his very breath.

“Wait.” He traced his thumb along the line of her bottom lip again, skin sliding against their mingled saliva. “There need to be rules.”

She nipped his thumb with her teeth. His breath hitched. “Fuck you and fuck your rules.”

His eyes flashed to a deeper shade of blue, though Elise knew that it was only the glamor shifting over him as his attention and energies shifted.

James stood, putting space between them. He put the entire coffee table

between them. Once he was safely on the other side, he rested his hands on the back of a wingback chair as if to steady himself.

“You can’t feed off of me,” he said softly, levelly.

It was a line she had expected him to draw, but it was still like being kneed in the gut. “I don’t have to bleed you.” That was more of a concession than she wanted to make. She wanted him inside of her and her teeth sinking into his throat.

“Obviously, you wouldn’t ‘bleed’ me.” He looked offended by the very suggestion, as if he hadn’t enjoyed the last time they’d fucked as much as she had. “I mean that I don’t want you to

feed off of the—any of our intimacy. Or anything else. I'm not a servant or slave. I won't be debased, injured, or treated like a piece of mortal meat.”

As if he could ever be only food to her. Did he think so little of himself? Did he think so little of *Elise*? “Just because you won't fulfill that need doesn't mean it will stop existing. I'll have to feed some other way.”

“If you would try to eat like a human does, try to sleep regularly, it may sustain you until we could come up with an alternate solution.”

Elise had avoided eating and sleeping when those had been actual needs for her mortal body. She couldn't imagine relying on it again, not if she

didn't need to. And there was no alternate solution. She wouldn't weaken herself for anyone. Even James.

"Lincoln would feed me," she said.

She watched the jealousy blossom over his mind. He'd always been good at keeping his thoughts from showing on his face. It wasn't enough to keep Elise from knowing the truth now.

"If he survives," James said.

"Is that a threat?" she asked. He didn't respond. "Fine. You let Lincoln die, it will just be someone else. One of my other human guards. Maybe all of them. Azis and Gerard and—"

"Elise," he snapped.

She pushed to her feet.

"I have a better offer," Elise said,

stepping around the chair. She curled her fingers around his lapels. His muscles seemed to ripple under her hands. “Let me feed from you. Blood and flesh and sex and anger. No nightmares or fear—that can be off-limits. I don’t want to hurt you in a way you can’t tolerate. But give me what I need to sustain myself, and you can have me. All of me.” She pressed her nose into his throat, inhaled his scents. His sweat reminded her of mirrored dance halls and blue foam mats. “No sharing. Just you and me. For as long as we can tolerate each other.”

A ragged breath escaped his chest. “Lord, Elise.”

“I’ll move you into my rooms.” Her fingernails crawled up his chest, biting

gently into his pectorals. “I’ll give you anything you want. I’ll break into the lower levels of the library to let you research among the rarest books in the universe. I have staff that can help you.”

“Listen to yourself,” he said softly. “They’re not *your* staff.”

She slammed her fist into the wall next to his head. James didn’t even flinch.

“The Palace is mine,” Elise growled. “Dis is mine. All of fucking Hell is *mine*. It’s my staff, my library, and I’m not going to let you and your prejudices—”

“*Prejudices*? You have an army of demons.”

“I’m the only thing getting human

slaves out of Hell. I'm changing a centuries-old regime based on human trafficking. Yes, I'm allied with demons. I *am* a demon. I need to be able to feed in order to make myself strong and save people. And there is not a single fucking thing that you can do to change that." She fisted his collar, fixed him with a glare. "You can be my partner again, but I won't give that up for you."

"You know that I've always loved you, Elise," James said. "But this...I can't do this. You've changed too much. I'm not going to let you feed on me. It's sick."

It still made her lungs contract to hear him say that he loved her, even as his denial sucked away all of her



oxygen.

Shouldn't she have been beyond that by now? She ruled Hell. She was a demon-god. She had been beyond human needs and mortality for years now, so many long years. But this man still had the power to shatter her with just a few words.

No matter what James thought, Elise hadn't changed. She was the same girl with all the sharp edges and broken pieces who he had conned into trusting him. She didn't care if he didn't like what she had been warped into as a product of his machinations.

"Then there's no compromise. You'll lead me through Malebolge. You'll heal Lincoln. And that will be it."

“As I said, I’ll help you. But we can’t do...this.” He gestured between them. “Not if you’re going to insist on acting like a demon.”

She wasn’t even frustrated anymore. Just exhausted. “I can’t give you everything when you won’t give me anything.”

“I’ll give you everything I can.”

Elise didn’t want to hear it anymore. She hadn’t changed, and James hadn’t, either. His words were still meaningless. “Forget about it. Meet me at the gates in...forty-five minutes from now, looks like. There’s body armor in my wardrobe that should fit you.”

By the time she stepped out of the room, he still hadn’t moved.

**ELISE DIDN'T REMEMBER** leaving her rooms and walking to the library. She was just suddenly *there*, opening the door to find Lincoln sitting at Onoskelis's desk again.

Her heart was still hurting, and it had nothing to do with the now-healed flamberge wound.

She stepped inside. Elise closed her eyes. Bumped the back of her head against the door.

"Hey," Lincoln said softly, standing up from the desk with a grinding of chair legs against the crystal floor. "You

okay?”

She didn't move or respond.

The sound of his beating heart grew as he approached her, bringing the tempting slosh of his blood within arm's reach. He touched her shoulder. She shoved his arm away. “Don't do that,” she said.

“Just trying to help,” Lincoln said.

“I'm not weak,” Elise said. “I don't need your comfort. If you attempt anything like that where people can see us, I will end you so quickly that—”

“Whoa. Hey.” He stepped back, hands lifted in a defensive gesture. “Don't take this out on me.” He was right. She wasn't angry with him. She was angry with James—his denial, his

rejection, his goddamn stubbornness. Lincoln was just the most convenient place to focus it.

Elise managed to give a terse, “Sorry.” That one word had an impressive effect on Lincoln. He relaxed and smiled, looked a little bit brighter. Strange how much people relied on those little courtesies like “please” and “sorry” to make them feel better about themselves.

“I noticed the army’s mobilized,” Lincoln said, settling back in front of Onoskelis’s books.

“I’m taking three centuries into Malebolge to look for the missing people.”

He drummed the end of his pen on

the desk. "I'm not coming, am I?"

"Not in your condition. No." Elise hesitated then sat on the chair across from him. "James believes he's found a way to cure you. It's risky. You might die."

The knot in his throat bobbed as he swallowed. "Doesn't seem like that matters much. Dead either way, right?"

"Well. If it works, you'll be more than cured." She gave him a serious look, making sure that she had his full attention. "You won't be infernal Gray anymore, either."

A smile spread over his lips, lighting up his whole face. "A real cure."

"Also, possible death." She knew it

sounded harsh, but he looked so elated by the idea of the alternative that she needed to make sure he heard what she was saying.

“I know you don’t believe me, but there’s a life beyond this,” Lincoln said. “I’ve done all the good I can. I’ve been a good man. I’ve sometimes fallen prey to my weaknesses, like all men do, but I’ve done it with love for God in my heart, and I’ve done everything I can to atone. Saint Peter is waiting for me at Heaven’s gates, and I’m fixing on meeting him with a clear conscience. I can’t do that if I’m a demon.”

Elise rested her hand over his. “Lincoln...”

How could she begin to tell him

that everything he knew was wrong? That every single sermon he had attended as a child had been a bald-faced lie, delivered by supposed holy men regurgitating the “truths” that the angels had wanted them to believe?

She didn't want to change his mind. It was a cold, harsh world. If faith was what he needed to wake up in the morning, well, who was she to take that from him?

But she couldn't let him face potential death in ignorance.

“Before I was born, my parents agreed to give me to an angel named Metaraon,” Elise said. “Through their combined efforts, I was born a weapon specifically intended to assassinate



Adam—the First Man, whom you would know as God.”

“No,” Lincoln said, “that’s not—”

She pushed on. “I went to the Garden of Eden. I faced Adam. And, just like Metaraon wanted, I killed Him.” It still hurt to say it, and it wasn’t just Eve that was aching. She couldn’t quite remember Adam’s face anymore, after so many long years, despite her perfect memory. He was a haze to her.

Whenever she said His name, she could only think of James when he had been possessed by Adam, and how she had walked away to let him die in misery.

He had obviously survived being Adam’s vessel for a few short minutes,

but that was still how she remembered Him. Struggling to cling to life as a weak, mortal man that Elise didn't want to love anymore.

“You're not messing with me, are you?” Lincoln asked, watching her face closely. “You really believe this.”

“It's not a belief. It's fact. God is dead and I killed Him.”

“I'm not saying I think you're lying or delusional. I'm saying that if you managed to kill a guy, it couldn't have been God. That's not how it works.”

Elise couldn't find the stamina to get annoyed. It took real nerve for him to deny the most important formative experiences of her life—but some part of her sympathized with his need to deny

it. “So you think there’s a Heaven. An afterlife waiting for your soul. Even though you’re in Hell right now.”

“We’re in a place that calls itself Hell, but Heaven and Hell aren’t physical places like this. It’s somewhere our souls will go when we’ve passed on. Our Lord God will be waiting to judge us all.” Lincoln smiled faintly. “Even you, Elise.”

She hadn’t thought about the possibility of an afterlife in a long time. It was almost funny to think of some God—someone other than Adam—waiting to judge her soul. “Must be nice to have that kind of faith.”

“That’s the thing about faith,” Lincoln said. “You can’t just have it

when it's easy.”

But apparently you could have faith when all the evidence indicated the contrary.

“I hope that Saint Peter is waiting for you in the afterlife, Lincoln.” It surprised her to realize that she meant it. Probably Eve’s influence again. Elise wasn’t nearly that sentimental. “But I also hope you’re not going to find out for a long time.”

“I’ll try the cure,” he said.

She wasn’t even remotely surprised.

“We have to perform this operation in Malebolge first. You understand.”

“There’s a lot more at stake than me,” he said. “So yeah, I understand.”

She wished he wasn't so damn understanding. He was too calm. Still smiling, glowing at the idea of finally having the salvation he'd always wanted.

Salvation, or an end to his existence.

Better to be dead than be a demon in Hell with Elise. It seemed to be a popular opinion these days.

"I'll see you when I get back," she said, pushing her chair back to stand.

"Can't wait," Lincoln said.

**It was raining** in Northgate when Rylie and Abel climbed through the fissure. She stood on the open lawn, face tipped back, and let it all wash over her. After

the dry air of Dis, the moisture was a relief to her skin and her soul.

Abel wasn't in the mood to cherish it. He caught Rylie's hand and strode toward St. Philomene's.

"In a hurry?" Rylie asked, struggling to keep up with him. It took three of her steps to match a single one of his strides.

"Elise thinks we're useless," he said. "Thinks she needs to just get rid of us."

"That's not her intent, I don't think."

"Yeah? You think she's just tossing aside a couple of werewolves because she...what, she's just overflowing with support down there? She doesn't want

us.” He enunciated each word, biting them out one after another. “But that don’t mean we can’t be useful. Someone’s gone and taken our pack. I say we figure out who it is. We can smell things that bitch can’t even dream of.”

He was right. Elise had investigated Northgate without werewolf support, and she’d said herself that there was evidence she couldn’t properly analyze at another scene without their help. They couldn’t get to Two Rivers, Georgia to figure out what was happening, but another crime scene had presented itself to them now.

If only it hadn’t been in their home.  
“Good idea,” Rylie said. “You’re

right. Let's find out what's happened to Abram."

Abel gave a slanted smile. "And the pack that fucked us over."

"And the pack," she agreed, even though he had probably meant to be sarcastic, and she definitely did not.

Stephanie Whyte wasn't in St. Philomene's Cathedral. Rylie could tell the instant that they entered the front doors. Weirdly, Rylie couldn't seem to pin down when, exactly, Stephanie had last been there. Her scent was weird. Almost like it had been tainted.

Or scrubbed.

"Someone's been cleaning," Rylie said, wiping her fingers over the coffee table. She didn't come up with any dust.



Abel prowled through the living room that Levi had set up in the cathedral. “That’s like that lemon shit Summer uses on everything, isn’t it?”

It was exactly “that lemon shit” that Summer used on everything. She had inherited a need for cleanliness from her grandmother, Jessica, and had always been kind of obsessive about keeping the kitchens and her computer room immaculate. If they left Summer to her own devices, she would break into every cottage and clean it, with or without the permission of the owners. She was so darn charming about it that nobody seemed to care.

This was too fresh to be Summer’s work, though. She was still on her pre-

honeymoon with Nash, which meant that she hadn't been on a cleaning spree, and definitely hadn't been among those who had been taken. *Thank goodness for small miracles.*

“You think Stephanie was trying to wipe away evidence?” Abel asked, sniffing his way around the nave. “What would she have been scrubbing? You think she made them go missing?”

Rylie didn't want to believe that Stephanie could do such a thing, but she also hadn't wanted to believe that Levi had tried to assassinate Elise. Apparently she expected a lot better out of people than they were actually capable of doing.

“Maybe,” she said hesitantly. “But

Stephanie's not that good a witch, is she? How could she make everyone disappear? I mean, it was *everyone*. The pack, the Scions, the Apple..." Possibly Abram, if he hadn't left when Rylie asked him to escape. And Abram would be hard to take down. Seth had trained him, after all.

"Maybe she didn't do it magically," Abel said.

Rylie couldn't think of any alternatives. Maybe a big truck? A lot of big trucks? But there wouldn't have been anything to scrub inside of St. Philomene's, in that case. The rain would have taken care of the worst of the evidence.

She followed the strongest strains

of the lemon scent out the back door, standing under the overhang to remain dry. Her gratitude for the rain had very quickly turned into her usual desire to avoid getting soaked. Wolves didn't enjoy being wet all that much, and neither did Rylie.

In any case, she didn't need to go far to be able to tell that there weren't any truck smells, like exhaust and metal. The Apple's stolen SUVs hadn't been around lately. There wouldn't have been enough of them to remove the entire pack quickly anyway—not unless the Union had gotten involved, which seemed unlikely.

There were so many potential enemies, and yet so few possibilities.

Abel's warm presence appeared at her back. She turned to see that he had removed his leather jacket and held it over her head like an umbrella.

She smiled at him. "Thank you."

He grunted.

They walked to the trailers that had once belonged to the priests, feet slurping in and out of the wet, muddy grass. Stephanie's presence was also conspicuously absent from the homes. And the smell of lemon was even stronger.

"These were cleaned more recently," Abel said.

But why? Everyone had gone missing from within town, hadn't they?

"Let's go back to the square," Rylie

said.

It was strange and unsettling to walk through Northgate now that everyone was gone. Rylie had seen the town through a lot of transition: when it was originally populated by good, conservative, God-fearing people; when it had been taken by her pack after the Breaking; and most recently, when the Apple had taken charge. But she had never seen it so uninhabited before. The emptiness resonated within her.

Even Abel holding the jacket up for her wasn't enough to distract her from how unpleasant it was.

They prowled around the statue of Bain Marshall together. There wasn't as much lemon smell outside, and if there

was, it had already been washed away by the rain—just like most of the odors.

Rylie couldn't even smell her son anymore, and she would have been able to detect him anywhere. Or so she'd thought.

The smell of soap and latex caught her attention. Rylie stepped around a pylon to see Stephanie Whyte carrying a box down the street, shuffling with its weight.

She darted over to help the doctor.

"Let me take that," Rylie said, grabbing the box.

Stephanie resisted. "They're just supplies. I can carry them." She wouldn't look at Rylie.

"Give them to me."

A werewolf and a pregnant witch in a fight over a box wasn't much of a fight at all. Rylie yanked it into her grasp and stuck it under one arm. It probably weighed at least fifty pounds, filled with dry rice and beans as well as filtered water.

Stephanie hung back, glancing nervously at Abel. She smelled fearful. "I didn't do anything to them."

"I know," Rylie said. Her heart ached.

"If this is Levi's fault, I just want you to know—I tried to talk to him. I tried to stop him."

"I know," she said again. With her free hand, she wrapped Stephanie in a half-hug. "I'm just glad to see that you're



safe. Where are you going? Back to the church? I'll drop off the box for you. You shouldn't be carrying this much weight right now."

"Good God, girl," Stephanie said. "Have I ever told you that you're so much better than this life?"

Startled, Rylie released her. "Thanks?"

Abel called out for Rylie. "Look at this," he said, nudging the grass with his toe.

"I'll be right back," she said, hurrying to Abel's side with the box propped against her hip.

Abel was looking at a part of the lawn that was alive. Strange, since the open fissure had killed everything

around it. Yet it was green and lush in a broad, curving stripe, and a full inch longer than the grass surrounding it.

“Someone’s been selectively fertilizing,” Rylie said with a faint smile, hefting the box against her waist. “Probably some weird Apple thing, you think?”

“A cult of selective fertilization? Really?”

“I don’t know what cults like to do. I’ve never been in a cult before. Unless you count chess club in middle school—they were pretty intense.”

“Chess club,” Abel said. “You’re such a fucking dork.”

“Yeah, well, you’re in love with a dork, so what does that say about you?”

“It says I’m a dumbass,” he said, and he kissed her. There was none of his earlier hesitation in it. It was a confident, claiming gesture, denying all of his teasing, telling her that she belonged to him.

She liked this Abel much better than the alternative—the teasing, possessive Abel that she hadn’t seen much since Seth died. The grass wasn’t the only thing starting to heal.

“We didn’t do it,” Stephanie said. She had finally ventured closer, regaining some of her usual confidence and attitude. “Believe it or not, the Apple has no interest in gardening.”

“Yeah, that’s way too constructive for you assholes,” Abel said.

Rylie leaned on his chest, hiding her smile against his shirt. “Be nice.”

From this new angle, she could see that stripe of too-green grass wasn't alone. A second stripe extended around Bain Marshall in the other direction. There were even little white flowers budding close to the fissure.

It hadn't been like that when Rylie last walked past, had it? She would have noticed something living that close to the heat of Hell. It should have been impossible.

She stepped away from him. “Do you see a pattern?”

Abel was instantly serious, following her as she walked around the lawn of the town square. “Yeah. I do.”

It was a big pattern. The grass had flourished in a design that reminded Rylie of crop circles.

Or one of Elise's magical runes.

She rubbed her hand on the grass and sniffed her fingers. It smelled like buttered popcorn.

"I think Elise is searching in the wrong place," Rylie said. "I don't think this was a demon thing."

Abel sniffed the grass, too. "Why? Because these flowers smell like a wood-burning stove?"

"More like a forest fire, really," Stephanie said. She looked disturbed. She knew where this train of thought was going.

The confirmation of what Rylie

suspected made shivers wash down her spine. “And I smell popcorn.”

She’d explained to him before that angels always smelled like buttered popcorn to her. It was a comforting scent that reminded her of her late father. She was the only one who smelled that—everyone seemed to get something different out of the presence of the ethereal.

Abel’s gaze sharpened. “You mean everyone was abducted by angels.”

And someone was trying to conceal the smell.

Rylie’s heart sank into her stomach. “We have to tell Elise.”

For once, Abel didn’t argue with her. He grabbed her arm and hauled her

back toward the fissure.

But someone was in their way.

Summer stood on the edge of the bridge wearing yellow rubber gloves and carrying a bucket of soapy water. The distinct smell of lemon Pine Sol hanging around her. Her wild curls were pulled back into pigtails. A clear plastic poncho sheltered her from the rain, keeping the white, knee-length dress underneath dry.

“Hey, guys,” she said. “I can’t let you go back to Hell and tell Elise what you’ve found. You can’t tell her anything at all.”

Rylie was slow to catch up. She was too shocked to see her daughter in empty Northgate when she should have

been having romantic flights around the Eiffel Tower or something.

Abel caught on much faster.  
“Summer, what did you do?”

“I’m preventing a war,” she said, lifting her sponge between them as if to illustrate. “And if you have any interest in saving countless lives, you guys are going to help me.”



**THE THIRD TIME** that Elise visited the House of Volac, she didn't wait to be allowed inside. She also didn't attempt to sneak past Volac herself.

It was showtime again, and the demon was Elise's audience for the night.

"The soul links have been disabled," James said. He hadn't moved or cast any spells that Elise could see, but she trusted that he had, somehow, removed the supposedly inviolable spells that prevented intruders from breaking into a House.

Elise nodded at Azis.

Her guards blasted open the locks.

The gates opened with a *bang*, revealing the plantation-style House of Volac at the end of the long, spiked path. There was no waiting army to clash with them. There were no ancient spells to smother them where they stood. Only an open, dusty plain, and the path past the flesh farms into the canyon beyond.

“Go,” Elise said.

The first century hustled through the gates in rows of three, and Elise and James stood aside to allow the century to pass. They were all fiends, controlled by a nightmare demon named Terah—a narrow-faced female with dark skin, luminous eyes, and a chilling calm. She

followed them inside, mounted on a fell beast, spurs dug into its leathery flanks. The beast danced on the brink of the gates.

“I will clear your path, Father,” Terah said, slamming her fist to her chest as she passed. She was impressive in her armor. She had declined leather and taken scale mail instead. Her elbows, shoulders, and spine had gold spikes jutting from them. She looked like she could kill just by bumping into someone.

She barked orders in the infernal tongue, and the fiends split, approaching the house from two sides.

The last of the fiends bled through, and Elise swept a quick look over the

remaining army. She had left most of the centuries holding Dis under Gerard's command, but had brought the ninth and thirteenth with her—enough nightmares and gibborim among them to raze an entire town. A dozen of her personal human guard stood between her and the centuries.

Her guard, and James.

He had also refused to wear her livery, or any armor at all. He was a splash of white against the teeming, leather-clad army, in slacks and a loose shirt with the sleeves rolled up to bare the brown tattoos curled around his forearms. James wasn't wasting energy on a glamor. White-haired and blue-eyed, he looked every inch the angel. All

he needed was one of Nash's flaming swords. Instead, he had more power hidden under his gloves than any human should have been capable of wielding.

James was watching her army, too. He hadn't complained about them since they left the Palace, but she could see it on his lips. "Elise..."

She lifted a fist. "Ninth century! Move!"

The gibborim rolled forward on their knuckles, following the fiends through the gates. Terah had almost reached Volac's doorstep. It was quiet now, but Elise knew that Volac was only waiting. She didn't want the fiends eaten too quickly.

"Elise," James said again.

“Not now,” she growled.

“Leave the humans here.”

It wasn't what she had expected him to ask. She had thought he was going to say—again—how wrong it was to command a demon army, or that he had changed his mind about guiding her. Elise turned to look at him. “Why?”

“Malebolge is no place for mortals. Don't make them go there.”

Elise's lips thinned. She couldn't rely upon a single living soul that she had brought with her—none but the human guards, vetted by Gerard and Neuma, whose judgment Elise trusted beyond all else. If she sent them away, she might as well plan to end her journey alone.

Terah shouted from within. “It’s clear, Father!”

Now two centuries were inside the House, and Volac still hadn’t shown her mask.

She was still waiting.

“Ready?” Elise asked James, knowing that there was no way to be ready for such a thing.

But he tugged on the wrists of his gloves, checking that they were in place, and he nodded.

Elise gestured for the remaining centuries to follow her and headed inside.

Terah was admiring the destruction of the plantation, her fell beast dancing on its splayed feet. It stepped on the

spiked path and didn't seem to care. "Was this your work, Father?"

"That was Volac herself," Elise said, skimming the horizon for any signs of the demon. She didn't see anything. It shouldn't have been easy to find a near-invisible creature, but she thought that Volac would probably be hard to miss.

The fiends of the first century scrambled around the empty building. Elise followed the right flank as they headed around the wing. James kept up silently.

The canyon stretched ahead of them, twisting sinuously through Volac's vast property. But between the edge of the canyon and Elise stood the first of the flesh farms. The fields were much



like the flesh gardens at the Palace, but with tens of thousands of hands jutting from the soil instead of dozens.

Other seemingly disembodied limbs were embedded in the rock as well: elbows and knees and the occasional curve of hairy skull. A harvester stood motionless on the side of the field, its hopper filled with twitching fingers and scraps of rotting flesh.

Volac's staff had abandoned the harvest days ago, and in the middle of work. There were bloody stumps where fresh hands should have been growing. Entire severed muscles had been abandoned, uneaten and untreated.

The House hadn't been working for a long time. Maybe even weeks.

“Elise,” James said, voice filled with warning.

She turned.

Darkness surged alongside the plantation, and Elise followed the rising shadow with her eyes as it lifted to tower over the army.

Volac had been watching. She’d just been waiting for Elise to walk so deep into the House that she couldn’t escape easily.

She swelled from the earth behind the shattered building, even larger than Elise remembered. The curve of her back, only a shade darker than the sky behind her, reared above like a skyscraper. Volac’s transparent foot crushed the dusty ground only a few feet

in front of Elise.

The puppet of a body descended in a swirl of skirts.

Elise jumped back, jerking her sword from its sheath. But Volac's human-like body wasn't attacking. It crumpled to the ground, empty. Volac had shed the puppet. No more need for deceit.

This was battle.

The air thrummed. Elise felt Volac's massive body moving.

"Get into the canyons!" she roared.

The fiends didn't escape in time. The foot lifted and then fell on top of the right-flanking demons. Because Volac was transparent, Elise could watch their gargoyle bodies pulverized into a

bloody pulp of meat and shattered bone. Four of them died simultaneously. Two had run, but not fast enough, and their lower bodies were crushed under the edge of her foot.

Elise thrust her blade into the shadow. Her falchion connected with something thicker than air, and a gash opened in front of her, baring meat underneath. Ichor splattered from Volac's injury.

It was a paper cut on a demon her size. The poison from Elise's blade spread slowly, engulfing the shadow in tendrils of black that just barely outlined a heel the size of a school bus.

The remaining fiends leaped at Volac, catching on to her ankle,

scrabbling up her calves.

She swatted them off. They fell around Elise.

Albrinck, the centurion of the ninth century, wasn't even bothering to engage with Volac. He drove the gibborim through the fields of the flesh farms, onward to the canyon. The nightmares and their centurion, Endi, weren't far behind.

They knew that there was no point in fighting something the size of Volac. More importantly, there was no point in fighting something that didn't really exist in this dimension as more than a shadow.

Terah seemed to disagree. She was directing the fiends to regroup.

“Into the canyons, Terah!” Elise

ordered again.

The demon wheeled around on the fell beast, firing her crossbow at Volac's shadow. "You heard her! Move!" The surviving fiends struggled free and pounded toward the canyon.

Hopefully, Volac would be too large to follow. But Elise wasn't going to count on it. Nothing about the demon's form obeyed the laws of physics.

She had to hold Volac off long enough for the others to escape.

"Hey!" Elise shouted. "You're in my hierarchy! This attack is not in my best interests!"

The limp doll on the ground seemed to speak. The tongue attached to the mask thrashed. "Isn't it? You're

attempting to circumvent a system put in place by Aquiel's administration—a system that benefits your administration as well—and it's not in the Palace's best interests for you to stop us. Even Belphegor wouldn't want you to destroy my flesh farms, I don't think.”

“How do you know? Have you spoken to him?”

That irritating giggle was no less obnoxious now that the demon was a giant, shadowy Zeppelin of a monster. “No, but I'm capable of making very educated guesses.”

The foot swung and connected with Elise. She went soaring past James. In a blink, she crashed inside the rubble of the plantation, surrounded by fragments

of wood and showering dust.

Volac loomed over her. Elise could almost make out a face high in the shadow—two massive eyes and a gaping mouth with teeth like rusty nails.

“Let’s not play at civility anymore, shall we?” Volac asked.

She slammed her hand down on the building.

Elise phased just in time. The roof collapsed where she had been lying a moment before, but she was already standing outside the building, clutching her obsidian falchion in both hands.

Volac turned slowly. The instant the demon’s eyes fell on Elise, she felt her skin contract.

She wasn’t going to be able to



phase again.

“Fuck,” Elise said.

She started running.

James was still standing outside the flesh farms, watching the army pour into the canyon. Elise grabbed his arm as she passed. “Move, James!”

“Excuse me,” he said, brushing her hand away.

He stepped between Elise and Volac and pulled off his glove.

One of Volac’s fists swept through the air, blasting a torrential wind over the grounds. James’s scarves whipped around him. She was going to crush him, too.

“Hey!” Elise darted for him.

James gestured, making a small

circle with his hand. Light blossomed from his fingertips. The magic struck Elise in a dizzying surge and she missed a step, staggered, sank to her knees.

Volac shimmered.

And then the demon was yanked through to Dis.

The entire demon—not just her shadow. She was no longer invisible. She was a behemoth, a thing even bigger than Aquiel had been, and far more ugly. Her legs were numerous, her head broad and flat and triangular, the sores on her skin gushing mucus that smelled like rotten milk and burned like fire.

Elise was standing underneath Volac's chest. The view right above her was of an open mouth filled with

thousands of angular teeth. Elise couldn't see the sky anymore, or the plantation. She was surrounded by pitted flesh and a dozen thick legs covered in razor-sharp spines.

Her jaw dropped open.

“James,” she said, “why the fuck did you just do that?”

He grabbed her hand. “*Now* we run.” He hauled her toward Volac's head—at least, what Elise assumed was Volac's head—which was hanging over the flesh farms.

A mighty shriek rent the air, so loud that it was like crushing Elise's skull between two rocks. The legs stumbled. Volac began to fall.

Elise didn't watch. She ran as fast

as her corporeal legs could carry her, James's fingers tangled with hers, breath caught in her throat and hair streaming behind her.

One of the legs swept out and smashed into the ground in front of them, cratering the rock. Debris pelted their legs. James skidded to a stop, pushed Elise to the right. "That way, go quickly \_\_\_\_"

"I'm going as quickly as I fucking can!"

They were caught in a maze of Volac's legs as they buckled, creating earthquakes each time a knee connected with the ground. The hands jutting from the flesh farms reached for Elise as she passed, fingers straining, catching at her

boots. She leaped over them. Kicked them away. She couldn't hurt or help them. She would be lucky to save herself.

James fell with a shout, hand ripped from Elise's. She whirled to find him on the ground. His leg was pinned under Volac's sagging belly.

Her heart leaped into the back of her throat.

She jumped over him before the weighty flesh could roll onto his chest, bracing it with both hands over her head. Elise's strength, like many demons, wasn't limited by muscle, but by her power—and she was very powerful. But she had never felt anything as heavy as Volac before. She gritted her teeth and

strained to push the rolls of flesh off of James, but she couldn't even get an inch.

James flicked a spell into the air.

Magic rippled through Volac's skin, making it shiver against Elise's fingers. Then it splattered.

The flesh liquefied near the ground, opening a huge hole in the skin that twitched and seized. Ichor slopped over Elise.

James pulled his leg free, slacks caked to his leg by the blood, and scrambled to his feet.

They ran side by side, the hot wind of Dis in their faces. Elise heard Volac continuing to fall but didn't look back. They passed the empty slave quarters only to hear the wood shattering under

Volac's weight a moment later.

And then there was nowhere to run.

They stopped on the edge of the cliff. The army was farther up the ridge, taking a path down into the canyon, led by Terah.

Elise gripped James's arm and prepared to jump.

But Volac finished settling, and her last leg sprawled out a good six feet away from them.

They were safe.

James and Elise stood on the edge of the cliff for a long moment, trying to catch their breaths. Flattened out, Volac took up almost the entire front of her property, like a ruddy beached whale struggling to breathe despite its weight.

She wasn't dead—not yet—but she couldn't move, either.

Elise took in the sheer size of the demon and all the assorted pieces that she could see, and she couldn't pick out any of the normal limbs she would have expected to find. She had no idea if Volac was facing them. She couldn't even see the gates over the swell of her back.

The demon wasn't moving. They really were safe.

“That could have been a really bad fucking idea, James,” Elise said.

“But it wasn't. That demon's true form was in a parallel dimension,” James said. “When I saw the size of its projection, I assumed that it was forced



to project itself to Dis because it wouldn't be able to survive here. There are other infernal worlds without gravity, or with fluid instead of air, to support creatures that size. By pulling her through..."

Volac *was* a beached whale. It was nauseating to see—and yet, somehow, deeply satisfying.

"Another one of Nathaniel's spells?" Elise asked.

"Yes, it's a trick I figured out from his work. Impressive, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I guess it is."

James smiled. Warmth radiated through their bond. He was happy to be fighting at Elise's side again—working together rather than working against each

other.

Reluctantly, she smiled back.

**By the time** Elise and James caught up, the centuries had already made their way down to the portal cavern at the bottom of the canyon. The path was too narrow to fit the fiends more than five abreast, and the gibborim had to edge in sideways. Elise pushed past them.

Terah and her fell beast stood at the edge of the portal, the reins looped over her fist.

“Malebolge,” she said with a dark smile. “It’s been too long.”

“Not long enough,” James muttered, staring at the leg through the shimmering fissure.

Elise surveyed the roof of the cavern. Several of the human legs were hanging lower than they had been when Elise had visited with Lincoln, as if having Volac fall on the farms had hammered them partway through the earth. Nothing else had changed. There was nothing to indicate that anyone had been through lately, either going in or coming out.

Her human guards were arrayed around the bottom of the path. Elise glanced at James before addressing them. "I want you all to stay here and guard this side of the portal. I'll take the centuries through. Make sure that nobody follows us."

"With all due respect, I think I

should go with you,” Azis said.

She would have preferred that, too. But James was right. Malebolge was no place for mortals. The breeding ground of nightmares would have been bad enough for people without tortured pasts; for humans formerly enslaved by demons, it could easily break even the strongest of them. Even Azis.

“I need you here, watching our backs,” Elise said in a tone that brooked no room for argument. She turned to face Terah and the other centurions. Albrinck and Endi were both incubi—brothers, actually—and about as obedient as one could hope from demons that lived in an infernal metropolis. “When we arrive in Malebolge, our goal is to secure all

humans or human products. We aren't taking control of the city. Bring anything you find back here and hold it for me to inspect. Understood?"

Terah nodded and turned to pass the instructions onto the fiends. As soon as she finished talking, they started hurling themselves through the portal, leaping over the edge without hesitation. When they connected with its shimmering surface, they vanished.

The collection of nightmares followed next, and then the gibborim.

Elise waited for all of them to pass, then moved to leap.

"Father," Terah said.

She paused. "Yes?"

"I just wanted to say...thank you.

This is enjoyable.”

*Damn demons.*

That wasn't Elise's thought. She shot a look at James, but he was scratching his eyebrow and looking elsewhere, feigning innocence.

“You're welcome, Terah,” Elise said.

She grabbed James by the sleeve, jerked him to her side, and jumped.

# Seventeen

**ELISE AND JAMES** emerged from the portal to find chaos.

She slammed onto her knees at the top of stairs hewn from bone. James hit a few inches ahead of her and slipped down several steps before catching himself.

“Good Lord,” he said, staring out at the city.

They had appeared within the ribcage of Malebolge. The bones curved around them, forming a high canopy with edges highlighted by distant fire. The tissue within the ribs had rotted, growing

massive mold configurations that had been hollowed out into buildings.

The gibborim were already tearing away doors and reaching inside to jerk demons out onto the streets of the spine—some newborn nightmares that looked very much like Jerica, and others for which Elise had no name.

Elise's gaze moved past the gibborim, following the line of the street down toward the pelvis. It was like standing on top of a hill in San Francisco, except that the streets were framed by tissue instead of cramped buildings, and the city spilled out underneath the small ribs and spread around the hips.

And Malebolge was still rioting.



The streets seethed with nightmares and brutes and a thousand other demon breeds. Some of the buildings were on fire, sending spirals of black smoke into the air. Screams carried on the air, echoing hollowly off of the inside of the ribcage, falling flat against the tender flesh of the rotting structures.

Terah's fell beast clung to the stairs a few yards below. She watched the burning with satisfaction in her eyes, hair fluttering around her jaw, stirred by a wind that stunk of decay. "Search!" she crowed. "Kill anyone who gets in your way!"

The fiends spread out, vanishing into the crowd. Elise jerked her Taser from its sheath at her hip and tested it by

pressing the button. It snapped to life, arcing with electricity just a few dangerous inches from her skin.

“See anything different, James?” she asked.

His eyes swept the city. “I never came to this part. We only passed through the market and climbed onto the shoulder. But...that’s changed.” He pointed at the pelvic cavity. “There’s a lot more down there now.”

It was a place to start. “Stick close,” Elise said, glancing over her shoulder. The fissure leading back to Dis was nowhere in sight. They would need to find another route to leave again.

Later. After she had found out what had happened to everyone...for better or

worse.

Elise led the way down into the market. A cluster of nightmares wearing ruddy orange leather spotted them and rushed.

She lifted the Taser so they could see it—a silent warning.

Still, they charged.

When she had brought Neuma into Malebolge to rescue Jerica, she had done it with as little fanfare as possible, trying—and failing—to avoid attention. But now she wanted them to know she was coming. She wanted them all to know that the Father had arrived and wasn't going to put up with the victimization of mortals.

Elise allowed her power to flare.

Her skin frayed. Shadow erupted from her, blackening the surrounding air.

“Stop.” Her voice resonated, echoing. “Don’t come near me.”

The nightmare in the forefront tripped over her own feet, crashing to her knees. “Father,” she gasped.

With her power expanding, Elise could see all around them. She reached into the shadows of the buildings the gibborim raided. There were demons inside. Many demons. Not a single mortal—not even slaves.

She allowed her shadow to grow as she stepped past the nightmares. They didn’t attack her.

The market was chaotic, but everything seemed to slow as Elise

descended into it, watching nightmares drop to their knees around her. They were smart enough not to fight her. But many of them had been bred by Yatam, the demon who had given her his power, the original Father; the other demons, with twisted and inhuman bodies, were not. And they had no sense of reverence at the sight of her.

A chisav hurtled toward her, four large hands thudding against the bone street. Elise sidestepped its charge and buried the Taser in its side.

Electricity crackled. It jerked, lost its balance, and collapsed.

It tried to stir. She kicked it in the head.

Elise studied her surroundings with

her boot on its flank. Terah was higher in the city with the fiends and gibborim, tearing through the rioters with little effort. Within the market itself, there were dozens of booths with their wares spread across tables for any passersby to browse.

Elise searched for human byproducts and didn't see anything. Not so much as a brush made of bone. There were plenty of crafts made from fiends and other lesser demons, but nothing that had been mortal.

That was far stranger than if she had found human cadavers everywhere. Trade in human products had always been strong.

Where had everything gone?

“What were they selling the last time you came through here?” Elise asked, turning to address James.

He wasn’t standing behind her.

Her eyes flicked over the crowd, searching for a hint of white among all the demons carrying torches and cudgels. She couldn’t see him anywhere.

Elise stretched out her senses, opening her mind to his, and glimpsed him climbing a stairway of bone that led up onto the chest of Malebolge.

James was leaving.

Her stomach twisted. She should have known that he was going along with her too easily. It was no surprise that he had his own agenda—not at this point. But he had said that he wasn’t going to

lie anymore. She had believed him.

Elise took a final glance at the army sweeping the streets of Malebolge. If there were any human survivors, the centurions would find them.

She had more personal business to attend to.

Relaxing her grip on her skin, Elise flitted into darkness.



# **Eighteen**

**ON THE OTHER** side of the door, Elise and James slipped outside of time.

Her entire life was condensed to a pinpoint that hovered in front of her like a tiny, burning star. All instants were visible simultaneously.

She saw herself birthed in a city of light, and the first time her father, Isaac, had placed a blade in her hands, and the moment that Elise had glimpsed James through a witch's bonfire. She saw the moment that she had fallen to her death in Reno, Nevada. And then the moment that Anthony had dredged her new body

out of the choppy, frozen waters of Lake Tahoe.

Elise saw Nathaniel, pallid in death, and reborn in the form of an angel with wet, limp wings hanging from his shoulder blades.

Eve's life was all tangled up with hers, too. A life in a beautiful garden, doted upon by all of the children she had birthed out of love, and the once-human man that had become God. She saw the moment that she had realized she was in love with Adam, and the moment He strangled her to death, terminating her eternal life.

She couldn't tell the difference between Adam's sins and James's betrayal anymore.

All condensed to a heartbeat.

And then her feet connected with the ground, shocking her back to reality, slamming her into her body once more.

Elise was on all fours, and she didn't immediately try to stand. She bowed her forehead to her hands. Her cheeks were damp. She struggled to reorient herself to reality in this new dimension—an ethereal city she didn't recognize.

It was the sound of James's heaving beside her that grounded her. Shifting dimensions was a huge shock for anyone. James was still mortal enough that he didn't take well to passing between worlds. Doorways usually weren't as bad as phasing, but that had

been no ordinary door.

“Did you see?” James gasped. “The way they built Eden and Shamain...”

“No,” Elise said curtly. “I didn’t see.”

She got to her feet and looked behind her, searching for the door that they had passed through. It was set high above her in a smooth wall—too high for humans to reach, but not so high that an angel couldn’t fly to it. Elise doubted that the wall would have been climbable by even the most determined mortal.

It didn’t look like anyone was inclined to attempt it anyway. Elise sensed a lot of sluggish heartbeats in the room, but nobody was moving.

They had landed in a cavernous

room with a ceiling so high that she couldn't see it. A damp mist clung to her ankles. She could barely make out a few stone spheres scattered across the sloping floor, some as small as coconuts, some as large as cars. They looked like they had grown out of the soil. Elise knew that if she broke the smaller stones free, she would find that they had roots and were hollow on the inside.

There were slabs beside many of the larger spheres, something between tables and beds carved from rough-hewn stone. That was where all of the bodies were reclining.

James's feeling of nausea at what he saw in the room was so powerful that

it actually staggered Elise. “Stop it,” she snapped. “Stop *feeling* so much.”

“I can’t.” He drew in a shuddering breath. “It looks so much like Araboth.”

Elise approached the nearest slab, holding her breath. There was a man she didn’t recognize lying on it with his eyes closed. A spear driven into his wrist led down into the ground. His thought patterns were peaceful. Like he was having deep, happy dreams from which he might never rouse.

It really was like they had stepped through the door and back into Araboth.

Back into Elise’s nightmares.

She shut her eyes, and for a few brief seconds, she allowed herself to panic. She surrendered to her pounding

heart and wild thoughts. *I'm back in the garden. He's not dead. I'm going to have to do it all again. I'll be trapped this time—I'll lose myself. I'll lose everything. He'll keep me and I will never escape.*

Elise knew that James was going to pick up on it, but she pushed him out of her mind and focused on the fear.

Then she forced it to drain out of her.

Slowly, she counted back from ten, hands shaking.

When she reached one, she wiped her palms on the front of her jacket, clenched her fists, and unclenched them. She wasn't shaking anymore. She wasn't afraid.

Elise opened her eyes to see James watching her. Heartache was etched all over his face. “It’s not Araboth,” he said.

“I know.” She was done being afraid of Adam. Unlike James, she wasn’t going to let ghosts haunt her life.

Composed, she brushed her fingers over the forehead of the man on the slab. His skin was clammy. He didn’t react to her touch.

“One of the missing thousands, I take it,” James said.

Elise moved down the sloping path toward the center of the room. The man wasn’t alone. She started out counting the slumbering bodies, but there were too many. She lost count.



None of their faces were familiar to her. There was no apparent theme to the collection, either. All seemed to be adults. None were visibly pregnant. Aside from that, they spanned all races, all ages, all genders.

She wasn't sure if she was relieved that she couldn't see Anthony.

Elise had witnessed both James and Nathaniel like this in Araboth: stretched out on stone slabs with roots driven into their veins, unconscious and near death. But they had been arranged like that so that they could be resurrected as angels.

"What are they doing to these people?" Elise asked. "They can't all be ethereal Gray, can they?" As far as she knew, only those who already had angel

blood within them could be reborn as angels, like James and Nathaniel had been.

James looked disturbed. “All I can think is that it tastes amazing here.”

It took a moment for that to sink in.

The humans were having bright, shiny dreams, caught in sleep with their bodies’ fluids feeding into the hatchery. Demons didn’t care for beautiful dreams. A human in a happy, restive state did nothing for the average demon.

For angels, however, it was like a buffet. And as an ethereal Gray, James was feeding off of the kind of energy that angels loved the most.

“This is a farm,” Elise said.

“I think so.”

“The demons have been selling humans to angels.” She felt numb. Unable to be angry, unable to feel another modicum of horror. “The angels are corralling humans for food.”

“I see stairs,” James said gently, stirring her from her shock.

He was right. There was a staircase at the center of the dark cavern. Elise stopped trying to identify bodies and focused on it. The stairs spanned the distance from the floor to the high ceiling.

“It feels like there’s a nexus above,” he said. “Some kind of concentration of this...energy. We should investigate it.”

Before she could move for the

stairs, a shuffling noise echoed through the cavern. A shadowy figure emerged from the mist on the opposite side of the staircase.

Elise drew the Beretta and stepped in front of James. “Stop right there,” she said. “Take another step and I’ll shoot to kill.”

“Who is that?” the responding voice was hoarse, quiet. Familiar.

Elise’s gun didn’t waver. “Identify yourself.”

“I’m Abram Gresham,” he said. “Where am I? What’s going on?”

She sighed and lowered the Beretta. Relief swept over her—not merely the relief at having found one of the missing people, but relief at the idea

that she wasn't going to have to tell Rylie that her son was dead. "I'm Elise Kavanagh. This man is James Faulkner. We've come to save you."

Abram staggered forward. He had been stripped down to his underwear. Blood flowed freely from his wrists, and his skin was ashen gray and slicked with sweat. He'd been on one of those slabs with the stone spikes buried in his arms, trapped in sleep.

James must have noticed the same things that Elise had. "How did you escape?"

"Escape what?" Abram looked around the room as if he didn't quite see it. Shivers slid over his body. He wrapped his arms around himself,

hugging himself tight. The vulnerable posture was strangely reminiscent of Rylie, though it was strange seeing it on such a big man instead of a petite blond girl.

Elise holstered Seth's Beretta. "I'm going to take a look at you. I won't hurt you. Understand?"

He nodded.

She took his chin in her hand, thumbing back his eyelids. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot. At the contact, she could easily distinguish his heartbeat from those bodies sleeping around them, and she could tell that he was still healthy and strong. Shaken up, disoriented, but not harmed. He hadn't lost significant amounts of blood.

“What’s the last thing you remember before being brought here?” she asked.

He didn’t move, remaining pliant in her hands. “Rylie and Abel walking into the fissure.”

So he had been there? He had seen the pack rejecting their Alphas, and hadn’t done anything to stop it? “That’s the last thing?” Elise asked.

The amount of effort he put into thinking looked physically painful. “Levi brought two members of the pack into Northgate to swear allegiance to him. But Abel had changed them into werewolves, and Levi couldn’t change them back. And then...” He scrubbed a hand over his closely shorn scalp.

“Damn. They took us all.”

Elise grimaced. “Okay. James, get Abram back to the door. See if you can find a way to reach it. I’m going to head up the stairs, see if I can figure out what’s going on.”

She expected James to protest, but she was surprised when Abram said, “I can’t go until we find Levi.”

“Levi? The guy who took over Rylie’s pack?”

“Yes,” Abram said.

Elise suddenly recalled the two different types of deodorant in Levi’s trailer, and thinking that he must have had a male roommate. Or a boyfriend. “Oh,” she said. Abel was going to *love* that.



“What?” James asked.

“Nothing important. Abram, I promised your mother that I’d get you home safely. That’s going to take precedence over finding the pack. James, get him out of here.”

She didn’t wait to see if they would obey her. She mounted the spiral stairs at the center of the cavern, climbing higher and higher.

They didn’t follow her.

As she reached the higher levels, she could see more of the slabs underneath, and the stone spheres that resembled Eve’s eggs. Some of them were glowing faintly, pulsing with inner light like heartbeats—pale beacons in the mist. She couldn’t see James and

Abram below. She hoped that they had gone back to the door, rather than doing something stupid.

She paused halfway up and searched the indistinct faces for Anthony. She couldn't make out any features, but she believed she would be able to identify her best friend if she glimpsed him. Yet nobody jumped out at her. She didn't think that he was there.

Which meant he might have already been dead.

Elise felt heavy as she climbed the remaining stairs. Light appeared ahead of her. She steeled herself and approached it.

Hundreds of yards above the floor, the stairs widened into open air.

Beyond, the faint light of dawn was filled with starlight, just as she had seen through the archway under the Dark Man's compound.

Elise climbed onto the ground and found herself in a cemetery.

She was on a lush, grassy hill surrounded by tombstones that looked like they had all been freshly carved. Elise kneeled in front of the nearest grave marker. It said, in large text, "Samael." She ran her gloved hand over the first letter.

Samael had been an angel. She had considered him a friend, even. He had been critical to her first escape from Eden, and he had been punished for it, becoming a hideous, twisted creature

that had craved the flesh of children. Elise had killed him. James had incinerated his body. There was no way that he was interred on this hillside.

The other markers all had angel names, too. Creatures that had died in a thousand battles. Probably all memorials rather than actual graves.

Not all of the tombstones were low and square. Some were large crucifixes with elaborate designs carved into the stone. And there was a boy—no, a young man—standing against one of the largest crosses, his arms folded across his chest, eyes closed in sleep. He was held in place by gray vines. His skin was dark brown, his hair dense and curly, his features a little too narrow to be

considered handsome.

The vines holding him pulsed softly with inner lights, just like the stone spheres in the cavern underneath her feet.

“Benjamin,” Elise whispered.

She knew this man. He was a precognitive named Benjamin Flynn who had been sold to the Union as a teenager. His parents’ motives had been benevolent; every vision had pushed him toward the brink of madness, and only a Union collar had prevented him from losing his mind before he even turned eighteen.

Elise had tried to free him and failed. Yet another one of her many failures that she had never expected to

face again.

Yet here he was, calm in sleep, his mind sparking even more brilliantly than the slumbering bodies below. His soul was brighter than the stars in the sky. Elise could almost see his visions just by watching him, entranced by the dazzling display of neural activity across his brain.

He was dreaming of a huge waterfall that foamed into a river far below, twisting at the bottom of a canyon that grew thick with trees. He dreamed of orchards filled with ripe fruit, the perfume of flowers, and buzzing bees.

Benjamin Flynn was happy.

“Check your email,” Elise

whispered, suddenly realizing who must have left her the first note that had led her to find those long lists of names.

This was B.

Anthony had told her that Benjamin was the one who had led him to find her body in Lake Tahoe when she was reborn as a demon. Manipulating people and events to fit his visions of the future was nothing new to him. He had given her the lists of people who needed to be saved.

He had given her the obsidian falchion. He had paid her using the victims' money.

A precognitive boy was manipulating everything in order to somehow ask Elise to save him from this

place.

Wherever it was.

Keeping him in the corner of her eye, she approached the fence encircling the hillside cemetery. The ethereal city stretched beyond. After so many months in Hell, the beauty of it stunned her to silence.

It wasn't like Shamain or Araboth. It didn't have that ancient look about it. All of the architecture had sweeping, modern lines, with a touch of classic styling—glass-walled skyscrapers supported by white columns, sweeping gardens built on bridges over aqueducts, high condominiums built with open sides so that the angels could fly to them like aviaries.



And the angels. Elise hadn't seen a sky filled with so many of her children since they had first built Eden as a family.

Hundreds of them swooped from building to building on broad wings of brilliant white and gray and gold and red. Bird of prey colors. She couldn't see much detail at this distance, but the starlight sparkled on their feathers like jewels. They roosted in the upper levels of buildings that looked like they had been grown in the shape of trees rather than constructed.

Shamain had been a dead city. As empty as a museum—or mausoleum.

This was a thriving metropolis, and every angel that remained alive seemed

to be living within its limits. There were enough angels to shatter Earth and Hell if they all decided to fight.

The ground curved slightly upward in the distance, allowing Elise to see emerald-bright forests entangled with the suburban outer reaches of the city. The aqueducts glistened with silvery water that poured down terraced waterfalls. And the city sang—it actually *sang*, in a soft melody that made Elise want to sing along with it.

Yet she felt panic at the sight of it all.

It wasn't her fear. It was Eve's.

The angel that dwelled inside of her had already moved beyond Elise's shock and made connections between the

organic-looking metropolis and the dead human bodies in the cavern below.

It was wrong. It was all wrong. It was sick, horrible, an abomination.

Eve hated it all. Eve didn't hate *anything*.

Elise felt dizzy. She pressed a hand to her forehead, trying to steady herself.

“What is happening here?” she whispered to herself.

Footsteps whispered on the grass behind her. She turned, opening her mouth to address James.

But it wasn't her aspis.

Nash Adamson had landed beside Benjamin Flynn in a whirl of downy feathers. He folded his majestic white wings behind him, tipping his head back

to gaze up at the young mortal man trapped against the cross.

“Nashriel,” Elise said, before catching herself. “Nash. Good to see you. We have to do something about this.”

He looked sad. “Yes. I suppose we do.”

“Help me free Benjamin Flynn.”

“They’ll realize you’ve disconnected him within minutes,” Nash said. “He’s at the crux of the mechanism feeding this city.”

“I can’t leave him,” Elise said. “He brought me here to save him.”

Surprise registered in the angel’s eyes. “Did he? Fascinating. Fascinating, and...impossible.”

“No kidding.”

She climbed up on the base of the crucifix, putting herself nearly level with the young man. He was several inches taller than her, but he had slumped within the confines of the vines. It was overwhelming to stand so close to him—she wanted to lose herself in his dream of a peaceful garden.

Elise wished she could wake him up. Demand that he tell her why—and how—he had given her the obsidian falchion and coordinated payment from so many accounts.

For now, she was going to have to settle for saving him.

She drew her falchion.

“You talked to Rylie about the

missing pack, didn't you?" Elise asked Nash over her shoulder. "That's why you're here, right?"

His expression was smooth, unreadable. "I've been trying to find them. I don't think that they've been processed into the system yet, so they must be held somewhere else."

*Processed into the system.* It was such a cold, clinical way to describe what the angels were doing to innocent mortals.

She brought the blade down on one of the vines.

The demon sword sliced right through it, blackening the edges with ichor. It immediately began spreading through the rest of the vines.

She hacked again, and again.

The bindings holding Benjamin's chest to the crucifix shriveled and withdrew. He sagged against her. She shifted to wrap her arm around his back, allowing his head to rest on her shoulder, and cut away the rest of the vines.

He was free.

"Help me, Nash," she grunted. His dead weight was much heavier than she had expected. She was strong enough to handle it, but her footing on the base of the cross was slipping.

The angel stepped forward to take Benjamin into his arms, cradling him like a child.

"You should take him back to

Malebolge immediately,” Nash said, sweeping down the stairs. His wings dragged behind him like a cloak. “I’ll find the pack and make sure they return to Northgate safely.”

Elise hesitated to follow him, staring out at the glimmering city filled with her children.

No, Eve’s children.

The children that Eve was currently beginning to regret.

Something was wrong, even more than she realized. It was nagging at her.

“No,” she said, following Nash down the stairs. “I can’t leave until I’ve saved all of these people.”

“There are tens of thousands. You can’t save them alone.”



“I have three centuries in Malebolge,” Elise said. “I won’t be alone.”

He stopped a few steps below and gazed up at her, pale eyes silently pleading. “Please, Elise. You have to leave now. *Please.*”

Dread settled over her. “Rylie didn’t send you here. Did she?”

Nash sighed and dropped his stare. They were only a few steps from the bottom. He jumped down, wings flaring to slow his descent, and set Benjamin Flynn gently on the ground. The young man was still unresponsive, but his dreams were fading.

“I’m sorry, Elise,” Nash said. “I really am. But I can’t let you bring an

army into New Eden.”

Her fist clenched on the hilt of the falchion. Tension stretched between them.

Where was James? Why hadn't he followed her up the stairs? Why hadn't he met her when she returned?

What had Nash done?

“You knew about this,” Elise said softly.

“I saw it in Leliel's mind. She worked on this with Metaraon for years. Built it from a fresh Haven. Seeded it with bones.”

*The bones.*

Eve's voice broke through Elise's consciousness, as clearly as though the angel was whispering from just behind

her. She had never heard Eve speak like that before. She was a piece of Elise, a facet of her soul acquired in Araboth, not a separate entity living in the same body.

Yet she heard Eve's voice. It was throaty yet sweet.

*The bones...*

All of the ancient angel cities had been built using the bodies of ethereal creatures—not angels, but the millions of ethereal animals that had once populated the forests of Heaven. Adam and the other angels had hunted them to extinction, one by one, and seeded their bones in the earth to grow buildings, artifacts, and artworks.

Eve had never had the stomach for

the hunt. She had birthed the ethereal animals, just like she had made the angels, and it had killed her to watch them slaughtered.

But all of those beautiful, elegant species that she had designed were extinct. There were no ethereal beasts left to grow a new city.

“The bones,” Elise said, and the words came out in Eve’s voice. Her chest hurt so fiercely that she was certain her heart hadn’t beat for several minutes.

The souls of the dead called to her. She ached with the force of their cries, reaching out to her from death with faint, fading wails. The living dwelled in their happiest dreams, but the dead had no

such fortune. They were trapped in the fibers of the city.

They suffered so that the angels could flourish.

Belphegor had said that she would want to invade Heaven once she knew what Leliel had done.

He had been right.

Damn it all, Belphegor was *right*.

“You knew,” Elise whispered.

Nash stepped away from Benjamin, opening his wings wide.

“I asked you to leave,” he said sadly.

“I can’t,” Elise said, lifting her falchion between them.

He nodded.

They lunged for each other at the

same time.

**ST. PHILOMENE'S CATHEDRAL** was quiet. The only sounds that broke the silence were the squeal of Stephanie's teakettle and the patter of rain on the stained glass windows.

Stephanie brought a tray of teacups back to the couches, setting them on the coffee table. "I hope ginger tea appeals to all of you. I admit that it doesn't seem quite dramatic enough for the situation, but we'll just have to make do with it because I don't have anything else."

Rylie had been drinking way too much ginger tea lately. Just the smell of

it made her feel queasy. “Thanks,” she said without reaching for a cup.

The only person who took one was Summer. She didn’t even like ginger. She was just too polite for her own good. “I guess I have a lot of explaining to do, don’t I?”

“You could say that,” Stephanie said dryly.

“I thought you were pre-honeymooning,” Rylie said.

Summer’s smile was wan. “Not exactly. We’ve definitely been traveling. I’ve seen a lot of amazing places now, all over the Earth, and even in parts of Heaven.” Her fingers were so tight on the teacup that the tips were blanched. “See, people have been going missing.



Lots of people. We were trying to figure out the pattern so that we could prevent further disappearances.”

“And cleaning up evidence when you were too late,” Abel said.

Summer nodded. “After Shamain fell, Nash learned that a certain faction of angels were...getting into trouble, I guess.” She lifted her cup to her mouth, but didn’t drink. “Okay, not a faction. All of the angels are involved. They didn’t tell Nash because his loyalties were in question. And rightfully so. But he found out.”

“Getting into trouble?” Rylie asked.

Summer bit her lip. “It’s a long story.”

“Does it look like we’re going

anywhere?" Abel asked, his voice a low, dangerous growl.

"Yeah, actually. Because we haven't finished cleaning up yet, and we need to do it before Elise comes sniffing around. She can't know what's happening. The consequences would be disastrous."

"You're too late," Stephanie said. "The Godslayer has already been through here."

Summer paled. "What? Oh no. No, no, no." She set down the teacup and clutched her necklace. "I need to tell Nash."

"Why are you trying to screw up crime scenes so Elise can't investigate?" Rylie asked. "If people are going

missing, she's the person who *should* know about it. She can save everyone."

"If she finds out what the angels have done, there's going to be a war. Nash and I were hoping we could fix it on our own before she caught wind of it."

"Caught wind of *what*?" Abel asked. "What the fuck has happened?"

"The angels have been killing people and feeding off the surviving captives," Summer said. "That's what happened."

"They wouldn't do that," Stephanie said. "They wouldn't have taken Yasir from me. And the rest of the Apple." The last part was added as an afterthought.

Sympathy twisted Summer's lips.

“They can, and they did.”

The doctor stood up. She looked like she was thinking of saying something then changed her mind.

She stomped out the door, leaving it open to the rain.

“The Apple worships angels,” Summer said softly, as if worried that Stephanie would hear. “The First Man, mostly, but angels, too. Nash found that a lot of the people who have gone missing were associated with the Apple. They seem to have been talked into giving themselves over willingly under the belief that they would be taken to some kind of rapturous Heaven.”

“So people like Levi,” Rylie said. She felt sick. “And he took the entire

pack with him. He took *Abram* with him.”

“Nash will bring them back. I’m sure of it. That’s why he’s not here right now, he’s—he’s going to bring them back, whatever it takes.”

“You were just gonna cover this shit up,” Abel said.

“No. We were working to stop them, too. To keep more people from dying.”

He got to his feet, looming over both of them. His hands were clenched into fists, biceps straining, the tendons in his neck standing out in hard lines. “And just...what? Let the angels have their city of dead?”

“The dead can’t be brought back,”

Summer said. “They’re gone. We wanted to save whatever lives we could. If we just cut off the city and let the angels hole up in New Eden, they couldn’t hurt anyone else. This isn’t about vengeance. It’s just—it’s damage control, you know?”

Rylie stared at Summer. All this time that she thought her daughter had been working on pulling a wedding together, enjoying herself with her fiancé, she had been out there trying to circumvent war.

And as a result, Abram and the entire pack were gone. Maybe dead. Their bodies ground into mush and pressed into bricks, or whatever the heck angels were doing.

For nothing.

“I think Elise has already figured it out,” Rylie said. “She was following a lead that she thought would get her to the missing people when we left.”

Summer paced with her hands clutched at her breast. “Crap. Major crap. We have to do something about this.” She whirled. “You’re friends with Elise. Right? You can talk her out of a war. Tell her not to go after the angels. If she drags her demon army across dimensions to kill them—man, it could break the whole universe.”

Rylie’s mouth was dry. She didn’t think that Elise would listen to her if she asked. But it would probably sound better coming from her than a stranger

like Summer. She was, at least, relatively confident that Elise wouldn't stab her for asking nicely.

But why would she want to do that?

"Thousands of people," she whispered. "A city built on the backs of the dead."

She exchanged looks with Abel. He looked like he was thinking along the same lines that she was.

"Will you help us?" Summer asked.

"Will you talk to Elise?"

Rylie was going to talk to Elise all right. But she wasn't going to ask to give the angels mercy. They didn't deserve it. She bit her bottom lip, shook her head. Rylie loved her daughter so much that it hurt sometimes, but Summer was wrong



about this.

“These angels fucked with the wrong people. They took your brother, kid. They took our pack. And they’ve killed. A lot.” Abel’s golden eyes glowed with fury. “If this means war, then I’m going to be on the side that’s killing those feathery bastards.”

For once, Rylie couldn’t disagree with him.

**James jogged through** the darkness, following the shape of Abram’s back as he retreated down the tunnel. It felt wet and cold in the halls around the cavern—a shocking change from Malebolge and Dis. He wished he’d known to bring a sweater with him.

After Elise had ascended the stairs, James had offered to take Abram to the relative safety of Malebolge. But Abram had, unsurprisingly, refused. James hadn't had the wherewithal to argue. He'd caused the pack enough pain in the last year. If there was a chance to save them for once, he was happy to attempt it.

It had been a long time since anyone had thought of James as a hero.

Abram led James through a pathway branching off of the main cavern. Now he weaved around corners in the tunnels, navigating them through the labyrinth as though he knew where he was going.

Strangely, James felt like he knew

where he was going, too. Even without Abram, he would have made all of the exact same turns. He couldn't even see where he was going, yet he felt confident that their destination was near.

The thing was, James was fairly certain that he had seen the cavern with all of the sleeping bodies before, and not just in Araboth. He had seen them somewhere else. He could almost remember an open-air nursery tended by a beautiful woman with Metaraon at her side.

James thought he was beginning to understand why he knew things that he shouldn't know, why he had memories that didn't belong to him—and if his suspicions were true, then Elise would

never forgive him.

He had already done well enough fucking up their relationship without Adam's help.

Abram stopped so suddenly that James almost ran into his back.

“What’s going on?” James asked.

He stepped aside. “Look.”

They had found another room, this one much smaller than the first. It was dark, low-roofed, and too misty to see more than a few feet. James stepped up to take a closer look at the wall. Instead of slabs, glass chambers were set into the stone. He wiped condensation off of the first. It was empty.

“I feel like I’ve been here before,” Abram said. “The stones. The slabs.

Even these...things. I feel like I've seen them before."

It wasn't possible. And yet Abram was saying exactly what James had been thinking.

It had to be a product of the strange magic in this dimension. Angels were even worse about invading minds than demons were, in their own ways. James couldn't trust any of his thoughts here, and neither could Abram, apparently.

"Focus," he said. "Let's see if we can find them in here."

They split up. James searched the right side of the room on his own, peering into each of the glass chambers in turn. He didn't recognize any of the first few people, though they looked

similar enough to be family—brown skin, brown hair, the same nose. It took a moment for him to realize that they were wearing iron jewelry.

These captives weren't human. They were basandere.

James moved a few chambers down, wiping the glass clear. This inhabitant wasn't human, either. It was a sidhe. They were incredibly rare, beautiful creatures with hair and flesh in jewel tones, more spirit than physical. She looked painfully fragile slumped against the inner wall. Her chest didn't seem to be moving.

He sensed a pattern. Sidhe were neither demon nor angel. They were a type of preternatural creature native to

Earth, just like basandere.

And just like werewolves.

“Over here,” Abram said.

James rushed to the other row of chambers. Abram had found a pair of wolves.

“Crystal and Trevin.” Abram moved down to the next one, swiping his hand over it. “Paetrick.” To the next one. “Deepali.” Abram finally stopped in front of another chamber. “Here.”

It was a young man that James had never seen before, but judging by Abram’s intent look, it must have been Levi Riese. He was asleep. His skin was dewy, his eyes bruised.

James ran his hands over the wall alongside the glass, searching for some

kind of button or lever. The stone had been carved smooth. “Do you see a way to open it?”

Abram pulled his fist back and punched the glass. His knuckles thudded off of it without leaving so much as a crack. He struck again and again. Nothing.

“Help me,” he said.

James reached out with tentative fingers of magic, probing the chamber. It hadn’t been locked with any kind of mage spell. That was almost comforting—he wasn’t sure what he would have done if the angels had rediscovered that particular ability.

He activated a rune and allowed the power to gather in his fist. “Step



back.”

Abram gave him space. James cast the spell at the chamber—a blast that should have made the glass shatter outward.

The magic died on contact, fizzling into sparks.

Abram grunted. “Move it.” He pushed James aside and went back to trying to break it with his hands.

James opened his mouth to tell him that he was wasting his strength, but then Elise pressed against his mind, sudden and strong. Panic rolled through the bond, powerful enough that it sucked his breath away.

He reached back to her, looking through her eyes. She was scrambling on

all fours to escape a source of burning light: an angel. She glanced over her shoulder long enough for him to see that it was Nash.

Chills washed over James. “We have to go.”

“Not until we get them out,” Abram said. What he really meant was, *Not until we get Levi out.*

Elise was burning.

“I’ll give you a choice,” James said. “You can stay here and attempt to free the pack—most likely in vain—and wait for the angels to find you, or you can come with me, and I’ll guarantee that I will return you to your family.”

Hatred flashed over Abram’s face, hand clenching into a fist against the

crystal, just a few inches away from Levi. He thought about the ultimatum for a long minute—long enough that James turned to leave.

But then he dropped his hand and followed James out of the cavern.

**Nashriel** had always been very sweet and doting with Eve. He had been as talented a craftsman as he was a swordsman and showered her with rings, necklaces, and other handmade gifts. When Adam had told her that He was going to take Nash as one of his soldiers, it had broken Eve's heart to think of one of her kindest sons committing atrocities at the orders of her husband.

The years had burned the sweetness out of Nash. And he definitely would not dote on Elise the way that he had doted on his mother.

It was difficult to wrap her mind around that, even when Nash drew his saber from his belt and ignited it. Flames licked along the sharp edge.

The cavern underneath New Eden's graveyard was dark enough that Elise could have turned to shadow if she wished. She could wrap herself around Nash, contract on his flesh, consume every last of inch of him.

But she held back. She hesitated.

Nash didn't.

He swung the saber at her with shocking speed. She had already been

running at him to attack, too—only her reflexes made her drop in time to avoid decapitation. Elise hadn't felt the bite of ethereal steel in this form, and she didn't want to bet her life that she could heal such a wound.

Instantly, Nash redirected the blow, pivoting on one foot to aim for the back of Elise's knees. He was trying to hamstring her.

She threw herself to the ground and rolled.

Elise came up with Seth's Beretta in both hands, getting onto one knee to stabilize herself. Neuma's brief shooting lessons flashed through her mind. She let a breath out and squeezed the trigger.

The shot punched into Nash's left

pectoral. His shoulder jerked backward. He didn't stop running.

His flaming saber swung toward her head.

Elise fired again, aiming for his hands. It was mostly luck that let her hit his wrist. Silvery blood sprayed, accompanied by the smell of charred meat and green apples.

His swing whistled harmlessly through the air an inch from her bicep. The momentum stirred her hair. A few locks fell to the ground, severed by the burning blade.

She shoved off the ground, launching herself at him. Her shoulder impacted with his gut.

They both fell, and Elise felt the

heat of his sword behind her. She didn't give him room to maneuver it. An angel's saber was a frightening weapon even when it wasn't lit, huge and vicious and sharp, but the size of it also limited his movement. It wasn't a stabbing blade.

Nash threw his weight, rolling them. Hard stone pressed against Elise's back. He reared up and punched her across the face with the hilt of his saber.

Her mouth flooded with a woody taste that wasn't quite blood. More like tree sap. She spat it out. "You're going to try to kill me instead of letting me stop this abomination of a city?"

"This kind of war would be devastating." He struck her again, this

time with an empty fist. She felt her canine loosen in her gums. “Millions could die. Billions.”

“You people started it,” she said, lipping around the damaged tooth.

She wrenched her arm out from underneath Nash’s leg and fired the Beretta at point-blank range, unloading the clip right into his heart.

He slammed into the ground. Clutched at his heart. Blood bubbled from his mouth and splattered down his chin.

Elise stuffed the Beretta back into its holster and drew her falchion—but again, she hesitated. The sight of Nashriel wounded and bleeding made her heart feel like it was breaking all



over again.

She brought the falchion down on his neck.

Her instant of hesitation had been too much. Nash rolled out of the way, and her blade connected with one of the spears jutting out of the ground instead. The female body to which it had been attached jerked, chest hitching. Ichor crept up her arm through the spike in her wrist.

*Shit.* Elise couldn't let the blade cut anything. Not unless she wanted to be responsible for the deaths of these mortals.

She needed a better plan.

Nash came to his feet with his wings blazing fire-bright. The light

seared Elise's skin. She felt like she was blistering, melting, flaking away—because she was.

Her hands flickered. The falchion fell through her bones and clattered to the ground.

She threw herself behind one of the slabs, reaching around long enough to seize her sword. It took two tries for her to force her hand to be corporeal and close on the hilt. Elise pulled it to her, sheathed it.

Then she ran.

Nash's brilliance had the side effect of casting darkness behind the obstacles in the room, allowing her to phase from one to the other where the shadows touched. Within a minute, she

was all the way across the cavern.

His voice echoed through the air.  
“Don’t make me hunt you.”

He didn’t know where she was, but that wouldn’t last long.

Elise pulled her body into itself. She became corporeal crouched behind an egg.

If Nash blasted her again with his wings, she wasn’t going to be able to hold it together. She could already feel herself being sucked back to Hell. Not to Dis, but to some darker place—the same dizzying sensation of falling that she had experienced when Sallosa plunged the flamberge into her heart.

She was getting real fucking sick of people almost killing her. She was better

than this. She was the Father. The Godslayer.

Elise sank her teeth into the meaty flesh of her hand, breaking the skin. The taste of amber blood flooded her mouth.

The churn of Nash's wings echoed around the cavern. He was still searching for her, and she couldn't tell where he was positioned because the entire room felt like it was filled with ethereal life. She had to act fast, before he found her.

She smeared the blood across the floor in a wide circle even as she reached out with her mind.

*James. I need a warlock rune.*

His consciousness fluttered against hers. He was on the move. Still in New

Eden, and trying to reach her. *You need what?*

*Warlock rune. Now. Needs to be big and mean.*

To his credit, he didn't ask why. He simply formed the image of a warlock rune from Onoskelis's book in his mind. She could see the visualization as clearly as though it were written in front of her.

Elise smeared her blood quickly, drawing the sharp lines and jagged spikes.

*I need the word, too,* she thought at him.

The word filled her mind with a sense of pressure, as comforting as being wrapped tightly in warm blankets, as hot

as standing on the brink of Dis's wasteland.

Elise whispered it as she continued to draw, suffusing the rune with magic.

It didn't come out right. She could tell immediately. The power wavered within her, uncertain and weak.

If she hadn't known any better, she might have prayed for the spell to work.

She splashed the last spot on the ground. The rune was completed.

Orange-red light exploded around her.

"Shit," she gasped as the rune blazed with fire, filling the cavern with a brilliant glow that Nash was sure to see. It painted all of the eggs around her in shades of gold. Her shadow was cast on

the distant earthen roof a thousandfold—a beacon directing Nash to her position.

The wind beat around her. He was moving in.

Elise gathered the magic in her arms as she stood.

Nash descended. He held the flaming sword in one hand and one of the stone roots in the other, snapped off of a slab and uplifted like a spear.

His expression was drawn, regretful. He was prepared to kill her. Ready to send her spiraling to the darkest pits of Hell from which she might never return.

She shoved her magic at him.

A column of fire gushed into the air, thicker than the redwoods and so hot

that its core was white. In the instant before it hit the angel, Elise almost regretted casting the spell—she had told James she wanted big and mean, but she wasn't sure she wanted it *that* mean.

The flames engulfed him.

Nash's wings caught instantly. They bent behind him, and he plummeted to the ground with a cry of pain, devoured by fire. Momentum carried him all the way to her. His body hurtled into hers.

And the stone spear plunged into her ribs.

The pain wasn't as shocking as the impact of it. Like being struck by a train. She staggered, back striking one of the slabs. Elise tasted her own blood when she gasped.



“Fuck!” she hissed, wrapping a hand around the spear near her body. Just the touch made the wound burn worse. It had punctured something important—a lung, maybe. She didn’t dare remove it yet. She snapped it off so that only a few inches protruded from her side.

It had been a smart move on Nash’s part. A wound from a piece of Heaven would slow her healing, make her weak, maybe allow him to kill her.

Too bad that her final move had been better than his.

He was devoured by flame on the ground. He screamed as he thrashed, beating at his arms and chest. Elise’s heart ached at the sight of him burning.

She was momentarily tempted to throw her jacket on him, smothering the flames, saving him from the fires.

But Nash had been prepared to kill her to preserve the secret of New Eden. He must have been prepared to die for it, too.

Elise ran to Benjamin Flynn and picked him up. He wasn't heavy, but he was much taller than her, and it made him difficult to carry. She rushed past Nash, still thrashing on the ground, with Benjamin dangling from her arms. Every step jolted the spike in her ribs. Her heart pounded, and blood dripped down her leg.

Elise thought she heard Nash shout at her, but she didn't stop to listen.

The sense of ethereal power was growing, pushing hard enough to make her head throb. The angels had realized that Benjamin Flynn was gone from the graveyard. They had probably sensed her casting warlock magic, too.

They were coming.

She phased to the wall with the portal back to Malebolge.

*James, where are you? We have to leave. Now.*

*I'm coming for you,* he replied.

*Did you get everyone?*

*No.* He sounded tense. Whatever had happened, it was bad news.

Elise opened herself to him. He was just a few hundred yards away. He must have been leading Abram—she

couldn't see the younger man in his field of vision.

She moved to meet them at the mouth of the tunnel. James and Abram emerged as she approached them. She'd expected—or at least hoped—to find them guiding some of the pack back. But they were alone.

“What happened?” she asked.

James's gaze fixed on her bloody jacket. “I could ask you the same.”

White-blue light flickered in the stairwell, and a cluster of angels entered. They blazed so brightly that they looked like a dozen burning stars.

“We'll catch up later,” Elise said.

James took Benjamin from her. Without his weight, she was a little

faster. They rushed toward the portal.

The newly-arrived angels closed in on Nash first. There was a good chance that they'd be able to save him if they acted quickly enough, and Elise was frustrated by how much relief she felt at that. She was even a little bit happy to see her children approaching, even after what they had done, and even though it meant potential death. Eve's love really was limitless. *Dumb bitch.*

"How do we get up there?" Abram asked, craning his neck to look up the portal.

"Elise?" James said.

She prepared to phase. "Hold your breath."

But then a trio of angels broke free

of the others and shot toward them with shocking speed, bathing her in light. Her skin ached. Her head throbbed.

She couldn't phase.

"Elise?" James asked, edging to her side.

She lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the light. It took all of her strength not to cry out. "Can't," she said through gritted teeth.

Benjamin's eyes cracked open. His irises were warm and brown. He glanced around the room, taking in the approach of the angels, the eggs surrounding them, the portal on the wall high above them.

"Grab me," he croaked.

Elise didn't think twice. She seized

his wrist, and then Abram's.

Reality distorted.

For a breathless minute, Elise felt like she was standing in two places at once. New Eden and the Dark Man's basement folded in on each other. She could see, smell, and hear both simultaneously. Darkness and light. Hell and Heaven.

The three angels approaching looked shocked and angry. It was Uriel, Azrael, and Sandaramet.

"They're leaving!" Azrael roared.  
"Stop them!"

Elise's view of the cavern snapped. It vanished.

They were left standing a few feet from the portal in the Dark Man's

basement, alone in silent darkness. Abram collapsed. Started vomiting, just like people always did when they shifted dimensions.

But how the hell had they just done that?

James dropped to his knees, struggling to hold onto Benjamin's weight in Hell's increased gravity. Elise sank with them. Clutched at Benjamin's hand.

"How did you do that, Ben?" she asked. He didn't reply. She smoothed a hand over his forehead. "Ben?"

He was unconscious again.

A cracking sound drew Elise's attention to the archway. The image of New Eden wavered, flickered. Then,



with a mighty groan, the stone around the edges cracked. The portal vanished. The hallway went dark.

The only door Elise knew could reach New Eden was gone.

**“FUCK,” ELISE GROWLED,** jerking away from James’s touch. “That hurts.”

“Sorry. Almost done.” He pulled and twisted. The fragment of the stone spear wrenched out of her side with a slick, meaty sound. She groaned, eyes shut, fingernails digging into her kneecaps. James set it on the desk next to Elise’s thigh.

Lincoln Marshall immediately picked up the bloody piece of stone. “What is this?”

“Don’t know what it’s called. It’s ethereal.” Elise grimaced as she probed

the edges of her wound. It seeped amber blood.

“Looks like it messed you up pretty good,” Lincoln said.

She grunted again. “Nothing I can’t heal. Speaking of healing...”

He didn’t even let her finish. “I want to do it,” he said firmly. “I spent the time you were gone praying for wisdom, and I haven’t changed my mind. I want James to cure me.”

Praying? James covered his mouth with his hand and concealed his laugh by coughing. Elise caught his eye. She wasn’t smiling—she didn’t find it remotely funny—but he could feel her agreement through the bond. It was nice to have reached a consensus on

something.

“Fine,” Elise said. She brushed her hand over James’s knuckles, then jerked her hand back, as if only realizing that she had touched him after the fact. He was sitting in her desk chair, at eye level with her wounded side. He focused on her knees and tried not to smile. “How soon can you attempt to heal him, James?”

Lincoln didn’t have much time. A few days before he went comatose again, if he was lucky. A few more days after that before the anathema powder sucked his life away. James would have to write a spell as quickly as possible.

“Two days,” he decided. “In the meantime, I have to ask that you remain

prone as much as possible and remain well-nourished, Lincoln. Feed frequently.” He chose his words carefully. He didn’t exactly want to encourage the man to eat like a megaira did, but Lincoln wouldn’t have a lot of alternatives if he hoped to survive.

“Will do,” Lincoln said. “Except Gerard’s asked me to go to a meeting this afternoon. Says he wants my help getting ready for a war. Any reason why he thinks we’re going to war?”

Elise’s lips pinched into a frown. “Go to the meeting. Tell Gerard I’ll have a decision soon.”

Lincoln tugged her off the desk, drawing her into a corner of her office—away from James. He spoke in a low

voice, quiet enough that James shouldn't have been able to hear him, except that James could listen through Elise's ears.

“What happened down there? Nobody's talking.” Lincoln sounded like he was trying to be so damn private. As though it was his right to speak to Elise like that.

She remained stiff, her hands limp in his. Her side was throbbing. “That's because nobody knows what happened yet. I have to make a decision, Lincoln. You'll be one of the first to know the outcome. For now, leave me the fuck alone.”

Lincoln's grimace flashed through James's mind, as seen through his kopis's eyes. But he nodded and left.

Elise didn't return to the desk to let James bandage her. She slipped into her bedroom.

The precognitive, Benjamin Flynn, was lying in her bed with the silky black sheets pulled up to his chin. Elise had insisted on having him put in her quarters where she could watch him. The cells where Rylie and Abel had been kept weren't good enough. It had to be her room, and Elise guarding him.

Dwarfed by the black iron bed, Benjamin looked young—no more than thirteen or fourteen years old, even though Elise had said that she thought he had to be an adult by now.

“Who is he?” James asked, hovering behind her as she sat on the

side of the mattress.

“He’s a prophet.”

“I know that part.” James had once possessed a book of Benjamin Flynn’s prophecies, and he knew how chillingly accurate the boy’s precognition and retrocognition was. “Who is he to *you*? Why is he the one you insisted on dragging back from New Eden, of all the victims?”

“Because,” she said, sinking on to the mattress beside Benjamin, “he knows everything about me. Everything. When he wakes up, he’ll be able to answer any question.”

She stroked a curl out of Benjamin’s face. The look she gave him was impossible to interpret, even with



the emotional feedback through the bond. There was definitely a mixture of worry and fondness. But even Elise didn't seem to understand her feelings.

"Is he going to die?" she asked James.

"I have no way to be sure."

"Alert me through the bond if he wakes up. And work on finding a way to block his premonitions while you're at it, because it's the only way we'll be able to keep him sane once he's conscious."

First she wanted a way to heal Lincoln. Now she wanted a way to heal Benjamin. It should have irritated James to have her make such demands as if his time and knowledge were infinite, but it

didn't. If anything, he found it exhilarating.

"I'll see what I can do." He hesitated. "Elise...about what we were discussing earlier..." He couldn't bring himself to say "feeding" in regards to their relationship. "I spoke more harshly than I intended. There must be some kind of compromise. Something we can both tolerate." She pressed a hand to her forehead. He could feel her growing headache through the bond. "I just don't want you to give up yet."

"James," she sighed.

"What?"

"Is that what you're worrying about right now? Of all the things?" All her other worries cascaded between them:

New Eden, approaching war, Lincoln's imminent death, the boy in the bed.

“Elise, there will always be something else. There always has been.” He traced the backs of his knuckles down her side, gently brushing the edge of her wound. “None of it matters nearly as much to me.”

She caught his hand. Pressed it against her side, where her shirt was sticky with blood. She was watching his face for a reaction. “I don't have the time or desire to negotiate with you.” The words were harsh, but her voice was soft. “I don't think there's a compromise. If you decide you want to be with me, you know what you have to agree to.”

“We don’t have to hurt each other,” James whispered.

“There are worse things than pain.” She pulled a new jacket on over her bloodied shirt and zipped it up tight. “Watch Benjamin for me.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m taking Ace for a walk.”

“But you’re still injured.”

“I’ll take care of it. You’ve got bigger problems to fix.” She took a last, lingering look at Benjamin, then vanished into smoke.

James would never get used to that. He wished she wouldn’t do it where he could see. It was a constant reminder that Elise had changed in a very permanent way that even he couldn’t

heal.

He spent the next several minutes spinning spells, weaving them together, and allowing his magic to settle into Benjamin.

The physical repairs were relatively minor. The boy was low on blood. Bolstering its production was a complicated spell, but fortunately, James already had it under his left glove. The minor head trauma was much easier. But once he fixed those things, he didn't know what else to do. Benjamin Flynn was still unconscious.

James grabbed a notebook from Elise's desk and started drawing. He'd need a new spell to block premonitions. Something no witch had ever done

before, as far as he knew.

“James,” Benjamin croaked.

He almost dropped the notebook. James ripped his reading glasses off to look at the boy, whose eyes were just barely open. “How do you know my name?” James asked, before realizing what a stupid question that was.

*When he wakes up, he'll be able to answer any question.*

Elise would want to know. She would phase to them instantly so that she could question him.

But surely she wouldn't allow James to ask a question first.

“Before you ask,” Benjamin said, his voice barely any louder than a whisper, “the Cubbies will never win

the World Series. They always want to know that. It's not happening."

James hardly cared for baseball. Maybe Benjamin wasn't that prescient after all, if he didn't realize that. "You're in the Palace of Dis, Benjamin," James said, even though he hadn't asked. "Elise Kavanagh rescued you from New Eden. You're safe here."

"I know," Benjamin said.

"Yes, I imagine you do."

His head lolled on the pillow, eyes sliding shut again. Benjamin was slipping quickly. The boy was going to be gone soon, and James didn't know when he'd be able to revive him.

If he wanted to ask a question, he needed to do it now.

The problem was that James had so many questions for him. Not just questions about the future, but the past. How and when Benjamin had been taken to New Eden. What the angels were doing with him. How he could have possibly been communicating with Elise, even as he was lost in prophecy in another world.

But none of those questions made it past James's lips.

“Am I somehow a reincarnation of Adam?” he asked. Benjamin struggled to focus on him, eyelids fluttering. “I’ve been having dreams of his memories. The magic of Shamain recognized me as though I were an old friend. And Elise called me...” He swallowed hard. “She



called me Adam.”

“You were possessed by God for a few minutes. The most powerful entity in the universe, at the time. It leaves a mark. But no. You’re not Adam. Adam is dead, and has always been dead.”

Relief mingled with confusion. “How has he always been dead?”

“He was severed from the universe,” Benjamin said. “His thread was worn out, and now it’s gone. Permanently. He won’t be back.” His eyes fell closed. “You have to tell Elise something. Please. It’s important. She needs to know this.” He was so quiet now that James could barely hear him.

James leaned in close. “What? What do I need to tell her?”

“Marion’s in New Eden,” Benjamin whispered.

The name meant nothing to him. James frowned. “Who’s Marion?”

The precognitive didn’t reply. He was gone.

**Rylie had been** through so many homecomings now that she could sense people approaching the fissure. The wind became hotter, the smoke thicker. It was like the entire world held its breath in anticipation of people crossing between dimensions.

She was waiting in the wreckage of Poppy’s Diner when she felt it coming. Rylie used to like having lunch there, before the Breaking, before Elise

entered her life. It was dark and filled with ash now, but it still relaxed her to curl up in one of the red leather booths with her diary. But when she smelled the shifting atmosphere, she picked up her journal, tucked it under her arm, and headed outside.

Abel had sensed the change, too. He was already waiting by the statue of Bain Marshall. She clasped his hand in hers tightly, trying to control her trembling.

They didn't have to wait for very long. The air rippled, and a fresh plume of smoke billowed out of the fissure.

There was a shape moving inside.

Rylie sniffed the air. She could tell even before the ash settled that it was

Elise—her scent was unmistakable, especially since she had brought Ace with her. But there was no preparing for how haggard Elise looked. She didn't walk with any of her usual confidence. She was caked in amber blood and limping. Rylie's breath caught in her throat. That could only mean bad news.

Then Elise stepped aside, and a man emerged from the smoke behind her.

Abram.

Rylie burst into tears and flung her arms around him, hugging her son tightly. "Oh, thank *God*."

He hugged her back just as hard. It was a lot like being engulfed in a bear's embrace. Even though he was bigger than Seth had ever been, it reminded

Rylie very much of hugging him, too. There was just something about Abram that felt warm in that same way. It melted her heart and made her soul fill with joy.

But the joy was short-lived. Abram's scent told an overwhelming story—a tale of worlds Rylie had never seen, and places far more dangerous than Dis. He smelled like sulfur and leather. He also smelled like buttered popcorn, apples, and freshly-mowed grass. He was drenched in the odors of Heaven and Hell. Rylie could almost picture New Eden just from inhaling his scent.

“Thank you, Elise,” Rylie said, trying to wipe her cheeks dry.

Elise looked stiff. Uncomfortable.

Ace was leaning hard against her calf, sensing her mood. “Don’t thank me.”

Rylie looked around her son’s arm. Elise and Abram had been unaccompanied on their journey up the bridge.

“Shit,” Abel said. He’d already reached the same conclusion that Rylie had.

“But...the Scions,” she said. “The pack.”

Abram’s expression said it all.

The pack wasn’t coming home.

**It was the** night of a full moon, and Rylie was lonely. She wandered the streets of the sanctuary feeling like her chest had been packed with shards of

glass. She hadn't expected to ever return to this place after Levi ousted her, and now that she had, she almost wished that Levi was still there.

There were only three werewolves in a sanctuary built for fifty, and it felt hollow.

Elise lingered underneath the trees with Ace, separate from Rylie, Abel, and Summer as they prepared to become wolves. None of them needed to shift, but Abel had never been as good at skipping moons as Rylie, and it would be a deeply unpleasant night for him if he clung to his human skin.

"You ready to go?" Abel asked, shedding his shirt.

"I can't," Rylie said, hugging

herself tightly. “I just...I can’t.”

Summer glanced at Elise. “I understand. We’ll see you in the morning?”

Rylie nodded.

Abel surrendered to his animal form, shifting into the wolf with popping bones and a low growl.

Ace’s ears flattened to his skull. He whined.

Summer didn’t immediately follow Abel’s example. She chewed on her thumbnail, watching him shift. Then she asked, “Did you see Nash?” She was speaking to Elise. “When you were in New Eden—was he there? I haven’t heard from him since he left, and I just thought...”



Elise only stared at her, expression unreadable.

“Please,” Summer said softly.

“Ask your brother,” Elise said.

“I don’t know where he is right now. He went off on his own. I think he’s still trying to figure out how to cope.”

Her response was curt. “Ask him when he comes back.”

Finally, Summer nodded. She seemed to step into her wolf form rather than going through the painful, violent shift that other werewolves did—a side effect of being born to werewolves, rather than bitten.

As soon as she had changed, Abel nipped at her neck, showing her the

affection as a beast that he couldn't bring himself to show as a human. She nipped back.

Abel and Summer chased each other into the forest, vanishing among the mist with a flash of their tails.

“What would you do if you were in my place?” Elise asked as soon as they were gone.

Startled, Rylie turned. She hadn't expected Elise to ask her opinion. She had hoped she wouldn't, in fact—she didn't want to have to choose between her daughter's request and what she thought Elise needed to do. “What do you mean?” she asked carefully.

“If you had an entire army of demons that you couldn't trust, without

enough supplies to feed them all while on the move...would you go to war?" She wasn't even looking at Rylie. She was gazing up at the sky. "I don't know if I could save the survivors in New Eden even if I wanted to."

How could she say that? The pack wasn't dead. Abram had said they were just trapped in some kind of stasis, probably serving as angel food. If there was any chance they could be saved, they had to try.

Maybe Elise had been struck by conscience for once. There were a lot of costs to war—costs that Rylie couldn't even begin to imagine.

But however bad it was, it couldn't be worse than letting every one of her

friends die.

Rylie bit her bottom lip. “Whatever you decide to do...” She struggled against the words inside of herself. She didn’t want to say it. She didn’t want to make this kind of promise. But the offer was straining inside of her, with all of the Alpha wolf’s fury and despair, and she couldn’t swallow it down. “We’ll be supporting you. Whatever you need us to do, we’ll do it.”

Elise looked startled. Startled, and pleased. But she said, “I won’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking. I’m offering.”

“A lot of people will die if we fight.”

“And my whole pack will

definitely die if we don't," Rylie said. Her words caught in her throat. She clapped a hand to her mouth, but there was no stopping the hot tears that tracked down her cheeks.

Wolves howled in the trees. They sounded mournful. Like they were crying along with Rylie.

She startled when she felt skin brush against hers. She looked down to see that Elise had rested a hand on her shoulder. Silently reassuring, but making no promises.

"Thank you," Rylie said, resting her hand on Elise's.

But the hand was gone.

Elise and Ace had returned to Hell.

**Elise sat on** the throne of thorns deep underneath the Palace, alone with Ace and the fluttering banners bearing her mark. The crossed swords normally gave her an equal sense of pride and annoyance. It was a symbol that demons worshipping the Father had designed, but it had become more than that. That mark indicated her territory. Her victories. It was painted on the walls of alleys in Dis and etched on the breasts of her guards' armor.

Now she had to decide whether to paint it on the walls of New Eden in the silvery blood of angels.

What they had done was unforgivable. Horrifying. Yet the damage was done. So many of those

humans had already been lost. And Elise was still trying to free all the humans in Hell. How could it be worse for the survivors in New Eden to be trapped in happy dreams than the mortals enslaved in the Houses of Dis?

But they were *angels*. Her children.

They were killing Lilith and Adam's offspring to feed themselves. The greatest of all sins.

Ace's nails clicked and his chain slithered against the tile. He rested his heavy head on her thigh, gazing up at her with wide puppy eyes. He was usually less skittish after being thoroughly exercised, and she had given him a brisk walk around the battlements after returning from Earth, but her dog was

still restless. He needed more room to run around. And she needed a solution that a few minutes of exercise couldn't give her.

He whined.

“What would you do?” she asked, scratching behind his floppy ears with her fingernails. His whiplike tail thumped against the floor. “You would eat them all, wouldn't you?”

His tongue lolled out the side of his mouth, leaving drool on her leather pants.

A faint smile crept over her lips and his tail wagged harder.

“Belphegor wants me to do it. If he wants it, then the result can only favor him. I bet there's something in New



Eden he wants. Or else he wants me to focus my attention on the angels so that I don't notice what he's doing." Not that she had any clue where he had gone after Shamain fell anyway.

Thinking aloud wasn't making the choice any more obvious.

War was an awful thing to conduct. Just as terrible, in many ways, as what had been done to the angels' victims. She would have to beat down the city's walls and force her army down New Eden's gullet.

But her army wasn't very strong. It was oversized, undersupplied, and disobedient. And Heaven wasn't exactly across a mountain range or some other inconvenient geographic feature. It was

in another dimension. She'd have to move the entire army to Malebolge before she could even reach New Eden.

Then demons would die. Angels would die. And the mortals would be caught in the crossfire.

But if she did nothing, then the survivors would never escape. Rylie would look at her with those big, heartbroken eyes. Thousands of lives would be lost—maybe more—because Elise hadn't forced the angels to come to heel.

It would all be on her shoulders.

Ace whined again. Her fingers had stopped moving.

She resumed scratching, and his tail resumed thumping.

The door to the throne room opened. She could hear the voices of Gerard and the centurions outside, waiting for her to tell them what they were going to do. Whether they were about to go to war or concede to the angels and remain in Dis.

James entered and shut the door behind him. His veils were loose around his neck, letting her see the tension around his eyes, the lines bracketing his mouth.

“Benjamin?” she asked.

“Asleep. He’s as restful as I can make him. But he roused briefly, and I spoke with him.”

Her interest was piqued. “What did he say?”

“He had a message for you, actually,” James said. “He wanted me to tell you that Marion’s in New Eden.”

Elise froze.

*Marion is in New Eden.*

Her hands began to shake.

“She can’t be there,” Elise said. “I would have heard.”

But why would he lie?

Benjamin seemed to want her to invade New Eden more than anyone else. If it was because of Marion...

“Who is Marion?” James asked as Elise stood, careful not to prick herself on the iron thorns of her chair.

She took Ace’s chain, wrapped it around her fist, and led him through the banners toward the door. He trotted at

her side, tail swishing, head lifted.

James hurried to keep up with her, too. “Elise, who is Marion?”

She paused in front of the doors, closing her eyes, collecting herself. This would be the beginning of her most important performance of all. She needed to be strong, without a hint of weakness—not just for the sake of the victims in New Eden, but for Marion. Elise couldn’t falter. She couldn’t fail.

“Elise?” James’s voice sounded like it was a thousand miles away.

She threw the doors open.

There were more than a dozen faces waiting on the other side, and they all fell silent one by one as they realized that Elise had arrived.

She looked between her guards, from Gerard to Aniruddha, to Isaiah and Azis. Even Neuma, Jerica, and Terah were waiting for her verdict. Her most trusted friends and allies. People that she wouldn't want to subject to war for anything.

*Almost anything.*

Elise clenched her fist on the chain hard enough to keep her hands from trembling.

“Prepare the army. We're invading New Eden.”

**Abram rode the** motorcycle with the radio turned off, enjoying the grumble of the engine and the wind whipping over his helmet.

It felt good to be back on Earth. He had never thought that he would be happy to see this miserable place, so much more gray and broken than the Haven where he had grown up, but at least it wasn't New Eden. It didn't smell like apples. There weren't so many angels that he felt like he was having an ice pick stabbed through his skull. He didn't have creepy stone vines drinking his blood.

There were lots of pluses to being on Earth, even if it still wasn't home.

The long drive didn't last long enough. Mountains soon turned to fields, and he reached the farm where Shamain's temple district had crashed that winter. Ethereal buildings jutted out

of the corn like bones in a disturbed grave.

His tires jittered against the broken cobblestone as he climbed into the ruins. The Union wasn't around anymore, so nobody tried to stop him. They had been stationed there for a couple of weeks after the temple fell, but now there weren't even cameras monitoring the site. Apparently the Union was stretched too thin after the Breaking to worry about anything that wasn't an active threat.

If ethereal ruins weren't an active threat, Abram didn't want to know what warranted their attention.

His headlight crept up a pair of bare legs standing in the middle of the



road and then shined on a woman's face. He stopped the motorcycle a couple of feet away.

It was Summer.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, hands planted on her hips. The look she gave him was chillingly reminiscent of the looks Gran used to give them when they got into trouble as kids.

It was the full moon. She should have been running with Rylie and Abel. He had counted on that to allow him to disappear without anyone noticing, but apparently there was no eluding his twin sister's attention.

He dismounted from the motorcycle, setting the helmet on the

seat. "I have to know."

"Know what?"

He brushed past her. She turned and followed him, matching him stride for stride.

Abram wasn't trying to push his sister out. He'd never been a man of many words, and he just didn't know how to begin to tell her what had led him to Shamain's crashed temple.

While he had been in New Eden, connected to the city, he'd had dreams. But not the kind of dreams that Elise had described the other victims experiencing. They weren't blissful visions of winning a high school basketball game or eating dinner with family or going on bike rides through the

Appalachians.

Abram had been dreaming of a garden.

It had been bigger than a city, with a giant tree at the center. Its trunk was wide enough that Northgate could have fit comfortably inside. The branches had formed a canopy over most of the garden, and there were juicy red apples on most of the branches.

That had been the entirety of his dream. A big tree. A garden. Red apples.

There hadn't been mythology in the Haven, but Levi had given him a crash course in Adam, Eve, and the place called Eden. He'd talked about them the same way that he had talked about

history, like Mesopotamia and Julius Caesar, like they weren't part of some primitive religion but actual fact.

And Abram was definitely dreaming of Eden.

The grass outside Eve's temple was yellow and hard, unlike the garden in his dream. Earth winter had been brutal on Shamain's ruins. Even the stone buildings had cracked and lost their luster. A mural rimming the base of the temple had turned to little more than a colorless blob.

"Guess there isn't much weather in Heaven," Summer said, rubbing her hand over the mural. The paint crumbled under her fingers. She wiped it off on the hip of her button-down dress.

“Seriously, Abram, what are you doing here? Talk to me.”

“I have to know,” he repeated.

His footsteps echoed as he stepped into the temple. Summer had told him all about the “super extremely awesome” clock that had been inside the building, but there was no sign of the giant cogs now. It was empty all the way up through the mezzanine.

He mounted the stairs. Summer spoke behind him. “Did you see Nash while you were in New Eden?”

“Yes,” Abram said. He was surprised that Elise hadn’t told her.

“And?”

“You won’t want to know.”

“I just need to know if he’s okay,”

Summer said. “He hasn’t checked in with me. He always checks in with me.”

Abram had never liked Nash, but now he kind of hated him. Regardless, his sister loved the angel. That had to count for something. “He’ll probably survive. The other angels found him.”

She sucked in a breath. “What happened?”

“Elise happened.”

Summer pressed her lips together. Anger flashed through her eyes. “He attacked her first, didn’t he? I told him not to try to take her head-on. Dammit, Nash...”

“Like I said,” Abram said. “He’ll probably be fine.” If it was “fine” to be trapped in New Eden with angels that

must have considered Nash an enemy by now.

“So we failed,” Summer said. “We didn’t stop the war.”

Maybe if they hadn’t tried to take the war into their own hands, it wouldn’t have happened in the first place. Maybe Levi wouldn’t be locked behind glass underneath New Eden.

He didn’t respond, letting his anger burn silently inside of him. But Summer knew. She always knew.

“Are you okay, Abram?”

Was he okay? His wrists were still bleeding intermittently. Those dreams were driving him crazy. And he was the only escapee of an abduction that had ended up claiming the pack he

considered family, albeit family that he didn't like all that much.

"I'm fine," he said gruffly.

They reached the top of the temple. Summer didn't immediately join him on the walkway. She hung back on the stairs, chewing on the inside of her mouth. "If you're going where I think you're going..."

The room with the lock for Eden—the old Eden, not New Eden—was down that hallway.

"You don't have to come," he said, turning his back on her. He could find it on his own.

He ran his hands over another mural, this one much better preserved than the one on the outside of the



building. It depicted some kind of female angel with soft brown hair and a sad smile in a lush garden, very much like the one Abram had been dreaming about.

Summer fidgeted beside him, twisting her hands.

“We should go back home,” she said.

Home? Northgate wasn't home. The sanctuary wasn't home.

Abram's fingers brushed a crack in the wall. He dug his fingers in and hauled the door open, revealing a short hallway and a round room on the other side.

He stepped through.

There was a statue of a woman at the center of the room. It was the same

angel from the mural, her arms open as if inviting him to embrace her.

The elements of the ritual that Summer had described were still intact. There was a large rug that had been woven by James Faulkner to use as a circle of power and an altar smeared with dried blood. This was where both Abel and Summer had tried—and failed—to open the lock.

Because the mural had been closed, the Union hadn't broken in to mess with James's ritual. Everything was still in place.

It didn't look like much. After everything that Summer had said about that catastrophic day, Abram had expected a lot more out of one of Eden's

locks.

He picked up a ritual knife with an elaborate hilt and a shining steel blade.

“Abram,” Summer said with more urgency.

He clenched his fist around the cutting edge and felt it bite into his flesh.

Blood dripped down the heel of his palm, off his wrist, and onto the feet of the statue. Just a few drops. *Drip, drip, drip.*

A humming filled the air, and the statue began to move. Her hands turned toward each other, lifting toward her breast. She assumed a prayer position, head bowed, eyes closed.

Energy crackled above her, filling the room with brilliant white light.

Abram flung up an arm to shield his eyes.

As he watched, the energy widened into a circle, allowing him to see the garden he had been dreaming of, filled with emerald green trees and a brilliant blue sky.

His blood had opened another one of the locks to Eden.

*Dear reader,*

Thanks for joining me for yet another story. Book six, **Torn by Fury**, will be available in summer 2014. If you'd like to know when it comes out, visit [my website](#) to sign up for my [new release email alerts](#).

I hope you'll also leave a review with your thoughts on the site where you bought *Lost in Prophecy*—it helps other

readers find the series, and  
your feedback means the  
world to me!

Happy reading!

Sara (SM Reine)

<http://authorsmreine.com/>

<http://facebook.com/author>