



Let Me Win You (Seven Horny Sins #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A sinful, light-hearted Monster/ Fantasy Romance with a race in a maze and a rattle tail.

What do you know? The perfect man does exist. At least, that's what I think when I meet Invi. He's awkwardly funny, endearingly charming, and drop-dead gorgeous.

Until I learn that Invi isn't really a man at all but one of the mortal sins personified—Invidia, the Sin of Envy, with a monstrous appearance that terrifies me when I finally get to see the real him.

His nature is to want what others have. Apparently, one of his brothers found his eternal love, and now Invi wants the same. Except abducting me is a very wrong way to win my heart.

Now, I'm stuck in Purgatory, quite literally in every sense of that word. My potential mother-in-law invents a competition for her sons, and I am the prize Invi is determined to win.

If he loses, I'll belong to one of his brothers.

But even if he wins, he risks losing my heart forever.

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Invi

From around the corner of the building, I watched the crowd gathering in front of the dance hall... Um, no, they called it “a night club” or just “a club” nowadays. I had to remember that.

I shook my head, both annoyed and frustrated. Humans modified their language more frequently than they changed their clothes. It was hard to keep up, especially if one came to this world as infrequently as I did.

My brother Avar, the Sin of Greed, kept locked up both the transcendence potion needed to travel to the human world and the moonstone ring that gave one a mortal body to blend in with humans. Through careful planning and a little luck, I’d managed to acquire both and came here to find her, the woman who’d love me the way Madison loved Avar.

From what I’d learned about modern humans from watching them through the Pandora’s Box back in Purgatory, one of the ways to meet a woman was to “go out” to a place where single people could mingle unchaperoned. The club was the latest “it spot” in the city, and every eligible bachelor and bachelorette seemed to strive to get in tonight. The crowd at the front door formed a long line that curved from the main street into an alley.

The cold wind blew between the tall concrete buildings, biting my fragile human skin like a blade. I pulled up the collar of my jacket that had cost quite a bit by human

standards. Sadly, despite its high price, the jacket provided no protection from the weather. The freezing air made its way under the leather, chilling me to the bone.

A car pulled over from the busy street, and a couple exited. Pulling his female companion by her hand, the man confidently strolled to the door.

“I’m Sabine’s friend,” he said to the guard at the entrance.

Without slowing down, the man then sauntered through the door, leading his woman along.

“Do you have an invitation?” the guard yelled after the couple.

But the pulsing lights and the music from the inside had already swallowed them both.

I could walk all the way to the end of the line and wait in the cold to get in. Time was of no essence to me, but my human body might not survive such an ordeal. Besides, from what I’d learned during my research, women appreciated confidence. Here, in this unfamiliar world with its strange scents and sounds, feeling confident wasn’t easy. But I had mastered the art of imitation better than anyone.

Rolling back my shoulders, I smoothed a hand over my hair that the barber had spent a considerable amount of time to trim and style into a deliberately messy knot on the back of my head, assuring me that was the most dashing way to wear long hair nowadays.

Bracing the cold, I unzipped my tailored leather jacket, like the man who’d just entered the club wore his. The dark shirt I had underneath and the black pants were rather plain for my tastes, but I chose the clothes after carefully studying the current fashion trends. All pieces came from famous fashion houses and cost me a small

fortune in gems and gold that I'd traded for the modern paper money for shopping. Humans valued their appearances, and first impressions were important.

Heaving a breath, I stepped out from the shadows and into the lights of the electric lanterns on the street.

The guard at the door was talking to the young woman who was first in line, and I walked past them like the other man had, as if I had every right to bypass the line.

"Um, sir?" the guard made a move my way.

"I'm a friend of Sabine's." I waved him off with an indulging smile, graciously forgiving him for his mistake of trying to stop me.

"Are you on the list?" His words almost drowned in the noise and music blasting from the inside.

I nodded, not slowing down my pace. The guard, the line, and the street were already behind me. The foul air of the night club engulfed me, rich with body odor, perfume, alcohol, and a trace of rodent droppings.

In front of me lay a room filled with humans, and one of them was destined to become what Madison was for my brother Avar.

Madison was supposed to be mine. I saw her first. But the greedy asshole that he was, Avar grabbed her before I got a chance. For a while, I'd plotted to take her from him. I'd fantasized that she'd see me as her rescuer and favor me over him.

Sadly, Madison fell in love with Avar. Who knew it'd take her such a short time to form a deep affection for my grumpy, anti-social, void of any charisma brother? But she did, and I was too late. I had missed my chance. If I took her away from him now,

she'd despise me.

“Hey.” A man from a group next to me elbowed his buddy. “Wanna hear a joke?” He didn't wait for his friend's reply to continue. “So, two chicks die and get to the purgatory, and the ground there is solidly covered with ducks.”

Ducks?

That got my attention.

Why ducks?

It made no sense. There aren't that many ducks in Purgatory. Some live in my swamp, but there aren't enough of them to cover the entire ground.

I paused to hear more.

My world had been created through humans' beliefs. If a large enough number of people believed in this duck nonsense, we risked this story becoming our reality. I winced. As much as I liked my ducks, I was not looking forward to them invading my house and our entire town.

Taking a swig of his beer, the man kept talking, barely containing his excitement, “An angel tells the girls not to step on a duck or they'll be punished. One of them accidentally steps on a duck anyway, and a butt-ugly dude appears, chained to her arm for the rest of eternity as her punishment. The other girl is super careful and doesn't step on any ducks for a year. Then one day... Poof! A hot guy is chained to her wrist?—”

His buddies snickered before he even reached the end of the joke, and the man was practically choking on laughter and beer as he finally delivered the punchline.

I pondered the joke. Was it supposed to be funny? Humor was a peculiar thing, just as unique to a person as their hair or eye color.

Sweeping the room with my gaze, I realized I was searching for a dark-haired woman. Madison had long, dark-brown hair, almost black.

I realized it wasn't exactly Madison that I was the most envious of my brother about. More than anything, I wanted what she and Avar had between them. That said, this was the city where she lived. The club was just around the corner from the restaurant that she owned. Somehow, it all felt like a good point to start searching for that special human woman of my own.

As the music dipped with one song ending and before the other one began, a burst of laughter broke through. It was loud, musical, and filled with the happiness that I longed for.

I pivoted toward the sound as did almost everyone else in the place, all of us staring at a young woman at the table in a corner. Faced with the attention, her laughter tapered to a most adorable giggle. She threw her hand over her mouth, the humor now bouncing only in her eyes.

Before I even realized what I was doing, I headed toward her.

"Good evening, fair ladies," I greeted the woman and her female companion who was sharing the table with her.

The object of my attention peered at me, her hazel-green eyes narrowing in suspicion. Then a new spark of humor burst in them as she lowered her hand from her face and gave me a cordial smile.

"Good evening to you, too, mighty knight," she matched my tone. "What brings you

to our neck of the woods this fine evening?”

She clearly was mocking me, but I couldn't muster any offense in response, wishing to hear her laugh again, even if at my expense.

“I heard you laughing,” I replied sincerely.

She blinked, gentle blush spreading on her round cheeks.

“It was rather loud, wasn't it?” She bit her lip.

“Nicole loves to laugh,” her companion, a blonde young woman with delicate facial features, stated. “It can't be helped.”

“I like it.” I ran a hand over my hair and confessed, “I'd love to hear you laugh again.”

Humor shone brighter in her eyes. They weren't dark like Madison's, I noted. In fact, Nicole looked nothing like Madison. Her auburn-red hair was considerably lighter too. Her body was plumper with far more curves. It was hard to accurately gauge her height while she was sitting, but she seemed shorter than Madison too. None of it mattered, however. I said I wished to hear her laugh again, and I wholeheartedly meant it.

“Make me laugh then,” she challenged. “Say something funny.”

Her companion rested her chin in her hand, her elbow propped on the table. “Tell us a joke, stranger.”

“A joke?”

My mind drew blank. It was hard to muster words when they both stared at me expectantly. The stakes of making a good impression rose exponentially the longer I gazed into Nicole's green-brown eyes with golden flecks.

"Yes." She nodded. "Do you know any?"

After millennia of existence, all I could remember at that moment was one single joke. It floated on the surface of my mind like a fucking duck.

"Two women died and went to Purgatory..." It was a mistake. The joke was stupid. It'd ruin any chance I might've had with Nicole. But she expected me to speak, so I pulled a chair from the table and sat down to get closer and make myself heard over the music that started playing again. "Let me assure you, there aren't that many ducks in Purgatory. Animal spirits travel freely between worlds, taking whatever shape they wish. But in this particular version of the afterlife, apparently, the ground is covered with ducks?—"

Nicole laughed, and I stopped, mesmerized by the sound and the sight of dimples gracing her cheeks.

"Shh." Her companion tapped on Nicole's hand. "Let him finish, Nic."

"Go on." Nicole graciously gestured for me to continue. She pressed her lips together, trying to contain her laughter, and I took it as a challenge, longing to set it free again.

"One woman accidentally steps on a duck, and she's immediately chained to a man of a hideous appearance as a punishment. The other woman managed to avoid such a misfortune for a year. After which a handsome man appears, chained to her wrist. 'Are you my reward for me being careful all this time?' the woman asks him. He looks at her in bewilderment and replies, 'I've just stepped on a duck.'"

A terrifying silence descended upon us. A moment later, peals of laughter tore it to shreds, and I heaved a breath of relief.

“It’s a terrible joke,” Nicole punted between the bouts of laughter. “So, so bad.”

I agreed. For one, what did it matter how anyone in the story looked like? Especially, since they all were dead already and out of their mortal bodies? So much in the human world hinged on a person’s appearance, but it meant so little where I came from.

“Yet you’re laughing.” I grinned with satisfaction.

“There is just something in the way you speak that’s kind of...sweet.” She paused her gaze on me.

The bubble of relief grew bigger in my chest.

Her eyes flicked between mine.

“What’s your name?”

“Invi,” I said. “It’s short for Invidia.”

“Invidia? What an unusual name. Where is it from?”

“Latin,” I said, making her laugh again.

I could stay like this forever, trapped in the bubble of her laughter and the warm feeling that was spreading through my chest. The rest of the world seemed to have fallen away completely. The club with its noise and stench was gone.

Sadly, the sound of a glass placed on the table snapped me out of the sweet reverie. Nicole's companion set her glass down, and I remembered I'd paid no attention to her all this time. I didn't even know her name, which was extremely rude of me.

"My apologies," I addressed her with a polite bow. "We haven't been introduced yet."

The blonde woman gave me a tight smile.

"There is no need for introductions. Now, if you excuse me..." She got up from the table abruptly and headed toward the corridor with the sign Washrooms over it.

I didn't mourn her departure, eager to spend some time alone with Nicole. Yet when I turned back to her again, the smile had left her face.

She leaned across the table to me.

"I hate to break it to you, Invi. But you don't have a chance here."

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Nicole

He was movie-star gorgeous. That was the first red flag.

His clothes came from the designer stores I could only afford to look at through the display windows. That was the second red flag.

By the time he even took a seat at our table, I knew he was bad news, and like every other hot rich guy before him, he tried to score it with Jessica by going through me.

Tall like a model, built like a porn star, with the face of an angel, Jessica was the embodiment of every straight man's wet dream. Sadly, few of them cared to look deeper to discover the amazing person she was inside and to cherish her the way she deserved.

"She doesn't date random guys from bars and clubs," I said to Invi.

"Who?" He looked confused.

I had to give it to him. His game was strong. As Jessica left, he didn't stare at her ass. In fact, he didn't glance at her at all.

"Listen, Invi..." It was an interesting name that suited him well. Once he said it, I couldn't imagine him being called anything else. "I appreciate the guts it takes sometimes to approach a woman like that. I don't want to offend you or to hurt your

feelings. But Jessica is not interested in meeting guys right now. She's dealing with a lot in her current situation and... Well, if you care about her well-being even a little bit, you would just say goodbye to me right now and leave. Spare her and you an unpleasant conversation."

A confused smile lingered on his lips. "Who's Jessica? I mean, I deeply sympathize with her difficult situation. But I'm afraid I don't know who you're talking about. I also don't understand why I have to say goodbye to you already. I only just met you."

Did he really think I'd buy it?

"Okay." I inhaled. "I tried to get you off easy, but if you want it the hard way..." I leaned in. "My friend isn't interested in you. She already has a rich, good-looking asshole who is treating her like shit. Wasting her time on another one is the last thing she needs right now. I talked her into coming out with me for a glass of wine and a little dancing after a very stressful day we both had, and I don't want her to regret it. She's not here to pick up guys."

Understanding finally relaxed his face—a damn good-looking face, I had to admit. His long, ink-black hair was tossed into a carefree bun with an artistic flair. His equally dark facial hair was meticulously trimmed and shaped into a pair of trendy sideburns and a short stubble of a beard that further made me think he must be in the arts.

A sculptor or a successful artist, maybe?

He could've been an actor or a model. Only then I would've certainly seen him somewhere. A face like that wouldn't be easy to forget.

His eyes of the most fantastic emerald green stood out against his light-brown skin. I stared at them in fascination before realizing that he must be wearing colored

contacts. No eyes could be naturally this intense.

“Jessica must be your friend,” he said with realization. “The one who went to the bathroom. Sorry, I got a little confused, but she never said her name. Also, my apologies if I seem a bit slow at grasping things, I’m new to this world.”

To this world?

Did he mean he was new to this city? Or to the country, maybe?

He spoke without an accent, but his manner of speaking seemed a bit strange. It could be foreign.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“I’m...um, from a small town. A long way from here.” He shifted in his seat, looking uneasy but not getting up to leave.

I feared he might be of that persistent, obsessive type, who saw getting into my friend’s pants their mission especially because I said she wasn’t interested.

Jessica so didn’t need this right now. She still believed her current relationship was salvageable, despite her asshole boyfriend’s frequent absences and lame excuses. I’d found out that he also cheated on her extensively. The scumbag had even propositioned me, in the nastiest of ways. But I knew it’d break her heart if I told her that. She was so looking forward to doing the cake decorating challenge with me this weekend. It didn’t seem kind to dump on her the news that would devastate her.

Now, I felt guilty about talking Jessica into coming out with me tonight when she just wanted to go straight to bed in her hotel room after we’d won the second round of the cake decorating challenge and advanced into the finals.

It had been by far the most stressful day for both of us ever since we'd opened a bakery together. I hated to compete, especially with someone like Aidan, or Chef Aidan, like he insisted on being addressed. But the competition of this level was sure to put our bakery on the map. The prize money would allow us to open the second location. The final round was going to be televised and broadcast all over the country, which could potentially expand our online market too.

I knew our pastries were good. People would line up sometimes for over an hour for a chance to get some of our stuffed croissants. But the online orders were slow, and the special occasion cakes seemed to be a hard sell in the small town where we lived.

"But I didn't come to your table to meet Jessica," the handsome stranger declared, obviously trying to save face in response to the rejection.

"I know." I nodded, humoring him. "You came to share the duck joke."

He grinned. The smile lit up his eyes, making the silver sparks in his green irises dance with humor. I didn't know that color contacts could do that.

"I was too flustered to come up with anything better," he admitted with disarming honesty. "I really wanted to make a good impression on you but couldn't think of a single funny thing to say."

"It's hard, isn't it? Especially, when you're put on the spot like that," I sympathized. "But you don't have to waste your time on trying to impress us. There are plenty of interesting young women here. Go talk to them." I waved a hand at the dance floor. "Just think about something cool to say beforehand. I'm afraid that duck joke won't get you far with women." I giggled.

"But it made you laugh." He slid his gaze to my lips.

“Yeah, well...I laugh a lot, which makes things awkward sometimes.” I suddenly felt flustered, too, my cheeks flushing with unexpected heat. “But I’m not the golden standard for all womankind. Trust me, you’d be better off chatting to someone else.”

“Why would I want to talk to anyone else when I’m already talking to you?”

I blew out an exasperated breath. “Because you’re just killing time, waiting for Jessica to return from the bathroom, hoping against all odds that you still might have a chance with her.”

“I’m not interested in your friend, Nicole. Why are you so sure that I came here for her?”

How long was he planning to keep this up?

“Because I’ve known her since kindergarten,” I said. “Jessica and I have been best friends for almost all of my twenty-seven years. And in all those years, not once a hot dude like you approached us with the genuine intention of asking me out. She would never date anyone who uses me as an easy way to get to her. And frankly, I’m sick and tired of being taken as her bubbly, approachable matchmaker. It happens so often that by now I’ve developed a strong aversion to your type.”

“What is my type? ”

I waved a hand at his perfect hair, stunning eyes, and the expensive clothes that hugged his wide shoulders and muscular arms ever so handsomely.

“You know... The hot, cocky type. The guys who look for an arm candy rather than a life partner in a woman.” I lifted my wine glass to my lips to signal that this conversation was over and he was free to leave.

Invi failed to read the signal, however.

“An arm candy?” he asked, staying put.

“Exactly.” I set my glass back down after just one sip. “That’s not what Jess is. She’s a sweet girl, with many layers that would take time for the right guy to peel back and discover her gentle, loyal, beautiful soul. You see? Jessica isn’t candy, she’s a pastry, kind of like our signature stuffed croissants. Only no one cares to dig that deep and peel off her layers. Most men are just happy to remove her clothes.”

“And you decided I’m one of those men too?” he asked with a bitter smile. “You gathered that based on nothing but my appearance because, clearly, you’re not listening to my words. I keep telling you I’m not interested in your friend.” He leaned over the table, resting his hands on it. A large ring with a pale-blue stone graced one of his long fingers. “But appearance is not more important than clothes. To really get to know a person, one should spend some time with them.”

“And you’re saying you want to spend some time with me?” I cocked an eyebrow, not hiding my sarcasm. This one might just turn out to be the most persistent of them all.

“Yes.” He held my stare. “I’m very interested in peeling back all your layers in search of your beautiful soul and your gentle heart.”

I took another sip of wine to hide the effect his words had on me. No one had spoken like that to me before, ever.

“Alright. Let’s pretend for a moment that you came here because you were really interested in me.”

“I am.” He nodded. “There is no need to pretend. What do you want me to do to

make you believe that I'm very interested in you as my potential eternal love?"

I choked on my wine, putting the glass on the table hard.

"What?" I coughed.

Holy doughnuts.

It all started to feel like a movie. One of those cheesy romantic movies, with a green-eyed hero, who said stuff that would normally make me laugh so hard I'd risk choking on my popcorn. Except that Invi wasn't looking at me from a movie screen. He was right here, reaching across the table to take my hand in his. And for some reason, with him, it stopped being cheesy. Instead, it felt...sweet.

His long, warm fingers wrapped around mine. Light flickered in the blue stone of his ring. Hope shone in his eyes that stared at me so intently, it made my heart flutter like a butterfly and my bones turn to marshmallows.

"If your heart is free, Nicole, please give me a chance. Spend tonight with me," he pleaded.

"Why me?" was all I could muster, trapped by his gaze and enthralled by his touch.

"Because I like you," he said sincerely. "And I hope there is a chance you'll like me too."

My mind told me to play it safe and run. From Jess's dating woes and from my own limited experience, I knew that guys who looked like him meant nothing but trouble and heartache for the girls like me.

But...

‘Appearance is not more important than clothes,’ his words echoed in my head.

Had I been too judgmental about Invi? Had I jumped to conclusions too quickly when assigning him to “a type?” So far, he hadn’t said or done anything inappropriate or even slightly unlikable, aside from that joke. I had to admit I’d judged him mostly based on his looks.

Jessica returned from the bathroom but didn’t sit down.

“Should we go?” She glanced at Invi’s hand covering mine on the table.

He didn’t look like he saw her, keeping his extraordinary eyes on me while waiting for my reply.

“Well... I...” I blinked, breaking the spell of his stare. “I can’t promise you the whole night, Invi, but I suppose you can have a dance or two if you want.” I turned to Jessica. “He asked for a chance to get to know me.”

“Please, join us.” Invi got up from the table and moved Jessica’s chair for her to sit down.

“Actually, I’m ready to leave,” she said, giving him a probing look, then turned back to me. “Or do you want me to stay, Nic?”

“No, you can leave if you want. I know you’re tired. I won’t be long, either. I’ll grab an Uber back to the hotel in a little while.”

“Alright.” She swiped her cell phone from her back pocket and pointed it at Invi, then snapped a picture, making him squint in the flash. “If you so much as lay a finger on my friend, your mug is going into every paper and on every website out there, and the caption won’t be anything you’d ever want to read next to your photo. Got it?” She

thrust a finger his way. “Show her a great time, then get her back to our hotel safely.”

“Yes, my lady.” He bowed his head with the elegance of a noble knight, indeed.

As he turned to me, a guy appeared at Jessica’s side.

“Why is a pretty girl like you standing here all alone?” He sidled closed, casually putting a hand on her lower back. “Dance with me, sexy baby.”

She cringed with a sigh. “I have a boyfriend.”

“So?” Her creepy admirer shrugged. “He isn’t here, is he?”

“The lady isn’t interested in your advances,” Invi stated loud and clear, offering Jessica his arm. “Allow me to escort you to your ride, Jessica.”

“Hey, buddy, you have that chubby one.” The sad-excuse-of-a-man jerked his chin at me. “I’ll take the hot one.”

He grabbed Jessica around her waist, pulling her into his side as she clung to Invi’s arm. Leaving his right arm in my friend’s possession, Invi calmly gathered the offender’s shirt in his left fist.

“I said the lady isn’t interested.” He slowly lifted the assailant off the floor.

“Hey—” the man croaked, choked by his own shirt that gathered under his arms with its front clenched in Invi’s fist.

He could’ve probably punched in his defense or maybe kicked at least, but he looked too shocked to even try. I didn’t blame him. I was shocked, too, staring with my mouth wide open at his feet dangling over the floor.

“Stay right here and don’t move.” Invi deposited the poor guy behind him, leaving him standing there like a piece of discarded furniture. “Shall we?” He offered his other arm to me. “If you please to accompany your friend with me.”

I rested my hand in the crook of his elbow, stunned and a little smitten by his manners.

And so we went, with Invi “escorting” both of us through the crowded club like some knight in shiny armor leading two court ladies through a castle’s great hall.

Jessica leaned forward, catching my gaze.

“Wow,” she mouthed, her eyebrows rising toward her hairline.

“I know,” I mouthed back, thoroughly intrigued by this unusual man, who frankly didn’t fit into any type I knew.

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Nicole

“Y ou said you’re not from around here!” I yelled into Invi’s ear.

The music on the dance floor was so loud, even yelling didn’t always help, forcing us to repeat the same questions and answers often.

“No.” He shook his head.

“Is it your first time in the city?”

“Technically, yes.” He nodded after a moment of hesitation.

The club music was fast. People jumped, twerked, and gyrated against each other all around us. With his hands on my waist, Invi led us in a slower tempo. Skipping every other beat, he swayed gently with me in his arms. Several couples next to us were making out heavily. However, Invi’s hands never strayed from their position on my waist. Yet he still made the dance feel intimate somehow.

I splayed my palms high on his chest, over the buttery soft leather of his dark burgundy jacket. His alluring scent enveloped me, and I tried to figure out what it was. Jasmine flowers with an earthy note, something like moss or green tea. Must be his cologne, one I had never smelled before. And now, it would forever be his scent even if I would smell it on anyone else in the future.

As one music track replaced another, I found myself leaning closer and closer to Invi. Eventually, my entire body ended up pressed against his, my cheek resting on his chest. My arms somehow wound themselves around his neck. Something pulled me to him stronger than a current, and I had to actively fight the pull, lest it drag me under.

“Maybe we should go,” I suggested, glancing up.

A soft, dreamy expression lingered in his face. He seemed relaxed and content, like hugging me here in the middle of the crowded floor was exactly what he wished to do.

“We should go!” I yelled over the music in response to his questioning gaze.

“If you wish,” he agreed, then maneuvered me off the dance floor to get my coat, then out of the club.

The cool autumn air chilled my flushed cheeks. The busy street appeared silent in comparison to the deafening music back on the dance floor.

“Are you hungry?” Invi asked, hiking up his collar against the wind and zipping up his jacket. “I’d love to take you for dinner.”

“Thank you, but it’s way too late for dinner for me. I’d be up the rest of the night if I eat this late, and I have a big day tomorrow. But if you want to eat something...”

“No. I don’t get hungry. I’m just looking for an excuse to spend more time with you.”

“Well...” Flustered by his honesty, I wondered if I should confess that I didn’t feel like parting from him yet, either. “My hotel is just a few blocks that way. If you want, we can walk together instead of me getting a ride. We can talk while we walk, which

would be easier on the street than back in that noisy club.”

“A walk sounds lovely.” He offered me his arm, and I threaded my hand through it with a smile.

“You have excellent manners, Invi. Your mom raised you well.”

“My mother?” He exhaled a laugh. “She had very little to do with the upbringing of either of us. Me and my siblings developed and matured largely on our own.”

That was the first time he mentioned his childhood, and now I wanted to know more.

“I’m sorry to hear that. But what about your dad? Was he around?”

He shook his head, hiding his chin from the wind behind his collar. “A father wasn’t necessary for our creation.”

What was that supposed to mean?

“Um... You don’t have a dad?”

“No.”

Was he conceived through a sperm donation? Or maybe the trauma of his father leaving early in his life made him deny his existence now?

“My father died two years ago,” I blurted out. “Heart attack.”

The loss was still too fresh and the pain too raw to speak about my dad’s death with the man I hardly knew. I wasn’t sure why I shared it with Invi. But his speaking candidly about his childhood with an absentee father and a neglectful mother

prompted me to open up too.

He gave me an inquisitive look. “Do you miss him?”

“I do. Very much,” I sighed, bracing against the familiar sting of longing in my heart that came every time I thought about my dad.

“Were you close with your father? Did he love you?”

The questions weren’t what people usually asked when learning about my father, but the sincerity in Invi’s voice implied it wasn’t just small talk on his part.

“He was my best friend,” I said. “After my parents’ divorce, I stayed with my dad, and he practically raised me. He was my favorite person, as I was his.”

“Then you’ll see him again,” he promised with such certainty as if he personally was in charge of making that happen.

“Oh, I hope so.” As it had been a norm when talking about my dad, I expected sadness to bring tears to my eyes, but it didn’t happen this time.

“You’ll see him again.”

Invi’s words weren’t anything I hadn’t heard from well-wishing people before. But the way he said them was different. It sounded like a promise, and I believed him. The confidence in his voice gave me hope stronger than I’d ever felt before.

Instead of tears springing to my eyes, a smile stretched my lips.

“Dad used to say that he’d send a dragonfly to check on me even from beyond the grave. I live in our old farmhouse, surrounded by trees with no water nearby. But I

saw a big green dragonfly on my porch last summer. I'd like to believe it was from him."

"It probably was," Invi said confidently, and I trusted him on that, too, maybe because I simply longed to believe that keeping the connection with my dad was possible somehow, even now when he was gone.

"Thank you." I glanced up at Invi.

"For what?" He arched an eyebrow in question.

His light brown skin had turned ashen in the cold. His lips had gained a slight violet hue. With his shoulders hiked up, he held his hands deep in his pockets, and I feared his trendy leather jacket failed to keep him warm.

"You're freezing. Here, take this." On impulse, I unwound the long, woolen scarf that Jess knitted for me still back in high school. It was soft, wide, and warm like a furnace.

I gestured for Invi to bend down to me. He was taller than an average man, and I was shorter than an average woman. If he stood straight, I'd have to literally climb up him to toss the scarf over his neck.

He leaned down to me, and I wound the scarf around his neck, covering his ears and chin then draping the rest over his wide shoulders.

"You're so not dressed for the weather." I tucked in the ends of the scarf to keep it from unraveling. "Don't you know how brutal our winters can be?"

There was my fault in his predicament. He'd probably arrived at the club by a cab or even a limo, and I made him walk.

A shiver ran across his shoulders as he nested his chin into the scarf. “It’s only November, not winter yet. It shouldn’t be this cold, should it?”

“It’s cold here at least six months of the year.” I fought a sudden desire to kiss the tip of his nose to warm it up. “And the rest of the year, it can be breezy, chilly, nippy or sweltering hot.” I shrugged. “We get everything.”

He hugged the scarf closer to his neck.

“It’s...it’s incredibly kind of you.” He seemed confused, unsure about how to respond to a random act of kindness like this. “But how about you? I can’t possibly allow you to be cold.”

“No worries.” I zipped my puffer jacket all the way up and drew the hood on. “I’m already wearing my winter coat. See? Warm and snug as a bug.”

He chuckled, giving me a once-over. “I can see the resemblance to a bug, or more like a silkworm in a cocoon.”

“Hey!” I nudged him with an elbow. “It’s better to be warm than sorry, even if it makes me look funny.”

“Not funny but adorable.” He squinted at me with a smile. “Nicole, dearest, you are the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

He drew me into a side hug with one arm as we kept walking, and I snuggled into his side, feeling almost giddy but unsure why. I’d been called cute and adorable before. That was what people usually called me instead of pretty or beautiful. It was the look that Invi gave me that was new to me. I couldn’t remember a man ever looking at me with such warm affection, definitely not a man I’d just met, a man who still remained largely a stranger to me.

I cleared my throat, needing to learn more about him.

“So...how many siblings do you have?” I asked.

“There are fourteen of us,” he replied casually. “Seven brothers and seven sisters.”

“Wow. That’s a lot.” Maybe I’d judged his mom too harshly by thinking of her as neglectful. Bringing up fourteen kids all on her own couldn’t have been easy. “Are you guys close?”

“Not particularly. No. Some of us get along better than others. But most seem to dislike me.”

“Why?” I couldn’t believe it.

He gave me a curious glance.

“You don’t think there are reasons to dislike me?”

“Well, I don’t know you that well, but so far, I honestly haven’t seen anything unpleasant about you. Other than your appearance, of course,” I teased. “You look disturbingly handsome.”

“That can’t be helped,” he said earnestly. “I have no control over my appearance in this world. Frankly, I find it extremely limiting.”

I laughed, because it sounded like a joke, and he smiled in response, gazing at me with that unique expression of his, as if he’d searched for someone like me forever and couldn’t believe that he had finally found me.

I ran a hand over my face, trying to break the spell of his brilliant green eyes directed

at me. Invi's presence made it increasingly difficult to stay in touch with reality.

"It's not far to my hotel now," I said, trying to ground my mind in reality.

"Why are you staying in a hotel?" he asked. "You don't live in the city?"

"No. I'm from a small town. Flat Field. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

"No one usually has." I snorted a laugh. "It's about a five-hour drive from here. Jessica and I grew up there. And now, we have a bakery together. We came to the city for the Fantastic Cake Decorating Challenge."

"What's that?"

"You haven't heard of it?" I gasped in shock, then admitted, "It's huge, but not as big as some others, I guess, especially if you aren't a baker yourself."

Since Invi wasn't in the industry, he understandably didn't hear about it. Tomorrow, the final round of the challenge was going to be broadcast on national TV. A lot of people would become aware of it then. But today, it was still mostly a secret to the general public.

"It's a new challenge," I explained. "Twenty bakeries from all over the country have been competing for the title of the best cake decorator. The semi-finals were today, with only two of us left to compete in the finals tomorrow."

Early in the afternoon, I felt a tingle of excitement at that fact. But it had worn off by now, leaving nothing but a maddening vibration of anxiety in anticipation of the next day.

“I can’t stand competitions,” I confessed. “The stress is too nerve-racking. I keep reminding myself that it’s not about winning but?—”

“What is it about then?” He looked shocked by my admission.

“Oh... I don’t know. Exposure? Teamwork? Skill improvement, right?”

“Nonsense. Why compete if you’re not trying to win?” He said it with such a firm conviction that I had to ask.

“Do you like competing?”

He grinned. “It’s my most favorite thing. The thrill of going for the prize and winning it is incomparable to anything else.”

“Well... I don’t know. We’ve made it to the finals, but I’m not even sure if I can handle the last day now. It’s so much pressure, and it keeps building up with every round we win. If it wasn’t for Jess, I’d probably just drop out at this point. Second place is good enough.”

“Second place means someone else bested you. Do you think you could live with that? Without even trying to win?”

I could absolutely live with being the second best if that meant I didn’t have to go through all that stress tomorrow. I couldn’t even stay in my hotel room tonight, afraid that the anxiety would kill me.

“Second place in such a big competition is amazing,” I argued. “I would be completely satisfied with it, despite losing the prize money. But Jess has been dreaming about it so much. We stayed up many nights, working on our cake designs. She wants to win so badly. I can’t let her down. And also, if we drop out now, it

means Aidan wins. And...aargh,” I groaned. “I can’t stand that guy. He’s so cocky. He’s already talking about himself as the winner. It’s infuriating, even if he’s probably right. We’ve never won anything before. This is our first challenge ever. We’re a small bakery?—”

Invi stopped abruptly, and I shut my mouth.

“Nicole, dearest, your mindset is all wrong on this one. Why do you settle for second place already when you still have the chance to win the first?”

I pondered his question for a moment but had no answer to give him other than that I’d prefer the path of least resistance at this point. Chances were, we’d end up coming second anyway. If I could spare us the aggravation of the competition, I would.

“Have you never lost, Invi?” I asked in turn. “Do you not know how rotten a failure feels?”

“Oh, I have lost, my dear. I’ve lost too many times to count. And every loss burns through my very core like fire, for eternity. But every time, it just makes me more determined to win the next time. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to win, Nicole. Nothing.”

The passion in his words was real, and I admired his drive.

“I wish I had your endurance and determination, Invi,” I sighed.

“I’ll lend them to you.” He grinned. “Whenever you need.”

There was something about his smile that made me want to stare at him all night long. I didn’t even notice as we walked past my hotel.

“Oops, sorry. Those glass doors behind us? That’s me.” I pointed at the entrance.

He glared at the lobby with so much resentment, it could’ve probably shattered the glass if we were any closer.

“I don’t want to let you go already,” he said.

I wasn’t ready to part from him either. But what else could there be between us? I had a busy day ahead of me tomorrow, with not a minute to spend. Then I’d be leaving the city on Monday.

He slid a finger under my chin and lifted my face to his.

“You’re overthinking it, aren’t you?” He freed my bottom lip from my teeth with his thumb and leaned closer, whispering, “Just feel instead.”

He tenderly touched my lips with his.

Breath hitched in my throat. Heat rushed me, spreading over my skin head to toe. I gripped his forearms to anchor myself in space and time.

It seemed to last forever. Yet it wasn’t nearly enough when it ended.

Breaking the kiss gently, he gazed in my eyes.

“How did it feel?” he asked.

Maybe it was a terrible idea, but the words rushed out of me before I could stop them.

“Do you want to come up to my room?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:25 am

4

Nicole

I sucked at one-night stands. The last time I had one, I ended up dating the guy for over a year. And what a waste of a year that had turned out to be!

I vowed never to do it again. But here I was, walking with a scorching-hot guy across the hotel lobby to the elevator that would take us up to my room.

Was this another case of bad judgement on my part?

I reasoned I was leaving the city on Monday. There was no chance for me to ever run into Invi again. Men like him didn't date girls like me, anyway. It could never be more than a one-night stand, and that was just fine.

Why shouldn't I have a night of fun with a sweet, handsome guy? Why couldn't I have a small adventure in the city before going back to Flat Field?

We entered the elevator. Invi wrapped his arm around my shoulders, drawing me to him. And I forgot all my misgivings.

I liked him. He seemed to be into me, too, at least for tonight. Why couldn't two unattached people enjoy a night together? I even happened to have a couple of condoms in my suitcase...

Taking my chin between his fingers, he lifted my face to his.

“Any regrets?” he asked, studying my expression.

“No,” I said quickly. “No regrets.”

Leaning closer, he took my mouth in a kiss again. I gasped against his lips. My heart seemed to skip a beat, leaving me suddenly lightheaded and making me weak in my knees. It felt so good to lose myself in this thrilling whirlwind that drowned even my anxiety about tomorrow.

“Wow,” I struggled to catch my breath when the kiss ended. “You don’t wait long, do you?”

“I’ve waited to do it from the moment I saw you,” he said as the elevator doors opened.

It’d been a couple of years since my last and only one-night stand. It’d been several months since my last date and the consequent breakup. But having sex was like riding a bicycle, wasn’t it? Just because I was a bit out of practice, didn’t mean I couldn’t go through with it.

“Well, here is me.” I slid the card in the lock in the door to my room, then pushed the door open, and flicked the lights on.

“Finally,” he exhaled, pulling me to him and kicking the door closed behind him.

“Invi...” I gasped as he kissed me like a starving man who finally got a meal.

Sliding the zipper of my jacket down, he slipped both hands in, then moved them to my shoulders to drop the jacket off. Next, he tugged at the neckline of my blouse to expose more skin for his kisses.

I felt like I'd been swept into a hurricane that was too powerful and too intense for me to handle.

"Invi." I pushed with my hands against his shoulders. "Wait..."

He pulled back, giving me a questioning look.

"It's just that..." I touched my lips with my fingers. My skin flushed with heat. My heart thundered. "It's too fast."

"It is?" he asked, looking concerned. "Is that not what you want?"

"I do. I want it." I fisted my other hand in his shirt, keeping him close to me. "But could we slow down just a little bit? Please?"

I felt foolish. I was the one who invited him here. And I didn't regret inviting him, far from it. But everything about him seemed so...overwhelming, including his passion.

I watched his reaction carefully. Did I offend him? Would he get angry, like my ex used to get on occasion?

"Slow down?" Invi stepped back, and I unclenched my fingers, releasing him from my grip. "Of course." He smiled, backing toward the bed. "We have time. We have eternity." He sat on the bed, keeping his eyes on me. "Now you come to me, my sweet girl. At the pace that suits you."

I took a step forward, and he leaned back, propping his hands on the mattress. The way he slid his gaze down my body made me feel naked even as I was fully dressed. I sauntered to him, swaying my hips like a showgirl clad in feathers and rhinestones, and not a small-town pastry chef dressed in a sensible blouse and slacks.

“There you are,” he murmured, spreading his knees wider for me to come closer.

I paused. And he didn’t move either. Waiting.

Swallowing hard, I touched the buttons on my blouse, then jerked my hand away.

“You’re first,” I said, tipping my chin at his chest. “Take off your shirt.”

A corner of his mouth lifted in a lopsided grin. He arched an eyebrow, as if finding my request highly entertaining.

“Alright.” He unbuttoned his shirt while I followed his hands with my eyes, button by button. “Off it goes.” He tossed his shirt aside, revealing a vast expanse of smooth, hairless skin over his muscular torso.

“You are...so fucking perfect,” I blurted out.

“Your turn.” He ignored my compliment.

“Um...” I fidgeted with a button on my blouse. “Now that you turned out to be so very perfect, in and out of your clothes...” I glanced back at the light switch by the door. “Can we turn off the lights maybe?”

“Perfection is boring, Nic. It’s always the same. The variety of human imperfections makes people unique and interesting.” He lifted his hand to my buttons. “May I?” I hesitated, and he smiled. “I promise to do it very slowly.”

I didn’t reply but took a step forward, between his knees, and moved my hand away.

“Good girl,” he rumbled approvingly, sending a flock of hot tingles through my body, all the way to my lower belly.

Drawing me closer, he kissed my collarbone, just above my neckline. With each new button open, he moved his kisses lower, from the top of my chest to the valley between my breasts.

“This needs to go too,” he murmured against my skin, sliding his hands back to the closure of my bra.

“Okay,” I exhaled as he flicked the hooks open and released my breasts.

“Gorgeous.” He cupped one, while kissing the other.

I couldn’t recall anyone calling me gorgeous before, not even hot or beautiful. To compliment me, people would normally use cute or pretty. But I loved being gorgeous for him tonight.

My thoughts trailed away as Invi dragged his tongue over my nipple, and I shivered from pleasure scattering over my skin. His large, warm palms ran up and down my back, before taking off my pants and underwear, then settling on my backside. He pressed my hips to the bulge between his legs and moaned at the contact, raking his teeth over the tip of my breast.

Desire swirled low in my belly, pooling between my thighs with liquid heat.

“Invi...” I fumbled with his belt buckle, desperate to have him naked too.

He opened the zipper, freeing his erection. Springing free, it slapped my thigh with enough force to get my attention.

I leaned back, eyeing his massive member that was pointing straight up at me.

“God, it’s...it’s huge,” I mumbled. “How do you even fit it in your pants? Or

anywhere else, for that matter?”

He stared down at his dick as if seeing it for the first time himself.

“Sadly, I can’t make it any smaller.” The solemn expression with which he said it made me giggle.

“Well, that’s a shame,” I quipped. My inner muscles clenched with ache as if I was already being impaled by his monster cock. “Um...how about we’ll just cuddle?” I teased.

“Cuddle?” To my surprise, his face lit up with delight. “I’d love that.”

Scooping me up, he rolled back onto the bed.

“Wow!” I laughed. “With so much enthusiasm, one would think you’ve never cuddled before.”

“I might have,” he said, letting go of me just long enough to kick off his pants and shoes before pulling the covers over us. “But it must be centuries ago because I don’t recall how it felt. Show me how it’s done.” He eagerly shifted closer.

“There are no rules, really.” I snuggled into his wide chest. “As long as we both feel nice, warm, and comfy. Are you comfy?” I smiled up at him.

He held my gaze for a long moment.

“Very comfy,” he finally replied, then gently tapped my cheek with his finger. “I adore your dimples. I’ve never found any attribute of a physical body as alluring as these before.”

“I never heard anyone speak the way you do,” I said.

“How do I speak?”

“I...I don’t know. Like one minute, you’re just a regular, insanely hot guy I met at the bar. Then another minute, I feel like I’m with some duke from a historical novel or an ancient entity dug out from an Egyptian pyramid or something.” I exhaled a nervous laugh, aware of how silly my words sounded.

He didn’t laugh, stroking the side of my face with the back of his fingers.

“Well, you’re not wrong about any of those,” he murmured before gently kissing my lips. “Does kissing still count as cuddling? Because I really like kissing you.”

“I’m not sure,” I breathed out, subdued by another warm wave of desire washing over me. “But I don’t mind if it does.”

He grinned before giving me another kiss. His fresh scent of jasmine enveloped me, flavoring his kisses too. His hands slipped around me. His arms flexed, bringing me closer. He slid his thigh between my legs, and I rubbed myself against it to alleviate the pressure building in my core.

Was it still just cuddling? I was no longer sure, but I didn’t want it to stop.

He cupped my breast, kissing down my neck. I rode his thigh, until he slipped a hand between my legs.

“I...” I panted, trying to warn him. “I don’t come when I’m with someone.”

Desire swirled, rising and ebbing in waves. It was an enjoyable feeling, but it wouldn’t lead to anything, no matter how hard he tried, and he might as well know it

right away.

He didn't stop, gently circling and flicking my clit with his finger.

"When do you come?"

"At home...by myself...with a vibrator..."

My ex didn't allow my toys in bed with us, either feeling intimidated or threatened by them.

I pressed my thighs together, trapping Invi's hand between them. A shudder of pleasure ran through my body.

"You're enjoying my touch," he noted.

"I am. Oh, it's so good..." I moaned, as he rubbed a little more firmly. "But it never ends with me coming. So...just go ahead and fuck me. It's okay."

He might as well chase his pleasure since chasing mine was useless.

Yet he wouldn't quit.

"Just a little longer? Please, let me enjoy you." He kissed me again, his one hand playing with me between my legs, the other one toying with my nipple.

I arched my back into his caress. I liked sex. I enjoyed the touching, the kissing, the closeness that came from the intimacy with another person. I loved having it all with Invi right now. To me, an orgasm wasn't necessary to enjoy this night. By trying to force what wasn't going to happen, we only risked ruining this entire experience.

Yet Invi proved to be more persistent than any other man I'd ever been with. Or maybe he truly enjoyed touching me?

Pleasure teased more persistently. I moaned into his mouth as his kisses alternated between tender and passionate. I teetered on the edge, needing just a little something more to tip me over.

A soft vibration suddenly fluttered between my thighs.

"What... Did you...?" I couldn't finish, as my desire surged.

The vibration coaxed the first tendril of an orgasm. It grew bigger and stronger, finally consuming me whole.

"Oh, God..." Breaking the kiss and gripping the sheets, I came harder than ever before. I came with someone else for the first time ever.

"There you are," he murmured, spurring my pleasure by working me with his fingers. "My sweet, darling girl."

Another kiss landed on my lips, and I finally opened my eyes, my inner muscles still clenching deliciously with the aftershocks of my unexpected climax.

Dammit, he was gorgeous. The best-looking man I'd ever had the pleasure to lay my eyes on. And his hand was still cupping me gently between my legs.

"It was beautiful." He smiled.

"Do you have a vibrator on you?" I blurted out. "Like do you casually carry one with you, just in case?"

He blinked, his smile fading, his eyes shifting aside.

“No.”

I glanced at my open toiletries bag on the nightstand nearby. I’d left it there after taking a shower that morning. My tiny bullet vibrator lay on top of the pack of tampons inside the bag.

“Oh, I see.” I relaxed. “Very resourceful, aren’t you? Well...” I stretched through my entire body, feeling comfy and warm, and hid a yawn behind my hand. “I guess it’s your turn now.”

But he shook his head. “You’re tired.”

“Only a little.” I smiled. “Orgasms tend to do it to me.”

“Let’s rest then.” He pulled a cover higher over us.

“What do you mean by rest? ”

Men didn’t do that, did they? I might not have had that many men in my life, but none of those I’d had would just “rest” with a raging hard-on and a naked, willing woman in bed with them.

“Do you not need help with this?” I nudged his erection with my knee.

He moaned at the contact, his eyelids dropping in pleasure.

“I’d give everything to be inside you,” he groaned. “But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Well...” I shrugged. With his giant member out of my sight when hidden under the

covers, it no longer seemed that intimidating. “We could try to make it work. I mean, just wrench it in somehow?”

He chuckled, hugging me to him. “We’ll try wrenching it in the morning.”

“What will change in the morning?”

“Everything,” he said softly, sounding oddly dreamy, and I felt the need to clarify.

“Um... Invi? This is just for tonight, right? I’m leaving the city on Monday.”

He leaned back to look me into my eyes. “I don’t want it to end, Nic. I like you too much to give you up already.”

Warm hope rose in me unbidden. I didn’t want this to be the last time I saw him either. I already knew I’d regret it bitterly if I didn’t at least give the attraction between us the chance to grow into something bigger.

So much for all my one-night stand determination. I really sucked at that hit-it-and-quit-it thing, didn’t I?

“I want more,” he insisted.

Invi might look movie-star gorgeous, but his behavior wasn’t what I would expect from a handsome asshole.

He moved a strand of my hair away from my face and kissed my temple. The gesture was not just gentle and caring. It felt almost reverent the way he touched me. I’d known him for barely a few hours, but he made me feel like I never felt with anyone else. I felt...cherished.

No, I definitely didn't want to give him up yet.

"We can have breakfast together," he said quickly. "I know where to get some very good blueberry scones. Please tell me you want more with me, too, Nicole."

I looked deep into his otherworldly emerald eyes.

"Well, what's the worst that can happen, right?" I smiled. "Breakfast sounds wonderful. We can certainly try for more."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:25 am

5

Nicole

A light breeze stroked my bare leg, filling the air with the sweet scent of jasmine and green tea. Birds chirped close by. Then something soft brushed by my thigh.

I squinted in the daylight, glancing down my leg. A large butterfly sat on my knee, gently moving its white-and-green wings. A gossamer bed curtain moved in the breeze. The butterfly rose in the air and fluttered away.

Rolling to my back, I stared at the bamboo bed canopy with the white curtains.

My hotel bed had no bamboo and no curtains.

No butterflies either.

I sat up with a jolt of alarm.

Where was I?

The four-poster bed stood in an open space with no walls. A huge grass-woven rug covered the wooden floor. Thick pillars supported a roof of long bamboo poles and large dark-green leaves that looked like giant lily pads.

The air moved freely through the open space under the roof, swaying the light bed curtains. Colorful birds flew by outside. Two white butterflies fluttered in a dance

around one of the support pillars, which I now realized was a tree trunk of an uncut, still living tree. The whole place was surrounded by trees. Their vivid green canopies swaying just outside of the rug-covered floor.

“This isn’t my hotel,” I muttered, tossing back the bed covers.

I was wearing a short, white camisole that was not mine. And there was a calla lily in my hair just above my ear.

“What the hell?” I screeched, tossing the flower away as if it were a spider.

What had happened to me?

It all seemed too real, too weird, and too unsettling to be just a dream.

Jumping from the bed, I ran to the edge of the floor to look out. I was on the second level of the structure of open floors and suspended walkways that connected them. It looked like a fun, sprawling vacation house with lots of open spaces, billowing curtains, and green leaf canopies. Except that I was far from being in a fun vacation mood.

How did I get here?

The last I remembered, I was warm and comfy, snuggling into Invi’s chest under the covers in my hotel room while falling asleep.

Had I been kidnapped?

If so, who kidnapped me? Invi?

A sharp pinch of disappointment shot through my chest. Did I trust too easily?

Again? Only this time, the consequences seemed to be even more dire than just a broken heart.

But why would he do this to me? And how could I have read him so wrong?

Maybe it wasn't him who took me. Maybe he was a victim too?

There was no one else on this floor with me. No one to ask my questions.

I scanned the area around the strange house. It was surrounded by a lush, green forest that extended as far as I could see in three directions. On the fourth side, the forest gave way to fields and valleys, with a bubbly creek running nearby. And beyond the fields, I spotted a line of buildings.

It looked like a town. Which meant there'd be people, and I could get help and hopefully some answers.

Instead of stairs or a ladder, I found a spiral ramp to get down to the ground floor that opened to a grassy area by a tall willow tree with a table under it. The table was set with dishes for two, but there were no people either on the patio or anywhere else as far as I could see. Just a few wild ducks floated peacefully in the calmer part of the creek with fragrant patches of blooming calla lilies on each side of the water.

A narrow path behind the willow tree followed the creek toward the fields. I hoped it'd lead me all the way to the town.

Barefoot and wearing only the flimsy camisole, I contemplated whether I should first search the giant tree house for some shoes and clothes.

A splashing came from downstream, then a man appeared from behind the willow tree, moving smoothly through the water that reached him up to his waist.

The man looked eerily similar to Invi. Except that not only his eyes were emerald, his entire body was green. He shimmered and appeared almost transparent, including the long hair streaming behind his back and...a pair of long horns spiraling up from his head.

Horns?

Shock seized my limbs.

I staggered backwards as he slid closer through the creek as if propelled by some invisible engine under the water.

The only normal thing about this man was the wicker basket covered with a red-and-white checkered cloth that hung casually from the crook of his elbow. Real and solid, without a speck of shimmer, the basket looked largely out of place with that creature.

The bizarre green man didn't appear to notice me, humming something under his breath. As he reached the patio with the table, I realized how large he actually was, probably at least twice my height. He moved toward the area with the table. The water dropped past his hips and lower on his way out of the creek, revealing...nothing. He had no dick, no thighs, or feet. Instead, his hips smoothly extended into a long, never-ending tail that snaked out of the water and coiled on the grass under the willow tree.

I gasped, choked by horror.

And now, the monster saw me.

“Nicole?” he exclaimed in surprise.

I screamed and ran.

I bolted in the opposite direction from him, without paying attention to where I was going. Panic spurred me out of the forest and through the fields.

“Nicole!” the monster shouted behind me in a deep rumbling voice that sounded a little like Invi’s, if Invi were to yell in a cave during an earthquake.

I ran faster, pumping my arms and gasping for air. My chest burned with effort. My right side pinched with pain. My boobs hurt, bouncing without a bra. I was not a runner, but horror gave me unexpected endurance and strength.

The grass in the field rustled behind me.

That booming voice sounded closer, “Nicole, darling, please...”

I glanced over my shoulder to see the monster gaining on me. His tail snaked behind him, propelling him forward with an astonishing speed.

I screamed in terror, pushing my legs to run faster.

A pair of strong hands suddenly plucked me from the tall grass, lifting me off the ground. And I came face to face with a woman.

Dressed in a long, elaborate gown, she was about twice my size, with a semi-transparent body that glowed and shimmered with pink. But at least she had feet instead of a tail and no horns that I could see.

“And what do we have here?” The woman gazed at me with curiosity as the color of her dress, hair, and body slowly turned from baby-pink to dark magenta. “Where are you running, sweetie?”

“I just want to go home,” I whimpered, trying to catch my breath. “But... A green

monster... A snake-man is chasing me.”

She exhaled with understanding. Her mouth pressed into a firm line of displeasure as she glanced over my head back into the field where the snake-monster must be getting closer.

“He’s neither a man nor a snake.” The woman sighed. “But yes, all my sons look and often act like real monsters. Of course, we can’t let him have you.” She placed me in the crook of her elbow before heading toward the town.

Not running, the woman moved swiftly. Her legs, much longer than mine, took us to the town seemingly in no time at all.

She carried me through a few narrow side streets, then walked up three steps to a wrap-around porch of a cute, two-story house.

It looked like a street café or a countryside restaurant with small round tables and wicker armchairs. People sat at the tables or mingled around. It would’ve been a lovely scene, had the “people” been actually people and not the mostly naked, humanoid shapes that were almost see-through and glowed with different colors.

“What is this place?” I asked quietly the pink woman, who had turned from pink to purple meanwhile.

“It’s a teahouse,” she replied casually. “My daughter, Kindness, runs it. It’s cute, isn’t it? Even if a little boring.”

She took me to a round table with four armchairs. An older woman the color of lavender occupied one of the chairs. Dressed in a white, flowing robe, she was one of the minority who wore clothes around here. She also seemed to be closer in size to me than to the pink-purple woman who’d brought me here.

“Look what I found, Charity.” The tall, purple woman sat me down into one of the armchairs at the table.

Charity stared at me with her lavender eyes that matched her long hair pulled up into a bun.

“Oh, not again,” she groaned. “Did Avar bring you here?” she asked me. “That bastard! Is he at it again?” She slammed with her fist against the crisp white tablecloth, making the dainty little teacups and saucers on the table jump and clink.

“Who’s Avar?” I asked the purple woman, who was ever so slowly turning to red now. The multi-colored creatures around me were hard enough to deal with, but this woman’s shifting lightshow was so disorienting, it was giving me a headache. “Who are you? And where the hell am I, anyway?”

The now burgundy-red woman calmly took a seat at the table, next to the lavender one.

“I’m Pandora, and this is Charity, my daughter.”

Charity looked at least twice as old as Pandora. It made no sense that she was her daughter. But nothing in this place made sense. I felt like Alice when she fell through the looking glass or into the rabbit hole. Maybe I just had to accept that everyone was crazy here, including me?

“Avar is my son, the Sin of Greed,” Pandora explained. “The one who chased you is Invi, the Sin of Envy. I have five more sons in addition to those two, and they’re all nothing but trouble.” She waved her hand in the air. “If you want advice from the mother of sins and virtues, don’t ever have children, my dear. Trust me, life is much easier without them.”

“I’m...um...” What was I supposed to say to that?

A massive emerald glowing shape appeared from around the corner of the house. The thick tail of the monster slithered between the tables and chairs on the patio, forcing a few of those present to scramble out of the way or to jump over it.

The giant snake-man spotted me in an instant and moved determinedly toward me.

I jumped to my feet, knocking back my chair.

“Stay away from me!” I shrieked.

He stopped as if hitting a wall. His features scrambled into a pained expression.

“Nic... It’s me, Invi.”

His shape shrank slowly. The horns wavered and disappeared. The tail seemed to melt, like a bright green snowbank in the summer heat, eventually splitting into two legs.

A lime-colored woman exited the house with a tea tray.

“Invi? Back already?” she asked casually. “Do you need more scones?” She blinked, spotting me. “Oh...I don’t believe we’ve met.” She put the tray on the table, adjusted the glasses perched on her nose, then offered me her hand. “I’m Kindness. Welcome to Purgatory.”

“To... Where?” I mumbled.

My mind gave up trying to make sense of any of this. My body seems to barely hold it together. My legs shook, and I gripped the table in a desperate attempt to stay

upright.

“You don’t look so good, honey.” Kindness lifted my chair then shoved it behind me.

“Here. You better sit down. I’ll make you some tea.”

“She doesn’t need your tea,” said the snake-man, who now looked like a bizarre, naked, glowing version of the man I’d gone to bed with last night, which felt like in another lifetime. “I have our breakfast ready, Nicole. Please come back with me. We need to talk.”

He gathered his long, green hair and twisted it into a bun on the back of his neck. If he tried to look even more like the man I had met in the club last night, he only marginally succeeded. No matter how hard he might try, regular people didn’t glow. And they weren’t green.

“Who really are you?” I whimpered, plopping down on the chair that Kindness had so helpfully placed behind me.

“Nicole, please...” the glowing man exhaled, his chest deflating as he took a step toward me.

I jerked, ready to run again, and Kindness thrust her arm at him, as if to hold him back.

“What’s going on here?” she asked, moving her gaze from him to me. “You have a body, sweetie. You aren’t dead yet, are you? Invi? What have you done?”

“He stole her.” Charity leaned back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest. “He saw Avar getting away with stealing a living mortal and thought he could do the same. That’s what happens when no one holds them accountable. The sins do whatever the fuck they want.”

“Language, my child,” Pandora chided the old woman.

“I didn’t steal her!” the green man whom everyone called Invi bristled.

“Oh, I believe you very much did,” I argued, struggling to breathe through the tightness in my chest.

That explained it. I wasn’t going insane. He stole me and brought me here, in...whatever this crazy place was.

“Nic, no... I...” Invi ran a hand through his forest-green tresses. “We had a connection, didn’t we? You felt it too. It wasn’t just me. You said you wanted more, and I... I thought my home would be the best place to get to know each other. It’s peaceful and quiet, away from all the noise and crowds?—”

“Are you talking about your swamp?” Charity cringed.

Kindness laced her fingers in front of the ruffled apron she wore over a long dress with a lace collar. “Well, his place isn’t so bad. It’s a bit wet but...”

Pandora pinched the bridge of her nose that had turned deep purple now, just like the rest of her.

“You boys really should stop doing this,” she groaned.

“Living bodies don’t belong in Purgatory,” Charity asserted sternly. “You’re risking plunging the current world order back into chaos.”

Tilting her head, Pandora twirled a strand of her hair around her finger, turning to white and then to pale yellow. “That said, chaos has its fun side?—”

“Mother.” Charity tossed her a glare, cutting her off. “You’re not helping.”

“The world needs an order.” Kindness nodded in agreement with her sister. “There are so many chaotic, unpredictable things out there already.”

“Nic,” Invi implored through the chatter of his family. “Please come with me. We started something wonderful?—”

“We didn’t start anything.” I shook my head vehemently. “You’re not the same man. You just can’t be. You... I don’t even know who you are.”

“I know I look a little different. But do looks really matter that much to you? I can take the exact shape of the body I had last night, and I’ll stay in it indefinitely if that’s what you want.” He ran a hand over his chest, and I followed it down his glowing shape, over the well-defined grid of his abs, and...down to a perfectly smooth area of his crotch. “Oh, sorry,” he muttered. “I forgot one last detail.”

With those words, the area between his legs bulged out, then formed two perfectly shaped testicles and a club-sized, emerald-green, glowing dick. It bobbed at half-mast as I stared at it in shock.

“What... What the fuck...How it’s even possible?” I gripped my throat. “What are you doing?”

My mind reeled. I felt like a pebble tossed into a creek and pushed around by the current with no direction. Nothing made sense, and I lacked the frame of reference to even attempt to organize it into any resemblance of sense or logic.

His massive glow-stick dropped down, and Invi’s expression dimmed.

“Is it not what you want? Because I can adjust it?—”

“I don't want you to adjust it,” I screeched, shoving back the chair again and jumping to my feet. “I don't want any of this...whatever this is?” I waved my hand around me. “I need to go home. Just take me back where you took me from. Please...” I sniffled as stress and panic were about to give way to tears.

“Aww, you poor thing.” Kindness hugged my shoulders. “Look what you're doing to her, Invi. You should be ashamed of yourself. She's shaking.”

“She's having a nervous breakdown,” Pandora stated coolly. “That's the problem with having nerves. They are an extremely fragile feature of a mortal body.”

Charity rose from her seat with a defiant expression. “We can't let him drag her back to his swamp.”

“You can stay here with me,” Kindness offered. “I always have room for a lost soul.”

“No!” Invi's shape flashed with red. “Nic is mine. You can't have her.”

“Just because you stole her, doesn't make her yours,” Charity snapped. “Even Avar was able to grasp that by returning quite a few of the things he's stolen.”

“I don't care what Avar does.” Invi raged. “Nicole is mine!”

Bright red streaks crisscrossed the serene green of his shape. Enraged, he clearly forgot to look like the Invi from last night. He grew in size. His shoulders widened. Long spirals of horns sprouted from his head. The outline of his legs wavered, and I didn't wait for them to turn back into the tail.

“I'm not yours!” I screamed, backing away from him. “You don't own me.”

“Nicole, sweetheart...” He moved after me, tripping over his feet that seemed to want

to merge into the tail.

“Stay away from me!” I shrieked, thrusting both hands forward, as if I could physically stop him.

“You’re terrifying her, Invi.” Kindness hugged me tighter. “Come inside, honey.” She led me toward the door to the teahouse.

“Nic, no, don’t leave!” Invi surged forward—slithering, no longer walking.

“Oh my God...” I whimpered, stumbling for the door.

“She doesn’t want you to follow her.” Charity stood in his path to me. “Stay back. Mother? What are you waiting for? Put on the wards. Now!”

“Come, come, quickly,” Kindness ushered me inside and closed the door behind us.

“Nic!” Invi raged behind the door, disturbing the stillness of the quaint house that reigned inside the walls with flowery wallpaper.

Scents of baking filled the front sitting room that had frilly curtains on the windows and white doilies on the high-backed armchairs.

“He can’t come in here.” Kindness released me from her arms. “Here, you will be safe.”

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Nicole

“H ere you go.” Kindness led me into a cute little bedroom upstairs with a four-poster bed under a lace coverlet. “I hope you’ll like it here.”

“But I can’t stay.” I gripped the doorframe. “I need to go back. I have a very, very important day today. I need to go home.”

“Oh...” Kindness straightened a ruffle on the coverlet. “That is unfortunate, isn’t it? I really don’t know what to do in your case.”

“Can you take me back?” I asked, hopefully.

She gazed at me with compassion.

“You see, travelling between the worlds isn’t that easy. I hardly ever go to your world myself. Your situation is not a typical one...” She took in my crestfallen expression and rushed to me. “Now, now, no need to get upset yet. Let’s talk to Mother. I’m sure there is something that can be done.”

Without even crossing the threshold of the pretty bedroom, I followed Kindness downstairs again.

The front door to the teahouse remained closed, with both Pandora and Charity now sitting in the armchairs with the ever- present tea tray on the small table between

them. Pandora's current forest-green color matched that of Invi's.

I nervously swept the room with my gaze. "Is he ...gone?"

Pandora nodded. "For now, anyway. But I'm not sure how long my wards can keep him away. Children get so much harder to control as they grow older."

"Technically, he shouldn't be coming here without Kindness's explicit permission," Charity snapped. "It's her teahouse, after all."

Kindness hugged me again. "Aw, sweetie, he terrified you, didn't he? It's a lot to take for someone with your limited mortal mentality. Come here, take a seat, have some tea. And don't be afraid. You're safe here."

She put me in one of the comfy armchairs across the table from the other two women and thrust a porcelain cup with chamomile tea in my hands.

"Invi is back in his swamp now," Charity assured me. "Where he'll hopefully stay."

"I wish I could make him behave." Pandora sighed. "But I'm afraid things will get only worse once his brothers find out about another human mortal in Purgatory."

Kindness nodded, her apple-green eyes growing big with alarm behind her glasses. "Oh, Invi will go livid if one of the other sins claims you for their own. The difference between envy and jealousy isn't great, and Invi has them both in spades."

"But I'm not interested in any of his brothers. I don't even want to meet them. I need to go back home. I have a very important event happening today that I absolutely can't miss..." My voice trailed off.

What time was it? How long did I sleep? What if I missed the cake decorating

challenge already? Making it all the way to the finals was the best thing that had happened to our bakery. Did I blow our chance? Did I let Jess down?

Dread seized my chest. Jess would be devastated, looking for me. She had probably called the police already.

“I really, really need to go back,” I said firmly. “How can I do it?”

Charity winced. Pandora shrugged. And Kindness sighed. Neither of their reactions gave me hope.

“Please,” I begged, pressing my hands together.

“Traveling to your world from Purgatory isn’t exactly natural,” Pandora explained. “The traffic usually moves in the opposite direction. To come here, one just needs to die, but to leave here, one needs a transcendence potion. Avar found the recipe for the potion and, the Sin of Greed that he is, he keeps it under a lock on his mountain.”

“Invi must’ve stolen some,” Charity chimed in. “Or maybe he made a deal with Avar in exchange for something. Our brothers are guilty of all sorts of shady dealings.”

“I don’t think he made a deal.” Kindness put a small basket of scones and muffins closer to me. “I heard from a few souls here, at the teahouse, that Invi stole both the potion and then the moonstone ring that gives a mortal body to a spirit. Avar was raging mad when he discovered the ring gone after a dinner at Gul’s last night. He was supposed to go back to Maddy’s world and couldn’t do it without the ring.”

I remembered the antique-looking ring on Invi’s finger last night. It had glowed with pale blue and shimmering green, looking expensive, like everything else about him.

I should’ve known better and stayed away from him then, like my common sense had

screamed for me to do. But something drew me to him, despite all the red flags I'd usually steer away from.

If only he hadn't been so sweet and charming last night.

I halted my breath against the tightness gripping my chest. I should've known it all was too good to be true.

"Does one absolutely need the ring to bring me back?" I asked the otherworldly ladies.

"No." Pandora stirred the tea in her cup. "The ring is for deception, not for traveling. But without the transcendence potion, it's impossible to go to your world."

Sensing my crushing disappointment, Kindness added quickly, "Avar travels to your world often, now that he has Madison, who has a family and a business to attend to."

"Who is Madison?" I asked.

"Um..." Kindness stumbled in her answer, then glanced at her mother and sister uncertainly.

"It's not important." Pandora swept her hand through the air. "What matters is that Avar is coming back in a week or two. He'll take you home then."

"In a week or two?" I repeated, in shock. "But I can't stay here for that long. I have to go back now. We're registered for the cake decorating challenge as a team of three. They'll disqualify Jess and Geoff without me. I can't let them down."

As much as I disliked competing, I couldn't leave Jess and our one and only employee, Geoff, in the cold like that. Poor Jess, she'd be crushed by missing out on

this chance, especially on top of all her troubles with her piece-of-shit boyfriend Shaun.

“You can decorate a cake here, with me,” Kindness suggested, cheerfully.

“Humans...” Charity muttered, refilling her cup from a chubby teapot painted with daisies and gooseberries. “They keep holding on to their miserable lives with all they’ve got, even after they get a glimpse of a much better place like our town.”

I tossed the virtue a probing look. “You don’t like us very much, do you?”

“Of course I do,” she bristled. “I love humans. How can I not? You’re wretched, weak creatures. You need all the love and help you can get.”

The line between charity and pity was thin, but Charity made it look non-existent. Except that I couldn’t even fight her on it in earnest. In Purgatory, I felt smaller than ever, and definitely in need of help.

“Is Avar the only one who has that transcendence potion?” I asked, holding on to the hope of being able to leave here soon. “How about anyone else?”

“Other than Avar, only Sup and Gul visit your world regularly,” Charity said. “But they also get the potion from Avar when they need it.”

“But I can’t wait for Avar,” I moaned in panic. “I need to be back today.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Kindness cooed. “Things have a way of sorting themselves out. Here, have a muffin.” She shoved a pastry into my hand. “Food makes mortals feel better, I’ve heard.”

Pandora sipped her tea, while gradually turning from pine green to baby blue. “What

are a few days when you still have most of your lifetime to spend in that world? Your body seems to be in good enough health. It may last several decades still.”

“I have a very important... no, a life-changing event happening today. If I miss it, I’ll let my best friend down—” My throat tightened in distress, momentarily cutting off my air supply.

“I’m sure everything will be just fine.” Kindness patted my shoulder sympathetically. “Just try to relax a little and have more tea.” She grabbed the teapot from the side table and filled my cup up to the rim.

The scent of chamomile made me feel nauseated. I couldn’t take another sip even if I tried.

“You humans are so dramatic,” Pandora drawled. “You fret over every little thing that doesn’t go your way and make a huge deal out of everything. A decade from now, you won’t even think about this important event of yours. And just one lifetime later, you’ll completely forget all about it. Just relax, drink some tea, wait for Avar. Nothing life-changing is going to happen in the few days meanwhile. Trust me. Your world is so boring, it often even beats Purgatory in that department.” She stretched in her chair and hid a yawn behind her hand. “I arrived here just this morning, and I’m already so bored.”

Charity curved her lips, unimpressed. “You’re always bored, Mother. But the world cannot burn in chaos indefinitely simply to keep you entertained.”

“Nothing permanent can be entertaining forever, child. The fun is in changing things up, every now and then.” Pandora gave me a closer look, as if gauging my potential for entertainment. “Invi wants you. Badly. You should’ve seen the fit he threw here before I forced him away.”

“Invi always wants what others have,” Charity scoffed. “After what Avar did, of course he had to go and do the same. Only he did it even more clumsily than his brother.”

“A mortal body is rare in Purgatory.” Pandora rested her chin in her hand, staring at me uncomfortably long. “It wouldn’t be just Invi who’d want you. I bet Ira would like a chance to earn your affection or Sup, who always appreciates pretty novelty things. Some of the other sins may want a shot at it too.”

“But I’m not soliciting my affection to anyone,” I bristled. “I didn’t come here to look for a man, or a sin, or...whatever. I didn’t even come here because I wanted to be here?—”

“I know, I know.” Pandora’s voice turned uncharacteristically gentle. “You were stolen, abducted, misled, and wronged. What a terrible, terrible thing Invi did to you. He absolutely needs to be punished.”

“Punished?” I wondered where she was going with it now.

“Yes. He and the rest of my sons need to know that this kind of behavior is not going to be tolerated. We allowed Avar’s deed to go unpunished and look where it led.” She pointed an accusing finger at me. “Next thing you know, all of the deadly sins will descend upon your poor, defenseless world and start snatching mortals left, right, and center. We can’t possibly let that happen.”

Kindness nodded, biting her lip in worry. “Mother is right. We can’t.”

Charity squinted at Pandora, who now flashed an exciting shade of pink.

“Mother, what do you have in mind?”

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7

Invi

They took her from me.

I never trusted my mother or sisters much, but I didn't expect such a betrayal even from them. They took my Nicole, locked her away, and put wards all around the teahouse, so I couldn't see or speak with her again.

"Ugrrh!" I roared, fisting my hands in my hair.

The sting at the roots did little to distract me from the inferno of rage and pain that burned through my insides as I restlessly moved in circles under the willow tree by my house.

I couldn't stay here. But I had nowhere to go for help. Ever since we had grown, Mother held little power over us. But she gained the upper hand in one thing that mattered the most to me—she took my Nicole away from me. And now I had no chance to clear things between us.

All I wanted was to spend a peaceful day with Nic, for us to get to know each other a little better. As she snored softly, snuggled warmly against my chest, I realized I had no strength and no desire to part from her ever again.

Then that pathetic human man knocked on the door of her hotel room, and I panicked that he might be a man who meant something to Nicole. That I might be too late. That

she couldn't be mine.

So, I brought her here, where I thought she'd be safe.

"Fuck!" I pressed my feverish forehead to the willow's cool trunk, leaving indentation of my horns in its soft bark.

"You have always been so restless, even as a child," suddenly came from behind me.

"Mother." I pivoted around to face the woman who gave me birth and had mostly been the bane of my existence ever since. "Did you come here to gloat?"

I gripped the willow trunk, digging my nails into the bark, lest I punch my own mother for what she'd done.

"How little you think of me." Lifting her multi-colored skirts, she gingerly stepped over my tail that stretched between us. "So, this is how you live?" She turned around, taking in the outside of my dwelling.

I built my house without walls because I enjoyed seeing the greenery of the wetlands and hearing the birds' songs in the morning. Dragonflies and butterflies fluttered under my roof freely. The patches of the fragrant lilies stretched all the way to my threshold, filling my place with their sweet scent.

I'd hoped Nicole would love it here, but she'd run away in horror...

The memory of that morning brought nothing but rage and heartache.

"What do you want?" I snapped at Mother, grinding my teeth.

She ignored my harsh tone, sliding her gaze over the chairs and table that I had set up

in anticipation of having breakfast with Nicole. The basket from the teahouse still lay by the creek where I had dropped it, but the ducks had long eaten the pastries that were in it.

“The chairs are a cute touch.” Mother pulled one away from the table and took a seat, uninvited. “Considering that you don’t sit in chairs.” She waved a hand at my tail.

I coiled the lower part of my body, positioning myself at the table across from her. She was right. Normally, I didn’t need a chair. But I’d planned to shift into a more familiar shape for Nicole—into a man of a human size, with legs. I never intended for her to see me in my natural form as a horned, slithering monster.

My mistake was taking the creek from the teahouse where I got the pastries for our breakfast. I had no time to bake any myself, especially after a brief but intense conversation with Avar about the stolen ring. He’d found me shortly after my return to Purgatory, and our conversation ended with a few solid punches exchanged between us after he’d run out of all the strong words he had for me.

With my tail, I could move much faster through the water than walking on legs, and I didn’t want to leave Nicole alone for too long. I had planned to take the more human form before coming up to the bedroom to see her. Unfortunately, she woke up before I reached the house, and she saw me at my worst.

And now... I had no idea how to fix this mess.

“All right, Mother.” I placed my hands on the table. “In the many centuries that I’ve been living here, this is the first time you’ve ever visited. And you couldn’t have chosen a worse time. I have no patience and no desire to entertain someone who keeps my woman away from me, even if they’re related to me.”

Anger boiled in me. I fisted my hands on the table, struggling to contain it.

“No need to be so curt, my son.” She tossed her long, wavy hair over her shoulder and covered my right fist with her hand, matching my shade of green.

The urge to tell her to leave burned through me.

“How is Nic?” I asked instead, starving for any crumbs of news about her.

Was she angry with me? She must be. Was she disgusted by my monstrous appearance? By the way she screamed and ran, she most likely was.

“Has she...” I swallowed around the hard lump of worry lodged in my throat. “Is she alright? Has she calmed down?”

“Oh, Invi,” Mother signed. “You’ve been around for thousands of years and still have no idea how to woo a woman.”

I thought I knew. I thought I had it all under control, but it all had exploded in the most spectacular and devastating fashion.

“Fuck.” I dropped my head into my hands.

“You don’t know shit about human women, do you?” Mother poked right into my open wound of shame and regret.

“Language, Mother,” I scolded, mechanically.

“Oh, don’t be a prude.” She waved me off. “You’re not your sisters.” She patted my hand again. “And there is no need to beat yourself up over a mistake. We all make them. Even the highest of the deities aren’t perfect. You obviously care about that girl, and I didn’t come here to gloat about your misery. I came to offer a solution.”

“A solution?”

That spiked my attention but raised some doubts too. Mother wasn't exactly known for solving problems. She was, however, infamous for creating them.

“You see, some of your brothers have expressed an interest in acquiring a human, too, now.”

“Who?” I snarled. The thought of any of my brothers coming anywhere near Nicole made me sick to my stomach. At the same time, my fists itched to punch something.

“Does it matter who?” Mother shrugged nonchalantly. “The important thing is that you want to have her all to yourself, don't you?”

“I thought I made it clear,” I gritted through my teeth. “Nicole is mine and only mine.”

“Why do you like her so much?”

I didn't need to think long to answer that.

“She makes me happy. I like what I feel when I'm with her. If Avar can have a woman like that, then why can't I have one too?”

“Oh, Invi. In so many ways, you're still a little boy, always trying to one up your brothers. Well, you can have a chance to do so and claim your woman too.”

“What do you mean? How?”

It sounded tempting, so tempting. Anticipation ran down my body, making the rattle on the tip of my tail vibrate.

Mother smiled at the faint rattling sound.

“Why don’t we do a little race?” she murmured. “The winner will get the girl. Just think about it. You can win her fair and square. Then no one would question your right to be with her.”

“Win her? Like a prize in the race?”

A rush of thrill rippled through my entire being.

To win Nicole, in front of everyone.

To prove to the entire world that we belonged together.

To claim her as mine, fully and completely, so that no one could ever take her away from me.

It’d be fantastic, except that...

“Nicole would never agree to that,” I said.

“Why not? Throughout human history, women have often been won, bought, sold, and traded as one of humanity’s biggest treasures or...” Mother wagged her hand in the air, “not so big ones too. Anyway, wouldn’t she find it flattering that the mighty mortal sins want to compete for her?”

Unease crawled up my back. Would Nicole feel that way? Sadly, I didn’t know her well enough to adamantly deny the notion.

“But she is so much more than just a prize to be won,” I replied.

Mother shrugged with a sigh of regret. “What a pity. It seems like a win-win solution to me.”

Hope was slipping through my fingers like water between the rocks in the creek. I leaned forward in the desperate attempt to hold on to it.

“Please, Mother, let me speak to her. Lift the wards. Let me see her.”

“What for? Do you think you can talk her into agreeing to become the prize in our little competition?”

I exhaled a humorless laugh. “First, I’m afraid, I’d have to find a way to convince her that being with me is the prize worth winning.”

“Sadly, it’d be of no use. The girl doesn’t want to speak with you. She’s terrified of you.” Mother shook her head with a mournful expression. “How could you have fucked it up so badly, sweetie? Despite your hermit ways and gloomy disposition, I always believed there was a charming streak in you, an ability to handle delicate matters with forethought and finesse. What were you thinking, bringing her here, then spooking her away like that?”

The problem was that at some point while being with Nicole, I had stopped thinking. I simply felt . And it was marvelous.

I missed that feeling so badly. I missed having her close again.

“Well,” Mother said. “I should go. Gul is coming for tea this afternoon.”

“Gul is coming to the teahouse?” I leaned on the table so hard, one of its legs cracked.

“Oops.” Mother jumped to her feet and away from the broken table as it collapsed. “You need sturdier furniture, Invi.” She brushed down her skirts that slowly turned turquoise as she finally snapped out of her prolonged green phase. “I’ll say hi to Gul from you, since you can’t be there yourself, with the wards and the human girl staying at the teahouse now. I hope she’ll like the cannelloni that Gul is bringing to tea. I don’t care much for food, but humans love those things. And I mean, you know your brother. Everybody loves Gul.”

As I watched Mother leave through my forest and toward Gul’s sunflower fields, I couldn’t help my concerns.

Mother was right about one thing for sure.

Everybody loved Gul.

All my brothers got along well with him. Every single soul that had ever passed through Purgatory enjoyed his company. Even my sisters tolerated him better than any one of us. Though he had some friction with Temperance every now and then.

And now Gul, my most insufferably lovable brother, was spending this afternoon with my Nicole.

My Nicole , who wished nothing to do with me.

And all I could do about it was just to circle the teahouse from the closest distance that Mother’s wards would allow me to approach.

A tortured groan erupted from my chest. Enraged, I whipped with my tail so hard, it tossed the broken table against the long- suffering willow tree. I wished I could slam it against Gul’s thick skull graced with a pair of ram horns.

I had planned my trip to Nicole's world for weeks. I'd snatched a cupful of transcendence potion on one rare occasion when Avar forgot to lock it up. I'd swiped his magical moonstone ring at the first opportunity, fully prepared to face his wrath upon my return to Purgatory.

Against all odds, I managed to find the woman I could see myself happily spending the centuries to come.

And it felt like I'd lost her already.

No amount of rage or self-loathing would bring Nicole back into my arms now. No matter how many of my brothers I punched or how many tables I broke, it won't help me win her over.

Only this wasn't about my brothers and not even about my feelings. It was about Nicole and what she felt for me. And right now, she hated me. For a very good reason too.

But maybe, just maybe I could try and change that?

This was a delicate matter, like Mother had said. I'd fucked it up badly already. If there was any chance to fix it, I had to handle it with forethought and finesse from now on.

Nicole

The warm scent of freshly baked pastries tickled my nostrils, waking me up. I climbed out of the white frilly bedding in the cute little bedroom on the second floor of the teahouse in Purgatory and padded to the ensuite bathroom, then put on the dress that Kindness gave me.

Most of the spirits in Purgatory wore no clothes at all. Some had clothes that appeared to be an extension of their beings, like Pandora's flowy gowns that changed colors along with the rest of her. But Charity and Kindness wore real garments made from fabric.

Kindness was about the same size as me but slightly taller. The brown dress with a high neckline, long sleeves, and a lace collar would probably reach down to mid-calf on her, but it was ankle-length on me. I used the wide ties on the sides to make a bow on the back, cinching it in the waist.

After gathering my long, wavy hair into a bun on the back of my head, I looked like a governess from the eighteen hundreds or a pilgrim woman from a few centuries before that. Not that it mattered. My appearance was the least of my worries. I'd spend an entire day in this bizarre world beyond death, the world that no one alive was supposed to see and where people like me were not supposed to be.

Meanwhile, the cake decorating challenge was now over back home. Aidan must've won it and would be gloating, as he always did. Jess had probably filed a missing

person's report, searching for me. I wondered if she was angry with me or worried for me, but she probably was both.

Jess had put so much hope into this and worked so hard for us to get to the finals, only to lose it all at the end. I was prepared to lose the challenge. I'd even secretly considered dropping out of it, worn out by the stress of the competition. Now that it was over, however, I bitterly regretted not getting the chance at winning it at all, not giving Jess and Geoff that chance either.

And all because of an impulsive, careless action of a mortal sin.

A shiver ran down my back. The charming, adorably awkward man I thought I'd sparked a connection with turned out to be not a man at all. Invi was a supernatural entity, a monstrous embodiment of a belief, of an idea—a mortal sin.

How was I supposed to wrap my mind around that?

The noise of a busy morning reached me from downstairs. Kindness must be baking with her helpers, getting ready to serve breakfast to all the souls who were stuck in their morning habits from their past lives as much as they were stuck in Purgatory now.

Not feeling ready to face them all yet, I opened the glass doors that served as the window in my bedroom. An ornate wrought-iron railing guarded the lower part of the opening, but there was no actual balcony outside of the room.

I gripped the railing, looking out over the field of sunflowers and at the green forest beyond that housed Invi's "swamp" as Charity had called it.

In contrast to the turmoil in my chest, the morning was lovely. Sunshine flooded the fields of tall sunflowers that hadn't quite grown enough to open their golden petals

yet. Birds chirped in the lime trees that grew around the teahouse. Several larger birds separated from the luscious green line of the forest in the distance and headed toward the town.

As they approached, I spotted the distinct coloring of the male ducks' feathers, with the iridescent green sheen on their heads. One of the ducks carried a flower in his beak.

The bird swerved toward me. I screamed as it flew right at me. Scrambling back, I tripped and fell on my butt. Flapping its wings just above my head, the duck made a turn inside my room.

With a loud "quack," it released the flower from its beak, then flew back out, leaving me sitting on the floor with the white calla lily in my lap. The faint but pleasant scent of jasmine and green tea wafted from the flower.

"What the hell?" I tried to wrap my mind around what had just happened when I noticed a wide piece of parchment wrapped around the thick stem of the lily.

I got up from the floor, unwrapping the parchment. It looked like a letter, written in ink.

"My dearest Nicole..." it started with.

I quickly ran my eyes down the letter, without reading it, to the signature at the bottom of the page.

"Invi."

Air rushed from my lungs with a heavy sigh.

I knew what I had to do. I had to tear the parchment to pieces then toss them out through the balcony doors.

Instead, I stared through the open doors at the wide line of the green forest on the horizon.

A monster lived there, who looked like a giant snake with horns. He stole women from their beds at night while they were sleeping. I had to remember that, instead of the way he kissed me or the way he worshiped my body like I was a goddess he prayed to...

I shook my head, chasing the memories out of my mind and the echo of those sensations out of my body.

Invi was a monster. Inside and out.

Yet instead of tossing the lily, I grabbed the glass from the bathroom sink, filled it with water, and gently put the flower in it.

“Are you married, Kindness? Or how does it work with sins and virtues?” I asked, nursing my second cup of jasmine tea over a plate of pastries in the virtue’s sitting room downstairs that she called “parlor.”

“Married? No, honey. We don’t procreate and don’t need a partner to feel fulfilled. My sisters and I gain satisfaction from being the best we can be. Watching people’s souls grow by making the right choices brings us more joy than any flitting carnal pleasure ever could.”

“Do you brothers feel the same?”

She sighed, stirring a spoonful of buckwheat honey in her teacup. “My brothers are

very different from us. They indulge in vice often and with no restraint.”

I’d been thinking so hard about what had happened between Invi and me, trying to understand his motivation and figure out his true feelings for me. But maybe things were much simpler here?

“Do the sins just do whatever they want?” I asked.

“Pretty much.” Kindness shrugged. “Who is to stop them?”

“So...” I stared into my cup. “And Invi... Does he often behave like he did?”

“You mean does he often get as angry as he got last night? No, not really. My brother Ira, the Sin of Wrath, gets far more destructive in his anger. Invi mostly just sulks when he’s upset. He’d just say something sharp and derisive in the heat of an argument, throw a few punches here and there, then he would let his anger simmer out in his swamp...I mean in his home. Come to think of it, I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen him turn red like he did yesterday.”

“I just don’t know what he expected.” I threw my hands in the air in frustration. “Like did he think I’d be fine with waking up in a strange, unfamiliar place and finding out I’d been abducted?”

“It doesn’t look like he quite thought it through,” Kindness agreed.

He just did what he felt like at that moment. He “indulged” his impulsive desire. Why would he care about the consequences? He clearly didn’t plan to keep me for long and didn’t worry about anything long-term.

“So, the sins don’t have romantic relationships then?” I asked.

“Oh, they have plenty of romantic encounters,” Kindness chuckled. “I’m not sure if I’d call them ‘relationships,’ since most don’t last long enough to define them as such. It’s not entirely my brothers’ fault, though. Souls don’t stay in Purgatory for long. And those that do can leave any moment, so it’s difficult to build anything lasting. Since you have a physical body, it’s possible to have a relationship of some permanence with you. A living body stays put for a while, doesn’t it?” She smiled over the rim of her cup.

“But are your brothers even capable of keeping a partner? Or staying in a relationship?”

She peered at me closely.

“Is that what you want? A relationship with Invi?”

“Oh God, no,” I protested, as my cheeks warmed up with blush.

That’d be the last thing for me to want. Invi was one giant, walking red flag, despite being green.

Yet something drew me to him, and I suspected it stemmed from the memories of my brief time spent with him. I wished it hadn’t been as wonderful as it had. I wished I could convince my heart it had been just a dream. A sweet, beautiful dream that threatened to haunt me forever...

“Kindness, please tell me he isn’t good for me,” I begged. “Tell me he’s a monster, inside and out.”

“Is that what you really want?”

That was what I should want. I couldn’t keep daydreaming about Invi’s hands on my

body or the way he looked at me that night. Otherwise, I risked going insane and doing something stupid like...miss him.

“Yes.” I nodded. “It would really, really help me to hate him right now.”

I needed to hate him for what he was, not to like him for what he pretended to be.

“Well...” She made herself comfortable, folding her hands on her lap over the crispy white apron. “Invi is a bit of a hermit, but he does come to the dinner parties that Gul, the Sin of Gluttony, often has at his farmhouse.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too bad. Being introverted or even anti-social doesn’t make one a monster. I live alone just outside of a small town, too, pretty much in the middle of nowhere.”

I probably was even more introverted than Invi then, since unlike him, I didn’t even go to that many dinner parties. I preferred to stay in with a book, a show, or just Jess for company whenever she didn’t have a date and came over for a visit.

“But Nicole, sweetie, he’s a mortal sin,” Kindness protested, “and as such is capable of every vice in existence. Like, he spends his nights in complete debauchery, with hundreds of souls fornicating with him.”

“Fornicating? With Invi?” I blinked in shock. “Really?”

Kindness nodded quickly.

“He beds three hundred and fifty souls a night. How filthy is that? Can you imagine?”

I rubbed my forehead, feeling suddenly extremely uncomfortable in my dress. Its ties seemed to cut under my ribs, hindering my breathing.

“I’d rather not imagine anything like that,” I said quickly. But my overactive brain already provided me with vivid images of an entire rainbow of souls, writhing in pleasure inside the green coils of Invi’s monstrous tail. “Three hundred and fifty, huh? How is it even possible?”

Kindness pursed her lips.

“One of my brothers is the Sin of Lust, honey, but they’re all made from the same cloth. Sex, over-indulgence, and greed. They’re all guilty of those. They’re not just horned, but also always horny. Add to that that none of my brothers is used to hearing the word no very often. They never deny anything to themselves. Invi isn’t an exception. He takes whatever he wants.” She gestured at me. “As you know.”

I nodded, feeling ashamed of every tender feeling I had ever allowed myself to have for this abomination of a man.

“He steals. He lies. He kills—” Kindness folded a finger with every accusation.

“Kills!” I gasped. “Has he really killed someone?”

“Of course he has. Plenty of times. He has no shame, no restraint, no compassion, no respect for women, either, not even for his own mother.”

“That’s...not how he came across to me,” I mumbled, vividly remembering everything that happened that night, including Invi’s impeccable manners toward both Jess and me.

“Oh, Invi is a master of disguise and pretending. You saw it yourself, how easily he changes his appearance. Now, I must tell you, although it is possible for all of us to alter our shapes in an emergency, it isn’t easy to pull off the dramatic transformation like Invi did yesterday. I wouldn’t be able to change my shape that completely or to

stay in the altered form like that for any period of time. But Invi has mastered it, just to deceive others.”

“Oh, wow...” I took a huge gulp of my cooling tea, trying to absorb all the disturbing things I’d just learned. “He truly is a monster.”

“In every way, honey. You definitely deserve better than my good-for-nothing brother. I’m sure there is a nice human man waiting for you out there somewhere.” She patted my hand, sympathetically. “Was I too harsh, sweetie?”

“No. Thank you, Kindness. I needed to hear all of that.”

It was best to hear the truth, no matter how harsh, than live in some sweet illusion fueled by memories that turned out to be based on nothing but lies.

“I’m glad to help.” Kindness brushed down her apron, getting up. “Well, I need to bake some more scones with those blueberries a soul has brought in earlier this morning. You can bake with me, if you wish.”

“I’d love to.” I got up quickly, eager to clear my mind. Baking was the one thing that always helped me get in a better mood. “Let’s make the scones.”

Kindness ran her kitchen in a relaxed manner. Plenty of souls came to help, but most just hung around with nothing to do other than chat while she worked.

I ended up spending almost the entire day downstairs and didn’t make it back to my room until late afternoon.

The balcony doors were still open, just like I’d left them. A wicker basket with a checkered cloth tied over it stood on the hand-knotted rug.

I approached the basket cautiously, wondering how it got here. There were no locks on any doors in the teahouse. A crowd of souls had passed through the house since I'd left my bedroom. Someone might've gone upstairs and dropped the basket off while I was baking.

But why wouldn't they give it to me downstairs instead? Or at least tell me that they had it for me?

I lifted the cloth carefully, finding a round plastic container inside. A mouth-watering smell filled my nostrils when I opened the green lid of the container. Inside was a mound of mashed potatoes and a thick slice of meatloaf with a generous serving of golden-brown gravy. A second container held a green salad with herbed oil for dressing. A set of cutlery was wrapped in a pretty lace-trimmed napkin.

Drawing in another lungful of the delicious aroma, I grabbed the fork and dug in.

As tasty as Kindness's pastries were, eating nothing but scones and muffins the second day in a row got old pretty quickly. There was just so much tea a person could drink in a day. I was hungry for real food, and the meatloaf with wild mushrooms hit the spot perfectly.

"Oh, it's so fucking good..." I moaned around the mouthful, stuffing my face with buttery mashed potatoes.

I hadn't even seen anything edible other than the baked goods for two days now. The beings in Purgatory seemed to know that my body needed food for maintenance, but they didn't particularly care what I had to eat.

Well, someone seemed to care. As my belly filled, I wondered who my secret benefactor could be. Digging through the basket, I found a folded piece of parchment.

“My dearest Nicole...” it read, written in the familiar strong, decorative handwriting.

I dropped the note quickly, suddenly feeling sick to my stomach. The food came from Invi, even as I had no idea how he got it in here.

I glanced back at the calla lily in its makeshift vase on the night table.

Did he make a duck to deliver the basket too?

“That’s some really smart ducks he has in his swamp ,” I muttered.

The image of his sprawling treehouse with its open to the air construction, billowing gossamer curtains, and the surrounding whispering tree canopies rose in my mind. Had I not been so confused and frightened the morning I woke up there, I might’ve found his home peaceful and beautiful.

“He’s a monster, Nic,” I reminded myself, but opened the note anyway.

It was short. Just one sentence.

“I’m living in hope of you considering my invitation.”

“What invitation?” I turned the note around, but it was blank on the other side.

Then I remembered the letter that the duck delivered to me that morning, the letter that I really should’ve thrown out, but I kept it on the night table under the glass with the lily.

Apprehensive, I opened the letter now.

“My dearest Nicole,

No words can describe the regret I feel about having offended you. Scaring you was never my intention.

Ever since you left me, I've been thinking about where I went wrong. My mistake was in part due to my inexperience. Before I met you, I hadn't seen a live human for decades and hadn't interacted with them much at any point of my existence.

I understand the right thing would've been to discuss your visit with you when you were awake. And at first, I planned to do just that. But I panicked when another man appeared on the threshold of your hotel room. At that point, I had already glimpsed my future with you, and even the slightest prospect of giving you up to him felt unbearable."

What another man?

I didn't recall anyone knocking on my door that night.

And why would anyone knock, other than if the building was on fire and I slept through the evacuation alarm?

"My biggest hope now is that in your kindness, you will give me a chance to apologize in person.

I would like to invite you for dinner tonight or on any other night at your convenience. I'd be honored to welcome you properly to my home and apologize to you for my actions, if not in hope for your full forgiveness, then at least in hope of lessening any ill feelings you may harbor toward me.

Sincerely, Invi."

I stared at the ornate scroll that he drew at the end of the last letter "i" of his name.

The entire message was written in a confident hand, with neat, pretty scrolls and ornamental twists of the cursive. It was by far the prettiest handwriting I'd ever seen. I wondered if he'd practiced beforehand to get it so perfect.

The style of the message was definitely of someone who didn't speak or write to modern humans very often.

I glanced at the word "sincerely" next, wondering how much sincerity there really was in this letter. Invi was a mortal sin, after all, susceptible to every vice and skilled in pretending, by the admission of his own sister.

The entire letter could easily be a lie. But a note of plea and even desperation seemed to be woven into its every word, though I had nothing to go by here but my gut feeling that had led me astray before.

The letter had more writing on the reverse.

"Either way, I'll make sure that you receive proper meals for dinner for as long as you will stay in Purgatory."

The basket was from Invi then, and he promised a regular delivery of them in the future.

"How the hell does he train the ducks so well?" I wondered, folding the letter and putting it away. "Is he going to send one to pick up the empty dishes too?"

I caught myself smiling.

A part of me wished to see Invi again, if just to make sure he truly was a monster I had to stay away from. But maybe it'd be good to have a conversation with him before leaving Purgatory in a few days.

If he wished to apologize in person, I believed I needed to hear it from him too.

9

Invi

This time, I was prepared. I'd spent almost the entire day on the highest level of my house, which was the look-out on the top tower, watching the town. Not that I could see much from this distance. The rows of town dwellings merged into a colorful ribbon with only a blue blotch for the teahouse. But I spotted the tiny brown dot heading in my direction the moment it separated from the ribbon of the town.

Was it Nicole?

Was she really coming?

Thrill rushed me with rings of tingles, reaching to the very tip of my tail and making my rattle tremble.

Soon, Nicole would be here, and I would hopefully get a chance to plead my case to her.

I slid down the pole from the look-out. Instead of the tail, I landed on the floor below with two feet, shifting into the form that Nicole would find more agreeable. I couldn't risk scaring her away again. If she so wished, I was prepared to give up my horns and tail for good. Shifting from my natural form always felt uncomfortable, but I'd had more practice doing it than any of my brothers and could bear it better than any of them.

Would she stay for dinner?

I hadn't spent enough time with Nicole to learn her favorite food, but I had a variety of dishes prepped and ready to cook. A new, sturdier table was set under the willow tree. I put the appetizers out—some greens and seafood. It called for white wine, which I had chilled. But I also put a bottle of red on the table because on the night I met Nicole, she was drinking red wine.

I circled the table, making sure everything was ready and in place.

Was she really coming?

What if the dot I'd spotted wasn't her? Kindness wore brown too. Except that Kindness hardly ever came to visit me, which was best for both of us. I didn't care about "keeping in touch" with the entire town through my sister. The less of the town gossip I heard, the better off I was.

What if it was Mother coming to talk again?

Mother preferred brighter colors, however. I couldn't recall if I'd ever seen her taking that dull shade of brown that Kindness would've lent Nicole to wear. I had much lovelier clothes ready for her, if only she would accept them.

Anxious and impatient, I circled the table one more time and realized suddenly that I was no longer walking . At some point, my legs had merged to form the tail again.

Fuck.

I couldn't let that happen in Nicole's presence. I had to focus and keep in control.

Shifting back to the form and size of a human, I rushed into the house to put on the

clothes I wore the night I met Nicole. The restraining sensation of the fabric would hopefully serve as a reminder for me to stay in this shape throughout the evening.

“Um... Invi?” Nicole’s sweet voice called from the outside while I finished zipping up my pants behind a screen. “Are you there?”

She came.

Making sure I looked the way she was less likely to fear me, I stepped from behind the partition with the trunk where I kept my one and only set of human-sized clothes.

“I’m here,” I said from my main floor sitting room.

She stood on the lawn by the front entrance. But because my house had no walls, I could see her from almost anywhere, even while being inside.

She was dressed in one of Kindness’s demure dresses that was way too long for her. The top part of her thick, wavy hair was pinned up, the rest draped in lush waves down her back and shoulders. And she held my basket in her hands.

“Oh...” She cleared her throat. “Hi.”

“Hello.” I bowed my head, somehow remembering my manners while fighting the overwhelming need to take her in my arms. “I’m...honored to welcome you to my home.”

Mindful of every step I took and making sure that my feet remained feet instead of turning into the tail again, I walked out onto the lawn to her.

“You...” She ran her gaze up and down my fully dressed figure that I made sure to be just a head or two taller than her. “You look different.”

“I’m trying to look as close as possible to the way I did when we met. I kept the clothes, and I can compress my size, get rid of the um...extra appendages.” I blew out a frustrated breath. “But I can’t have a real human body without the moonstone ring.”

“Did Avar take the ring back?”

“He did.”

When I returned to Purgatory, Avar was furious and itching for a fight. I allowed him to tackle me to the ground before he finally calmed down a little. Luckily, I had managed to put Nicole to bed before he showed up. This whole situation could’ve been even more complicated had he seen her.

“What I mean is that you look different from how you did yesterday,” Nicole explained.

“Because yesterday, my appearance scared you.”

“It did,” she admitted. “The horns... The tail... It’s rather unusual, but I keep wondering, and it’s driving me insane... Which one is the real you?”

She looked at me so intensely, I feared that there was only one right answer to that question. Tragically, I had no idea what that answer was.

“Which one do you want me to be?” I said.

I realized immediately it was a wrong thing to say. Her chest rose with a deep breath, and hope in her eyes dulled.

She thrust the basket my way. “Thank you for the food. It was delicious.”

“You liked it? I have more.” I gestured at the table under the tree. “Will you stay for dinner?”

“Thanks, but I already ate.” She pointed at the basket in my hand. “I washed the containers. So, you can just put them back in...” she glanced at my house, “wherever you normally store them.” She rubbed her left arm with her right hand, looking uncomfortably out of place. “I should go. I just wanted to thank you for the food and bring back the basket to save your ducks the trouble of fetching it.” She smiled. It was a tiny, barely-there grin. But she smiled. “How did you train the ducks to provide delivery service for you?”

“Ducks are smarter than many people think,” I said, encouraged by her smile. “Living on my own and keeping to myself, I have enough time to train an elephant to dance ballet if I wanted to. Except that elephants don’t like my wetlands, but ducks are always around...” Maybe I should’ve stayed calm and nonchalant, but desperation got the best of me. “Stay, please,” I implored. “It doesn’t have to be dinner. We could just have dessert instead. Do you like key lime tarts?”

“Normally, I do.” She exhaled a brief laugh. “But I’ve eaten so many pastries in the past two days, I don’t think I’ll feel like having any for a while now.”

“I knew it.” I shook my head in dismay. “I tried to find a way to tell Kindness that humans need more than scones and tea for sustenance, but I couldn’t get close enough to the teahouse to talk.”

“Well, spirits eat for fun, not sustenance. It’s understandable that not everyone knows about every detail of human preferences. It’s okay, though. Kindness means well.”

She glanced back in the direction of the town, and I worried she was thinking about leaving again.

“You don’t have to eat the tarts,” I said quickly. “I have other, non-pastry, dishes. Pistachio dusted shrimp, scallops in a buttery lime sauce, roasted Brussels sprouts with bacon. Or we can just have some grapes and cheese with coffee?”

“Wow, where did you get all that food?” She took a step toward the table, which was in the opposite direction from the town, allowing me to exhale a breath in relief.

“I made it.”

“You can cook? Really?” She glanced at me in disbelief before turning her curious gaze back to the table.

“Why does it surprise you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just that... Well, I have a hard time envisioning you in an apron by the stove.”

I lifted the tray with the small dishes with appetizers.

“Here.” I offered it to her. “I didn’t know what you like and made a little bit of everything. Tell me your favorite, and I’ll don the apron right now to make more of it for you.”

She bit her lip, eyeing the food on the tray.

“I’m not even hungry, but I want to try it all.” She picked up a shrimp, gingerly so as to not shake off the pistachio spice mix. “Mmm,” she moaned around the mouthful. “So good. I would’ve never expected the Sin of Envy to be such an accomplished cook.”

Her pleasure resonated through my entire being. My knees trembled, ready to merge

into the tail, and I forced my mind to focus on keeping my current shape.

“Why not?” I swallowed hard, watching her sample a scallop next.

The tip of her tongue darted out to lick the buttery souse off her lips, and one of my cocks popped out from my crotch like a timer on a turkey.

“Fuck,” I cursed in my mind.

It was getting increasingly harder to control my cocks and my tail. And now, my forehead itched, too, with my horns ready to sprout out.

“Well...” I cleared my throat, holding my entire form as stiff as a rock. “There is a very simple explanation. At some point, I decided to become a better chef than Gul and spent several centuries learning and perfecting my cooking.”

“So, you became an amazing chef just because you wanted to best your brother?”

“Mostly for that reason, yes,” I admitted. “I enjoy being the best.”

“You really take sibling rivalry to a whole new level, Invi.” She shook her head, but the smile on her lips was that of amusement, not judgement.

“The problem is that all my brothers are really good at something,” I said. “Trying to compete with all of them is incredibly hard and often disheartening.”

“You hate losing,” she remembered.

“Very much so. There is nothing I hate more. I do anything to win, even if I have to spend a century or two at the stove, learning to cook while risking burning my tail—” I cut myself off, realizing it probably wasn’t a good idea to remind her of my visual

short-comings.

Thankfully, she giggled, covering her mouth behind her hand in a gesture I found irresistibly adorable.

“It sounds dangerous,” she teased. “Well, let’s see what else you achieved after taking all that risk.”

She moved closer to the table, and my hope for an evening with her grew stronger.

Setting the tray on the table, I pulled a chair out for her. “Why don’t you take a seat? Have a glass of wine? Red or white?”

To my relief, she hesitated only for a moment, before sitting down.

“Well, normally, I prefer red,” she said. “But it’s rather warm here today, isn’t it?” She cast me a furtive glance, while pulling at her tight neckline to let the air under her dress.

And now I was thinking about everything she hid under that dress, which didn’t help with containing my straining cocks at all. I plopped into the chair across from her to hide my raging double erection.

“It’s warmer here, in the wetlands.” It cost an effort for my voice to sound more or less normal as I poured her a glass of chilled wine, then poured one for myself, too, because I needed to chill the fuck out here. “The air is more humid, which adds to the heat, I believe.”

“This place is only a short walk from the town. How is the climate here so different?”

“Distance doesn’t have the same meaning in Purgatory as it does in your world. Our

climate is rather subjective. Many factors affect it, even state of mind sometimes.”

“Interesting.” She seemed distracted, unbuttoning the two top buttons of her dress.

I forced my eyes away from the sliver of her skin revealed in the opening but wished she’d keep going. The effort it took me not to stare at her neck and chest, weakened my control over other parts of me. I felt a horn pushing through my skull and quickly covered it with my hand, pretending to rake my fingers through my hair.

“Yes. Purgatory is a world of its own.” My voice came raspy this time, despite my best efforts.

“I’ve been here for two days now, but I still know very little about this world,” she said. “I didn’t explore it much, mostly because I was told to stay in the teahouse for my own safety.”

Her words hung between us in the silence that followed. I was the one she’d been hiding from in the teahouse. I was the reason she had to hide.

“You’re afraid of me...” I exhaled, crushed by it.

She gave me a prodding look. “Not enough, clearly. Since I’m here now, despite all the warnings.”

Now was my time to set things right between us.

“Nic, I’m so, so sorry.” Shoving the chair away, I did what the legs allowed me to do much better than a tail would—I fell to my knees in front of her. “I wronged you. There is no excuse for what I did, other than my fervent desire to get to know you better. Please forgive me. If I could, I would take you back home instantly.”

“Would you?” She focused on my face as if trying to confirm the meaning of my words in my expression.

“You don’t trust me.” It came out as a statement, even as I had intended it as a question.

“How can I?” she sighed uncertainly. “Everything I thought I knew about you turned out to be a lie.”

“Not everything. Actually, everything I ever told you about myself is true. But if you have any questions, just ask. Ask me anything you want.”

She kept her assessing gaze on me.

“Will you be honest in your answers?”

That was my intention. But my intentions mattered little if I failed to convince her in my honesty.

The memory of something I’d seen on the magical Pandora’s Box or TV, like humans called it, gave me an idea.

“Let’s play a game,” I offered.

She arched an eyebrow skeptically. “What kind of a game?”

“Truth or dare. You’ll ask me questions, and I will answer them truthfully. One can’t lie when playing that game, can one?”

“One shouldn’t lie,” she corrected, keeping her close attention on me. “Well, it wouldn’t hurt to try, I suppose. But it’s probably best if you get off your knees and sit

in the chair again.”

“Does it mean I’ve been forgiven?” I asked hopefully, not moving from my kneeling position.

“I accept your apology, but my ultimate forgiveness will depend on how honest you’ll answer my questions.”

That was better than nothing. It was a step in the right direction. At least, that was how I longed to see it.

Taking my seat again, I folded my hands on the table in front of me.

“I’m ready,” I said. “You can ask me ‘truth or dare?’ now, and I will choose.”

She shook her head.

“No. We’ll change the rules a little. I’ll choose for you whether it’s truth or dare.” She stared straight at me. “And it’s truth . Tell me, Invi, why did you abduct me? Why did you bring me here? Why didn’t you at least consider asking me if that was something I was ready for?” I opened my mouth to reply, but she wasn’t done yet. “I know we agreed we both were open for more. But ‘more’ normally means something like another date. Not an actual fucking abduction to another world.”

She clearly felt strongly about it. Her voice rose and her face flushed with the color of anger. I knew that shade of red well. I had an entire brother in that very color.

“Why, Invi?” Her voice dropped. She clutched the stem of her glass so hard, it was in the real danger of snapping. “Is it because the mortal sins are used to doing whatever they want?”

“No,” I rushed to explain, then faltered, “Well, yes. That is possibly a part of it. When everyone thinks the worst of you, sometimes it’s easier just to prove them right than to keep trying to convince them otherwise.”

“But I didn’t think the worst of you. I thought very highly of you when we first met. I...I liked you so much...” Her voice broke, and it broke something inside me too.

Liked, she said. Past tense.

Somehow, I had managed to have this delightful woman like me.

And I blew it.

Was there even the slightest chance for me now?

She asked for honesty, and that was what I had to give her.

“Nic, I didn’t plan to...um, abduct you. At first, I thought we’d have breakfast together in your world. But then this man knocked on your door at a rather indecent hour.”

“What man was it?” She looked genuinely shocked, and I liked it. It meant his visit hadn’t been arranged between them. It appeared, it hadn’t been welcomed by her, either.

“I’m not sure who he was,” I said, wishing I had at least punched her midnight visitor in his jaw, to deter him from any thought of ever pursuing my woman again. Instead, I’d just shut the door into his face, repulsed by his very existence in such a close proximity to my Nicole.

“What was his name?” she asked. “Did he introduce himself?”

“No, he didn’t. Which is rather rude, come to think of it.” I scratched my chin.

“What did he look like?”

I shrugged. “A relatively tall human. With red curly hair and those...what do you call them?” I waved a hand in front of my face. “Freckles.”

“Geoff?”

“Who is Geoff?” My shoulders rose, and my hands clenched into fists, as if ready to fight the human whose name slipped so easily from the lips I couldn’t wait to kiss again.

“He’s our new and only employee,” she explained. “Jess hired him just before we left for the city to do the challenge because we needed three people on our team. I don’t know him that well...” Her eyes opened wider as she stared at me with a new horror. “Tell me something, Invi. Did you open the door naked?”

“Yes.”

“Oh no...” she groaned, dropping her face in her palm.

“Nic, sweetheart, these are the only clothes I own, and I procured them literally on the day we met. I’m simply not in the habit of being dressed.”

“Right.” She scraped her hand down her face. “Did he say what he wanted?”

“No. But by his outfit that consisted only of a bathrobe and a bottle of wine in an ice bucket, it was quite clear what he had in mind.”

Her cheeks turned the loveliest shade of pink. “But it doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense to me,” I disagreed. “He clearly thought you were in your room alone and desired to spend the night with you. I can’t blame him for seizing the opportunity, but I couldn’t let him have you. I just couldn’t...” The stubborn horn tried to make its presence known once again, and I rubbed my forehead against the itchy spot. “Even the slightest possibility of losing you to him was more than I could bear. I realized I couldn’t wait until the morning and risk someone claiming you before me. I had to bring you here, where I thought we could be alone. Where you’d be mine and mine alone.”

“Oh, Invi...” She shook her head, her lips pursed in displeasure.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” I tried to explain. “Never in a million years would I have wanted you to fear me. I went to the teahouse to get us some pastries for breakfast, afraid that baking them myself would take too long and they wouldn’t be ready by the time you woke up. And the tail... Well, my brothers and I were created as monsters. That nightmarish form is just more comfortable for me to be in, but I never meant for you to see it.”

“Is that form, with the horns and the tail... Is that the real you?”

“It’s all real, Nic. All of me. In every form. No matter what I look like on the outside, I can only be me on the inside.”

She drew in a breath, slowly spinning her wine glass on the table by rotating its stem between her fingers.

Moments ticked by, and she said nothing. Needles of apprehension pricked my chest. I had told her everything. I’d deliver my apology the best I could, but I feared it might not have been enough.

“Do you hate me?” I expressed my fear out loud before I could think better of it.

“Hate?” She glanced up. “No. I don’t think I ever did, even when I seriously tried to hate you. I was terrified of you, though.”

“But not anymore, right? Tell me you aren’t afraid of me anymore.”

“I don’t think so. No.” She let go of her glass and placed both hands on her lap. “But of course, it all depends on what you do from now on, on how you act in the future.”

My chest expanded with hope.

“Does it mean there is a chance for us to have a future together?”

Frown wrinkled her forehead. “That wasn’t what I said.”

But she didn’t deny it either.

I gripped the edge of the table.

“Then say it. Say it isn’t so,” I challenged, halting my breath in anticipation of her answer.

Her chest rose with a long breath as she searched my eyes.

“But why, Invi? Why me? What is it about me that you want so much? Because, let’s face it, I’ve lived in this body for close to three decades now, and I never had a man fight for me this hard before. Men don’t find me very desirable, to be honest. I’m not sure what you see in me that attracts you, but whatever it is?—”

“Your soul.”

“What?” She scrunched her nose in concentration, struggling to understand

something that was so clear to me.

“Nic, it’s not just your body. I desire you in every way a person can be desired. All of you. Your soul suits me. I love how I feel in its presence. But to win your soul, I realize, I have to win your heart too. Your body is also a lovely and quite exciting addition that I can’t wait to have my hands on again.”

The blush on her cheeks flared anew, and I forced my thoughts away from her body.

“I’ve never cooked for anyone before,” I said. “But I enjoyed it today. And I want to do it again. I want to know what it’s like to care for someone and to have them care about you in return.”

The well-familiar longing squeezed my chest, forcing me to stop talking.

“Invi.” She reached across the table and covered my fist with her small hand.

The contact rushed me with sensations. For a moment, I could focus on nothing but her.

“Oh—” she sucked in a sharp breath, and I realized with horror why she was staring at my forehead.

The damn right horn made it out after all. And the left one followed.

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath, raising both hands to the base of the horns. “Just give me a moment, please. I’ll get this under control?—”

“Don’t,” she said softly, snapping my attention back to her with that one word.

“No?” I dropped my hands on the table. “But I don’t want to scare you.”

“I’m not scared.” She eyed my horns. “I’m just...curious. And since you said you don’t want to hurt me?—”

“I don’t.”

“I believe you. If it’s more comfortable for you to have the horns out, just do it. You don’t have to force yourself to be something you’re not just to please me. May I?” She reached for the left horn, and I stiffened.

On one hand, I’d be damned if I denied her anything at this moment or anytime thereafter.

But on the other hand, her touching my horns would have a similar effect to her stroking my cocks, and I just didn’t know if I could take it. I’d either have to fuck her right here on the table or I would simply combust into the pink flames of lust.

“This is different,” she murmured, sliding her light fingers up the curved edge of my horn.

I bit my lip so hard, it’d bleed if I had a physical body with blood. Desire rushed to my groin, filling my entire being with the tingling sensation of need.

“It feels warm and not quite as hard as I expected,” she said, squeezing my horn in her deft little fingers.

Oh, I was hard. And not just in the horns. My rock-hard cocks pushed against my pants, literally bursting out of them. With the mortifying sound of ripping material, my cocks and my tail both busted out of their jail.

Nic jerked her hand away.

I thanked Heaven for the table that concealed my erection. But there was no space to hide my tail. Like an uncoiling spring, it unfurled in thick, green loops all around me. The chair I'd been sitting on fell backwards, then rolled down into the creek, spooking the ducks.

Nic jumped to her feet.

“What happened? What did I do?”

“Ugh, the fucking horns.” I groaned, grabbing one in frustration.

Her stroking them had the same effect on me as my sucking and licking her nipples had on her. And now, all I could think about were the little moans she made when I played with her breasts.

A hot charge of desire shot through me, making me let go of my horn as if it was a hot iron. My shirt busted open at every seam. Clearly, I was no longer human size. I lost all control over my own shape.

“Wow...” Nic tilted back her head, sliding her gaze up my monstrous form. “So, this is the real you.”

I blew out a breath in defeat.

“Yes. That’s me. In all my monstrous glory,” I said with a bitter smile.

There was no point in hiding now. Trying to shrink again would only make me look ridiculous. Also, my clothes had been irreparably ruined.

“This is incredible.” Nic tipped her head to the side, examining my tail. “I mean I saw you in this form before. But I was so terrified, I had no presence of mind to

appreciate it.”

“Are you really appreciating this?”

“Well, it’s not something one sees every day. At least not where I come from.” She glanced up and down my height as I propped myself on a coil of my tail. “You look even bigger up close.”

She said it calmly. Wonder had melted the fear from her hazel eyes, and she looked like she really appreciated what she saw.

“Now that you know the truth, how do you feel about us spending the night together two days ago?” I asked carefully.

A shiver of apprehension ran down my tail in anticipation of her reply. My rattle trembled with a subtle buzzing.

“What’s that?” Nicole perked up with curiosity. “What’s that noise?”

Instead of an answer, I silently raised the tip of my tail in her line of vision.

“It vibrates?” she asked incredulously.

“It does.” I shook the tip faster, making the rattle vibrate harder.

She propped her hands on her hips, narrowing her eyes at me. “Well, that explains the mysterious appearance of a vibrator in my bed that night.”

“You seemed to enjoy it.” I ventured a smile.

She didn’t deny it. A gentle smile played on her lips, with a dreamy expression

settling over her eyes. She leaned forward slightly across the table toward me. And I hated that table for still standing between us.

I wanted her close so badly, my chest ached.

“It’s my turn now. In our game,” I rasped through my tightening throat.

“Are we still playing it?”

“Yes. And since you chose for me, I’ll choose for you now. It’s a dare, my dear Nicole.” I propped my hands on the table and leaned across it toward her. “I dare you to kiss me.”

10

Nicole

I nvi leaned with the massive bulk of his upper body against the table so hard, the poor piece of furniture squeaked, its legs sinking into the soft grassy ground half-way.

“I dare you to kiss me,” he rasped.

His otherworldly eyes of vivid green stared at me with the same intensity as on the day we first met. Aside from the lack of facial hair and...well, the lack of human skin, his facial features remained the same too.

When he looked at me like that, I didn't see a monster. I simply saw the man I had spent a wonderful night with. The man who stood up for my best friend, who worshiped my body like at the altar of a goddess, and who made me feel like a goddess too.

“It doesn't need to be a dare.” I reached to cup his face, bringing it closer to mine.

Just like the rest of him, his head was larger in this form, but his lips met mine with the same tenderness as before, robbing me of breath just the same. Swaying on my feet, I gripped his shoulder.

He pulled back in concern, supporting me with a hand around my waist.

“Kissing you has never been a chore,” I breathed out. “I always loved it.”

He searched my eyes, looking like he was going to say something, only to just exhale my name at the end.

“Nicole...”

He grabbed me, lifting me over the table to him. A wide sweep of his tail cleared the table from the dishes, sending them to the ground and the food into the creek to the utter delight of the ducks.

“What a waste of food.” I mourned the loss of all the mouth-watering dishes.

“I have something much better here.” He lay me onto the table, licking his lips. “Far, far more delicious.”

I stared at the tip of his tongue as it skimmed his upper lip. In this unearthly form of his, Invi’s tongue was impossibly long and forked, split in two at the end. I drew in a bracing breath, fisting my skirts as he tied his long hair back into a knot, clearly meaning business.

“Relax, my dearest,” he murmured, caressing the side of my face. “I won’t do anything you won’t thoroughly enjoy. Before I start, however, is there any part of me you’d like me to change for you?”

He must’ve sensed my apprehension, but I hated for him to think that I disliked any part of him. His appearance was unusual. Just a couple of days ago, I would’ve found it inconceivable. But now...

“It’s always me on the inside,” he’d said.

Deep inside, his essence never changed, no matter what he looked like on the outside. Understanding it helped me to accept his appearance, whatever it happened to be.

Invi opened the buttons of my dress, kissing my skin as he revealed it.

“No.” I sank my fingers into his hair. “I don't want you to change a thing, Invi. I feel drawn to you, no matter what form you're in.”

“Ahh.” He smiled, lifting his head. “The good old appeal of a sin. It helps, even despite my frightful looks.”

“You're not really that frightful, upon a closer look.” I brushed aside a strand of his forest-green hair, revealing more of his handsome face.

Through everything that had happened, I felt a real connection with Invi. Every moment we spent together, I grew closer to him.

Was it wrong? I didn't know. But with his hand sliding up my thigh and under my skirt, his touch felt more right than ever.

He slid aside my dress, letting the warm breeze stroke my naked breasts. His forked tongue flicked my right nipple. I gasped, arching my back, and he slipped his hand between my legs, finding my most sensitive spot.

“Oh, Invi...” I moaned.

With the tip of my breast between his lips, he just hummed in response. The fork of his tongue nudged my nipple, sending a shudder of arousal through my entire body. Need burned through me, and I thrust my hips into his touch.

“More,” I begged, needing to feel him inside me. “Oh God, please... Fuck me, Invi.”

“Mmm, there is nothing I want more, sweetheart.” He clicked his tongue, roaming his eyes over my exposed chest. “But I’m afraid I’m impossibly big for you. With my shape not under my control today, I’d hurt you, and I’d never forgive myself for putting you in danger like that.”

“How big?” I challenged. “Show me.”

I rose on my elbows, forcing him to lean back a little.

The mighty mortal sin suddenly looked rather flustered. “Do you really want to see them right now?”

“Them? Is there more than one?” My mouth dropped open. “But...it can’t be. I’ve seen you naked before?—”

“You saw me in my human form. Here, in Purgatory...” he scratched an eyebrow, looking uneasy, “I have two.”

“Two? Two dicks? Really? But how do they even fit down there?” I craned my neck, trying to glimpse his crotch. “Side by side? One over the other? Nested inside each other, like the Russian dolls?”

He grinned at my impatience.

“What a curious little duckling you are,” he murmured so tenderly, my heart ached with longing. “Let me make you come first.”

Taking my chin in his fingers, he tilted my head for a kiss while his hand took its previous position between my thighs.

“Look how wet and needy you are, my dear.” He moved his fingers in circular

motion, spreading my arousal over my hot and indeed very needy clit. “This can’t wait another second.”

I tried to protest but couldn’t muster a single word in reply as his deft fingers expertly worked me between my legs. Pleasure rippled through my body, building up into a desperate urge to release.

“Invi, I need you...” I breathed out against his lips. “So, so badly...Please.”

He leaned back, raising the tip of his tail in my line of view.

“May I?” He arched an eyebrow in question, waiting for my permission.

I paused, staring at the rattle on the end of his tail. He had used it to make me come before, but only on the outside so far.

“Do you want to...put it inside me?”

Both of his eyebrows slid up in surprise. Clearly fucking me with his tail was not what he had in mind. He probably just wanted to use it on me as a vibrator again.

Great, now I managed to shock the mortal sin with my perverted ideas.

His expression quickly turned from surprised to intrigued, however. “Is that what you want, my sweet Nic?”

I was in Purgatory, spread out on the Sin of Envy’s dining table with my skirt up and his finger inside me. The rattle on the end of his tail buzzed softly while slowly inching up my thigh. It was way too late for me to act all demure and proper now. The urge to be filled didn’t ease. It pulsed even more persistently.

Blowing out a breath, I went for it. “Yes. I want it.”

An approving rumble vibrated deep in his throat as he slid the rattle further up my thigh. It touched my hot, swollen clit, spiking my pleasure. I whimpered, jerking my hips.

“Oh God...oh God...oh God,” I chanted, blinded by pleasure.

“No God, just me, my sweet, darling girl.” He trailed kisses along my neck then down my chest. His long tongue flicked my hard nipple as he slipped the vibrating rattle inside me.

I stilled when it stretched me, sinking deeper and deeper. The incredible sensation of the gentle vibration against my inner walls and my g-spot made me see stars, rendering me speechless. Invi pressed the pad of his thumb to the bud of my clit while his rattle vibrated harder inside me, setting off my orgasm.

Pleasure exploded through my body, making my thighs shake.

“Beautiful,” Invi murmured, placing a kiss between my breasts. “What a divine picture you present, my dearest.”

I opened my eyes and was met with the view of the white-and-green butterflies playing between the swaying branches of the willow tree. What a serene, beautiful place this was.

Who would’ve believed that a mortal sin lived here?

Who would’ve guessed all the debauchery that had happened here?

Invi moved a strand of hair away from my face. “My dear Nicole, watching you

writhe in pleasure brings me the most exquisite joy.”

I stopped short from asking about his own pleasure. Did he care about it at all? For the second time he'd had me undressed and panting. But I was yet to see Invi come. Instead, I pulled my dress closed on my chest and yanked my skirt back down while getting up.

When I accepted his invitation, it had not been in my intentions to come on his hand with his rattle shoved deep inside me. And now that it happened, my feelings for him had muddled even more than before.

With the heat of arousal gone, I tried to remember why having Invi's hands and tail in me was not a good idea.

“So...” I focused on closing the buttons of my dress. “Are you still planning to have three hundred and fifty souls here tonight? Or will it be just three hundred and forty-nine now, with me added to the count?”

“What count?” He helped me off the table, which was hardly necessary. With its legs having sunk even deeper into the grass and dirt, the table was barely a foot off the ground. “Nic, what are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about you having sex with hundreds of people in one night.” I almost wished he would deny it even as I needed him to be completely honest with me.

“Oh, that...” he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

By the tone of his voice, I knew it was the truth, and my heart sank in despair.

“So, it's true then, Invi? You need to fuck that many to be satisfied?”

No wonder he'd never even bothered with his own orgasm when he was with me. I was just one person, after all. How could one compete with three hundred and fifty?

"Absolutely not," he protested. "I don't need hundreds. And it happened just once. One night. A few centuries ago."

"But it happened. Why?" I tried to understand, I really tried, but it remained behind my human comprehension. "Really, Invi? Three hundred and fifty people at once?"

"Not at once," he said. "It took me a few hours to please them all. And after about three hundred and three, I was so tired, I didn't even care about my own pleasure anymore."

"Just a few hours?" I laughed sarcastically to mask my hurt. "I mean, I know you have two dicks, but still... Why did you do it?"

He raked his fingers through his hair, teasing out a few long strands from the knot he'd made.

"I learned that Lux had bedded hundreds of thousands of souls over the centuries, and I wished to beat him at that."

"Is Lux?—"

"Luxuria, the Sin of Lust. He makes it look so effortless. And he seems to enjoy it more than anyone."

"So, you got jealous?"

"Envious," he corrected with a soft smile. "I calculated that if I had sex with three hundred and fifty souls every night, I would eventually catch up with his number and

then beat him. But I lasted just that one night.”

“You quit after just one night? Why?”

“Everything we do here in Purgatory is ultimately for pleasure,” he explained. “Otherwise, why even bother with the existence, right?”

“Um...” I wasn’t sure how to reply to that.

Thankfully, he didn’t wait for an answer. “Well, after that night, I realized that for me, pleasure comes from quality not quantity. Scarcity ultimately makes my joy that much more intense.”

“And ‘scarcity’ for you would be like what? A dozen instead of three hundred?”

“One, Nic. Just one. All I want is you. As often as you’ll have me.”

With a finger under my chin, he lifted my face to his and paused just long enough for me to protest, but I didn’t. I let him kiss me.

“Do you believe me?” he asked, searching my eyes after the kiss. “Who told you about that night?”

“Kindness. Only she said you did it every night, not just once. She also said you were a liar and a murderer. And...well, many other bad things.”

He winced as if having bitten into a lemon. “Please don’t believe everything Kindness says. She lies a lot. In fact, it’s safe to assume that everything Kindness says is either partially or completely untrue.”

“How can she lie? She’s a virtue.”

“Do you think the virtues are infallible? That they can’t lie?”

“Maybe they can. But they shouldn’t, should they?”

“My sisters are queens of hypocrisy, but they often act like they have no faults. They would commit the gravest of atrocities as long as they can justify it somehow that it’s necessary for a greater good. Kindness believes that lying is perfectly acceptable as long as it’s done with the best intentions. She is the cause of most white lies and often of lying by omission too.” He looked at me carefully. “Did you, by any chance, make Kindness believe that her badmouthing me would make you feel better?”

I thought back to my conversation with the virtue.

“I’m afraid I did...” I admitted with a pang of guilt.

“Were you that angry with me, sweetheart?”

It wasn’t the anger, but my desperate attempt to fight my attraction to him. It scared me how easy it was for me to like him. Even back when I was afraid of him, I still felt attracted to him.

“I hoped to discover something terrible about you,” I explained, avoiding his eyes. “Something that would help me not like you as much as I did.”

“Well, Kindness is always happy to help.” He nodded somberly. “But did her lies actually help? Do you like me less now?”

“Well, I still like you enough to come here and...to let you make me come .” I tilted my head with a tiny smile.

He gave me that look of warm adoration that made me weak in my knees and melted

my heart in response.

“Nic, dearest...” He brushed my hair aside, then gently circled the dimple on my left cheek with his finger. “Please give me the chance to win your heart.”

“How are you planning to do it?”

“I deeply believe that all I need is time. I have to regain your trust, to prove that I’m worthy of your affection, but I can’t do that with all my brothers already lining up to court you.”

“Nobody is courting me,” I laughed, confused about how he’d come up with that.

“Didn’t Gul call on you last afternoon, bringing his stupid cannelloni as a courting gift?” he growled low.

“Gul brought the cannelloni, yes, but I didn’t get to meet him. I was in the kitchen, and Kindness didn’t let him in.”

My words didn’t seem to make him feel any better.

“Mother must be keeping them at bay for now,” he said gravely. “She wants us to compete in a race for the prize of your affection.”

A tendril of worry tightened around my chest.

“What does that even mean?” I frowned. “How can a personal feeling like affection work as a prize?”

“You’d be the actual prize, my dear—you and the chance to earn your affection afterwards as Mother informed me this morning in a second visit since...well, since

the day I started living on my own. Mother would lift the wards around the teahouse, and the winner of the race would get the honor to host you in his place.”

“But it isn’t right. It can’t be legal to use a person as a prize in a game. Why didn’t Pandora talk to me first? I’m not some trophy to be won.” I pursed my lips in indignation and clenched my fists tightly, but fear slithered inside me already.

Here in Purgatory, I was but a mere human among the mighty, supernatural beings. How could I stop them from doing whatever they wished with me?

“This race can’t happen,” I said, hating how small my voice sounded.

“Nic...” He hugged me to his chest, and I leaned against it for support, my heart thundering inside my ribcage as if trying to leap out and run. “No matter what, I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“Okay,” I said, with little faith in his words because they sounded too much like an actual white lie right now, just to make me feel better.

“If I win the race—and trust me that I will win it, come hell or high water—you’ll stay with me until Avar is back,” he murmured soothingly, stroking my back. “I’ll get the transcendence potion from him?”

“Will you let me go back?” I looked up to see his face.

“Sweetheart, I’ll do everything to make you happy. If you want to return to your world, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Thank you.” Hope eased my worry a little. I wanted to trust him so badly, but I still wasn’t sure if I should.

“I’ll do more than that, dearest. Avar has a device that can transport you back to the time when I took you from. I know it’s important to you. You’ll go back to that Sunday morning and won’t miss the finals of your cake decorating challenge.”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Is something like that even possible? Also, isn’t Avar mad at you for taking his ring?”

“I’ll make it possible, sweetheart. You don’t have to worry about any of it. I’ve messed it up badly between us. Let me fix it. Please give me a chance to make up for what I’ve done.”

“But for all of that to happen, you’ll need to win that race first.”

He nodded. “After I win, no one will ever contest my right to claim you. I’ll be able to do whatever I want, and all I want is to make you happy.”

“But what if you lose?” Blood rushed from my extremities, leaving my hands cold and trembling. “What will they do to me then?”

“I won’t lose,” he said with conviction. “I’m faster than most people know. I excel in competitions, and no one has the motivation that I have to win this.” He cradled me to his chest, placing a kiss on my temple. “I’m the Sin of Envy, sweetheart. Rivalry and competition are deeply rooted in my very essence, and winning is the only goal I’ve ever known. Please, Nic.” He cupped my face, tilting my head back to look deep into my eyes, “Please, let me win you.”

11

Nicole

“ Y ou look lovely, Nicole!” Kindness exclaimed, clapping her hands. “Like a real princess.”

Maybe not exactly a princess, but I liked my reflection in the large mirror on the main floor of the virtue’s teahouse.

The white satin of my dress flowed down my body, skimming my curves. The gossamer mint-green overskirt shimmered softly, as did the wide sleeves of the same transparent, light-like-a-cloud material. Silk white lilies decorated the sleeves and the bodice. And I had a matching barrette in my hair.

“This dress is so beautiful.” I smoothed my skirts with my hands, enjoying the glide of the luxurious fabric under my palms

Maybe I did look like a princess, after all. A swamp princess?

The thought made me smile.

Pandora entered, giving my outfit an assessing glance. “Is this from Invi? Who knew he had such a good taste in clothing? I always thought it was only Sup’s area of expertise.”

“Invi is good at many things,” I replied.

His family seemed to think that Invi spent his time wallowing in envy, tortured by unfulfilled wishes for what he couldn't have.

Instead, he used envy in the most constructive way—he made it his motivation to better himself. He might not reach his brothers' level of expertise in each and every thing that they were good at, but he strived to reach and beat his personal best, learning his limitations and improving his skills. Invi tried to be the best he could be, and I admired him for it deeply.

“Well, our mounts are here,” Pandora gestured at the door impatiently. “Let's get going, shall we?”

Her color changed rapidly in wild bursts this morning, making her flowing garments and unbound hair look like the tiny supernovas were exploding all over them. I assumed that must mean that the mother of mortal sins was excited for the race taking place today.

Kindness took off her apron for the first time since I got to Purgatory.

“Alright,” she said, hanging the apron on the hook by the kitchen door. “Let's go then.”

The snow-white “mounts” that Pandora had mentioned beat with their hooves against the cobblestones of the road in front of the teahouse.

“There you are,” Charity exhaled with relief, handing the reins of one to Pandora. “What took you so long? The boys must be waiting for us at the maze already.”

She tried to give the reins of the next one to me, but I just stared with my mouth open at the magnificent creature.

“They have wings,” I gasped.

“Of course they do.” Kindness hurried to another winged horse, hiking up her skirts to jump into the saddle with the grace of a much younger being than her appearance suggested. “They’re pegasi, the winged horses.”

“It’s practically impossible to get to the maze without them,” Pandora explained, getting into the saddle too.

Apparently, it wasn’t going to be just any plain old race in the open. No, Pandora wished to make it “a little more exciting for everyone” by sending her sons through an ancient maze located somewhere on the outskirts of this world.

“I thought distance didn’t matter in Purgatory,” I said.

“Distance doesn’t matter much, but some things on the ground between here and there do. Flying is safer.” Charity shoved the reins into my hand. “Let’s get moving, shall we? Because time flies here just as fast as it does everywhere else.”

“Have you ridden a horse before?” Kindness asked quietly, leaning down from her saddle.

“I have. I live in a small town surrounded by farms with lots of horses. But I never rode one with wings.”

I wasn’t the strongest rider, but I felt confident in the saddle. Normally.

My pegasus stretched his great white wings straight up, almost concealing the sun from view, and my apprehension spiked. I hesitated, gripping the reins in my sweaty hands.

“They aren’t that much different from horses,” Kindness tried to assure me. “You’ll be fine.”

I wasn’t certain if I should trust her on that, especially after what Invi told me about Kindness’s propensity to tell people what they wanted to hear regardless of the truth.

“They’re definitely much nicer than unicorns,” Charity confirmed. “Those moody beasts would stab you with their horns without a doubt.”

“Come on, sweetie,” Pandora urged. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Um, that I’ll fall off and die?” I took a step closer to the magnificent but intimidating animal. He snorted and ruffled his wing feathers, probably sensing an inexperienced rider already.

“Oh, you mortals.” The mother of sins rolled her eyes. “You’re always so afraid of dying, like that’s the worst thing ever.”

The worst or not, I really didn’t want to go through the whole death experience due to choosing a wrong mode of transportation.

“Are you sure I can’t walk?”

“And risk being devoured by some stray creature of the underworld?” Charity asked casually.

“What creature?” The nervous flutter of apprehension in my stomach pulsed stronger.

“Charity, don’t scare her,” Kindness pleaded. “Look at her. The poor thing is stressed enough already.”

Pandora leaned over and grabbed my winged mount under the harness.

“Here, I’ll hold him for you,” she said. “Jump on.”

I blew out a breath, grabbed the horn of the saddle, shoved my foot into the pretty golden stirrup, and did as she said.

The stirrups were shorter than what I was used to and positioned a little more forward to allow for the wings to move below the narrow saddle. But other than that, the feel of the saddle under my butt was familiar.

I exhaled, adjusting my grip on the reins.

“Well, it’s not too bad?—”

The wings moved, and my pegasus soared into the air. I squeaked, dropped forward, and hugged his neck in a death grip.

“Do we absolutely need to fly?” I yelled into his white silky mane.

The wings didn’t appear to grow from the animal’s shoulder blades but were positioned closer to the middle of his body, behind my legs. It made our position in the air almost identical to the one on horseback, roughly horizontal and parallel to the ground. But the pegasus’s lurch up with each flap of his wings was vastly different from a horse’s gait on the ground.

My mount tilted to the right, making a sharp turn in the air, and my stomach leaped up, choking my scream of horror. The ground shifted in my view, making me feel like I was falling.

“Oh, my fucking shit!” I cursed, finding an odd comfort in the filthy words when the

entire world appeared to turn upside down.

“You’re doing great.” Pandora lined up her pegasus behind mine. “We’ll be there in no time. And it is safer this way. Charity wasn’t lying when she spoke about the beasts of the underworld. They don’t usually come up all the way to the surface. But it’s better to be safe than sorry, right?”

“Why are there any beasts at all?” I choked out between the gasps and screams as air rushed by me. “We aren’t going to the underworld, are we?”

“No, of course not. But the maze is kind of close to it.”

“Kind of?” What the hell did that mean? “Are you kidding me? Are we literally going to hell?”

“Not quite.” Pandora grinned. Unlike me, she looked like she was immensely enjoying the wild ride or...the wild flight, to be precise. “The maze is just at the entrance to hell, but we’re not going in. And look! We’re almost there already.”

Hugging my winged mount’s neck tightly, I ventured a glance down.

The green forests and vistas below us gave way to a wasteland with sharp, black rocks jutting out from pale dirt.

“And the boys are already here.” Pandora perked up, craning her neck for a better look. “I bet they’re so excited to meet you. Sadly, Ace couldn’t come, but he sent his regards.”

“Which one is Ace, again?”

“Acedia, the Sin of Sloth. He rarely bothers with anything, just like most of my

daughters, who tend to stay away from fun in general. Diligence is always too busy with something to ever take a break. Chastity can really only exist in a complete isolation. She lives the farthest away from the town and any possible temptation. Frankly, I'm surprised even Charity and Kindness decided to attend. But Charity has a streak of curiosity in her, and Kindness probably just came to make sure everyone was alright. She rarely misses any gathering if she's invited."

She peered closely at the large colorful shapes congregating by a massive gate in a high wall that rose from the ground in a semicircle.

"Unfortunately, Avar and Sup couldn't make it either," she sighed. "Both are currently in your world, for unrelated matters. But I don't see Lux there. He promised to come for sure. He was so excited about the race and the prize. I wonder if he's running late or something."

I tried not to think about the possible reasons for the Sin of Lust to be excited about winning me in the race.

"You promised me last night that no one will hurt me, no matter who wins today," I reminded Pandora, growing more concerned the closer we got to the wall.

"Don't worry." She waved me off. "Lux wouldn't do anything to you that you wouldn't beg him to do." She tapped her chin, surveying the area below. "Now, where is he?"

The wall was a part of a giant circular structure under a roof that had partially prolapsed, leaving a segment open to the elements. From the air, the piled-up dirt and scattered rocks on the remaining roof made the entire complex appear buried in the ground.

Three sins waited for us in front of the massive metal door in the wall.

Invi was easy to recognize by his long green tail trailing across the scorched sand. The moment my pegasus touched the ground and I exhaled in relief from arriving alive with all the contents of my stomach still inside me, Invi rushed over to me.

“Nicole, are you alright, my darling?”

Jumping off her mount, Pandora quickly stepped between us.

“No contact with the prize until she’s won.” She waved him away. “Such are the rules.”

“We should be able to at least say hi to her, shouldn’t we?” came in a low rumbling voice from another sin.

I scrambled off my pegasus in the most ungraceful way in a hurry to walk on solid ground again, then peeked at the one speaking.

Bright yellow, with the head of a bear, the thick horns of a ram, and a long fluffy tail of a fox, Invi’s brother met my eyes unabashedly.

“Greetings, sweet thing,” he rumbled, good-naturedly.

Invi’s tail lashed out like a whip, landing on the ground between his brother and me. Dust rose into the air, leaving a line in the sand that Invi clearly didn’t want his brothers to cross.

“Easy, Invi,” the giant yellow bear drawled. “I’m just trying to introduce myself.”

“Make your introductions from here,” Invi barked. “No need to get any closer. You’re scaring her already.”

I remained partially hidden behind my pegasus, using the animal as a shield from the monsters on the other side of the line drawn in the sand by Invi.

The horned bear shrugged his wide, furry shoulders. “Hey, I’m much better looking than any of you.” He winked at me. “No need to be afraid, cupcake. I’m Gula, the Sin of Gluttony. But you can call me Gul.”

“She has no reason to call you anything,” Invi muttered under his breath. “Trust my word, you’ll never come close enough to her to have a conversation.”

“We’ll see.” Gul laughed heartily. “Don’t let my size fool you,” he said to me, slapping his sides. Gul didn’t have his brother’s washboard abs. His humanoid shape seemed equally wide everywhere, from his fur-covered shoulders down to his tree-trunk sized legs. “I can run faster than anyone, especially if there is a treat like yourself waiting for me at the finish line. Get ready to sleep in my house tonight, sweet dumpling.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Invi growled like a grizzly bear. His hands clenched into fists. A red streak of anger sliced through the serene green of his shape like lightning through the clouds.

Before a fight could break out, however, the third sin shouldered his brothers out of his way and away from each other.

Just as tall as them, he was bright red, which made me step back in alarm. Red was the color of anger as I’d learned. Only this beast didn’t exactly act raging mad. His massive shoulders seemed tense, his hooves stomped into the ground hard as he narrowed his eyes at me. His long tail whipped around his calves, as if he struggled to contain the rage that threatened to erupt any minute.

“You...” I exhaled with a whimper. “You must be Ira?” His name came out in a

squeak.

He bowed his great head of a bull, graced with a pair of horns, but said nothing.

“Well, let’s start then.” Pandora clapped her hands loudly, spooking my pegasus.

The animal shrank back, flapping his wings. I gripped the reins tighter, struggling to keep him in place.

“Nic?” Invi slipped over his own line in the sand.

“Nuh-uh!” Pandora raised her arms, signaling him to back off.

“I’m good,” I assured him quickly, afraid he might get penalized or even worse, disqualified, for breaking the rules.

Our gazes crossed, and I held eye contact, unable to let go. I wished to say something special to him, just to him. But I didn’t want to make it too obvious that I felt closer to him than to anyone else here. I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to have favorites in this contest.

“Thank you,” I said, running a hand down my skirt. “Thank you for the dress. I really like it.”

“Hey!” Gul roared. “You gave her a dress? I didn’t know we were allowed to give her presents like that.”

“Oh, spare the outrage,” Pandora groaned. “Like you didn’t bring her cannoli the other day.”

Ira glowered at Gul, clearly unaware of Gul’s cannoli offering.

“That was just a little treat,” Gul explained, scratching behind his ear apologetically. “To welcome her to the neighborhood, so to say.”

A low growl vibrated threateningly deep inside Ira’s wide chest, like a rockslide rushing down.

“Alright, alright.” Pandora raised her hand again. “Save all that energy for the race. Now, has anyone seen Lux? He promised to be here.”

“He changed his mind,” Invi smirked.

“Invi.” Lowering her voice, Pandora squinted at him the way my dad used to look at me when he knew it was me who painted our cat’s tail green. “What did you do to your brother?”

“Nothing.” Invi shrugged innocently, “Lux is fine. Avar will let him out when he’s back.”

“Out of where? ” Pandora threw her hands in the air, exasperated.

Despite his confidence about winning the race, Invi obviously decided to improve his chances by eliminating at least some of the competition. And for that, I was grateful to him. The peculiar nature of the Sin of Lust alone would increase my worry exponentially if there were even the slightest chance of him claiming me as the prize at the end of this race.

The heavy metal gate rumbled and screeched on its hinges. Thick, black smoke rushed out through the gap of its opening.

“It’s starting!” Charity yanked at her reins, taking off on her pegasus.

“Quickly, Nicole,” Kindness urged, lifting off into the air too. “The race is about to begin.”

“Time to get out of here.” Pandora hopped back into her saddle.

“Nic!” Invi rushed to me, smudging the line in the sand with his tail. “You need to leave. It’s not safe for you on the ground.”

“If it’s not safe, how about you?”

“I don’t have a body to lose, remember?” With the swing of one arm, he lifted me off the ground then deposited me into the saddle. “Go. Stay safe. I have a race to do.”

I leaned from the saddle to him, catching his gaze.

“Win this thing, Invi. I want you to win.”

A wide grin curved his lips.

“Will do.” He winked, then slapped my pegasus on the rump, making him flap his wings and rise into the air. “Trust me, Nicole dearest, you will be mine.”

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12

Nicole

Holding on to my flying horse with both arms, I somehow managed to steer it to follow Pandora.

Charity and Kindness were way ahead of us already, flying along the wall and around the maze building.

“Where are we going?” I screamed after Pandora, who kept moving up to the top of the wall.

Was I supposed to follow her ? Or the virtues?

Worry buzzed through me. If it was dangerous for us to stay near the opening doors, how would Invi fare down there? Even without a body to lose, one could suffer when faced with danger.

My head was spinning when I tried to look down, and I couldn’t see a thing through the thick black smoke spreading over the ground below.

“What is happening down there?” I asked Pandora, catching up to her.

“Come this way.” Pandora waved for me to follow her over the wall. “It’s a perfect view from here.”

My pegasus lined up with hers, and we hovered over the prolapse in the roof.

“Keep at this height. Don’t get any lower,” Pandora warned. “Things can get nasty inside these walls.”

The exposed section of the maze had high walls constructed from stone and metal. The walls were so high and the space between them so narrow that sunlight didn’t reach the ground between them. Sharp rocks littered the packed ground, and black smoke clung to every turn and corner inside.

“Just how nasty can it get down there?” I asked anxiously.

This whole idea of the race had disturbed me from the beginning. But seeing this dark, sinister place made me realize it also might be extremely dangerous.

Pandora shrugged in reply. “I mean the maze is the gateway to hell, so...not exactly a pleasant place to be.”

“How close is the actual hell here?” A shiver ran across my shoulders, and I clung harder to the warm neck of the pegasus. “Why did we even come here? If you absolutely had to have this stupid race, why not have them run along the creek in the forest or on the road in town?”

“And what would be the fun in that?” Pandora laughed in sync with the kaleidoscope of colors bursting through her shape.

I couldn’t believe how much she was looking forward to this. “Are you really going to have fun while watching your children fight for their lives in this nasty place?”

She tossed a lock of her hair over her shoulder. “Calm down, little human. You’re forgetting that my children are powerful entities, practically immortal, and perfectly

capable of taking care of themselves. Ira is actually the one in charge of the maze. It's his second home. He spends more time here than in his own lair."

"Ira...lives here?" I cast another glance down at the grimy walls and the dark, narrow passages, wondering how anyone would spend a minute here not because they had to but because they wanted to.

On the other hand, with his hooves, his head of a bull, and his state of barely contained rage, Ira actually fit right in there, visually at least.

"He keeps the maze stocked with horrible beasts to torment the sinners for the devils," Pandora explained.

"Are there more than one devil?"

"Of course there are. One wouldn't possibly be able to look after all the circles of hell on his own, not with your world supplying a steady stream of sinners on a daily basis. There is also an entire army of demons to manage and supervise. It's too much work for one being to do it all, no matter how powerful he may be. Hell is huge. The maze is just the very top circle of it—a front hallway, if you will. The actual hell spirals deep under ground. And trust me, it is as ghastly as they say. Let's just hope you'll never see the inside of it."

"How do I make sure that I won't?" I asked, seriously disturbed by the possibility of landing here at any point of my existence.

"Hell is not as hard to avoid as many think. Just try not to mess up majorly in this lifetime, and you'll be fine." Pandora scanned the maze below us. "Oh look!" She pointed down inside of the outer wall. "There is Invi. And the others."

In the gloomy darkness of the maze, the glowing figures of the sins were easy to spot,

even through the thick, black smoke that hugged the walls and the ground. Invi's tail pierced through it like a bright green ribbon shimmering along the passages. Gul and Ira followed close, both currently moving just as fast as my Sin of Envy.

"There are several ways to get through the maze," Pandora explained. "Only one is the shortest, but it's not necessarily the safest. The trick is to figure out which way it is, because the maze doesn't stay the same."

"What do you mean it doesn't?"

"It's not stationary."

Her reply didn't really clarify anything, but I didn't ask again, focusing on what was happening below.

As Invi continued straight, Gul turned off into a passage on the right, and Ira turned left.

"Wouldn't Ira have an advantage over his brothers, since it's his maze and he knows it the best?" I asked.

"Not necessarily, since the maze moves all the time." Pandora twirled a strand of her hair between her fingers. "So, which one is your favorite?" She tipped her chin at the glowing figures that rushed through the passages below.

"I don't have favorites," I said quickly.

"But you do have at least some preference for the winner, don't you? You'll be living in his house, after all."

A tendril of black smoke separated from the wall as Invi was passing by. It stretched,

forming a clawed hand with gnarly fingers that reached for him.

“Watch out!” I screamed, nearly sliding off the saddle in agitation.

Pandora flew in a circle around me. “We’d better take you out of here. You’re way too unsteady in the air.”

I followed her, but my focus remained glued to the green sin below. The gnarly black hand grabbed his tail, yanking him back. He fell to the ground, face down.

One passage over, a massive shape leaped from around the corner on Ira. The Sin of Wrath roared so loud, the walls of the maze shook. The beast that attacked him looked eerily similar to Ira. It had a humanoid shape with the head of a bull, but with no tail and with feet instead of Ira’s hooves.

“A minotaur!” Pandora gasped in awe. “You won’t normally see them anywhere but here in the maze.”

Another beast just like the first one rushed Ira. Their horns locked with a thundering sound that spooked my pegasus. Frantically beating the air with his wings, my mount lurched to the right, shaking me out of the saddle.

“Ahhh!” I screamed, plummeting until the reins yanked at my hand stopping my fall.

I dangled in the air, held only by the reins clutched in my hand, as my pegasus flew around, flapping his wings wildly.

“Nicole!” Pandora called from above, but I couldn’t see her through the cloud of black, pungent smoke rising from the maze.

No, the smoke wasn’t rising, I realized, as a gray rock wall rushed by me—I was

falling.

In a desperate attempt to get free from my weight dragging him down by the reins trapped around his neck, the pegasus jerked to the left, slamming me into the wall so hard, breath rushed out of me in a groan. The reins slipped from my weakened fingers, and I fell into the gaping mouth of the maze.

I braced in horror for the inevitable impact with the sharp rocks and the hard ground below.

Instead, strong arms caught me. The thick green tail coiled around me tightly. I rolled on the ground, but Invi's torso and tail cushioned my fall and kept me safe from the rocks and the walls.

"Invi..." I exhaled.

"You have to get out!" He panted in alarm.

His tail uncoiled like a spring, lifting him above the ground, with only the short, rattled end propped in the dirt.

"Mother!" he shouted, holding me up in his arms. "Get Nic to safety. Now!"

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Pandora's voice filtered through the surrounding smoke. "I'm trying. But it's tight. There is no space for the wings between the walls?—"

The clashing of horns and the roars of minotaurs fighting with Ira nearby drowned the rest of her words.

A growl came from below. Invi jerked suddenly as if something rammed into the lower part of his tail. Like a cut down tree, he tilted and crashed with me in his arms.

With a screeching, deafening sound, the walls of the maze shifted.

“It’s moving.” I gripped Invi’s shoulders in rising panic as our passage grew narrower. “Invi, the maze is moving.”

“Fuck.” Pressing me to his chest, he propelled himself with his tail, sliding over the ground smoothly like a knife through butter.

The smoke around us thinned. But the sky disappeared, too, as we rushed into the covered section of the maze.

With a feral roar, a minotaur ran after us. As he got closer, he dropped to all fours, somehow galloping even faster that way. His bovine mouth opened wide, baring two rows of sharp teeth that belonged to a predator, not a bull.

“Invi, your tail!” I screamed.

The nightmarish beast snapped his teeth, taking out a chunk of Invi’s tail, just above the rattle.

The muscles in Invi’s neck bulged out. He growled, making one final push to propel us out of the disappearing corridor just before its walls slammed closed together.

We fell to the ground, Invi’s tail dropping in coils on top of us. A thick black liquid burst out from between the closed walls, spraying us with the sticky, stinky mess.

“What is this?” I shook my hand, trying to get rid of the stuff.

“The minotaur. All that’s left of him.” Invi pushed from the ground, still clutching me in his arms.

Disgust brought bile up to my throat as the full meaning of his words registered with me. When they had slammed together, the walls of the maze liquified the minotaur monster into the black, foul-smelling goo that was covering my entire arm.

“You can’t be here.” Invi scanned our surroundings quickly, as if expecting more monsters to jump out at us any minute.

With the roof over our heads, it’d be completely dark if it wasn’t for Invi’s glow. The walls had closed all around us, leaving only a narrow passage up ahead.

“You know what?” I tried to wipe the black gore off my arm, but it clung to my skin like tar. “At this point, I’d say you shouldn’t be here, either. This race is fucking dangerous, Invi. This could’ve been us!” I thrust my filthy arm his way with black goo dripping from my fingers.

“You,” he corrected.

“Pardon?”

“This could’ve been you, Nic .” He turned to me, trapping my eyes with his gaze. “You are the one with a mortal body, not me.”

“I’m sorry, but being flattened into a pancake between two stone walls couldn’t possibly be pleasant regardless of whether one has a body or not.”

“It’d be a torture for me,” he agreed. “But I would recover. You, however, my dear, gentle, fragile human... You would be dead.”

I swallowed hard, fighting the heavy ball of dread sinking in my stomach. I’d narrowly avoided being crushed to death with that minotaur in there. Had Invi been just a little slower or that minotaur a little faster... We wouldn’t be talking here right

now.

Invi gently ran his fingers over the hair above my ear. “I came here fully aware of the danger, my darling. But I’m not prepared to put you through this.”

I drew in a long, shaky breath of the stale, musky air. “What are we going to do now? How can we stop the race?”

“We can’t. The maze is closed. The only way out now is by going through it.” A deep frown crossed his features. “Dammit. This was not in the rules!” He slammed his fist into the nearest wall.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t stay in the saddle.” I dropped my shoulders in regret. “Riding a flying horse turned out to be quite different from riding a regular one.”

“It’s not your fault” His voice softened. “I’ll blame myself before I’ll ever blame you. I was the one who brought you to Purgatory in the first place. And for that, I’m deeply sorry.”

This was new to me. The few men I’d dated would’ve seized the opportunity to put the blame on me, even if just to graciously forgive me right after. Invi had made one mistake on impulse, but he had fully accepted his responsibility for it and had apologized more than once already.

“How’s your tail?” I asked. “He bit you pretty hard. Does it hurt?”

Invi lashed his tail over the ground to test it.

“It’s fine,” he said. “We feel pain differently than mortals do. The bite doesn’t bother me at all. We should be going.”

Setting me down next to him, he peered cautiously into the narrow passage ahead of us, which was our only way forward.

“You have a race to win.” I nodded, heading alongside him into the passage as he moved ahead.

“No. I have a mortal body to protect, one that I’ve grown quite fond of and wouldn’t want to see damaged in any way.”

“Oh, you mean this old thing?” I gestured at myself casually. “Getting a new one can be an upgrade,” I quipped in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Yet his expression remained serious.

“Don’t say that. Losing a body is often painful. I don’t want you to suffer. Also...” He gently stroked the side of my face then traced my collarbone with the tip of his finger. “I like this body too much not to mourn its loss greatly. I’m hoping to touch it again in ways that make you whimper and moan in pleasure.”

I got hold of his finger, since his hand was too large for me to hold.

“You have to stop being so charming, Invi, or I’ll beg you to do unspeakable things to this body right here and now, and then where would we be?”

Finally, his features relaxed a little, his lips stretching into a dreamy smile.

“With you naked and in my arms, my dearest Nicole, even this dreadful place would feel better than heaven.”

13

Invi

I had to stop thinking about the sensation of her supple flesh under my palms and about the needy little noises she made with my rattle inside her and my tongue on her breasts. Fucking Nic with my rattle and my fingers had been the most exquisite experience of my entire existence. It had everything to do with her soul, of course. But right now, all I could think about was her body.

A faint rumbling sound reached my ears, and I strained my hearing, trying to figure out what it was.

“Sorry,” Nicole mumbled, placing a hand on her belly. “It must be around lunchtime by now, and my stomach doesn’t know we’re a long way from the teahouse and its kitchen.”

While I was daydreaming about all the ways I’d use her body for our mutual pleasure, I completely forgot that her body needed regular sustenance to function. I felt like slapping myself for that oversight.

“We might be able to find some drinkable water,” I said. “But I strongly advise against eating anything in the maze, even if it appears edible.”

Nicole wrinkled her nose. “Honestly, I have no appetite at all right now. It stinks so bad here.”

I drew in a deep breath and instantly regretted it. The filth of the minotaur's remains still clung to us mixed with the rotten stench of sulfur in the air.

"It's the smell of the sinners, Nic." I scanned the slime-covered walls around us. "They're the ones who make hell the vile place that it is."

"It's disgusting. But you don't smell like that. In fact, your scent is exceptionally nice." She leaned a little closer to me, gripping my finger tighter. "Why do sinners stink, but not the sin?"

"There is a big difference between a sin and a sinner," I said. "My brothers and I are the embodiment of the feelings that you often can't help having. Your kind can hardly go through a lifetime without feeling angry or envious or aroused, which is natural, just like feeling tired or hungry. It's how each person handles those feelings that ultimately may make them a sinner."

I let her ponder my words while I focused my attention on the walls and the slimy black shadows clinging to them. We had no choice but to keep moving this way. There was no need to alarm Nicole yet. She'd been scared enough already. I was happy to distract her with the conversation while I remained vigilant for both of us.

"For example," I said, making an effort to keep my concerns out of my voice. "Have you ever felt envious of someone?"

"Of course I have." She took no time to reply. "Ever since Jessica and I hit puberty, I saw how differently our bodies were changing. Hers turned into that of a beauty queen. And mine...well, let's just say I never danced in a string bikini at a pool party and never will." She shrugged.

The importance that humans placed on the appearance of their bodies never made any logical sense to me. With time, I simply learned to accept it as one of the many

peculiar quirks their souls had when inhabiting the mortal world. I could only compare it to the pleasure my brother Sup derived from every article of clothing he had or the satisfaction my brother Avar felt from owning literally anything.

“But what did you do when you felt envious of your friend?” I asked, carefully steering her away from a bulging shadow on the wall as we passed by. “Did you say anything to make her feel inadequate? Did you derive pleasure in eroding her confidence? Did you try to harm her in order to feel better about your own perceived inadequacies?”

“What? Of course not,” she bristled, indignantly. “In fact, if anyone tried to do those things to Jess, I’d punch them in the throat.”

I chuckled at the vigor of my feisty avenger.

“And that’s why you’ll never stink like the sinners in here, my darling. You’d be disgusted to learn what some of them have done to other human beings out of envy. From the moment I met you, I knew your soul must be one of the most fragrant ever.”

“Because I would punch people in the throat?” she teased.

“Because you laugh freely, as a soul unburdened by the vile parts of sins.”

She glanced up at me. “I believe I’ve grown to enjoy some parts of one particular sin a little too much lately.”

Warmth pulsed in my chest at those words and that glance. The joy I felt in her company was incomparable to anything else. I had to have her, even if it took an eternity to win her heart.

But first, I had to protect her.

A thick, black tendril slithered along the wall like a snake. It lashed out, reaching for her.

“Stay back, Nic!” I grabbed her in my arms, snatching her away from the filthy soul of a damned one.

She cried out in shock, clinging to my neck.

“What is that thing?” She glared back at the wall.

The soul flattened itself against the rock once again, becoming nothing but a stain.

“Just someone on their way to hell, dearest.” I tried to keep fear out of my voice, but it wasn’t easy.

Fear I’d never experienced before rolled through me in sickening spasms. For the first time in my existence, I fully realized how devastatingly fragile a mortal body was and how much pain and suffering it could cause to the soul inside it—to my Nic.

“What do they want with me?” she asked.

To drag you down along with them.

But I couldn’t tell her that. She seemed terrified enough already.

“Just ignore them,” I said. “Try to keep as far away as possible from the walls. In fact, I’ll carry you from here on.”

I settled her more comfortably in the crook of my arm, and she didn’t protest, keeping an arm around my neck.

“How long do you think it’ll take us to get out of here?” she asked in a subdued voice. Despite my best efforts, she was afraid.

“I’m not sure. I can sense where the exit is, but I don’t know how many turns and passages it will take for us to get there, especially since the maze has shifted.”

“Well, at least you have the sense of direction. Because I have nothing. I’m not even entirely sure where the floor and the ceiling here are. If you told me the maze flipped upside down and we’re walking on the roof now, I’d believe you. I’d be so lost without you.” She picked up a lock of my hair and wound it around her finger. “You’re not allowed to part from me, Invi,” she said softly.

“I’m not intending to. Ever.”

I held my breath, waiting for her to remind me that she was leaving when Avar returned to Purgatory. But she just hugged my neck tighter with a sigh.

After taking a few turns, following one endless corridor after another, I tried to estimate how long we’d been in the maze already. It definitely must be past lunchtime. Probably close to dinnertime soon. A human could survive without food for a while, but they wouldn’t last long without water.

There was some groundwater in the maze, but we’d have to descend to the level below to find it, which meant making a detour and risking losing any lead I might have over my brothers.

As if sensing my thoughts, Nic asked, “Do you think your brothers are okay? I lost Gul out of sight quickly. But I saw Ira fighting minotaurs before I fell.”

“My brothers will be fine. They’re immortal, remember? The worst that can happen to them is that the souls of the damned would drag them to hell.”

Her eyes opened wider. “And what happens then?”

“They’ll have to find their way back up if the demons let them. Meanwhile,” I smiled, “I’ll win.”

“Are you sure you’ll win this thing?”

“I have no choice. I have to win. And I have my eyes on the prize.” I held her gaze until she laughed.

The ground trembled. The screeching sound of walls moving announced that the maze was being rearranged once again.

“Oh, shit.” Nicole tensed in trepidation.

This time, however, instead of closing in on us, the walls of the passage shifted away from each other, making the space wider. Several more walls appeared up ahead of us. They formed three different corridors for us to turn into. All three seemed equally dark and menacing.

“Where to now?” Nic asked.

I tried to orient myself in the new surroundings. “Just a minute, dearest. The maze is still moving.”

She glanced behind me over my shoulder.

“Um, Invi...” Her voice dropped to a half-whisper. “What the hell is that? ”

I whipped around to face a giant head rising from the ground. It had more horns than Avar. They spiked and curved in every direction. Two tusks grew out on each side of

the monster's snout, making his bovine head look more like that of a boar.

What the hell, indeed?

Instead of the shoulders, the shadows on the ground formed a pair of long, grimy tentacles. A few more sprouted, lashing against the floor and the walls with splatters of inky black mud.

The abomination's mouth opened with a revolting, deafening screech, bearing two rows of sharp gray teeth.

"Oh, my God..." Nic whimpered, digging her fingers into my shoulder.

The maze was still moving, the screeching of its shifting walls echoed through the three passages in front of us. I scanned them again, listening for my senses to tell me which one would be the shortest way to the exit.

But there was no more time to wait.

The creature behind us lurched forward, its tentacles undulating under it like a giant ball of rolling mud.

Fuck it.

Uncoiling my tail to propel me forward, I leaped into the passage on the right.

The nightmare behind us screeched, groaned, and cried in a thousand voices, each more terrifying than the one before it.

"It's after us," Nic informed me, sounding tense but calmer than I would've expected.

I felt the creature. Its presence scraped against my senses like a cold, foul claw. One of its tentacles slapped against my tail. The contact sent a paralyzing arrow of pain through my system, making me lurch to the side. I hit a wall with my shoulder.

Nic cried out in horror.

Shoving away from the wall, I kept going, unable to even think about what would happen to us both if that thing caught up with us.

The passage ended suddenly in a cliff, with a river running deep below. Without Nic in my arms, I could've possibly pushed off with my tail hard enough to leap onto the other side of the cliff. Then I could've stretched my tail for her to cross over too. But leaving her here alone, even for a moment, with the terrifying monster from hell was unthinkable.

"We'll dive." I moved to the edge.

"Are you sure?" Nic looked over her shoulder and into the gorge below.

"Hold your breath—" was all I managed to say to her.

The monster leaped, and so did I.

The dark water closed over us. And for one blissful moment, the repulsive sensation of the creature's presence in my head eased. Then a splash rippled through the water, and the disturbing invasion slammed into me anew.

Holding Nicole to me with one arm, I used the other arm and the tail to propel us to the surface for her to draw a breath.

She blew the water out of her nose and gasped for air. I didn't need her to speak to

know she saw the creature swimming after us. Nic didn't say a word, but her body remained tense and her eyes wide open as she stared over my shoulder.

A wall rose in the path of the stream. The river ran under it, with no more air for Nic to breathe.

"Take a deep breath and hold it," I instructed.

She did as she was told, without questions. Not knowing how long the stream would remain underground, I drew in a full chest of air too.

As we dove then swam in the dark water underground, I counted the seconds in my head, but I couldn't remember how long a human could live without air.

A convulsion ran through Nic's body, and I nearly panicked, ready to crash through the rock, the wall, and the hell below, just to keep her alive.

Cradling her head in my hand, I placed my parted lips on hers and allowed her to breathe the air I had kept for her.

I had no lungs, no heart, no muscle tissue, or any blood vessels. But my form and functions were created to mimic a human body—with a heartbeat, breathing, and a pulse. I could eat if I wanted. I could breathe. But I didn't need to do any of that to exist. Nic did.

She gripped handfuls of my hair in her fists, keeping me close, and breathed. My smart woman drew air in small, measured breaths, mindful of making it last. I just hoped that the river tunnel ended before I ran out of air too.

The creature behind us was getting closer. The water was saturated with its presence. The black tentacles splayed, like ink, choking out my glow and plunging us in nearly

complete darkness.

Nic closed her eyes, held on to me, and breathed, just breathed. What a good girl she was. I wished I could tell her that, to comfort her somehow. But I had to focus to keep her alive.

I pushed harder, working my tail to keep moving and to stay ahead from the hellish creature. Its darkness seemed to fall back, giving space for my glow to spread. The tunnel's roof above us rose higher, allowing for a sliver of air above the water surface.

I lifted Nic with her face above water, letting her take a breath freely.

"Invi? Are you okay?" Fighting for air, she worried about me.

"I'm fine, sweetheart. What can possibly happen to a sin?"

She angled her head to take a look behind us. I kept swimming with the same speed as before, but the distance between us and the creature was growing.

"He's...falling behind," she said in a halting voice as she kept working on her breathing.

"The tunnel is ending." I gestured up at the ceiling that was rising higher and higher, widening the tunnel into a riverbed once again.

A little further down the stream, the riverbank widened into a flat rock platform on our right. The creature was no longer pursuing us. I couldn't see it, no matter how hard I tried. More importantly, I couldn't catch even a trace of its rotten presence in the water anymore.

“It’s safe for us to get out now,” I said, taking a course toward the flat platform on our right.

14

Nicole

Invi helped me climb out of the water, then quickly inspected the area to make sure it was safe.

The underground stream was body temperature. The air wasn't cold either. But without the sun, I felt the chill in my wet clothes acutely.

Shaking, I hugged my arms.

"Is he really gone?" I asked cautiously, not taking my eyes off the river while half-expecting that thing to show up again.

"I believe he is," Invi assured me. "The beasts are sometimes confined to one section of the maze. Once we left his section, he couldn't follow. I can't sense him at all now." He scooped the water from the river in his hand and took a drink. "It's safe to drink, Nic, if you're thirsty."

I didn't wait for him to offer it twice. Kneeling on the rocky riverbank, I drank the tepid water from the river greedily.

Once the thirst was gone, fear returned.

"Can there be other monsters in here?" I glanced around, scanning every little rock and shadow for hidden dangers.

“You mean other than me?” Invi smiled.

It took me a moment to understand the meaning of what he said because I no longer viewed Invi as a monster.

“I was so stupid to ever fear you,” I admitted.

“I’m just glad you don’t anymore.” He gently lifted my hair off my shoulders and squeezed the water out.

“What was that thing that chased us? I’ve never seen anything so...repulsive.” I shuddered in disgust.

“I honestly don’t know,” he said. “I’ve never seen anything like it before, either. It appears to have started out as a minotaur, but then something went wrong with its design.”

“Who made it?”

“Probably Ira. He has a creative streak in him, and making all these creatures provides an outlet for his anger. He populates the maze with all possible kinds of nightmares.” He glanced up the stream, making sure the beast indeed was gone. “He might’ve thrown this one in here on purpose, to slow Gul and me down and allow him to win.”

If it wasn’t for Invi’s quick thinking in the river, there’d be no prize to win. I would’ve suffocated in the tunnel. Just in the past few hours, Invi had saved my life more than once. But he wasn’t safe either, and I worried for him even more than for myself.

“The mortal sins are worse than men to each other,” I said. “Siblings' rivalry between

you is out of control. Ira could've killed you with his beasts—your own brother.”

“I can't die, Nic.”

But I wouldn't have it. Thinking about Invi getting hurt made me sick to my stomach. Even if the maze couldn't kill him, he didn't deserve to suffer.

“You could've been hurt, trapped, or sent down to the actual hell.” I took a step closer, needing to touch him if just to reassure myself that he was indeed safe and sound after literally shaking a few monsters off his tail.

He ran a hand down my back and over my soaked skirts. “You're cold. We have to get you out of these clothes.”

“Do we now?” I smiled, which would've been flirtatious if my teeth didn't chatter so much.

He chuckled at my clumsy attempt at sexy teasing. “Let me wring out your dress before you catch a cold.”

I lifted my arms for him to slide my dress off over my head, leaving me only in my bra and panties.

Acting quickly and efficiently, he wrung the water out of the delicate fabric, then laid it out on the nearby rock.

“It won't fully dry.” He straightened out the skirts over the rock. “But it'll get a little bit drier by the time we'll figure out where to go next.”

“How are we going to figure it out?”

He turned back to me and paused, taking in my half-naked, shivering figure.

“Come here. Let me keep you warm.” He took me in his arms.

His tail coiled around my legs, sharing his shimmering warmth with me.

“It’s nice.” I leaned into his chest, savoring his closeness. “How do you stay so warm?”

He shrugged. “It’s a sin thing, I guess. Isn’t there a saying in your world ‘Hot like sin?’”

I laughed. “I don’t think that saying refers to the body temperature. But if it does...” I snuggled closer, “lucky me.”

He kissed my hair. “It’s me who’s lucky. Lucky to have found you.”

Was it luck or fate that led me to him? Still a little while ago, I would’ve called meeting him a misfortune.

“We may have to stay here for some time, Nic,” he said.

“Why? Is something wrong?”

“The river is flowing away from the exit from the maze. If we keep following it, we’ll keep descending when we need to go up. If we swim back up the stream, we’d return into that bull-octopus-spider abomination’s territory again.”

“Oh please, no.” I cringed. “Anything but that.”

“I whole-heartedly agree with you. But there is no other exit from here right now. I

think we should wait until the maze moves again and hopefully opens another passage for us.”

“How big is the chance of that happening?”

“The maze is built to be used. The isolated pockets of space like this one are rare and happen only temporarily. It’s safe to assume one passage or more will open up with the next move.”

“Okay, we can wait. I trust you.”

He kept his eyes on mine for a moment.

“You do?”

Things had changed since when I first woke up in Purgatory. I’d been steadily running out of reasons to doubt Invi as he kept proving himself to me over and over again.

“You care about me,” I said. “You saved my life out there. I know how little the spirits in Purgatory care about having a body, but you do, simply because it’s important to me. I trust you, Invi. I trust you with my life.”

“Will you also trust me with your heart?” he asked tentatively.

I glanced away quickly, unsure if I could take the intensity in his gaze.

“Maybe on a trial basis, for now?” I smiled. “To see how it goes?”

“I’ll take it on any terms.” He grinned so wide, as if I’d already agreed to marry him.

It was hard to jump in like this, even on a trial basis. So many things could go wrong. How did one ever try to have any kind of a relationship with a mortal sin personified? But when he held me like this, I felt warm and cozy in his arms, safe and happy. And everything seemed possible.

“You know what? I don’t care who wins today,” I said softly, sliding my hands up to his shoulders. “I just want to stay with you for however long I have in Purgatory. I want to sleep in your bed with the white curtains and wake up to the butterflies fluttering around. I want to have breakfast with you under the willow tree, surrounded by the calla lilies that smell like jasmine. And one night, I still hope to see your two dicks that you’re yet to show me.”

He snorted a laugh, nuzzling the top of my head.

“It’s impossible to be sad or upset for long with you around, Nic. Your spirit is a true ray of sunshine, capable of defeating any darkness, no matter how grim or desolate.”

“I’ve heard that before. Only in a far less flowery language. And from friends, not from someone I was interested in romantically.”

“Oh, I’m very, very interested in you romantically.” He slid a finger along the strap of my bra, then lifted it with a frown. “Your undergarments are also wet.”

“They sure are,” I wiggled my bum. “More than you realize.”

There I was, flirting again. I was so not good at it, but Invi didn’t make me feel bad or embarrassed about that, and it was easy to be everything I wanted to be with him, both sexy and silly.

“We’d better take them all off then.” He matched my tone, unclipping my bra.

“Only if you get naked too.”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. “I’m always naked, my dear. I hardly ever wear clothes.”

“Not wearing clothes doesn’t mean being completely naked in your case,” I teased. “I still haven’t seen it all, have I?”

I reached up, cupping his face for a moment before stroking his horn. Pink sparks shot through his shape from where I touched his horn, and I loved how visual Invi’s arousal was.

“Nic.” A warning note sounded in his voice.

“I know what I’m doing, Invi. I want you horny, my sweet, hot sin.” I circled his horn, sliding my hand up and down its spiral.

He moaned, rolling his shoulders back.

“You don’t like it?” I asked innocently. “Then tell me to stop.”

“You’re such a little vixen,” he groaned.

Loosening the coils of his tail from around us, he spread them wider over the ground, then placed me over them.

“Well, these are certainly coming off now.” He slid my panties off, then tossed them on the rock next to my dress.

He leaned over me, licking his lips with the most adorable expression of anticipation, but I closed my legs so fast, my thighs slapped against each other.

“Nope. Not until I see them .”

Propped on his arms over me, he dropped his head between his shoulders.

“Be careful what you’re asking for, sweetheart. You tempting me may end up with you being thoroughly fucked.”

“I’m sorry. Did I not make it clear?” I batted my eyelashes at him before reaching to stroke his horns again. “That’s exactly what I’m hoping for.”

“Fuck,” he growled, but didn’t move away. Instead, he tilted his head into my caress. “It feels so fucking good, Nic. I’ve forgotten how good it can feel.”

“I guess there was no time for this during that night of three-hundred-and-fifty souls, was there?”

“Will you ever forget about that night?” He winced.

“How could I?” I smiled. “It’s an achievement, honey. And all achievements should be celebrated, no?”

He cupped my breast, sliding his thumb over my hardened nipple. I arched my back with a moan, and Invi smirked.

“I’ll make you forget, my dear Nicole. I’ll fuck you so hard, you’ll forget your own name.”

“Promise?” I quipped, making him chuckle.

“You got your way, bold little wench.” Pushing away, he straightened his back and placed his hands on his hips.

Arousal rippled through him in pink swells. The squares of his abdomen flexed. The outline of the lowest pair of them wavered, then split low in the bottom.

A massive cock sprang out, hard and straining. It seemed bloated in the middle, with round little bumps dotting its entire length. It leaned to the right, as the second one, identical to the first one, emerged leaning to the left.

“There really are two,” I gasped in disbelief.

Knowing that fact beforehand didn’t fully prepare me for this sight. Each of the cocks was thicker and longer than my forearm.

Invi inhaled, stretching his back. His magnificent dicks bobbed in the air, turning from green to the most vibrant magenta. I reached to stroke them both.

“How does it work? Do you come from both of them at once? Or from one at a time?”

“I feel climax with my entire body, darling. For a spirit, sex is not for procreation but for pleasure. And pleasure is everywhere... Nic, please...” He dropped forward, propping himself on his outstretched arms as I kept touching and squeezing his double equipment. “You have to slow down, or I...”

He thrust his hips into me, making me lose my grip on his cocks.

“I want to see you come, Invi. Can I keep touching you, please?”

“I’m not coming alone, sweetheart. You’re coming with me.”

“Except that neither of these will ever fit in me. Forget about both at once.” I sighed, disheartened.

“I’ll make it fit.” He grinned. “Which one do you want? The left or the right one?”

I bit my lip, eyeing his cocks.

“It’s hard to choose. They both are so perfect. Well, let’s start with the left one. What do you think?”

“The left one it is then.” He stroked his cock, and it shrank in his hand, both in girth and length. “How small do you want it?” He stroked again, making it even smaller.

“Wait.” I stopped him mid-stroke. “Let’s not overdo it. May I?” I took it from him.

The appendage was harder than the rest of Invi’s shape, but it still had a pleasant give when I squeezed it lightly.

Invi used the moment to slide his hand between my thighs.

“If you’re playing with me, let me play with you too,” he murmured, circling my clit with his finger.

Desire swirled through me, and I shifted my legs open for him.

“That’s a good girl,” he said softly, slipping a finger inside me. “Look at you, hot and wet for me already.”

When it came to Invi, it proved easy for me to be ready for him because even his casual touch often felt like a foreplay—gentle and caring.

He dragged a tongue over my nipple, sending another rush of excitement through my body.

“Oh, Invi...” I writhed under him as he pumped his finger in and out of me, with his thumb dancing on my clit. I feared I might not last long. “Now, please,” I panted. “I want you inside me, now.”

His finger slipped away, and the thick crown of his left cock pressed against my opening.

“Are you ready to take me, sweetheart?”

I nodded, my inner muscles clenching in anticipation.

He slipped in slowly, pushing in at a steady rate. My body stretched around him, straining to accommodate his still sizable girth. Maybe I should’ve let him make it a little smaller, after all. But the pressure added a new layer of pleasure too, with the hard bumps on his cock tugging at the edge of my opening before sliding in to rub inside me.

“Oh, it’s so good,” I moaned as he paused, giving me a moment to adjust. “You feel fantastic inside me, Invi.”

He groaned in approval, pushing just a little further before sliding back a notch.

The faint buzzing of his rattle came with a gentle vibration against my thigh. Excitement bubbled through me, and my arousal spiked when the rattle touched my clit.

“Ahhh...” I gripped his arms as he pumped into me in earnest.

The power of his thrusts contrasted with the gentle vibration of his rattle, resulting in the most exquisite sensation. I could no longer keep the pleasure at bay. It took over me completely. I forgot where I was or how I got there. I forgot my own name. But I

remembered his.

“Invi—” I panted, before the orgasm cut off my voice, and pleasure was all that remained.

He pumped once more with a strangled growl. The pink ripples ran from his groin outwards, blending with the emerald green and the brilliant gold like the most spectacular fireworks. Rings of light and color rolled up and down his long tail, casting multi-colored glow on the walls of this dreadful place, making it beautiful.

“Invi.” I took his face between my hands. “You are the most fantastic, stunning being I’ve ever seen.”

“My sweet, darling Nic...” Catching his breath, he peppered my face with quick, tender kisses. “What we share, dearest... It’s bigger than me. Bigger than anything.” His arms shook, and he collapsed over me, hugging my legs.

“It’s okay, darling,” I whispered soothingly, running my fingers through his long, silky hair. “It’s all good. We’ll take it one day at the time. One wonderful day after another.”

I smiled as tenderness flooded my chest in a warm wave.

Here, in the gateway to hell, I felt happy. And it was all because of him. Invi might be the actual mortal sin but with me, he’s always been kind and gentle. He had a good, kind, reliable spirit that I would’ve cherished if found in a human.

He stilled, hugging me tightly, and I wondered if he felt it too, our connection.

Playing with his silky strands, I realized that my sorrow from the thought of ever leaving him had grown greater than even the sense of duty to return home.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:25 am

15

Nicole

Warm and comfortable, I must've dozed off.

A screeching noise yanked me out of sleep. The maze shook. The water in the river bubbled and smoked.

Invi sprung up. The ground under us bulged out, unraveling the coils of his tail. I slipped off to the floor.

A wall rose between us.

"Invi!" I screamed, struck by panic. The horror of being left alone in the maze sent me to my feet. I clawed at the rising wall, breaking my nails, but it was already too tall for me to climb over.

"Nic!" He grabbed onto the top edge of the wall, risking his head being crushed as the wall neared the ceiling.

His tail lashed over the wall, scooped me from the ground, and dragged me over to his side. Reaching its full height, the wall slammed into the ceiling with a crashing noise and a cloud of rock dust just as Invi and I fell to the floor, both on the same side.

Invi landed on his back, with me dropping on top of him.

“Invi.” I climbed up his torso and hugged his neck. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. You?”

I buried my face in his shoulder. “Don’t you ever, ever leave me.”

He wrapped his arms around me tightly.

“Never,” he vowed.

I couldn’t imagine being left here without him. I would never find a way out of here on my own. I simply wouldn’t survive. But it went further than that. I no longer wanted to be without him even beyond the maze, even in the world where I lived.

“Let’s go,” I urged, climbing to my feet. “Let’s get out of here and win this damn thing.”

My clothes were left on the other side of the new wall. They were blocked away from us now, with no way of getting them back. I had nothing but my sandals on my feet. But I didn’t care. I’d do this naked if I had to, as long as Invi was with me.

Holding my hand, he rose from the ground and looked around, searching with his senses for the right direction for us to move.

“This way.” He pointed at one of the several corridors that had opened all around us this time.

I headed that way, walking alongside him, but he lifted me in his arms again.

“It’s safer this way,” he explained.

I didn't object. The scare I got when we got separated had rattled my nerves. The closer I was to him now, the better I felt. Besides, he moved faster than I could walk, which meant we'd be out of here sooner, and I was so ready to leave this damn maze.

"It's not far now," Invi assured me, as if sensing my mood.

He sounded calm, but I noticed how alert he was, scanning the walls carefully. The black stains on the dark gray walls appeared to move. Some undulated along the stone surface by spreading out then contracting again. Others bulged out of the rock, forming knobs and tendrils.

A faint humming vibrated through the air. At first, I dismissed it as background noise. After a while, however, words formed in the humming.

"Come..."

"Come with me..."

"Help me..."

"Do you hear it?" I asked Invi.

With his mouth pressed into a firm line, he nodded. "Just ignore it the best you can."

The stench of sulfur grew stronger, making it harder to breathe. The air seemed warmer, too, sweat slicked my hair around my face and trickled down my neck in a thin, chilling rivulet.

Black smoke seeped from the walls, blending with the stains and the shadows. An impenetrable darkness moved in the same direction as we did, slithering along the walls in tendrils and gathering under the ceiling in drips.

“Come with me!” A clawed hand reached out from the smoke, grabbing my foot.

I screamed and kicked it away.

Another hand pulled at my hair.

“Fuck off!” Invi punched it, and it retreated into a puff of smoke.

“What are these?” I hugged my arm, barely evading another clawed shadow.

“These are the souls of the damned on their way to where they belong.” Invi punched another dark spirit out of our way.

He lashed his tail from wall to wall, shaking off the souls of the sinners that tried to cling to him.

“Come, come, come with me....” The words rustled from all around us.

“Why do they want us to come along?”

“They’re frightened,” Invi explained. “It’s always scary to face the consequences of one’s actions, especially when one is completely alone.”

The wall on the right up ahead had caved in. The space beyond it was pitch dark with waves of smoke and heat blasting out of it.

“Is that...hell?” I swallowed hard.

“No. Just a passage into it,” Invi replied.

The dark spirits moaned in horror, as the gaping hole sucked them in. They rushed

down the corridor from both directions, then disappeared into the open mouth of darkness.

“No! No! No!” they bemoaned their faith.

“Don’t let it take me.”

“Hold me.”

“Stop me.”

Long, gnarly fingers clawed at Invi and me, pulling us forward.

“Nic, listen to me carefully.” Invi held me with both arms, while punching and shoving the sinners away from us with his tail. “There is no way around this. We have to go past it. We’ll have to make a run for it. If we get separated?—”

“We won’t.” I shifted in his arms to hug his neck tighter, then hooked my legs around his chest. “I won’t let them separate us.”

He smiled and placed a quick kiss on my cheek.

“No matter what happens,” he said. “You run, alright? Run past the dark passage and don’t look back. The exit is close. If the corridor forks up ahead, you should be able to see the outside light at the end of at least one of the corridors. Do you hear me?”

I nodded. “We’ll be fine. We’ll stay together.”

“Nicole.” He dipped his head to see my eyes and get my full attention. “You will not survive hell. If they drag you in, you’ll be cremated alive. Do you understand? No matter what happens to me, you’ll have to keep on running.”

“Come with me!” a spirit screeched, grabbing Invi’s hair.

“Come!” Another one pulled his arm, prying it away from me.

He punched the dark spirit away, then angled his head down, thrusting his horns forward.

“Let’s go.” He moved ahead.

The black smoke curled all around us. Dark shapes leaped out from it, grabbing on to Invi and pulling, pulling, pulling him toward the darkness of hell.

I wanted to close my eyes and hide my face in his chest, to pretend that none of it was happening.

A claw scraped my arm, searing my skin with pain. But it drew no blood. It hardly even left a scratch. Another thin hand with knobby knuckles grabbed for me, but its claws slipped from my skin as if it was oiled and slippery.

As the dark spirits held Invi, dragging him to the gaping mouth of the passage, their claws, teeth, and hands seemed to be unable to get a purchase on me.

The black smoke curled around my ankles and wrists. The pungent stench invaded my nostrils. The shadows shrieked and moaned, their tendrils sifting through my hair and grabbing for my limbs, but their fingers slipped off without locking.

“Nic, you have to run,” Invi ordered.

His shape had almost completely drowned in shadows. He propped his tail against one side of the dark passage while holding on to another as the spirits pulled and shoved him towards the all-consuming scorching heat of hell.

With his other arm, he sat me down.

“Run, sweetheart.”

“Not without you.” I shook my head so hard, it was a miracle my neck didn’t snap.

The shadows tightened around him like chains. I tore at them with my hands, ripping them to shreds, only for the new ones to curl around him right after. Bracing my heels into the ground, I clung to his arm.

He tensed. The muscles in his neck and arms bulged out as he strained to hold on to the walls against the impossible pull of the damned.

A blast of heat from the depths of the passage blew back my hair.

“Go, Nic,” he pleaded. “See? They can’t drag you in with them. Because you don’t belong in hell. But you will be taken in with me if you don’t let go of me. Let me go.”

“Never.” I punched the closest ghostly shape, then another one. “Remember? We stay together.” I kicked another dark soul, sending it into the abyss of hell with a moan.

I’d never kicked or punched anyone in my life. But now, I was throwing both kicks and punches right and left, fighting the shadows.

“Go to hell! Let him be!”

With both arms free, Invi got a better hold of the crumbling wall, but the darkness had already claimed his tail, pulling it into the passage. I took a step after it but quickly shrank back.

“Fucking hot.” I whipped the sweat off my brow.

A screeching spirit flew by, then grabbed onto Invi's shoulder. "Come with me!"

"No! He's mine." I slammed a fist into the dark shape, knocking it off Invi and into the whirlwind of the damned that spiraled down the passage to hell. "Come on, my love," I pleaded with Invi. "Try just a little bit harder."

A convulsion ran through his entire being as he tried to free his tail. Baring his teeth, he strained his arms and shoulders, pulling himself out of the tunnel to hell. I kept shoving and punching the spirits off his torso, as far as I could reach into the passage without boiling alive.

His tail flew out of the tunnel with so much power, it lashed against the opposite wall, shaking off the spirits that clung to it like mud.

"Come." I grabbed him under his arm, pulling him away. "Move, please."

Using his hands and his tail, he crawled along the floor under the hurricane of dark smoke and shadows.

"Almost there, Invi," I urged, brushing off the hands and claws reaching for him. "We're almost there, baby."

When the storm of heat and darkness was finally left behind us, he dropped to the ground, exhausted, and grabbed for me.

"Nic?"

"I'm here." I kneeled at his side.

He hooked his arm around my waist and pulled me in for a kiss.

“Did you call me your love, back there?” he grinned, and I slapped his arm.

“Is that all you remember from your fight with the forces of hell?”

“It was the best part, for sure.” Smiling wide, he pushed from the floor with his hands and rose above the ground, propped on his tail. “All right, dearest, let’s finish this.”

I stumbled alongside him, going down yet another long corridor. My knees shook, and my feet seemed to forget how to walk from exhaustion. But Invi could hardly move himself. He didn’t need the added strain of carrying me.

“Look, there.” I pointed at the end of the corridor as we turned around a corner. The glow of the setting sun colored the ugly walls of the maze with warm burgundy and gold. “It’s over, Invi.” I exhaled with relief, speeding up the best I could.

Several adjacent corridors led to a small plaza outside the exit with a crowd of multi-colored souls gathered around it. A few hundred spirits joined Pandora and the two virtues. Shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow, the crowd cheered, spotting us on our way out.

As Invi and I approached the exit, a large, yellow shape rolled out of one of the corridors and onto the crowded plaza, barely a step ahead of us.

“What a fucking vile place that is!” Gul climbed to his feet, shaking out his fur. Glancing over his shoulder at Invi and me behind him, he grinned ear to ear. “I won!”

My heart dropped into my stomach.

We were too late. After all we’d been through, we still lost.

“No.” Invi grabbed for me, but Gul was faster.

Snatching me, he raised me over his head like a trophy.

“I won! She’s mine.” He turned me in his hands, giving me a quick inspection. “Just look at you, completely naked and so delightfully dirty. The maze is a grimy place, isn’t it? You must be very hungry too. Do you know what that means?”

I didn’t want to guess what that meant. My head was spinning as he turned and tossed me around like a doll. It was all I could do not to throw up.

“It means I’ll feed you and give you a bath.” He lifted a strand of my matted hair with a wide smile that looked more like a scowl because of his long tusks. “I’ll finally get a chance to use all those bath soaps I have. A mortal body is such a neat thing to have?—”

“She’s mine!” Invi roared, charging Gul.

“Hey!” Gul moved me under his arm and out of Invi’s reach. “I won her, fair and square.”

He lowered his head, meeting Invi’s next attack with his thick, curved horns.

“Now, boys,” Pandora clapped her hands, stepping between them. “The rules are that the winner gets the prize. If Gul is the winner, the human is his to do with as he pleases.”

“But I don’t want to be his!” I yelled from under Gul’s arm, kicking my feet. “Can I not make decisions about my future here?”

“I’m sorry, but that wasn’t in the rules.” Pandora waved a hand, muttering something under her breath.

Invi lunged at Gul again but crashed into an invisible wall this time, his tail lashing against it.

“Fuck!” he yelled, slamming his fists into the invisible barrier separating us. “Mother, remove the ward, now! Stop meddling.”

“Oh, but who will keep you boys in check if I do?” she cooed. “Without me, you never follow any rules at all. Well, it appears Ira didn’t make it. Which leaves just the two of you, and Gul was here first. We all saw it, right?” She turned around to the crowd, and they clapped in support. “Gul is the winner,” Pandora announced cheerfully.

Gul pressed me to his chest, and I found myself drowning in his thick, golden fur as he took me away.

I jerked my head back, spitting out the fur. “Let me go!”

“Don’t worry, little dumpling. I’ll take good care of you.” Gul petted my head. “What would you like for dinner tonight? I have veal pelmeni with sour cream and black pepper. Or how about Beef Wellington? It’s often a favorite with mortals. You’re not a vegetarian, are you?” He winced. “It’d put some limitations, but I can work with that. Do you have any other...um, what’s that word that humans use?” He snapped his fingers, his long claws clicking against each other. “Dietary restrictions?”

“Nic, I’ll free you!” Invi’s voice reached me from behind. “No matter what, I will.”

“Invi!” I pushed away from the wide furry chest, but Gul held me firmly.

“Forget about him,” he murmured. “No one can feed you better than I can. I’ll wash your hair and find you some cute clothes to wear. We’ll have so much fun together. You’ll love it.”

16

Nicole

Loud music blasted from outside through the multiple sets of open patio doors. Groups of souls mingled around Gul's spacious living room. Coming and going. Getting drinks and snacks. Chatting and making out.

Dressed in a long white bathrobe and a pair of fur slippers, I sat alone on the big, plush couch, hugging my knees to my chest.

Instead of Gul giving me a bath after the race, I had a quick shower in one of the many guest rooms in his huge farmhouse in the middle of a sunflower field. He was clearly hurt and disappointed when I refused to take a bath in the huge tub in his personal ensuite off his equally huge bedroom. He looked even more offended when I locked him out of the guest bathroom to take a shower alone.

I would've stayed in the guest bedroom for the rest of the night if a bunch of souls hadn't barged in, kissing and laughing. They quickly took over the bed, inviting me to join them, but I graciously declined, left the bedroom, and had been sitting on this couch ever since.

Gul stomped in from the kitchen, carrying a steaming mug wrapped in a checkered towel.

"There you are." He grinned, plopping on the couch next to me. "You haven't eaten anything, which is not good for your body." He placed the mug on his knee and

stirred its contents with a painted wooden spoon, then brought a spoonful to my mouth. “Here. It’s chicken broth. Really good for mortals.”

“I’m not hungry,” I said, wishing I could just fall through this couch underground somewhere, so he would finally leave me alone.

A kissing couple of guests blocked from my view the Korean drama playing on the huge TV set that everyone called “the magical viewing box.” And now, I couldn’t even pretend that I was watching the TV because it would seem like I was staring at the couple making out, like a pervert.

“You need to eat,” Gul insisted, trying to pry my lips open with the spoon of broth.

The appetizing scent of broth tickled my nostrils, making my mouth water. I realized I was starving. I hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast that morning before the race. But I refused to be fed by him and jerked my head away.

“I’ll eat. But by myself.” I pursed my lips defensively.

“Must you be like this?” Gul growled with disappointment, dropping the spoon into the mug. “Why do you deny me the pleasure of taking care of you?”

“Why do you think I care about your pleasure? I don’t want to be taken care of by you. I’m perfectly capable of eating on my own.” I grabbed the mug from his knee and drank the broth straight from it in small sips so as not to burn my mouth. “Ooh, this is good,” I moaned as the fragrant, golden broth filled my empty stomach with warmth.

“It is, isn’t it?” Gul perked up. “I put a little miso paste in it for that umami taste and a fresh fennel root. Fennel root gives an excellent flavor to the chicken soup. Not enough people know it, sadly. You should try my pelmeni next, and the cream puffs

for dessert. You know what? We should make a brandy glaze for them. After you're done with the broth, let's go to the kitchen and?—"

I lifted a finger, stopping his tirade.

"Just to be clear, Gul, I'm not interested in doing anything with you. You're right, I need to eat to stay alive. But I'll make my own food. We're not hanging out together, not cooking anything, and not sharing baths."

Crossing his massive arms over his furry, barrel-shaped chest, he sat back on the couch, sulking.

"What did he do that I can't?" he rumbled, grumpily.

I didn't need him to clarify who "he" was.

"For one, Invi promised to take me back home when Avar returns and gives us the transcendence potion."

"And you believed him?" Gul scoffed. "I doubt that Avar will give Invi anything. Avar is the Sin of Greed. He isn't good at giving. That's the reason Invi stole the potion from him in the first place."

I gave him a side glance. "Doesn't Avar give the potion to you all the time?"

"Yes, he does. But we have an agreement. He gives me the potion, and I provide him with whatever he needs from the human world. I have plenty of contacts there, you know. I bring the best ingredient that even Madison can't always find, and she owns a restaurant back home."

"Who is Madison?"

The name sounded familiar. I recalled one of the virtues mentioning it before, but no one had provided me with an explanation.

“Madison is Avar’s girlfriend. She’s mortal, with a live body like yours.” He slid his gaze down my bathrobe-clad figure. “Well, not exactly like yours, but you know what I mean.”

“So, she isn’t a soul then? Not dead? Does she live here in Purgatory?”

“Sometimes...” he replied tentatively, as if wondering how much he should tell me.

“Sometimes? Does it mean that she comes and goes as she pleases? Then you can take me back, too, can’t you?”

“Why would I do such a thing?”

I shifted on the couch to face him. “Because it’s the right thing to do, Gul. Because, otherwise, you’re keeping me here against my will.”

“I did nothing wrong.” He moved his jaw, his tusks glistening menacingly in the warm lighting of the room. “I have every right to keep you, cupcake. I won you, following all the rules.”

“But following the rules isn’t always enough. I’m a person with feelings and a life of my own, and I’m asking you to please let me go.”

“What if I asked you to give me a chance to earn your affection in return?”

I sucked in a breath, sitting back.

“I’m afraid I can’t do it?”

“Why not?” He frowned.

“Because Invi has already taken what you want, and I gave it to him freely.”

“Fucking Invi!” He jumped off the couch. “I won the race, yet he still managed to beat me. He stole my prize!” He roared. “And now, he dares come here to fight me for what’s rightfully mine.”

“What did you just say? Invi was here? When?”

“While you were in the shower.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” I got up, too, facing him off.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You locked the door, remember?”

“But...Ugrr,” I groaned, cursing my need to wash off the gore of the maze as soon as I got the chance. “Where is he now?”

“In his swamp, most likely. I warded this place from him, all of it, including the field. He’s not to set a foot...I mean, not even the tip of his fucking tail on my property. And you...” He pointed a claw at me. “You’re staying here for as long as I please. Hey, everyone!” He propped his hands on his hips and yelled out to the souls who were peeking in from the yard, attracted by the noise of our argument. “I’m throwing a big party tomorrow, to celebrate my new acquisition.” He gestured my way to present the said acquisition to his guests. “And everyone is invited!”

The souls shouted and cheered. Those outside ran in to learn about the announcement from the others.

“I thought this was the party.” I swept my arm around the room that was quickly

filling with souls of every color of the rainbow.

Gul waved a hand. “That’s just a small gathering of a few of my closest friends. Tomorrow, the real celebration begins!” The room erupted in screams of approval and enthusiastic applause. “See, cupcake?” Gul grinned, waving at his guests. “Everybody loves me. Soon, you’ll learn to love me, too.”

17

Invi

I hadn't seen Nicole for two days now. I couldn't even come close to where she was. I couldn't talk to her. I had no way of finding out how she was other than excessively questioning the souls who went to Gul's endless parties. And question I did.

From Gul's guests, I'd learned that Nic usually sat quietly, away from the main party somewhere, mostly alone or talking to a soul or two. Some were upset that despite Gul's best efforts, she hadn't cheered up enough to join the party or have fun.

She wasn't happy, and I had to change it.

I'd promised to take her home. I'd promised to set her free. And I was dead set on doing it, even if the whole of Purgatory stood in my way.

With that firm determination on my mind, I climbed the deliberately difficult to navigate path up to Avar's mountain and slammed my fist against his massive entrance door.

"Now what?" Avar opened the door, already naked but still in his human form that was about half my normal height.

I smirked, looking down at him. "Well, hello there, little one."

"Fuck off." Avar returned to his front hall but left the door open for me to enter.

“Welcome back.” I moved forward, pulling my tail in.

“Thanks, we just got in. Maddy is still resting after the journey. She always passes out on the way and needs a minute or two to recuperate. And here you are, showing up even before my cat did. What do you want now? This again?”

He took the magical moonstone ring off his finger. Immediately, his shape grew. The human skin turned transparent, blending completely into Avar’s shimmering purple self. The horns, the feelers, and the tentacles sprouted from all their usual places. In only a moment or two, my brother looked like a monster he was born to be.

Yet when Madison bounced down the path around the mountain, there was nothing but adoration on her smiling face as she looked at him.

“I’ll make a lasagna for dinner—” she paused, noticing me still lingering by the door, because it took forever to drag my fucking tail in, which was one of the reasons I had no doors in my place.

“How are you feeling, my treasure?” Avar asked her.

“I’m good. About to make dinner,” she replied, not taking her eyes from me. “Hello, Invi.” She furtively slid a cautious glance down my tail.

Until now, I had always made the effort to shift to a humanoid form in Madison’s presence, to make it easier for her to accept me. But Nic accepted me just the way I was, and I saw no reason to hide my true appearance from anyone anymore.

“Good evening, Madison.” I gave her a bow like every lady deserved to be greeted with. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Take your fucking pleasure elsewhere,” Avar grumped.

“I’ll be glad to,” I assured him. “But only after I speak with you.”

“Well, I’ll go make that lasagna.” Madison made to leave but then paused to ask me, “Will you join us for dinner, Invi?”

There was no fear or repulsion in her eyes, only some curiosity as she cast another furtive glance at my tail. She must know there was no reason for her to be afraid of me, and with Avar in the room, she clearly felt completely at ease—fearless.

“I’m honored by the invitation,” I replied. “But sadly I’m already engaged elsewhere this evening.”

“Well, maybe some other time then? It was very nice seeing you, Invi.”

I inclined my head as she turned around to leave.

“Stop staring at her,” Avar growled when Madison disappeared up the path. Apparently, I hadn’t averted my eyes fast enough for his liking.

I was no stranger to the feeling of jealousy, but Avar almost had me beat in that department.

“I can’t speak with a woman without at least making some eye contact with her, can I?” I snapped.

“She doesn’t have eyes on her ass,” he retorted.

“I wasn’t even looking at her ass. I—” I brushed him off in frustration. “Listen, Avar, I’m not interested in Madison.”

“Sure you aren’t,” he scoffed.

Avar's cat snuck in through a small swinging door in the bottom of the front entrance that I hadn't even noticed until now. Did Avar add a special door for the cat? That was ridiculous. But then again, I had built a dam up the creek near my house, so that my ducks had a nice pond to swim in whenever they wished.

"Ahh, there you are, Keeper," Avar murmured affectionately, petting the cat with a tentacle. "Run up to the kitchen, buddy. Mommy has some treats for you there."

"Mommy?" I smirked. "If Madison is his mommy, does that make you the cat's daddy?"

Avar shrugged, unfazed. "Just the cat's for now."

"What do you mean, for now? Don't tell me—" I stared at him, speechless from the realization setting in. "Are you..."

"Not yet." Avar laughed, slapping me on the shoulder. "But Maddy and I have talked about it. The ring turns me into a human with all the reproductive functions included. Things are going great at the restaurant. We're considering trying for a baby at some point in the future."

He sounded so much like a human man at that moment, it sent chills down my back.

"Well, wow..." I rubbed my forehead, momentarily lost for words. "Are you seriously considering making a new mortal body to house a soul?"

He laughed. "When you put it that way, it doesn't sound nearly as lovely and magical as when Maddy talks about it. But yes, by having a baby, we would be giving a new body to a soul that we would then get to nurture from birth and hopefully raise into a decent human being."

“Good luck with that,” I wished him without a hint of teasing or sarcasm.

I had serious concerns about the huge undertaking that Avar was considering. The mortal sins were not meant to birth and raise humans. But we weren’t meant to have mortal bodies, either. Yet Avar had one on a regular basis now, going freely back and forth between the worlds.

That was what I actually came to talk to him about.

“I need your help, Avar.”

“No.” He shook his head adamantly. “No ring. No potion. Don’t even ask.”

“It’s not for me.”

He paused his stare on me in bewilderment. “For whom then?”

“For a human woman I brought to Purgatory while you were gone.”

The feelers of Avar’s beard flared up in agitation.

“Oh for the love of all that’s holy, you actually did it! You went ahead and did exactly what I told you not to do. Why? Because I have Maddy, and you just couldn’t suffer that, could you?”

“It had nothing to do with Maddy. Well, it stopped having anything to do with her the moment I laid my eyes on Nicole.”

“So, you brought her here? And now what?” He stared at me expectantly.

“She wants to go back home.”

“No surprise there. Poor woman. Where is she?”

“At Gul’s. He warded his place from me. I can’t even see her. But I promised her to take her home when you returned to Purgatory. I need the potion so that I can fulfill my promise. Whatever you want from me in return, just ask, and I’ll do it.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, giving me an unimpressed look. “So, you don’t like her anymore and want to get rid of her? Is that it?”

“No. It’s not it at all. I love her,” I blurted out.

The moment I said it, I knew it was true. I loved Nic with every fiber of my being. I’d do anything to make her happy. I’d sign a thousand-year servitude contract with Avar just to give her what she wanted.

“You what? ” He nearly choked on the word.

“I love her. Why is it so hard to believe? You love Madison, don’t you?”

“But you can’t say you love somebody just because you want what Maddy and I have.”

“I don’t want what you have. I want exactly what Nicole and I have built in the little time we’ve had together. I wish for it to grow and bloom. But for that, we both need to be in a better place, and for Nicole that place is not Purgatory. I love her so much that I want her happy no matter the cost. I love her so much that I want her free, even if that means I may lose her.”

Avar propped his hands on his hips, staring at me for a long moment. I held his stare, hiding nothing.

“Interesting,” he finally said. “Of all my brothers, somehow, I never imagined it’d be you to fall in love, but here we are. Well, the wrong you did to her needs to be righted. If she wants to go back, I’ll give her the potion.”

He headed up the path with the glass cabinets on both sides that displayed the many items of his humongous collection.

I followed him to the cabinet with a glass carafe inside. It contained the familiar burgundy liquid—the transcendence potion that allowed both humans and sins to travel back to the world of mortals.

Avar took the carafe out, then produced a small vial from a silver box inside the cabinet.

“How are you going to give it to her if Gul warded his place against you?” he asked, pouring some of the potion into the vial. “Why did he do it, anyway? Have you two had a fight or something?”

I rubbed the back of my neck.

“It’s a long story. Let’s just say he believes Nicole belongs to him.”

“And you’re convinced she’s yours?”

“I want her to be mine. But it’s her choice to make.”

“Well, I’m not getting between Gul and you. I don’t know enough about this situation to take sides. But if the woman wants to go home, she should. Do you know how to give this to her?” He handed me the vial with the potion, then lifted a finger in warning. “And don’t you ask me for a ward breaker. I’m not lending it out to anyone anymore. Not after Charity and her posse broke into my house and vandalized this

place.”

“I don’t need the ward breaker,” I assured him. “I’ll find a way to get the potion to Nic without it.” I enclosed him in a quick hug, my chest warming with genuine gratitude. “Thank you, brother.”

“Alright, alright.” He patted my back before releasing me from the embrace. “Go, free your woman.”

“Oh, speaking about freeing...” I uncoiled my tail, ready to head back down the mountain. “Could you let Lux out of your basement, please? I almost forgot about him.”

Avar’s jaw dropped.

“Lux? What is he doing in my basement?” His voice dropped to a threatening rumble. “Invi, what did you do this time? What the fuck happened here in my absence?”

A lot of things, but I had no time to recount them all.

“You know how irresistible Lux can be when he wants something. I didn’t need him to further complicate things that were complicated enough already. I put the basement key back under that tall sharp rock by the lilac bush. Just keep in mind, he’s probably pretty angry by now. He’s spent a few days locked in there.”

The cat sauntered down the path, licking his whiskers.

“Can you believe it, Keeper?” Avar shook his head. “The scoundrel stole my basement key and locked up our brother. Do you ever feel ashamed, Invi?”

“Sometimes. A little.” I smirked. “Just the appropriate amount of shame for a mortal

sin to feel. Oh, and about this cat...” I shook my rattle, making it vibrate before gently rubbing the cat’s neck with it. “I’ll need to borrow the horologe too.”

18

Nicole

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay a little longer?” Gul asked the last group of souls on their way out.

This never-ending party had taken three whole days, filling his house with music and chatter. Crowds moved through the rooms and the gardens day and night. I slept at odd hours whenever there was a bed or a couch available.

Souls didn’t need toilets, but Gul made one for me off the guest shower room. Except that every time I had to use it, I had to kick out groups and couples who wanted to make out in privacy, away from the main crowd.

It wasn’t all bad. There was plenty of good food and cocktails for everyone. Under different circumstances, I might’ve enjoyed some parts of this party more than I did. But since I was essentially a prisoner in Gul’s house, joy was hard to find. All I felt was the irritation from all the noise and the extreme exhaustion from the lack of sleep.

When the crowd finally receded, an overwhelming sense of relief washed over me.

Gul, however, seemed to get sadder and sadder with every guest departing.

“Stay the night,” he implored the last few souls. “We’ll make croissants for breakfast or poached eggs.”

“We promised Kindness to be there for her scones first thing in the morning,” one of the departing souls replied.

“And it’s almost morning already.” Another one gestured at the sky that lightened with the approaching sunrise.

“Yeah, we’ve been here for days,” the third one added. “Half of the souls I came with already got their Higher Judgement and left Purgatory.”

“That’s the problem,” Gul sighed as they all filed out from the house and closed the doors behind them. “No one really stays in Purgatory for long. I don’t even try to remember any of them because chances are in a week or two all of them will be gone.”

He sat on the couch next to me and clapped his hands to turn off the magical viewing box, which marked the end of the party. Without the TV, I felt the silence even more acutely after the days of the constant noise.

Gul glanced at me uneasily.

“You seem quiet. Are you sad too? Come.” He opened his burly arms wide. “A hug will do us both good.”

He’d been exceptionally nice to me after the last argument we’d had when he caught me looking at the green line of Invi’s forest on the horizon beyond the sunflower field.

“Go back in the house, cupcake,” Gul had said, shoving a glass of wine in my hand. “Or I’ll think you’re still pining after him.”

“I miss him,” I replied honestly.

“Why? Why do you care about him so much? What did he give you that I can’t give? Nothing. Invi has nothing, and what he does have, he doesn’t appreciate enough. That’s why he always wants what others have. That’s why he wants you too, you know? Because I have you, and he can’t.”

“Is that why? Really?” I yelled, offended for Invi more than for myself. “Or is it the reason you trapped me in here? You knew I liked Invi, and you snatched me from him. And now, you’re accusing him of the very same thing that you did yourself.”

“We are not the same,” he roared.

“In this case, you’re so fucking identical, you could be twins. Just because ‘everybody loves you,’ doesn’t really make you lovable, Gul. There is absolutely nothing about your actions that I like.”

We yelled and screamed at each other that evening, until a crowd gathered around us and I ran out of breath.

But the animosity between us hadn’t lasted long. I generally disliked prolonged confrontations, and Gul seemed to be too cheerful and lighthearted by nature to hold a grudge or to sulk for long. Eventually, we established a shaky truce between us. He cooked and entertained his party guests while I helped with cleaning and organizing.

“I’m tired.” I groaned from exhaustion, and he swept me into his arms.

His thick fur enveloped me like a cloud. The warmth of his shape and the strength of his arms made for a very comfortable hug. If only I didn’t miss the arms of someone else so badly.

“I really hate it when the party is over and all the fun stops,” Gul grumped.

“You know there is fun to be had after a party too.”

“Like what?” He leaned back, looking intrigued.

“Well, I like staying in and reading a book or watching a movie.”

He gave me an incredulous look. “On your own? Completely alone?”

“Yes. Or with a friend.”

“But what if all your friends leave before you even get a chance to get to know them?” He paused, as if struck by a realization, then a corner of his mouth lifted in a lopsided smile. “Except that you’re not going anywhere, my sweet dumpling. You’re staying right here for as long as your body lasts. Which would probably be a few decades still. I got so lucky with you. Do you want to watch a movie?” he offered with a renewed enthusiasm. “I’ll make us popcorn.”

I nodded, silently. His mention of the many decades that he meant to keep me in Purgatory plunged my heart back into misery.

During the party, I had tried to find an opportunity to escape. I figured that with so many people loitering around the house, I’d eventually get a chance to sneak out. But Gul remained vigilant, keeping a watchful eye on me all the time.

I’d learned from some of his party guests that Gul frequently left to get supplies from my old world. But during the several days that I’d spent at his house, he hadn’t left once. The food, drinks, and other party supplies never ran out. He possibly left while I was sleeping. Or maybe he had someone else to deliver things for him.

The sound of corn popping came from the kitchen. I eyed the open patio doors, calculating. If I made a run for it, would I manage to cross the field on my way to

Invi's house before Gul caught up with me? Distances were often deceiving in Purgatory, making it even harder to gauge.

"Nicole?" Gul poked his horned head through the opening to the kitchen. "How do you feel about garlic salt and avocado oil on your popcorn?"

With flapping of wings, a large bird suddenly flew through the open patio doors into the living room. It crashed into my shoulder at full speed, then dropped to the floor in a whirlwind of quacks and feathers.

"What the fuck!" Gul rushed to me. "Are you alright? Did it hurt you?"

"I..." I stared at the bird.

It was a duck. It sat on the floor with something that looked like a corner of a bundle peeking out from under its wing.

"What a stupid bird," Gul muttered, irritated. "If it was alive, I'd think it had rabies."

"Actually...Ouch." I winced, moving my shoulder. "It feels sore. I may need some ice."

"Be right back." Gul rushed back to the kitchen. "Lay down on the couch and don't move. I'll take care of it."

The moment he disappeared through the doorway, the duck straightened its wings and moved aside, revealing a small bundle.

I unwrapped the paper, which was a note, written in now well familiar handwriting.

"Drink the potion, it will take you home. Hold the duck in your arms when you drink

it. The horologe is pre-set to take you back to the same time you left from. And always remember, I love you.”

Longing and tenderness spread through my chest at once, like an explosion. There was no signature this time. But I didn’t need it to know who it was from, even as he’d never told me he loved me before.

The bundle held a slim vial of burgundy-colored liquid, and the duck had a leather strap wound twice around its neck like a bejeweled collar. It was set with metal gears and pale blue stones.

“Here is the ice.” Gul stomped back into the living room, holding a bag of ice wrapped in a kitchen towel. “Why are you not laying down like I told you?”

Grabbing the duck from the floor, I backed away from him to the open patio doors. As it turned out, I didn’t need to cross the field to be free. I just needed a few seconds to drink the potion.

“Nicole?” He noticed the vial in my hand. “What is it?”

I pulled the cork out with my teeth while backing further away.

Understanding spread on his face.

“No, please, dumpling, don’t leave...”

“Sorry.” Gripping the duck under my arm, I brought the open vial to my lips with the other hand. “I’m so sorry, Gul, but you can’t hold me. I need to go.”

Seeing his crestfallen expression, I forgave him instantly for everything he ever did to me. We could never be lovers. But maybe under different circumstances, we could’ve

been good friends.

“I can’t stay.” I emptied the vial with the potion in one gulp.

19

Nicole

The buzzing sound of the alarm pierced my sleep. I had been dreaming, hadn't I? It was an interesting dream. Fun, sweet, but also a little scary...

With my eyes still closed, I searched with my hand on the nightstand for my phone, then shut the annoying alarm off.

I had an hour to get ready and make it to the studio for the final round of the cake decorating challenge.

And then, I remembered...

I sat up in bed, blankly staring at the wall in my hotel room.

Gul, his house, and Purgatory were all gone.

The duck with the fancy collar was gone too.

And so was Invi.

I was back in my world, just like I had wanted. Despite losing the race, Invi had still found a way to fulfill his promise to me. I returned early enough to make it to the challenge on time. I didn't let Jess down. Nothing was ruined. We still had our chance.

Yet I got out of bed with a heavy heart.

I got dressed and made my way through the gray, late-autumn morning to the TV studio, then walked backstage where Jess already waited for me.

“Have you seen Geoff?” she asked in lieu of greeting.

“No. Why? He isn’t here?”

“No,” she groaned in distress. “I can’t find him, and I can’t get hold of him. He isn’t answering his phone.”

“Maybe he’s just running late?”

“Without even a call to warn us?” She threw her hands up in the air. “Ughh, I knew I shouldn’t have hired him. He’s way overqualified for this job. But he was so funny and charming. We clicked so well, and I thought...” She just stood there, dropping her shoulders in disappointment. “I thought it’d be a joy to work with someone like him.”

“I’m sure there is an explanation. Maybe he just slept in, forgot his phone, and is on the way here already?” I made up excuses for Geoff at lightning speed for no reason other than to comfort Jess.

“But we have no time to wait for him.” She sighed. “And the team needs to have three people or we’ll be disqualified.”

“Jess.” Corinne, one of the challenge organizers rushed to us. “I have your third member registered, I just need your signature to confirm the replacement.” She thrust her tablet to Jess for an electronic signature.

“What replacement?” Jess blinked at her in confusion.

Her mouth fell open as she stared at the man walking toward us.

My breath hitched, and my heart leaped so high, I feared it’d choke me.

“Morning, Jessica,” Invi greeted her while giving me the most adoring smile.

I froze as if struck by lightning. I’d been afraid to hope to see him again. But there he was, conveniently shaped and sized like a human man again. Dressed in a pair of black dress pants, a button-down shirt, and an olive-green, impeccably tailored leather jacket. With his fancy tousled hair style and meticulously trimmed facial hair, he looked more handsome than ever, and suddenly, I didn’t know what to do.

Since chronologically, it’d been only a few hours since he had first approached me in the club last night, did it mean we should be acting like practically strangers? Was I supposed to greet him as a mere acquaintance?

Thankfully, Invi solved the dilemma for me.

Not breaking our eye contact, he sauntered closer.

“My dearest Nicole,” he murmured, with the brightest, happiest grin before cupping my face and giving me a long, tender kiss.

And just like that, all awkwardness melted away. The memories rushed in instead—the time we had spent together and the intimacy we had built. It didn’t matter where it happened or what shape he was in. He was Invi. And he was mine.

“Did you steal the ring again?” I asked between his kisses, sinking my fingers into his very human hair on the back of his head.

“No. Didn’t need to. Avar was in a generous mood when he heard about you.”

“Um...” Jess cleared her throat. “Sorry to interrupt, but we’re running out of time here.”

Invi turned to her but kept me at his side in a one-armed hug.

“Invi? Is it?” Jess offered him a hand to shake, but he brought it to his lips for a chaise, old-fashioned kiss.

“It’s nice to see you again, Jessica,” he said politely.

“Do you know anything about cake decorating?” she asked.

“I’m very good with pastries and other desserts. I also practiced working with fondant before coming here.”

“You did, really?” I smiled.

He winked at me. “You know I can learn and perfect any skill, especially if faced with competition.”

“Well.” Jess sighed, running a hand over her blonde hair that was swept up into a high bun this morning. “We don’t really have a choice. You’re in.” She gestured to Corinne for the tablet, then quickly scribbled her signature to formally accept Invi on our team.

While we donned our coats and aprons and before the cameras started rolling, Jess quickly explained the concept of our cake design to Invi.

“The theme of the challenge is Make Believe or Escape From Reality . So, we’re

making a fairytale princess castle with a moat and a rose garden. We're only allowed to have three layers of cake, but we have a wafer tower. That's where the princess is going—on the balcony close to the top of the tower."

"I'd like to put a swan in the moat," I added. "But that's only if we have any time left. Usually, the time is pretty tight in these contests. That's actually the most stressful part about this whole thing," I admitted. "I hate the rush and the tension even more than losing."

"I've learned recently," Invi said, "that there is more than one way to win. Still, you shouldn't go into a competition thinking only about losing." He flashed us one of his swoon-worthy smiles. "Let's win this thing."

The show started. The cameras were on. The host and the judges moved between our and Aidan's work areas.

Focusing on our cake, I couldn't help stealing glances at Aidan's worktable. His team's design quickly shaped up, and it was stunning. Their Escape From Reality concept had a futuristic flair, with the cityscape of tall skyscrapers and lights depicted through neon fondant and pulled-sugar details.

The design was sleek and unique. The judges seemed intrigued, clicking their tongues and spending quite a bit of time on analyzing the details.

"Fuck," Jess cursed under her breath, standing over an open box with the parts of the cake we were allowed to bring to the show. "One of the wafer tubes for the tower is cracked. We can't use it." She gently lifted the other one out of the box. "The spare one survived, but we have to get it right from the first try. No do-overs if we mess up."

There was no time to mess up, anyway. But we had practiced it before and knew what

to do. As Jess carefully positioned the tower in the right place with Invi helping her, I rolled out and stamped the white fondant. Together, we covered the tower with the fondant to be painted with pink and gold bricks.

I held my breath as Jess carefully cut an opening for the balcony door in the tower. At that moment, one of the camera crew tripped over a cable and bumped into Jess from behind.

“Watch out!” I screamed a belated warning.

Invi caught the crewman under his arm, stopping him from falling into our cake, but Jess’s arm jerked. Her knife slipped, cutting a chunk out of the cake underneath the tower. The delicate wafer structure cracked in the middle. Its top part crashed, taking some of our carefully constructed castle with it.

With a strangled cry of utter despair, Jess threw her hands up into the air and froze.

I stared at our ruined cake in disbelief, hoping it was all just in my head and the cake was still fine somehow.

“I’m sorry,” the crewman mumbled. “I’m so, so sorry, guys.”

It felt like every sound and all activity in the room was suddenly suspended. The show host rushed to us, drawn to the disaster like a shark to a sinking boat.

“It looks like our team here experienced a devastating setback,” he crooned with glee, frantically gesturing for the cameras to zoom in on our misfortune. “Unbelievable, simply unbelievable,” he kept repeating in a manufactured anguish. “Will they ever be able to recover?” He took a dramatic pause, before shouting with an increased enthusiasm, “Stay tuned after this commercial break!”

A signal sounded, announcing the break and a brief time off cameras for us. All three judges joined the host at our counter, wondering if we were even planning to proceed.

From across the room, Aidan raised a bushy eyebrow under his pretentious, crisp-white chef hat. Amusement mixed with pity in his expression, despite his best efforts to school it into something more sympathetic for the cameras. Then he must have realized that our failure meant he almost certainly won the challenge, and glee spread on his face unconstrained.

“We’re fucked,” Jess exhaled, staring blankly at our ruined creation.

“We can fix it,” Invi suggested optimistically. “How badly is the spare wafer tube damaged? Can we hold it together with the fondant? Or glue it with the butter cream? Then, we can take off the top cake layer. The cake will be a little smaller, but?—”

“It’s no use.” Jess shook her head, devastated. “A smaller, patched up cake will never win the challenge. We lost, no matter what we do now. I’m so sorry, guys,” she sniffled. “It’s all my fault. The cake is ruined.”

“Ruined? Or...” I scratched behind my ear, slowly walking around the table with the cake.

Ruins didn’t always mean failure. More often than not, they had their own kind of beauty. Even such an evil entity like a mortal sin had a good side. If envy could be turned into a healthy motivation for self-improvement, maybe our cake could still be turned into a winning design too?

“What if we don’t fix it?” I asked, as new possibilities emerged to me from the wreckage of the cake.

“Do you want to give up?” the host asked, shoving the microphone in Jess’s face.

She sighed, hugging herself. “Might as well.”

“We can’t just give up,” Invi protested. “Now without at least trying.”

“Trying for what?” Jess asked uncertainly.

“For something new.” I carefully removed some of the fallen pieces of the tower, leaving a few on the cake, like crumbled mortar. “We’ll change the design. Look.” I grabbed the knife from Jess and cut deeper the gorge in the damaged layer, turning it from the neatly landscaped castle grounds into something that could be decorated like a crevasse in a pile of rubble overgrown with ivy and shrubs. “It’s no longer a princess’s castle, but the haunted ruins of it.”

“Haunted?” Jess scrunched her brow with a skeptic expression.

“Very, very haunted,” I repeated in a deep, sinister voice. “Its crumbling walls are overgrown with ivy and moss. Instead of the rose bushes, there are weeping willows in the shadows, draped in cobwebs. And the moat...” I paused, thinking about what to do with all that painted fondant and caramelized sugar water we had already put in. Taking it out now would only waste precious time.

“It’s not a moat, but a swamp,” Invi announced brightly. “With duckweed and calla lilies. Black calla lilies,” he added, matching my foreboding voice from earlier. “The magical, sinister kind.”

“Because there is more than one way to escape reality,” I concluded, raising a finger. “And fairy tales aren’t always pink or covered in glitter.”

“We’ll need to change the colors then.” Jess cupped her chin, looking more intrigued than devastated now.

“Most of these things can be just painted over, with green for moss and mold, or with gray and black for decay.”

“The princess can be the water nymph? Or the forest witch?” Jess had perked up.

Our combined enthusiasm for the new design was steadily growing now.

I hadn’t even noticed when we got back on air until the host bellowed into his microphone, “They’re not giving up, ladies and gentlemen! It looks like the team has come up with an idea to salvage their creation. But will it work? What will they do? How will it turn out at the end?”

I did my best to tune him out, focusing on bringing the new design to life.

“She’ll be a witch,” I determined, putting a long string of ivy into the princess’s hair. “Or a swamp princess.” I smiled, painting her pink skirts with streaks of black and green.

Jess was already busy with transforming the jagged edges of the broken tower into crumpled bricks and mortar. And Invi started rolling out tiny pieces of black fondant for the delicate funnels of calla lilies.

I hoped the judges would find our new design far more unique than the old one. After all, a haunted swamp didn’t appear on fancy cakes nearly as often as princess’ castles. But somehow, it didn’t even matter what everybody else thought about it at the moment. I felt inspired and eager to bring it to life. I even stopped stealing glances at Aidan’s cake, too absorbed into working on our own.

“Ten minutes left,” someone counted down the time.

“Is the witch going on the ruins of the tower?” Jess asked, holding our fully

transformed princess.

“No.” I stopped her. “She should be by the water. She likes it there. I think water is where she gets her magical powers from.”

“Or,” Invi murmured. “She is the one who breathes life and magic into the entire place, including the swamp.”

His lips brushed by my temple, sending a warm flock of goosebumps down my arms.

“And what’s this?” Jess blinked her long eyelashes at the fondant figurine Invi placed on the glassy surface of our swamp covered in duckweed.

“A duck,” he announced proudly. “I know you wanted a swan,” he said to me apologetically. “But I’m much better at depicting ducks, as it turned out.”

“Do we need a duck?” Jess shook her head, hesitantly. “It doesn’t fit with our overall...” she waved her hand over the cake, “the dark, haunted, gothic kind of theme. Ducks are fun and whimsical. Cartoonish even.”

“Oh, they can be very sinister,” he disagreed. “Especially if you’re late to feed them, even when they’re ghost ducks that don’t need food.”

“Ghost ducks?” Jess stared at him as if he completely lost his mind.

“Here.” I plucked a few feathers up on the duck’s head and wings, giving it a ruffled appearance, then blotted a couple of dark spots on its back. “It’s a zombie duck now. And it fits right in with our dark, sinister swamp.”

The chime announcing the end of the final round of the challenge rang over Invi’s deep laughter as he pulled me in for a kiss.

“Zombie duck,” he chuckled. “I love it.”

Jess shook her head again but left the zombie duck on the cake since we weren’t allowed to add or take anything after the signal.

Tension drained out of me, leaving me propped against Invi’s hard body.

“Well, for better or for worse, it’s over now,” I exhaled.

The judges were each given a slice of our and Aiden’s cakes. The crew quickly shooed us out of our work areas, for the judges to have full access to examine our creations.

We had some time to kill now, until the judges would have made their decision.

“Are you thirsty?” Invi asked Jess and me. “Can I bring you some water?”

Jess nodded. “Please.”

I didn’t even know where to get water in this place. But Invi sauntered off confidently, as a man on a mission who knew what he was doing.

Jess followed him with her eyes as did I.

“You guys are really into each other,” she noted. It wasn’t a question. We clearly made it pretty obvious.

Before I could reply, however, a loud “Babe!” sounded from the audience.

During the break, many people left their seats, trying to get closer to the cakes for a better look. From one of the top rows, a man jogged down the stairs in a confident

swagger.

“Shaun.” Jess smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. The expression in them was troubled.

Maybe it wasn’t the best time for me to speak to her now. Maybe I should wait until after the challenge. But I couldn’t help the feeling that I shouldn’t have waited at all. I had kept silent for days to spare my friend’s feelings, but now, I couldn’t stand to keep the truth away from her any longer, not even for another moment, because lying by omission was still lying, even if it was done with the best intentions.

Before Shaun came close to hear us, before he got another chance to place his lying lips on my best friend’s mouth, I spoke up.

“Jess, he’s been cheating on you,” I blurted out the words that had been burning on my tongue ever since I’d found out about the cheating son of a bitch myself.

Her breath tripped, but she didn’t seem as shocked as I would’ve expected.

“Did you know?” I asked.

“Well...” She rubbed her throat as if trying to help her words pass through a lump lodged inside. “People talk. It doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“Not just any people, Jess.” I took her hand in mine, with her fingers feeling as cold as icicles. “I’m not repeating any rumors by someone else here, though there are many. But he propositioned to me last week.”

“You?” Tearing her eyes away from the lying asshole coming our way, she stared at me with a pained expression.

“He was shocked that a ‘fat, ugly chick’ like me turned down someone like him because he gets lots of ‘hot ones’ whenever he wants. He also said he was confident I’d never tell you because I’m too kind and I love you too much to hurt you. Those were his exact words, Jess. And for a while, I was afraid to tell you because I didn’t want to upset you. But I think you’ll be hurt much, much worse if you stay with him. He’s bad news. And you deserve so much better.”

“Babe!” Shaun leaped from the bottom stair of the first row of seating and ran to us. “You look fantastic on TV. I told you, you were born for this. I bet there’ll be lots of offers coming our way now. We’ll be rich! Anyone who sees this ass?—”

He swung his hand to give her a slap on the rump, but she caught his wrist before his palm touched her body.

“We need to talk,” she said, visibly composed, but I could tell by the trembling of her fingers and the hard set of her jaw that she was hurting inside, and it was because of what I had said.

Doubt slithered into my chest, bringing along a bitter taste of regret.

Maybe I should’ve taken my time with this?

Maybe things would’ve still worked out between Jess and Shaun, somehow?

Maybe he could’ve changed?

“Talk about what, babe?” He seemed confused, batting his eyelashes at her innocently.

As she turned toward the glass doors out of the studio, however, he shed his innocent expression like a wolf would slip out of a sheep’s clothing. The glare he tossed my

way was filled with hatred but also with a hint of surprise. He had honestly believed that I wouldn't tell her.

Shaun had thought that my kindness was my weakness, that it would stop me from telling the truth to my friend. And now, I realized that my reluctance to be honest with her actually was making me the accomplice to his lies.

All my doubt disappeared, as did the regret. I was no longer sorry that I spoke up. I was glad I did. My only regret was that I hadn't done it sooner.

"Nicole!" Geoff hurried to us from a side entrance for the crew. "I'm so sorry! Did I miss it?"

He looked devastated in more ways than one. His shirt wasn't tucked in properly. His pants were missing a belt. And his bright orange hair hadn't seen a brush or a comb today.

Invi arrived with two bottles of water for Jess and me. Spotting Geoff, he positioned himself between me and him.

"Are you alright?" I asked Geoff as he propped his hands on his knees, bending over to catch his breath.

"I tried..." he squeezed between the short, shallow gasps for air. "I tried to make it here this morning, but I..." He scraped a hand down his face, making me worry in earnest.

"Geoff, what happened?" I placed a hand on his shoulder.

With a low growl, Invi moved even closer, trying to wedge an arm between Geoff and me.

“Invi.” I brushed him off. “I need to find out what’s going on. We’re okay, Geoff. We found a temporary replacement. But where have you been?”

“I...” Geoff began again. “I was locked in a utility closet in the hotel.”

“Locked?” I struggled to understand. “Why?”

Geoff spread his arms wide. “I don’t know! I was returning to my room last night when some asshole shoved me in the closet from behind, then locked the door. I had nothing but a bathrobe on and no food or drink other than some ice and a bottle of sparkling wine...”

The events of the last night started to finally come together like pieces of some weird puzzle.

“Did you, by chance, knock on my door last night?” I asked.

“Your door?” He moved his eyes from me to Invi, then back again. “Then... Are you...”

“Invi is my boyfriend, yes,” I confirmed to a very obvious delight of my mortal sin, whose lips stretched into a triumphant smile and whose cheeks warmed with giddy blush.

I smiled too. It was new to me to see a man so happy from just being called my boyfriend—new and nice.

“And Jess?” Geoff turned his head looking around. “Where is she?”

Of course, it all made sense now. Our red-headed Romeo here had mixed up the rooms and knocked on the wrong door last night. Though, he’d probably have just as

little chance with Jess as he had with me at that hour.

“Jess is over there.” I gestured at my friend, who was pointing an accusing finger at the fuming Shaun behind the glass doors. “She’s talking to her boyfriend.”

“Oh, she has a boyfriend?” Geoff’s expression fell.

“I’m afraid not for long now,” I said, bringing a look of hope to his face. “But, Geoff, listen...” I placed a hand on his arm. “Even if she does break up, the last thing she’ll probably want is to jump into another relationship right away. Okay? You need to be patient.”

He worried his lip between his teeth. “A woman like her won’t stay single for long.”

“Single or not, Jess gets harassed a lot by men who hope to be her next boyfriend. Do you really care about her?”

“Do I?” His voice squeaked as if I asked whether he enjoyed breathing or wished to stay alive. “Nic, I’ve turned down job offers I would’ve killed for before I met Jess. But when she called to hire me, I didn’t hesitate. The best work interview I’ve had in my entire life was with her. We connected so well. It felt like I met my other half, you know? I’m usually intimidated by beautiful women and try to stay away from them. But with her...” He sighed, his gaze drifting to Jess across the room.

She seemed to be screaming at Shaun now, her face turning red and her arms gesturing wildly. Yet, a dreamy softness settled over Geoff’s features as he looked at her.

“It was so easy to talk to her,” he gushed. “I made her laugh, and she was so quick at replying to all my jokes. I haven’t met anyone so sharp and witty before, yet so easy-going and down-to-earth too.”

Jess flicked her wrist in the air, as if literally casting Shaun into oblivion, before turning her back to him and returning to the studio room. The glass door shut into Shaun's face. He made a move to follow Jess, but then just spat out some curse words at her back, stomped his foot, and left.

Instead of coming to us, Jess marched around the room, with her eyebrows pinched together, and her mouth set into a firm line.

"She's upset." A deep concern etched on Geoff's face. "I should go to her."

I made a move to stop him. Jess obviously was trying to calm her nerves a little before returning to us and eventually facing the cameras again. But then I thought about something.

"You said you know how to make her laugh?" I asked Geoff.

He grinned confidently. "Yes, I do."

"Then go." I nodded. "Cheer her up, please."

"She asked for water." Invi handed him one of the bottles.

"And, Geoff..." I touched his arm again. "Just keep in mind that she probably doesn't want another boyfriend right now. She could really use a friend, though. Okay? Could you be her friend? Can you give her more than a Champagne fueled night in a hotel room?"

A blush spread over his face, connecting the gazillion freckles on his neck and chin.

"I... Knocking on hotel doors is not something I usually do. But they say women like confidence, right? So, I figured that Jessica was worth everything, even my potential

humiliation if she sent me away.”

“Well, she probably needs you more now than she did last night.” I gestured at Jessica on her way to complete the second circle around the room.

Geoff jogged to her. At the sight of him approaching, the wrinkle between her eyebrows smoothed out, and I exhaled with relief. Geoff gave her the bottle of water, accompanied by the world’s most awkward bow. Jess giggled, hiding her mouth behind her hand like a schoolgirl.

“What do you know,” I marveled. “I think she really likes him.”

“Does that make you happy?” Invi tilted his head to see my face.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I bet our freaking cake that it was you who locked poor Geoff in the closet.”

His right eyebrow lifted in the expression that said the Sin of Envy harbored no regrets about dealing with Geoff as he saw fit.

I shook my head. “Is that the way you deal with competition? By locking people in closets?”

“Or basements.” He shrugged. “Whatever works to keep them away from you.”

“Invi.” I gave him a stern look.

“My dearest Nicole.” He grinned, unrepentant. “Do you know that envy,” he lifted a hand palm up, as if presenting me with something, “and jealousy,” he lifted his other hand in the same manner, “are very close?” He brought both hands together, steeping his fingers. “And I embody them both, so...” He spread his arms aside in a disarming

gesture, and I was deep enough in love with him already to find it charming.

“Well, it’s a good thing that when it comes to me, there is no competition. I never had many men vying for my attention. So, you can ease your worries. And please, make sure to ask questions before locking up sins or people.”

“I’ll try,” he promised with that impish smile of his.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. It really was a good thing that men weren’t falling for me at the first sight.

“How about trust, Invi?” I peered at him. “For example, you’re arguably the most attractive man in this building, if not in the entire city, but I’m not going to shove every woman who bats her eyelashes at you into a closet, because it’s not about other women. When you said you wanted me and only me, I believed you. I trust you. Because I love you.”

His eyes opened wide. His breath halted. His mouth parted, and...

The signal sounded, announcing that the show was going on air again.

The judges gathered both teams by the cakes and stretched the announcement of the winner for as long as could possibly be accepted by the audience before they’d rebel.

“And the winning cake is...” the head judge finally declared, “The Haunted Ruins!”

“Aaaah,” Jess screamed as if her soul was leaving her body from happiness.

Her knees buckled, and Geoff grabbed her, stopping her from collapsing to the floor.

“We won?” I gasped, afraid to believe.

“We sure did,” Invi said softly in satisfaction clearly too profound to be expressed loudly. “Though I still think the cake should’ve been called The Swamp Princess.” He gave me a devoted smile.

Happiness burst out of me.

“We won!” I jumped up to wrap my arms around his neck, and he caught me, spinning me in a circle of happy giggles.

He buried his face in my neck.

“I love you, my darling,” he murmured against my skin. “I love you so much, sometimes I fear my chest may explode from this feeling.”

“Invi...” I leaned back to see his face, but he quickly caught my mouth in a kiss, and I closed my eyes, savoring the sensation.

“I love you more than I can tell...more than I could ever explain...more than anything,” he said softly, covering my face with light, tender kisses.

My heart sang, purring like a cat in the warm rays of Invi’s caress and affection.

The sound of someone clearing their throat popped our bubble. I unlinked my arms, sliding down his tall body back to my feet.

Jess stared at us, as did the entire audience in the room and, judging by at least two cameras aimed at our faces, probably a few million TV viewers all across the country.

“Wow!” the host exclaimed. “The winning team is off to a wild celebration already, ladies and gentlemen.”

Goeff retorted with a few witty comments, and Jess deftly diverted everyone's attention away from us, allowing me to run a hand down my mussed hair and straighten my blouse, all the while smiling in the spotlight like a woman with no regrets.

"So," Jess turned back to us after the cameras had moved on to Aiden to properly document every drop of his bitterness and disappointment. "This isn't going to be a one-night thing between you two, is it?" she asked me, with a gesture at Invi.

"No," I admitted. "It is much bigger than that."

She looked at me closely.

"You really like him?" she asked with a voice softer than her gaze. "Is he here to stay?"

I loved him.

But considering that as far as Jess knew, I'd only met Invi a few hours ago, I figured professing my love for him would probably raise concerns and even suspicions on her part.

So, I simply nodded. "I do. And yes, he'll be around."

We hadn't figured out yet how exactly we could be together. But Invi had promised me back in the maze that he'd never leave me, and he'd proven already that he was the man of his word.

Jess drew in a long breath.

"Well then..." She smiled, slapping Invi on his upper arm. "Welcome to the family."

Because good friends became a family. And now, Invi was one of us too.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:25 am

Nic

A month later

I turned the wheel, steering my white, windowless van down the dirt road to my house. I often joked that my van looked like a perfect vehicle for a serial killer to kidnap his victims. But it was also perfect for delivering custom cakes for weddings and other events.

Except that lately, our delivery area grew way beyond the limits that I could reach on my van.

I might still get severe heartburn at the mere mention of Shaun, but the asshole turned out to be absolutely right about one thing. Before the show had even ended, Jess started getting offers.

The camera loved her, and so did the audience. She ended up hiring a lawyer to help her go over the tall stack of contract offers from modeling, to hosting, to pastry chef positions in fancy restaurants, and to reality TV.

After a long and careful consideration that included detailed consultations with Geoff and me, she decided on a baking show that was going to be filmed in our bakery.

The first episode had been filmed last week. But even without this new show, our business blew up beyond our wildest imagination.

In addition to a personal assistant to help her handle all her TV appearances, Jess

hired more people to help in the bakery, which made her one of the top three employers in our tiny town, prompting Geoff to quip during an interview that the town should at least name a park or a street after her.

Jess offered me to be in charge of opening the second location in the city that we had planned to open after winning the challenge. But I saw a better opportunity. Since our win on national TV, our online sales had grown tenfold and kept growing.

People from all over the country and even from around the world wanted a custom cake from our bakery. My dream of designing cakes for a living had finally come true. I'd just completed two super fancy custom cakes for a local delivery this week. Today, I dropped by the bakery to catch up with Geoff and Jess and picked up a few more orders to design within the next few days.

Shortly after winning the TV challenge, I finally got to meet Madison and her purple boyfriend Avar, the Sin of Greed. I made a deal with Avar. In exchange for the transcendence potion, whenever I visited Invi and baked stuffed croissants, I sent a duck with a bucket of them for Avar and Maddy to Avar's mountain.

With the steady supply of the potion now, I often designed and created my cakes at Invi's house in Purgatory.

As I pulled into my long driveway shaded by the century-old oak trees, I spotted a flash of green up ahead. My mortal sin rushed out of the front door to meet me. It'd been only a few hours since we parted, but I couldn't wait to see him again.

The moment I stepped out of the van, he looped his tail around me and pulled me into his arms.

"What took you so long?" he murmured, nuzzling my hair.

It was a good thing I lived literally in the middle of nowhere, with no one but birds

and squirrels to witness my boyfriend's tail curl around me in the tightest of hugs.

"I have a job, baby," I said patiently. "It takes me away from you occasionally, but I couldn't possibly quit everything and just breeze through life as a mortal sin's girlfriend."

"Why not? You absolutely could. There is literally no reason for you to work other than that you enjoy it."

"But it is a very good reason, isn't it?"

"Whatever brings you joy, dearest." He kissed me. "Are you ready to leave this world now?"

I smiled at the way he put it. From anyone else, it would almost sound like a threat. When Invi said it, he merely invited me back to his hometown.

"Let me just put the car keys in the house, get rid of this winter jacket, and lock the front door," I said. "Then, I'm all yours?—"

Holding out the car keys, I stopped in my tracks, my mouth still hanging open with the last word I said. A large green dragonfly descended on my wrist out of nowhere. Its delicate wings shimmered with iridescence like faucets of a prism.

It was December, with a thin but solid layer of snow already covering the ground. Thick icicles had formed in the corners of the roof of my old house, and any body of water for miles around must be frozen by now.

Yet there it was, a fragile dragonfly sat on my wrist in the dead of winter.

"Invi?" I whispered, not taking my eyes from the marvelous insect. "Could it be? Is it...really from dad?"

“What do you think, sweetheart? How do you feel?”

Animals didn't need a Higher Judgment. They weren't assigned to any one world. Instead, they traveled freely between the worlds, like Invi's duck did when he came from Purgatory with me the morning before the final round of the cake decorating challenge, then returned to Invi's creek with the horologe around his neck.

What I thought? I thought it was absolutely possible for the dragonfly to come see me as a greeting from my dad who was no longer with me.

And what I felt?

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, freeing my mind from as many thoughts as I could to give place to feelings instead.

“I feel love, Invi,” I said softly. “So, so much love. And peace...” I opened my eyes and smiled. “Love is truly immortal, isn't it?”

Invi

“So, what kind of cakes do you have to make this time?” I asked, lying on my side on the second level of my house in Purgatory.

“Both are wedding cakes,” Nic said, licking her spoon.

A warm breeze played with her thick auburn curls, with one falling over her forehead. She sat on the very edge with her feet dangling over the green lawn below and held a crystal cup of yogurt in her hand. I had my tail wrapped around her waist, just in case. Not that she would leap off the second floor, but it made me feel better that I could catch her if she fell.

Tree canopies broke the afternoon sunlight into a myriad of dancing spotlights that

bounced over the grass and the white calla lilies. The ducks dozed in the creek, floating lazily in the water. White-and-green butterflies fluttered around. This was my home, with everything being comforting and familiar. And with Nicole here, it was absolutely perfect.

“Both couples requested floral designs,” she said between spoonfuls of yogurt. “But they couldn’t be more different. One bride wants field flowers—sweet, early-spring vibes, pastels, with just one tier. The other couple ordered a giant seven-tier one, with a gothic theme, and I’m really excited about making it.”

“What kind of flowers are you thinking about?”

“Withered white roses and...” she glanced at me mischievously with her spoon in her mouth, “black calla lilies.”

“Will there be a spot for a zombie duck?”

She dropped her spoon into the cup and laughed, which was exactly why I mentioned the zombie duck. She always laughed when I brought it up, and I loved the sound of her laughter so much, I wished I could bottle it to keep and listen to it on those rare occasions when she wasn’t with me.

“You know what? Maybe I could fit a zombie duck on this one?” she mused. “Or maybe at least some feathers? We can make them from colored pulled sugar. You know those green feathers with the iridescent sheen that male ducks have on their heads? I’ll try to recreate the colors by experimenting with different ingredients. Want to help?”

“I would love to, very much. I got some pearly food coloring from Gul. It may work.”

A wrinkle formed between her eyebrows as she cleared the bowl with her spoon, gathering the last remnants of her blueberry yogurt.

“How is Gul doing?” she asked somberly.

Gul was extremely lucky that Nic had never voiced a single word of complaint about her stay at his place. I still felt that I should’ve at least punched him once or twice for taking Nic away from me, however briefly. But my sweet, kind woman talked me into letting him be. She harbored no ill feelings toward my brother. And since I would do anything for her, she easily convinced me not to retaliate against him.

“Well, you know...” I scratched behind my ear. “Gul is Gul.”

“Has he had any parties recently?”

“No.” I couldn’t deny it. Gul hadn’t been himself lately. He hadn’t had a single party at his house ever since Nicole left. “Honestly, I’m not even sure he sleeps in his house or if he sleeps at all. Last time, I found him wandering aimlessly in his sunflower field.”

“I should go talk to him.” She set aside her empty bowl, but I tightened my tail around her, holding her in place.

“Don’t Nic. You did nothing wrong and have nothing to fix here.”

“Even if losing his ‘prize’ isn’t the cause of his sour mood, Invi, something is eating at him. Do you think he’s missing Ira? Were they close?”

I shrugged. “Not more or less close than any of us are. We all miss Ira. But we didn’t lose him forever. He just got stuck in hell and is working for the demons, for now.”

The sinners dragged Ira into hell, like they had almost dragged me in, too, if it hadn’t been for my brave, stubborn Nicole who held on and refused to let go.

Since Ira didn’t have Nicole to save him, he was stuck in hell now for possibly a few

centuries or longer. But he was able to call Sup and let him know what happened, so that we wouldn't worry too much. Yes, the demons had phones in hell, and they let Ira use one.

Mother left Purgatory the day after the race, finding something better to do elsewhere, which didn't surprise anyone.

And Gul was roaming the sunflower field, looking for something he never had.

"What if Gul needs help?" Nic worried.

"If he does, he'll ask for it." I adjusted my grip on her. "Nic, darling, he's a big sin. He's been around for a long time. One can't possibly live for as long as we have and not have an existential crisis on occasion. He said he wants to be alone. Let's honor his wish and let him be, at least for a little while."

She drew circles with her finger on my tail absentmindedly. "Well, you know him better than I do. I hope you're right."

I reached over to brush the curl dancing in the breeze away from her face. The wrinkle between her eyebrows didn't leave her forehead, and it pained me to see her upset. Whatever bothered her, my instinct was to make it better. And I knew exactly how to distract her from the gloomy thoughts about the matters that she couldn't change and shouldn't be wasting her time worrying about.

"Well. I should probably start on those cakes." She adjusted a strap of the thin white camisole she wore in Purgatory when we were alone. The light material allowed her skin to breathe in the warm air of my wetlands. But it also allowed me to see every curve of her body through it.

Propped on my elbow, I slid a finger down her shoulder, catching the strap to drag it back down.

“Invi?” She glanced at me, caught the heated expression in my eyes, and blushed.

“Mhm?” I hummed, dragging the strap further down her arm.

The embroidered edge of her neckline slid down, too, exposing the voluptuous swell of her breast. I swallowed hard as heat throbbed through my entire length, pooling in my groin.

She angled her head, and repeated my name in a scolding voice now, “Invi.”

The hard bud of her nipple poked against the flimsy fabric of her camisole as I pulled it lower still.

“We have time, don’t we?” I asked innocently.

She licked her lips. “Time for what?”

I shifted the tip of my tail to slide the rattle under her skirt.

“For a little snack for me,” I murmured, leaning over to kiss her bare shoulder.

Her cleavage teased me with the view of the partially exposed areola. My mouth watered, but I couldn’t kiss her breasts in this position.

“May I reposition you, my sweet darling?” I lifted her with my tail.

“Invi!” She squeaked, grabbing onto the coil of my tail around her middle and kicking her feet up in the air.

“No need to fear, dearest. I’ve got you. I just need you a little closer,” I murmured, bringing her to me.

I peeled the fabric away from her breast and finally sucked the tip into my mouth. She gasped, then released a breath with a moan.

Both my cocks sprung out at once at her moan that promised the most exquisite pleasure.

I dipped my hand into her neckline to cup her other breast. Her nipple hardened under my thumb. I squeezed her breast gently, enjoying her warm, pliable body in my hands, then pinched the tip between my fingers, hard enough for her to suck a breath in through her teeth.

“Oh, Invi...it feels so good,” she moaned again as I released her nipple, rubbing it with my thumb again. “So, so good.”

Slipping my rattle between her legs, I made it vibrate just at the right speed to drive her wild with lust but not enough to reach her completion yet.

She writhed in pleasure, trapped in the loops of my tail. With her camisole shoved down her chest and her skirt all the way up to her waist, she presented a delightful picture. But I promised myself a snack.

I rotated her in the air, bringing her sweet pussy to my face. She was already dripping with arousal, and I plunged my tongue inside her, eager to fill my mouth with her taste. I didn't mean to make her come yet. But she tasted exquisite, and I couldn't get enough of her.

I licked, sucked, and nibbled with abandon, until she stilled in my grip then shuddered in climax.

“Oh, you did so good,” I murmured, before curling my long tongue around the hot, tender bud of her clit and milking her orgasm to the last whimper and tremble.

Loosening the coils of my tail from around her, I released her on my chest as I lay down on the warm wooden floor.

“Invi...” she buried her face in my chest. “It’s always like an earthquake with you. Look.” She lifted a hand with her trembling fingers splayed wide. “My whole body is still shaking.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” I smiled contently, tracing a line down the delicate groove of her spine.

She stretched with a soft sound of pleasure. Her foot brushed against one of my cocks.

“But how about you and your own joy?”

“I immensely enjoy touching you, always,” I said sincerely.

She rolled over to her stomach on top of my chest and put her chin on her hands. “But do you like fucking me?”

“I enjoy that too,” I grinned, both cocks bobbing in the air with enthusiasm.

“Good. Could you pass me the oil, please?” Pushing away from my chest, she slithered down my torso like a little wanton serpent until her ass bumped against my cocks.

I slung my tail down to the main floor and swiped a vial of fragrant oil from the stand in the sitting room—another advantage of having no walls in my house and of having an enormously long tail.

She straddled my tail, just below my crotch, doused her hands with the oil, then wrapped her deft little fingers around each of my thick shafts.

I tossed back my head with a loud groan of intense pleasure. She ran her hands down the bumpy protrusions along my both lengths, playing them like instruments. My arousal spiked. Heat throbbed in my groin. My cocks strained so hard, I feared they'd burst.

"Make them smaller, baby," Nic purred, rubbing her tits against the cocks for her and my pleasure.

I rose on my elbows to see her better. I'd be damned if I missed a single detail of my woman enjoying me like that. Grinding my teeth, I forced both appendages to shrink to about half of their size.

"Just a little bit smaller, please," she asked sweetly, and all I could do was obey. "Good..." she approved, breathless from anticipation.

Facing me, she rose on her knees and positioned one of the cocks between her legs, rubbing herself against it.

"Ready?" She wiggled her eyebrows in jest before sinking onto my cock. Leaning forward and sticking her ass up, she bit her lip, working my second cock into her back opening. Then she brought her hips all the way down and stilled.

"How does it feel?" she asked softly, her eyes open wide in wonder.

I strained every part of my being, afraid to move, for if I did, I knew I wouldn't stop. Lust rolled through me in waves, forming pink circles that ran from my crotch up my torso and down to the tip of my tail.

"It feels like heaven, dearest. Just like heaven, I swear." I'd never been to any of the paradises out there and would never be allowed to enter one. But I knew that none of them could possibly be better than being here with her.

She wiggled her butt a little, testing our connection.

“Can you make the one in the front just a little bigger, please? And the one in my ass just a tad smaller?” she asked, commanding my cocks like her own little army, and I couldn’t imagine a better general for that.

“Ride me, sweetheart,” I moaned, complying with her request.

Pressing her hand on my hard belly, she lifted her hips, letting me slide a little out from both of her wonderful holes, then pushed down again, taking me back in. Pleasure spiked higher, blinding and all-consuming. Somehow, I remembered to bring my rattle to her clit. She leaned forward, trapping it between us while she wantonly rode me, my beautiful girl.

“I want you so badly...baby,” she panted, riding me faster. “So...so much.”

Her breath halted, cutting off her words just before her thighs trembled and her inner muscles tightened around me.

And I could no longer hold it. Pure bliss rolled through me in a swell. My usual green color exploded with all the colors of the rainbow as my climax quaked my entire shape from the tip of my horns to the rattle of my tail that was still trapped under Nic’s hot little pussy.

She collapsed on my belly, looking utterly spent. I reached for her and dragged her up to my chest where I could kiss her hair and whisper how much I loved her.

My entire being filled with tenderness so light and warmth, it was a miracle that I didn’t float up into the air.

“I love you too,” she murmured, kissing my chest.

I stroked her hair, smoothing the thick locks down. “There is nowhere else I’d rather be than here with you for the rest of my existence.”