

EXOTIKA

ELLORA'S CAVE

SHAWNA
MOORE

*To Hellé
and Back Again*

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To Hellé and Back Again

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TO HELLÉ AND BACK AGAIN

Shawna Moore

Dedication

Extending much love and gratitude to my mother, father and dear friends. In appreciation of those times when you've offered your love, guidance and sage advice, I dedicate *To Hellé and Back Again* to you all. Life sometimes takes us on rides to places much akin to Hell. But we stare down that devil, Uncertainty, and refuse to blink first.

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Chapter One

Flecks of amber shimmered inside the cinnamon-red orb as it hurtled toward me. Slender fronds filled with sparks waved around its periphery. Every hair on my head strained skyward. The sensation of thousands of fire ants skittering over my scalp competed with the sting of sections of hair being yanked out by the roots.

Caesar's entire army might as well have marched over my chest as the flaming ball smashed against my front. All air heaved from my body and I pitched backward. My ass hit the floor and my head followed. Scalding fingers fondled my naked flesh. The cacophony in my brain built to a thick wave that foamed back and forth.

"Hellé Hawthorn." A raspy voice coming from within the fiery phenomena whispered my name over and over.

A veil of bluish-gray smoke floated over my face. Someone or something touched my scalp. Bile bubbled up in my throat. No matter how fast I moved my eyeballs behind the closed lids, no effort coaxed a single tear.

"Hellé? Hellé? Tell me you're okay."

Menlikus. My lover and best friend who'd risked his life to reach me and save me from a death worse than any my father, the devil, could impose.

Despite the swarms of bees leaving their hives deep within my gray matter, his words and breathing made it past the din.

Faint drags of his fingertips tickled my forehead. Chills consumed me and I swallowed the latest flood of bitter liquid.

"I..." Lifting my arm provided a lesson in futility. I'd been turned into a barely breathing hell-born noodle.

"You might be hurt. Even near death." He stroked my cheek. "Lie still. I'll get help."

"No help, just you, Men." The high tide ebbed inside my brain and I opened my eyes. "Did you see that?"

"See what, honey?" He kissed my lips softly and ran the pad of his finger over my carotid. "Your heart's beating pretty fast. And you're sweating."

I sniffed. Peppermint on his breath. Cocoa oil on his skin.

Several more breaths did the trick. His maleness filled my nose and settled on my tongue.

A slight lift of my body brought a back brace in the form of Men's arm. "I've witnessed some crazy stuff as the devil's daughter but that ball lightning beat all." I rubbed my eye but the stinging remained.

"All I saw was you falling almost as soon as you opened the office window." His smile rested only inches from my mouth but I resisted kissing him. "Are you in any pain?"

My heart ceased skipping the ropes of blood that pumped through each chamber. Another swallow cleared most of the acid.

Bending both legs and rotating my head brought no discomfort. "No. And I don't believe the devil is to blame."

"If not him, who? He's the prime candidate out to burn the ass of the daughter who pissed him off one time too many."

* * * * *

I walked the short distance across the spa's office to the door and back to Menlikus. My clairvoyant powers had diminished since arriving here on Earth but I knew one thing above all else – that ball of sky fire was merely a sample of what was yet to come.

Someone or something was heading on a more sinister – and likely fatal – collision course with me.

Instead of waiting several more days, Death banged at my door in the wee hours of this Wednesday morning.

Almost an hour had passed since the shock of a million lifetimes ripped through my body.

Sixty minutes may not be precious to some, but with my friends' lives and mine in jeopardy every second counted.

"Talk about being given the high-voltage finger. I thought leaving Hell to get here to Earth was painful." My mouth watered for his.

Menlikus placed a gentle kiss on my closed lips. "I never thought I'd see you again. Just wasn't sure I added enough zalendarium to the formula Shenda didn't use."

"I'm glad my moments of mistrusting her proved unfounded and she gave you her vial of formula. Still, I wish she wouldn't have stayed behind in Hell. Daddy has other mistresses. He doesn't need her. Shenda and I were friends for so many centuries."

Menlikus wrapped his arms around my upper body. "You have Gar, Barden and Ulevi. And me. We're all here for you now and always."

The tingling in my fingers couldn't begin to compete with the sensations starting between my legs. "True. And I love you all for your loyalty and so much more. So far Daddy hasn't whipped up those destructive winds and the warp speed global warming he threatened if I didn't get out of Hell."

He lifted my left arm and kissed a hot path over my hand and up my pointer finger. "But he must know by now I have to return to his kingdom to get more zalendarium. Otherwise you and your girlfriends will die."

My nipples tightened as he sucked my first two fingers. "He wouldn't give a damn if we died. But I'm glad you outsmarted him with the formula and beat him at the wrestling game. Any man who figures out a way for the girls and me to stay alive and get sexual pleasure at the same time is the ultimate genius."

Men posed in front of me, his hands gripping his skull. "Flattery will get you everywhere with me. I knew you'd love the idea of being able to suck me off to survive."

"If that's what it takes to stabilize us until our bodies adapt to life aboveground I'm all for giving you lip service. Garmula, Ulevi and Barden can put their shares of the zalendium into some other guys' food though. I'm not about to share you, even with my best girlfriends." He patted my ass. "Now I know there's nothing wrong with you. You're as sexy and territorial as ever."

I bent over at the waist and some of my spinal tension eased. The polish on each of my toes and fingers was cracked, almost as though someone wielding a tiny hammer had struck the center of each nail. "Even the current flowing through du Sade's bondage bed couldn't match the amperage of that ball lightning." On straightening, I rolled my stinging shoulders.

"There's no storm activity outside." His teeth pulverized another peppermint candy. "No interruption of power in here either. Crazy damn thing."

"Crazy doesn't touch this situation. More like malicious intent. Someone is watching me. This was their warning." And if I wasn't mistaken, Menlikus never stared at me as much as he'd done in the past couple minutes. "Have I grown a second head since being knocked on my butt?"

"Noooo... But as long as you say you're okay let's forget the whole thing happened. It was probably just a freak of nature. Happens all the time here on Earth." He tipped a paper cup filled with water against my tingling lips. "Here, this will taste good."

Crazy stuff did happen regularly on Earth.

Crazy stuff but not ball lightning. "What would taste better is sweet revenge. Revenge on the person who hurled that megawatt medicine ball at me a little while ago." A couple more gulps eased the churning in my gut. "Time is a bitch. A bitch with more hissing heads than a roomful of Medusas." The plush seat of the leather chair cradled my tingling butt.

I rested my partially numb hands on my legs. I'd never dreamed staying here on Earth could be more dangerous and burn me more than the men I'd dated while living in Hell.

All men except Menlikus, that is. "Did you call my name earlier?"

He caught the kiss I blew and sat down beside me.

"No." Menlikus wiped the remaining oil off his chest and forearms, wadded the paper towel in his meaty hand and drew back his arm.

"Didn't think so." A run of my tongue over my teeth found none loose or missing.

"Together we'll figure this out." The right arm that had held me so many times over the centuries extended and hurled the trash over the reception desk. "Never seen anyone outsmart Satan's only daughter. Once my love sets her mind to something, nothing can stop her."

The remnant of our early morning massage and some other paper whispered against the bottom of the wastebasket.

Shivers skittered down my spine. "That ball lightning sure tried. We have less than week to figure a way of getting one or both of us to Hell for more zalendium. That's the only way the girls and I will survive here on Earth. If we can make it a month, we can make it up here forever. But in the meantime, I have to find some Zyrs."

The best man in this world or any other abandoned the trendiest piece of steel deco furniture in Sin City and knelt at my feet. "What's a Zyr? Can one of them guarantee me safe passage to and from the devil's domain?"

"You? I never said I'd let you go back to Hades alone. Or go at all. It's up to me to ensure the survival of my friends and myself. No way do I want you taking more chances." My right leg lifted at his touch and I skimmed his lips with my toes.

No matter what we faced, Menlikus wouldn't surrender his toe-sucking fetish.

I shivered as he pecked minted kisses over the tips of each toe, lingering longest at the largest one. His tongue circled the sensitive underpad.

My burning lips set the moan free. "Zyrs are creatures similar to vampires yet they only need a daily sip of blood. Even as little as a thimbleful will slake their hunger. Most of them satisfy this craving with raw meat from the supermarket. Zyrs also absorb positive, creative and psychic energy."

"They only come out at night?" Furrows creased Men's forehead.

"No." Leaning forward, I pushed my big toe past his half-open lips. "They are humans who have made a pact with the devil. They are seen daytime and nighttime. In every city across the world you can find Zyrs."

"Why have I never heard of them before?" He licked the underside of my toe harder, the pulsing in his tongue matching the rhythm of my heart.

"Only the devil and those born of his blood have the ability to spot Zyrs. A Zyr was responsible for creating my new identity. And for putting a digital and paper trail in place to support my supposedly stolen identity. Zyrs up here can help me with most anything. A car. Money. Insurance. Legal paperwork. You name it."

"Interesting as long as you can trust them. If only one of them had some zalendium." Men sucked harder and his groans blended with mine.

"Like when dealing with anyone e-else, especially His Royal Pain in the Ass, you...have to watch your back."

"And your sexy ass." He set my aching big toe free and nibble-sucked a hasty path over the remaining toes. His steady, hot hands gripped my thighs and hauled me to the edge of my seat. "But no man will be touching your perfect butt as long as I'm around."

At the flaring of my lover-beast's nostrils my legs parted quicker than Garmula's bed curtain panels when one of her favorite Impressionist painters came into her cave down in Hell. "You're the only man I need."

His hot, heaved breath winnowed up my leg.

"Shouldn't be too hard to find a fresh corpse. The dead body will provide the flesh suit I'll wear when descending to Hell." He surged forward and between my legs. Part of his long-enough-to-make-any-woman-want-more tongue flashed out and flicked against my wet pussy. "Once I reach Kellion, I'll pause. The cadaver will drop to Hell. Sir Satan can't see into Kellion so I'll be safe. After a short time I'll continue down to the platform."

A thrust of my hips brought the rough tip of his tongue against my clit. "You might misjudge the portal or end up somewhere other than the platform."

"Not a chance." He took his mouth off me, looked up and winked. "Your body temperature is only one of the things that makes you the hottest woman ever. When you left Hell you left your heat signature behind on the transferal platform. I know how hot you get when you're determined to do something you want but the devil doesn't. If I'd touch you at those times you'd burn flesh and everything else right off my bones. That's why I'm confident. Confident the section of metal on which you stood will still be steaming when I get back down there."

Always the positive thinker, my Menlikus.

But I hadn't agreed to letting him go back to Hell alone.

Slap-slap. Slap-slap.

Barden's slippers.

The minion who most loved making mischief—and making men beg for more rounds of sex with her—appeared and waved her arms overhead in a half attempt at stretching.

After licking her kiss-swollen lips, she yawned. "You two out here still making up for lost time? What was that thump a while ago?"

"Hellé got hit by this bizarre ball lightning." Men nibbled a crooked path up my calf and kissed my knee. "Never seen such a thing. Came at her from out of nowhere when she opened the window."

How best to tell my girlfriend we all had bull's eyes painted on our butts and boobs? "Men and I are planning a way to get him back to Hell."

"Hit by lightning? Are you okay?" Barden rushed over to me and sucked her thumb for a moment. "Wait a minute. Get him back to Hell? He just got here and you want him to leave already?" She presented us her back, hopped up onto the counter and spun around.

Good thing the man of my hour and more was busy stroking my thighs with his tongue and fingertips.

Barden delighted in forgetting her panties and flashing men her pussy. Even if said men were forever off limits to her claws and domination games.

She crossed her long legs.

"I'm fine for now but our time up here is marked." Grabbing two handfuls of Men's hair, I guided his mouth higher. "Men discovered a flaw in my formula and corrected it to get here and save us. We girls need more of a mineral that's found in his cave wall to sustain us."

The next yawn opened her mouth wider. "A fucked-up formula? That can't be. You don't make mistakes." She grabbed her head with both hands and thrashed it from side to side. "It's too early in the morning for all this crappy news."

I let go of Menlikus and pointed toward the back hallway. "Return to Talon and keep him company. Men and I have to sort things out."

Her nervous leg habit almost launched her left slipper. "Once you two get the mineral then what? How will it help us?"

After closing my eyes I slowly counted backward from ten. "You, Ulevi and Garmula will have the pleasure of coating your tongues with it before giving a guy some special head. Once he gets off, you'll get more time on Earth."

"Oooh. That's so much better than vitamins." She smacked her lips. "Pure genius. What better way to wash our medicine down?" Another spin faced her in the direction of Talon, a rock star who snored louder than any pack of wild dogs or men. "Once Talon gets up, he and I are going to have our initials tattooed on our hips." She hopped down, backed up several paces, turned to face me and pulled her left breast free of the vinyl bra cup. "He loves sucking my nipples. Can't get enough of me or so he says."

That concert-loving hellion had more sexual adventures than those experienced by ten concubines.

But her heart of gold mattered most in our friendship.

Before I said another word she sprinted toward the backroom where Talon was rousing. Rousing and no doubt sporting a hard cock that would keep her mouth busy far longer than it took Men and me to plot his hellish return.

"Get in some good licks with that drummer of yours." Practice that would serve her well once Menlikus or I returned with the zalendarium.

No sooner had I pushed up and off the seat than Menlikus grabbed my ass and played his mouth over my pussy. Hard to tell which throbbed harder—the balls of my feet or my clit.

My fingers buried themselves again in his rust-brown hair. His fondness of mints made my pussy tingle. How lucky I was. Not every woman had a man who would risk his life and punishment of unspeakable means to save her from death.

The boiling beneath my belly spilled lower and flashed down both legs. His fingers kneaded my buttocks and I rose onto the tips my toes.

Only once my eyelids closed did the ambient lighting that leaked out of the glassy bulbs stop boring into my eyes and brain. Freed by unseen fingers, the knot deep inside me opened. He tongued me harder and I swallowed the scream that would wake the building's couple of tenants if I set it free.

His lips left my skin and he caught me around the waist. Our damp bodies pressed close. Our moans gasped out.

Cooler air whistled around me as he twirled us around the room in time to a tempo playing only in his head. One glance into his gray eyes told more than the truth.

It told me I had to be careful and do everything possible to keep him as close to my heart as the blood within.

Laughter rumbled in his throat and his kissable lips freed the magical sound. He lifted and cradled me. A playful butt pinch stilled my squirming. While one of his arms continued pinning me, his free hand fished in the skeleton head candy dish and emerged with a silver-wrapped candy miniature.

His fingers made short work of the tinfoil and he tucked the tablet of dark chocolate inside my mouth. Liquid sweetness dripped onto my tongue and trickled toward my throat. My next muffled groan eroded more of the sticky breakfast that was bad for my hips but good for a special time with Menlikus.

The masculine teeth that had bitten into grape after grape—and sprayed the sweet-scented fruit juice over my breasts and belly on our first hell-meet—closed around the bit of candy bar protruding from my mouth.

Our lips touched for only a nanosecond before he devoured his part of the treat. "Just how will you find these Zyrs?"

My steamy kisses cleaned the stickiness off his lips. I licked the transferred chocolate gloss from my mouth. "Shortly after the minions arrived they combed the city and spread the word about Comus."

"What's special about Comus?" He resumed his intense staring at my forehead for a moment before looking away. "Well, other than the fact it caters to men's fantasies?"

"Zyrs bear the mark of the god Comus." My man-hungry lips targeted his nose. "Images of a descending torch and feather from Comus' wing are tattooed on their inner thigh or sometimes on their scrotum. Only the devil and those born of his blood can see the mark. Zyrs have a deal with Daddy." On shifting position I freed my right arm and rubbed Men's back. "He appears to them prior to a life-threatening, dangerous or troubling situation. If they promise to do one illicit or naughty deed within twenty-four hours he agrees to spare them the badness and guide them away from disaster."

"What if they promise him then go back on their promise?" The gray in his eyes took on a golden cast.

"He either kills them instantly or makes their lives intolerable in more ways than one. But they usually comply. Daddy knows whom to pick for his disciples—most of them while they're still on Earth."

He whistled low. "That's some recruiting system."

With the nail on my left forefinger, I traced the shell of his ear. "The rest of the devil's lot is chosen once they enter his kingdom. Some of his potentials resist outright and ask him to take them straight to Hell to avoid possible further suffering. Especially if they aren't sure they can meet his terms or if they are really ill." Each stroke of my hand over his muscled upper back intensified the ache in my heart.

Menlikus was willing to risk his life again for my friends and me.

If our plans failed...

His lashes touched together for a fleeting moment. "What you need is help from those who might not be Zyrs. Clergymen. Cops..."

Placing my finger on his cheek, I stilled the tic. "There are sinners in all walks of life. All professions. Christians yield to temptation. Those chosen don't have to draw blood or do something illegal to satisfy Satan. Many have simply engaged in a legal but more explicit sexual practice they would normally shun."

He nuzzled the side of my head. "Zyrs have eternal life?"

"No. They have a mortal lifespan, more or less. They don't automatically live for hundreds or thousands of years simply because they are allied with Satan." The bulge of his biceps more than filled my trembling hand. "They continue their service to him in Hell once their mortal lives end. If Daddy had the selection process any other way it would become suspect. He has his reasons and ways although I don't agree with most of them."

Men's squint brought out those sexy lines beside his sparkling eyes. "How does he put the mark of Comus on them?"

"Once they fulfill their promise, the chosen are visited in their sleep by the Oreads or Eros, who brand them with the images." I puffed an eyelash off his cheek. "After the mark is made, the brander has a bit of sexual fun for accomplishing his or her mission."

More than a bit of fun in some cases.

The first part of my favorite tune hummed behind his sealed lips. "Humans can't see the mark?"

"Not a chance. Only other Zyrs, Satan and his offspring have such keen sight." As he carried me past the candy dish, I reached for another piece but caught only air. "Actually, I'm probably the only one of the devil's children who bothered learning how to detect the faint tattoo. My brothers rarely come up for air from fucking to watch what goes on in the real world."

His next laugh rode a chariot and whipped over my face on wheels made of the wind. "Those two will forever serve themselves, their dicks and their father."

"At first I thought *you* might be a *cop*." I swallowed fast and killed the approaching hiccup. "Then possibly a Zyr when you didn't haul our butts in for questioning. But once you were naked below the waist... Well, that's when I was really puzzled as to your real identity."

Men set me back on my feet and propped me against the reception desk. Heat as intense as hellfire was exchanged between our bodies. "Never forget you likely prevented a disaster up here by leaving Hades."

"Hard to tell. But I couldn't take a chance and let His Royal Pain in the Ass wreak havoc on innocent humans. What worries me now is what will happen if he discovers you sneaking back into his realm." The more I squirmed against him the more droplets squeezed from his bare cock and wet my belly.

His chocolate-and-peppermint-scented hands framed my face. "Can he really see and sense everything? Everything except Kellion?"

"No." I glanced at the ceiling then back at Men. "Only the man up there has such all-seeing power. Contrary to what mortals think, the devil defines his focus. When he's not occupied with Shenda or another mistress, Daddy gazes at the World Screen. But he only hones in on so many places around the globe each day."

Men's scowl morphed into a grin. "So it's possible he might not even be aware of our plan?"

Using my thumbs, I spread his smile wider. "Entirely possible. Satan got rid of me. That was his ultimate goal. I was always more powerful than my brothers. The only one who dared standing up to Daddy and telling him the truth. If it means not endangering you further...saving the lives of my friends as well as my own...I'll risk returning to Hell."

Something thumped against the front door's metal handle. The brass bell smacked against the glass. A rush of salt-tangy air followed. Menlikus stepped back and spun toward the noise.

I'd locked that door after two of our party guests left around three this morning.

One heartbeat after another caused a fluttering traffic jam in my throat. To my left lay a leering face that wore spiked black hair, blue-black eyes, a slender nose and a mouth that probably told more lies than were ever pathologically documented.

No doubt this man was more trouble than the devil.

Handsome than most mortals and likely harder to shake off than Daddy's python.

The door slapped closed and he narrowed the distance between himself and us. One of his meaty hands raked through his close-cropped hair. The other tugged his belt free from the silver buckle.

Long fingers capable of stroking a lyre or the strings of any woman's heart to pleasing result fondled the free end of the leather accessory. "I've heard you work wonders with muscle pulls."

Why bother telling this brazen early riser we weren't yet open for massage business? I brushed past Menlikus but he caught my right hand.

"I..." The rest of the words went down with my spit.

Were my eyes playing tricks on me since my fall, or was a vaporous golden mist emanating from our visitor's skin? Several blinks failed at eliminating the effluent carrying the odor of rotten eggs.

There was definitely a mist.

A glowing yellow mist so fine only my eyes could detect it.

Was he a Zyr? If so, I'd never heard of a Zyr who radiated such an odd chemical signature.

Only one way to find out.

Another swallow set my blood-pumping organ on an even course.

Do whatever it takes to reveal his real motive for coming here.

Garmula's giggles blended with the stranger's harsh breathing. If only she would learn to curb her curious ways.

One would think that several ass-scorching rounds with the devil and Shenda would have taught her a lesson.

"I'll see which one of the girls is free to provide you a massage."

His grin rivaled Daddy's on his most devilish day. "I don't want one of them. I want *you*."

Chapter Two

For ten minutes it proved a trial figuring whether the pulled muscle was in our visitor's groin or in his head. Each bottle of massage oil I picked failed to suit him. If he mentioned J's assortment of balms and lotions once more I'd send him up to that boutique special delivery.

My shoes were meant for more than posing.

One well-aimed plant of my pointy-toed pump would guarantee a change of topic.

Menlikus whispered to Garmula as she switched on the CD player. Woodwinds and strings filled the suite with a pastoral selection. A piccolo chortled several times then silenced.

The stranger in leather wrapped his arm around my waist. My nostrils tingled and my mouth watered with each whiff of him.

Why bother using oil when he had to be slick with sweat?

Garmula flapped two mango-colored body-sized towels at us. "We aren't therapists, if that's what you need."

As I reached for the flacon of coconut-mandarin oil, mystery man snatched my hands. "Not necessary. I'm not into being oiled up." His thumbs stretched and the pads fitted over my radial pulse. "Those two men weren't complaining when they left here. Your strong hands could probably work out anything."

And they could also set him on his ass if he tried anything funny.

I looked past his shoulder. He knew about our other party guests. For some reason he watched Comus and I probably wouldn't care for his answer.

"We're all about providing the best." Barden peeped out from the back room, wearing a white lace thong and pinching her nipples. "If Hellé can't bring a man to his knees and make him feel better no one can."

The latest bulletin from Miss Blabbermouth might be the last one issued inside Comus. If Mister Muscle Pull were with Vice our butts would be better off at the hands and paddle of the burly fetishist who once proved a face and force to be reckoned with in the London's Underground in the sixties.

"Hope you aren't a cop." Garmula cast the towels onto the nearest massage table and fluffed her bed hair into a wilder mess.

The man whose scent reminded me of a walk along a desert canyon laughed and kissed each of my fingertips. "I'm not Vice. I play far too dirty to be with them."

No doubt, but he could still be bluffing.

A deeper breath burned at hitting my tongue. Since his arrival, the guy with the bedroom eyes hadn't lit any matches. Nor had we.

Yet there was the faint yet distinct tang of spent matches in here.

I glanced at Menlikus and mouthed his three favorite words—I love you. He settled on the camel leather recliner, his gaze fixed on the man who'd requested my hands.

And who would likely request much more if I didn't take charge of the situation.

"Bet you wouldn't mind if more than one of us worked on your muscles." Barden turned around, stuck out her ass and slapped the fullest part of the left cheek. "We girlfriends do lots of things together."

"Especially men." Garmula puckered and blew us a cinnamon kiss.

The uses that girl had for chocolate, candy and assorted spices boggled even my liberal mind.

"I'd like that some other time but today I want Hellé Hawthorn." He grabbed the hemline of his dark-brown tee and pulled the snug garment over his head.

Halos of black hair rimmed his taut nipples. Smatterings of the same coarse curls continued over his chest and down to the waistband of his pants.

"Suppose she's busy?" The fingers on Men's right hand bunched tighter than we girls did at the entrance to a heavy-metal guitarist's cave when he hosted an impromptu concert days before my sixteen-hundredth birthday.

My so-called client shucked off his shirt at Men's outburst. "When Hellé hears what else I have to say she'll make time for me."

Garmula whispered something to Barden and they headed back to where Talon was hollering for another ménage.

If only I hadn't lost some of my power, I'd burn this smart aleck's brain with some well-planted words of my own. And I wouldn't have to open my mouth to accomplish the task.

But I couldn't risk alienating a man who might be a Zyr. I arranged the towels on the table and patted the place where he'd lay. "Make yourself comfortable. I don't believe you ever mentioned your name?"

His strides matched those of Mercury when he paraded into the Delvinium and lit the torches during one of the most memorable bacchanals in Hades.

Regal.

Cocksure.

Well-spoken.

But the main thing this moody man possessed was animal magnetism.

"I'm Van." He licked both lips. "I'd say it's a pleasure meeting everyone but that doesn't hold true."

"If you don't care for my presence, tough shit." Men slammed his fist against the chair arm. "I'm not going anywhere."

“And neither am I.” Van’s thick thumb and forefinger popped the snap on his pants and eased the zipper down. His stare was fierce enough to bore holes in the ceiling panels. “Not until Hellé and I have it out.”

Menlikus stared past Hellé and Van. That fucknuts had no clue he was dealing with the devil’s daughter and a man who had bested Satan in a wrestling match.

Barden, Garmula and Ulevi could hold their own if the situation turned sexual but only if they hadn’t already spent their spare immortal energy.

He worked his tongue over the backs of his teeth. Not since she’d tripped and fallen into the Wiruni Pool as a child had the woman he loved been so far in over her head.

Something about this Van.

Something that reeked more than skunk piss and burned more than acid.

For someone who always possessed a bounty of common sense, Hellé seemed to have momentarily veered so far off the sensible course it was scary. On a half-good day she would have sent this stranger packing.

A day spa for women or a nail salon would have been better business ventures for her and the girls.

Instead she went ahead, answered the siren’s wail of her desires and opened Comus.

He abandoned the recliner and climbed onto the farthest massage table. From here he could watch and respond at a nanosecond’s notice if Hellé needed help.

Just what was this Van’s game?

If he wanted Hellé, Leather Boy would find the competition for her heart much stiffer than his dick.

Garmula and Barden raced into the back hallway with Talon hot on their heels. Ulevi remained out of sight, probably because she’d consumed too much candy and too much cock for too many hours on end.

Whatever.

His focus must remain on Van. If he glanced away for even a split-second more than hell might break loose.

Hellé gnawed her lips and refrained from looking at him.

You’re not fooling me, pretty lady. You’re scared.

You don’t know if this guy is a cop, a sadist or a stalker.

Or maybe a sexual vampire?

“Can’t he find something else to do while you’re working on my leg?” Van leaned against the table.

Hellé looked at him and back at Van. She repeated the process several times.

Yes, I know, honey. Van could be a Zyr.

If so there isn't any sense antagonizing him off too much or you won't benefit from his help.

He sniffed. Good. Hellé wasn't wet.

Despite the faint odor of rotten eggs coming from her client, her arousal scent remained one he detected no matter what.

The cocksure stranger hadn't turned her on in the slightest. That guy couldn't even bother to shower before coming here. Only someone with shit for brains wore leather pants in the desert heat.

Or someone who got off on extremes.

A slight reach to the left put his hand in contact with a purple exercise ball. He palmed the squishy device.

Not bad.

Helped the wrist pain and gave him something to squeeze instead of squeezing that leather-wearing bastard's balls.

Another squeeze split the latex sheath. Sand spilled over his leg and onto the carpet. "My business is right here in the room. With Hellé. She might soon be pulling your leg but you sure aren't pulling mine."

Hellé swallowed the laugh. Always quick-tongued, the love of my life. And quick-tempered whenever another man threatens our love bond.

The lunchbox-style chocolate pudding I'd eaten a couple hours earlier revisited my tonsils. My belly churned harder.

If Van tried anything untoward, Men sat poised and ready to strike faster than any of the serpents in Satan's Toamu Pit.

While his bites on my neck, clit and nipples always brought the most delicious cold chills, Men's teeth split flesh and muscle as easily as they did butter.

And human flesh wasn't as hearty as the skin worn by those in Hell.

What a dilemma.

Just when Men and I were getting down to some serious reunion business.

But only by stripping off Van's tight pants could I reveal the truth—if he bore the mark of a Zyr or was simply another guy who wanted hands-on attention from the latest masseuse in Sin City.

Hopefully Men's patient nature would prevail and he'd remain over there on the table when I undressed our visitor.

But the fact he'd already split the exercise ball didn't bode well.

As I assumed a crouch in front of Van, he tousled my hair. Blood beat underneath my fingernails as they pulled the leather away from his flesh. The stirring in my brain matched the churning in my belly.

"Keep going, Hellé. You can't deny me. You've no choice. If you don't put those hands on me you'll never know what will mark your days on the Strip."

Mark? Days? Van presented as a master of deceit. Had he simply sealed a deal with the devil and remained here on Earth to serve out the remainder of a mortal life sentence?

Or perhaps his agenda reeked of ruin more than he?

Regardless, there was no way I'd cater to his request if it involved anything sexual.

The heels of my hands pushed the pants below his knees. "You seem more interested in aggravating me than in seeking my help. If you're only here to cause trouble you know where the door is."

"Damn right." Menlikus brushed the sand off his thigh. "And if you start anything with Hellé you'll finish it with me."

"That so?" Van's laugh mimicked the sound made when someone tried to clear his throat from a swig of whiskey that went down the wrong way.

His wide-legged stance provided unimpeded views of his inner thighs. No mark of the Zyr there.

A growl filtered across the room and cycled in my brain. Even Menlikus suspected my next move.

Damn this black-haired man for ruining my romantic moment with the man who'd vowed he'd go to Hell and back again to save my life and the lives of my friends.

"Have to admit I like your approach to therapy." Van's hand passed over the top of my head but didn't touch a single hair.

His full-blooded cock stabbed straight at my mouth. Ducking a bit lower, I examined his balls.

No mark.

No play.

Game over, Mystery Guy. "Do you have any other pains or muscle complaints?"

Most women might be spellbound by his goods but I wasn't about to get touchy-feely with a man whose motives for coming here were questionable at best.

As I stood up and peeked around the six-foot-something male barrier, a sulfuric stench and Men's stare hit me square in the face.

Van reached over his left shoulder and tapped his back. "Lots of soreness there some mornings."

"Then we'll use hot and cold therapy. And you can leave your pants on." Perfectly ethical therapeutic approach and one that wouldn't get me into any trouble with a possible undercover cop.

"Fine." Van pulled up the biker pants. The zipper hissed on its way to the top of the metal track. "Tell me where to go."

Men abandoned the chair. His foot stomped and sand scattered. "Go to Hell."

This time Van's laugh rumbled louder. "The devil wouldn't have me."

* * * * *

Garmula helped me carry the heating unit and cold stones from the back room. "Hope you charge him enough for this. I interrupted a perfectly awesome orgasm to get these stones up to the proper temperature."

"And your sacrifice will be rewarded."

"Anything for a friend. Besides," she said, and giggled and nodded in the direction of the ménage, "Talon can't handle more than one woman for very long. Hey, look at that."

In the therapy area, Menlikus stood within a foot of the massage table. Every muscle tense. Ready to strike. Staring at the naked back of the man named Van.

The man who wasn't a Zyr.

Garmula moved the stack of magazines off the table and plugged in the unit. Inside the black velvet satchel the hunks of massage stone shifted. The rich *kiss-click* of marble meeting marble. Made me wet remembering how, when we were in Hell, Men sucked my nipples until they ached then glided cold hunks of marble over them. His application of the stones eased the thrum of blood that sometimes threatened to split my skin if my heart got too much of his loving and lusty ways.

"Thought you'd forgotten me." Van folded his fingers together and propped his chin on his hands. "But I will admit you have a good watchdog."

Men shot me a glance. "If I was inclined to bite anyone you'd be long since dead. Your kind isn't a kind women trust."

"And yours is?" Van's guffaw rocked the massage table.

Men's fist collapsed the corner of the black table pad. "D—"

"Since you have a couple of complaints we'll deal with the most severe one first." I removed the pieces of marble and laid them beside Van.

Turning away from the antagonist, I grabbed Menlikus' hand. As our fingers intertwined, I squeezed. Eyes closed, I let the memory of our first date flit around my brain. Took the better part of a week for the water in the Wiruni Pool to run clear of the chocolate we'd poured into it for a late-night swim.

Only Shenda's excitement over the whole issue, and the fact her time spent there with Daddy brought out her second biggest hunger, had prevented a white-hot clash between the devil and me. All over a sinfully delicious date with Menlikus.

The scant hair on my arms and the back of my neck stood on end. Blood pulsed hotter throughout my body and I let him go.

Those five stones would retain their temperature as I carried them from the unit. I didn't need hellfire to be hot anymore.

Earth had electricity.

Van reached past the table. His fingers beckoned me. "You know all about chakras and balance?"

Men erected a blockade but stepped aside at my approach.

If I didn't know better I'd swear my lover was jealous of this morning's visitor. And for no good reason. "I've studied many forms of therapy."

One after another I spaced the hot stones along his back. While most would flinch a bit at being exposed to an object registering a hundred fifty degrees, Van snuggled close the table cushion.

A sigh gurgled in his throat. "The granite stones you're using are from Norway. And you've chosen Carrera marble for my muscle pull. An absolutely perfect marriage. Your intelligence matches your beauty."

Men glowered and grabbed a magazine. "And she also recognizes bullshit when it's slung."

My handholding with Men and the residual warmth from fondling the stone brought out the best in my massage technique. Each manipulation of Van's flesh raised the scent of his sulfuric musk in the room.

As I smoothed my hands over the muscles on his flanks, Van ground himself against the massage table.

"Are you feeling better? Is the backache subsiding?"

"Haven't enjoyed something this much in I can't say how long." Van's sigh followed ones coming from the spa's back room.

The tang of leather melded with the ripeness of his natural scent and escalated the banging in my brain.

This man knew his way around a woman.

And there weren't likely many, if any, who turned him away from their beds.

As long as he took a shower first.

Men gripped the open magazine and split its papery spine. "Hellé charges by the half-hour and there are other clients already scheduled."

Nice lie, Men.

"Time to change these stones. Heat will speed your healing." I lifted the oval stone laying close Van's sacrum.

Steam oozed between my fingers and I dropped the stone. *What the...?*

"Okay back there?" Van splayed his legs farther apart. "Or am I making you nervous?"

Nervous was for first dates, first sex and piano recitals.

After grabbing the body-sized Turkish towel, I scooped up the lava-hot rocks and deposited them in the heating unit.

As they hit the bonded protective coating they sizzled and I fanned the rising fog. "It's just been a bad morning."

"That got worse about fifteen minutes ago." Only Menlikus' good looks ran deeper than his jealous streak. The sections of ruined magazine left his hands and hit the recliner seat.

At my urging Van turned over and lay on his back. Hair blacker than my daddy's eyes covered parts of his chest and tight abdomen. Despite his movements the marble rocks remained on the table.

"Do you need me to remove my pants so you can manipulate the area around my muscle pull?" Cobalt and green speckles appeared in Van's pupils.

"No. Lie still." A quick palpation revealed inflammation of his crus. I unzipped his pants to a point that allowed me to slip a corner of the marble stone over the lateral most point of the muscle's attachment.

Hot peppermint breath billowed against my left ear. "Get that jerk out of here."

Men only whispered when danger or Daddy lurked nearby.

"Shouldn't take much longer." I reached back and cuffed Men's cock with my cooler hand.

A couple pumps stiffened what I wanted between my legs.

"You into sex with more than one man at a time, Hellé?" Beneath the zipper panel Van's cock was far more swollen than any of his pulled muscles.

If I didn't get that hunk of marble off Van's crotch Men might ram it down my latest client's throat.

Or shove it somewhere that would require proctologic intervention.

As my fingers closed over the Carrera marble, I clamped my teeth over my tongue. The stinging tracked to my toes and the top of my skull. I let go of the scalding therapeutic stone and staggered backward against Menlikus.

Men on Earth were hot but this black-haired stranger was taking things to the extreme.

Either Van could turn up his body heat... No. It simply wasn't possible. A roll of my shoulders freed me from Menlikus' hold.

"Hellé, something is wrong. I can come back another time. Maybe then your watchdog will be sleeping." Van tickled his fingers over the smooth surface of the marble stone I'd used.

"Don't bother." Men stormed around the front of the table.

I mimicked Van's motions and stroked the stone. Cool to touch, as it should be.

But it hadn't been that way a moment before.

And heat of the intensity that I'd felt didn't normally dissipate that quickly on Earth.

My contact with that ball lightning must have really skewed my system.

The lightning strike had to be the reason I experienced surges of intense heat when touching those stones. Stones that weren't nearly as hot as the coals comprising the

Jhara Path. Even as a young child I'd skipped over them without so much as a whimper.

Van slung his legs over the table and slid off. He claimed his t-shirt and finished dressing. "We all have bad days now and again." Without making eye contact, he slinked toward the front door. At reaching the reception desk he reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a piece of yellow paper. "Sorry to make your already shitty day worse, but you better take a look at this."

Chapter Three

Menlikus crushed the empty whipped topping can. "If that jerk had stayed here one more second this would have been his skull." He twisted the mass of metal and ripped it into two sections.

"But he's done us a major favor. Even if he's not a Zyr." I entered the last code sequence Van had provided.

The next breath brought Barden's new chocolate-marshmallow perfume. A little went a long way.

Sweet Stuff and her entourage had finally emerged from the back room. Soft slaps of hands against skin. Loud sloppy kisses. Ulevi wanting Talon to put the speckled glass wand in her pussy one more time before they went out for coffee and Hell only knew what else.

A click of the mouse removed the web page I'd loaded. No sense in alarming them until I checked out Van's lead.

"Look at that." Barden's fuchsia manicure drummed on the desktop. "Working again. Don't you know how to have fun?"

"You and Menlikus should join us. Talon knows a great place for jelly doughnuts." Garmula hugged me and tried hauling me out of the chair.

But when I was on the scent of a man possibly preparing to screw me over, and not in a good way, my butt wasn't into budging. "You four enjoy. Men and I'll have more fun staying here. And don't forget those two guys coming in around eleven thirty."

Garmula perched on the desk, her skirt hiked up to within an inch of her crotch. She removed a tube of cranberry gloss from her wristlet and sponged some on my mouth. "You want us to kiss off? Right?" Climbing down, she posed between Men and me. "Don't do anything I wouldn't."

If only she knew. "You'll get the abridged version later."

Talon coughed and hooked an arm around Ulevi's and Barden's shoulders. His grin flashed the gold caps on his canine teeth. "I'm getting an extra cream-filled doughnut."

His pinch on Ulevi's ass made her holler. The girls got away from the rocker and entertained each other in the hallway with a bump and grind.

One-way glass might prevent some from seeing their antics but my eyes didn't miss a thing.

"Eat whatever, whenever." I swatted Garmula and she joined the merry trio. "I'm busy."

"Too busy for Menlikus to put cream or jelly on you and eat it off?" Garmula yanked her tight yellow *I am woman* t-shirt up to her neck. In order to reveal the hiding place of her skull and crossbones tat, she lifted her right breast and licked the nipple.

Ulevi and Barden continued their butt-slapping, giggling party beyond the barrier of security glass.

Talon held the door for Garmula and winked. "Playing's more fun than working. I never got a chance to play with you."

"And you never will." Menlikus picked up the umbrella he'd used when playing Charlie Chaplin and stabbed the steel tip into the carpeting.

I reached into the desk drawer and removed an orange-flavored lollipop left over from the Halloween party and tossed it at Talon. "Play with that."

Talon caught the candy, tore off the cellophane wrapper and shoved my offering so far back into his mouth only a smidgeon of stick poked between his lips. His cheeks caved in for a moment and then he puffed them out.

When I stared him down and remained silent, he saluted us and joined the hallway revelry.

Once I ran my errand and returned here, Men and I would brainstorm another place to live and conduct business. Something about this suite, about the whole damn ease with which I garnered that lease, smelled worse than the collective boots of Caesar's army when they returned from battle.

Men held the umbrella as some held a javelin. As he drew back his arm, his biceps bulged. Teeth gritted, he aimed the rainy-day accessory past my head. "Some men are jackasses."

"And then there's you." I patted the spot where Garmula had propped a short time earlier.

My chair no sooner did a one-eighty and the umbrella swished down and landed on the table where Van had lain.

Dead center.

I returned the text box to its normal position and continued typing. Was Menlikus really lucky enough to elude the devil? Or had someone else intervened and paved the way for his safe journey here to warn us?

Someone of perhaps a higher power than Satan?

Someone who would look beyond my birthright and see my soul and conscience?

Men kissed the top of my head and I typed the last of the code. A pack of wolves howled inside my head and prompted a stampede of elephants up my sternum. At reaching my throat, the jungle beasts trumpeted and lay down. Several swallows later I freed the words from underneath the imaginary animals' hides. "Hacking into a person's corporate files isn't something I've ever done."

"You had to know if Van was up to no good. I still think he's luring you into a trap." Men removed two paperclips from the gray magnetized container.

Before I took three breaths and blew them out he twisted the wire into a crooked rendering of a locust's body. With each scroll of data my gut spilled more acid.

My tapping finger deposited moisture but no print on the laptop's screen. "He isn't. And I don't think it's a trap. Look at this."

* * * * *

For almost fifteen minutes Menlikus paced the front office and therapy area while the words on the computer screen bore into my brain. Jared Strong definitely got around. And likely piqued the interest of more people than the women he seduced, married and divorced. Earlier research confirmed him as a giant in the construction industry.

Strong ruled the undeveloped desert and much of the Northwest.

If Daddy were ever to choose a perfect disciple, that scumbag would be at or near the top of his most-wanted list. "Interesting how Jared typed out what appears to be the story he gave police. Probably for rehearsal and memorization."

Glug. Gluggg-glug. The water cooler belched another time before settling.

Menlikus tipped the paper cup to my lips and poured the water over my tongue. "Don't doubt that."

Scalding stones. Mysterious men arriving at Comus. What next? I swallowed and nudged Men's hand away from my face.

Hellfire flared from my scalp to my toes. "Jared's third wife is still missing. He claims to know nothing of her whereabouts. From these police file notes he loves rubbing his power in everyone's face. But if he tries making trouble for us he'll find out I'm not like his other tenants or business associates."

"Van must have connections inside Strong's empire. Some IT guy there probably helped him out. Otherwise, how would he have managed hacking into Strong's system?" With a couple gulps Men finished the rest of the water. "Pisses me off Van gave you the code. You'll be implicated in an electronic break-in."

"I don't think Van hacked the system. He only provided me with the code. My gut tells me he has abilities that defy simple explanation. Can't say how, but Van knew it was better I did the hacking." I closed out of the file and headed toward my stilettos. "And I'm about to give Strong another look at the woman he shouldn't cross."

"Better you did the hacking? How do you figure?" Menlikus walked an arc around me. "Aren't you worried about the police tracking you down? You aren't exactly above suspicion with that stolen identity ruse, Hellé."

First the left foot then the right slipped into the shoes I'd use to kick Jared Strong's ass if he dared mess with my lover, my friends and me.

We'd risked our lives to be here on Earth.

Jared Strong would meet his far-from-mortal match today.

And speaking of cyber break-ins... If we were staying here longer, I'd somehow hack into the central air-conditioning's program and block off our suite's ductwork grids.

Cold temperatures and I didn't mix. "Worried? This computer was here when we moved in. They might trace the connection but they can't prove I'm the guilty party."

"How could I forget?" He rocked my body against his and kissed the fingers of my right hand. "Hellé Hawthorn doesn't have fingerprints."

The more I worked my ass against his bare cock the wetter my panties became. "One benefit of being Satan's child." I nodded toward the door. "Good thing there's one-way glass on that door."

His teeth caught my earlobe. "Then you won't have to worry about anyone seeing what I'm going to do to you right now."

Damn.

While I'd rather get horizontal and every other position with Menlikus, business with Strong had to come first.

Although he'd wrestled Daddy and won, my pretending to relax caught my lover off guard and I pulled a quick Krav Maga move.

My maneuvering wouldn't harm him but it would get me out of his sexy grip. No mistaking the look on his face. I might as well have slapped him. I crouched and took all of his hard inches in my mouth and throat.

After a couple hard sucks, I set him free. "Keep your cock hard and your body hot."

"You know where to find Strong?" He helped me up. "You don't know what that guy's capable of doing."

My quick massage eased his muscle tightness. "When you thought Van was whispering dirty words in my ear he was really telling me where Strong hangs out. His home office is off the Strip. Hopefully he'll be there when I arrive. If not, I'll wait him out."

Storm clouds gathered in the gray of his eyes. "I should go with you."

My kiss brought out his tongue and a hint of creamy sweetness from his spray-can snack. "Thanks, but I'll be fine. Stay here. Save your strength." I slipped the code sequence into his hand. "Burn this. We'll figure out how to get you back to Hell once I return. If he isn't careful, Jared will be doing lots more than telling lies to the police." A quick rout in the file cabinet uncovered my handbag. "And by doing more, I sure don't mean me."

* * * * *

Only by arriving at Jared Strong's floor could I get rid of the guys who seemed to think I'd enjoy getting my ass pinched during an elevator ride. Civil engineers? Come on. They might have degrees in engineering but they were as far from being civil as I was from Hades.

The tallest one, wearing the plum-wine silk necktie and crisp white dress shirt, held the door for me when it opened. "Have a great day, Miss Hawthorn. Can't wait for my appointment next Tuesday at Comus."

Okay, so I'd introduced myself to them. Why not seize the networking opportunity?

Business was business.

At least Mister Manners had a nice smile and kept his hands on his prospectus instead of my gluteus maximus.

I stepped out, put a couple feet between the hot-blooded design team and myself and turned toward the polite man whose gold-plated name badge read *Mark Linden*. "Thanks. You won't be disappointed." *If we're still around*. After all, four lives—mine included—depended on securing more zalendium.

The sleeve of our future client's dark-gray suit coat lifted slightly with his wave and his monogrammed cufflink winked at me. The doors drew together and I headed toward the woman who, if my initial assessment proved correct, would erect quite a formidable barrier between the man I'd come to see and me.

Once her fingers stopped tapping the keyboard, she lifted her head slowly and squinted at me. "May I assist you?"

The cinnamon of her breath mint hit me along with a stare Medusa would admire.

Maybe this gatekeeper was Miss M's granddaughter several times removed? "I'm a tenant of Mister Strong's and he—"

Her slender deep-veined right hand came up and her glasses came off. "I'm terribly sorry. He's quite busy and always schedules appointments." Her forefinger flicked the computer screen. "And I know you don't have an appointment."

What boiled faster, the water churning through the coffeemaker on its way to brewing a fresh pot or my blood? "I'm sure you've memorized his next several meetings but—"

A short gasp filled the space between us. "I have the whole week's schedule committed to memory."

And that should earn my respect or some kind of prize? Should I tell her I'd read and memorized the contents of a dictionary from first page to last before I turned three hundred hellish years?

No. My mama might be married to Satan but she always taught me good manners made a lady while bad manners made a mess of everything.

"Please announce me to Mister Strong." I extended my hand but she kept hers near the desk. "I'm Hellé Hawthorn and I know he'll agree to meeting with me for a couple minutes." Here on Earth I had to deal with people in a human way—one involving cordiality. Back in Hell negotiations involved a show of power. "Thank you."

She muttered something, yanked the receiver off the base and stabbed the numbers one, five, nine and three with her middle finger. "Mister Strong insists on

appointments. I'm sure he...hello. Yes, Mister Strong. I hate to disturb you while you're with clients. Hellé Hawthorn is here and she—" The matte-red lips slammed together and air huffed from her nostrils. "I'll show her to your office."

The black receiver slapped against the desk phone's base. Metal casters clicked against one of those plastic chair mats and the woman corporately identified as Margaret Deverly stood up. After she finished typing the note on her screen and launching it into cyberspace with a click of her wireless red-lighted mouse, she dragged her posture-conscious self to the hidden gate separating her domain from the lobby of the fifteenth floor of The Fremont Building.

Her fast fingers and the angle of the computer monitor might fool some but not me. My eyes followed her every keystroke. *Wonder what Jared Strong would think of paying his employees while they typed messages to their husbands telling them which dry cleaner's had the tuxedo ready to be picked up?*

One of the pinkish-white overhead lights oscillated for a moment before calming. The longer I remained here on Earth, the more I became convinced the wise man above the clouds somehow spared me a few of my otherworldly powers.

"Mister Strong's office is down this hallway." Margaret veered left and aimed her kitten heels toward the impressive, polished wooden double doors.

And the six-and-a-half-foot brown-haired man with a grin that wore more crap than any pig after a romp in the muck.

Jared held out his left hand to me. "Thanks, Margaret. I'll take care of Hellé from here."

Chapter Four

Even before Strong opened his office's mahogany doors the tang of countless animal hides stretched over wooden and steel frames burned my nose and tongue with each breath taken in. Jared punched the passcode and a sharp beep sounded.

"You're a woman who appreciates the finer things in life." His gaze raked over me from head to heels. "And I know you've come to extend your appreciation for the property you've leased." He flung open the right door, stepped aside and swept his arm toward the opening.

I glanced down the hallway. Miss Deverly might be out of sight to most but my ears detected the pressing of the heel of her hand against the unlatched gate. She was hovering around the corner. No doubt she wanted to catch every word Jared and I exchanged.

Head and shoulders straight, I hip swayed past the man who would prove far less a match than Menlikus or my morning muscle-pull client. Holding the door for me didn't compensate for his patronizing tone. Extend my appreciation? I shot him a backward glance. *Think again, womanizer.*

My mama taught me manners but she also schooled me in the ways of men.

Men like Jared were only interested in the net worth and pussies of women who were pushovers when it came to his sweet-talking ways.

I'd bring the curtain down on his passion plays and wrap his wily ass up in the curtain cord before he could open his mouth. "You're right about the lease. That is the reason I'm here. To discuss the terms."

The doors clicked closed and he stepped away from them. "I'm not a man who renegotiates anything but I'm willing to listen."

He'd do more than come to new terms before I finished here. Blame it on the lightning strike or my abnormally hot blood, but my body, mind and soul weren't backing down today.

A pair of cocoa-brown driving moccasins lay beside the desk fashioned from black glass and steel. I propped myself against the cool beveled edge. Four security cameras were trained on me. One barely visible above the doorframe. Another peeping from the mouth of the polar bear rug. A gray minicam in the wine rack over the wet bar.

And dare I forget the best one. What appeared to be an electric pencil sharpener whose opening was trained toward the jet leather couch and glinted rather than remained black as was customary for such a device.

How many unsuspecting woman provided him pussy shots over the years?

"Make yourself comfortable, Hellé. Care for a cocktail or some wine?" Four fingers bit into my bare shoulder and he gently steered me toward the piece of sectional furniture with gold-plated footrests that cost more than some made in several months.

"Nothing for me, thanks. I'm not much for alcoholic beverages." Especially when my system was adapting to a new environment and becoming more compromised with each passing day. I sat down and crossed my legs.

He approached and stopped the toes of his dress shoes less than an inch from my stilettos. "I'll have a dirty martini with lunch so I'm fine now." His fingers made short work of his belt and he yanked it free of the keepers. "And I happen to have a bit of free time before that one o'clock reservation."

While my girlfriends were feeding their faces and Talon's with cream- and jelly-filled pastries, I'd feed this moron a line his fat mouth couldn't resist biting.

"I appreciate your meeting with me without an appointment."

His next laugh displayed perfect dentition, complements of top-dollar dental enhancements. A slave to good oral hygiene, I could always spot prime laminates across a room. "Pretty women with nice asses don't need appointments. I'll do them anytime."

Jared Strong was all about sex and money, the order of preference alternating at whim. Rubbing up against him could buy me enough time to find another place for us to stay before he remotely suspected his latest tenants had vacated the premises.

Despite the air-conditioning the backs of my legs clung to the supple leather donated by some cow for this double-crosser's couch. "Don't you mean you'll 'see' them anytime?"

"Do...see." He pointed to the mirrored ceiling panels. "It's all the same in here." Each pass of my hands over my bared thighs provided the necessary centering.

I'd pounce on this cock of the walk and pluck his fancy feathers when he least suspected. "First time I've ever seen an office decorated this way."

"May today be the first for us in more ways than one." The charcoal summer wool suit jacket launched from his left hand, lofted behind him and landed on the desktop, scattering a few manila folders. He raised an imaginary glass and toasted me. "Let's put pleasure before business, Hellé."

"I don't think you'll be in a pleasant mood when you find out what's on my mind." And it wasn't the nauseating notion of doing him in some office-cum-rumpus room.

From top button to bottom his shirt gradually draped open and he tossed it away. For any woman who enjoyed licking sweat, whipped cream or anything else off a cover-worthy male chest, Jared's didn't disappoint.

Both coral pink nipples were puckered as though someone had bitten and sucked them.

His pants sank to his ankles and he stepped free of them. Another fling of his hand placed the perfectly creased garment on top of the suit jacket. "I'm in the mood for putting my mouth to better use than talking."

At least he told the truth sometimes. Quite a lot of hard cock awaited action. *Cut with the comedy, mister. My lips weren't wanted for talking, either.*

The black and red carpet squares formed a checkerboard pattern. His widespread legs placed his large pedicured feet on one of each color.

He was buffed from the tips of his fingers to the ends of his toes.

And in between lay a feast for the eyes and other parts of a woman's anatomy.

I shifted forward on the plush cushion and the heel of my left foot went back and struck something solid. Metallic, from the clinking my heel made at making contact.

A pole or bar of some sort? Was he into martial arts and nunchucks?

The heat surging inside my chest surpassed the temperature between my legs. *Bring it on, bad boy. Let me see what you can do when you're up against a woman who plays it smart while she dumbfounds you.*

"You like eating pussy?" I closed my mouth over more words. Menlikus wouldn't care for my strategy but sometimes a woman had to play the carnal card to get what she wanted.

And I wanted out of a yearlong lease over eleven months early.

He knelt beside me, brushed his fingers over my calf and reached under the couch. His hot hand emerged bearing a spreader bar. "Better than anything else."

If I weren't here to deal with this dimwit in the proper way I'd have refused his request to "secure me in a sexy way".

Each time the spreader bar glanced off his palm my blood pumped faster. Dangling from the ceiling on a harness-type apparatus would make some nervous but not me. Jared's preference for oral sex left my hands and legs free. This would allow me to make an escape and surprise his silly ass later. A confirmatory glance revealed the gleaming steel S-hook—the only thing keeping the swing and me aloft. Simple calculations determined the distance between the top of my head and the ceiling panels to be about sixty-six inches. Only half a foot existed between my feet and the floor.

He kissed the crotch of my panties and tossed them on top of his suit. "You're right where my mouth wants you. You'll forget all about talking terms after I've shown you how a real man treats a woman. You might even beg me to extend the lease for another decade or so."

Fat chance, bullshit for brains. Closing my eyes, I counted backward from ten. How dare this devil on Earth cast doubt about Menlikus' manhood and ability to satisfy me, sexually or otherwise?

On his worst day Men could best any guy, mortal or under-beast. No one was going to talk like that about my best friend and lover and get away with it.

The wall clock's more slender hand swept away the seconds and I mentally ebbed the flow of adrenaline. Mind over any matter worked every time. Better to save my strength and strike when Jared least suspected. No harm in letting him lick my pussy and believe he had the upper hand in our dealings.

I preferred stealth and surprise attacks to those hastily executed.

Nodding toward the spreader bar, I licked my lips and winked. "That's not necessary. I can open as wide as you want and hold the position until your tongue gets tired."

He glided the cold metal bar up my right leg and massaged my bare pussy with the tip. At his hard swallow the prop clattered to the floor a couple of feet away from us. "I like it best using the bar."

"But I can move my hips better and ride that sexy mouth of yours if my legs aren't confined." Buy that and I could sell you stock in any number of defunct companies.

Fingers that had counted millions over his business years clutched my ass and spread my buttocks before letting go. I rocked forward slightly and bumped my crotch against his wet lips.

His toffee-scented tongue gave a quick lick before we lost contact. "You won't regret renting from me, Hellé." He licked my inner thighs and ended with a tongue trick that parted my labia. "We'll be on excellent terms when I leave this office in a little while."

Another one who fucked and fled. Or licked and left.

He got what he wanted out of women and didn't stick around to cuddle or shower off the sweat.

While I plotted my escape and rechecked my bonds, he removed a can of something from the top desk drawer and returned.

A metal ball clacked against the interior of the can with each shake of his hand. "You like it in the ass?" His free hand pumped his cock.

"I like it everywhere." But Men's old cave and the Wiruni Pool were my favorite places for sex.

"Glad to see you aren't afraid. Some women run from rougher sex play." He cupped his full balls and nipped my calf.

A spot of dried crimson paint lay below the pin-dot nozzle. I sniffed and siphoned out the next half breath. Nothing toxic in the paint. What plans had he for using that stuff?

The carpeting muffled his steps as he skirted me. Cold liquid misted my right buttock then the left. The letters "J" and "S".

He'd marked me. Put his initials on my ass. True the stain was only temporary but what went on in his warped mind?

Nothing of which I wanted to become a part. "I'll bet your tongue will feel better than any spray paint against my skin."

The can smacked against the leather couch cushion. "You got that right." Hot and wet, his tongue teased the curve of my left buttock. He followed with a sound slap that jostled the swing's moorings and swayed me forward.

"Come around here where I can see you. I want to watch you lick my pussy." If there was one thing the devil taught me it was how to deliver the most convincing lies in a convincing sexy tone.

Jerks like Jared devoured and thrived on such compliments.

I'd only ever loved life and sex with one man—Menlikus.

Well beyond the closed office doors the elevator chimed. What was up with my superhuman senses and powers? They were returning slowly but surely despite the fact my formula was compromised.

Jared planted his muscular self in front of me. "One of these days I'll stop by Comus. Nothing better than having four women work me out."

Or kick you out on your ear. "Let's not worry about my girlfriends. For now back up a couple feet and get your tongue ready."

His lips opened and he maintained eye contact as he obeyed my carnal command. "You aren't bluffing, are you?"

"How could I bluff? My hands are caught up in the cord and I'm hanging here a willing puppet for your pleasure." Gross. But I'd say anything to make him a believer.

As the elevator slipped down the shaft he surged toward me. "No. Today's all about me. If you play nice I'll let you have a turn some other time."

So much for pressing his carotid with my knee and rendering him unconscious. Seeing him trussed up and meeting my demands would have to wait a bit longer.

He splayed my legs wide and put his mouth on the wettest part of my body. Memories from the past played in my mind. The first devil's food cake I baked with Mama. My first foot race with Athena where we tied and ended up laughing so hard we couldn't talk for a couple of minutes. A demonstration of strength by a magician at my ten-hundredth birthday party.

"Mmmm. Yes. You are the man."

The sucking and clit stimulation stopped. Jared peeped up at me, wearing a moustache of cum. "Never met a woman I couldn't satisfy. And you're more easily aroused than most."

Wrong. He was falling for my act. I'd fooled Casanova and more able-bodied men than Jared Strong.

He crossed over to the couch and flipped up the closest arm cover on the couch. From inside he pulled a whip. Not a bullwhip like Daddy used on Shenda but a more pliant strip of cowhide.

"See how you like this." The construction company magnate dragged the stout handle down the crease of my ass and sneaked it back up again.

"You like rough play? So do I." But not with him. This guy had no idea to what levels we took sex in Hell.

Antics down there would boggle his mind and twist his balls so tight he'd more than scream for attention and mercy.

* * * * *

Menlikus set the umbrella beside the spa's front door. What was keeping Hellé so long? She should have been back by now. Another moan came from the back room.

He was stuck here with a foursome whose playtime knew no end. If only their trip for doughnuts had kept them away longer, he could have gone after Hellé. But if he made any attempt at trailing the woman he loved Garmula would be on him tighter than skin. Her ears missed little to nothing. Even through the rock wall separating her cave from Hellé's she'd heard every intimate word Hellé and he exchanged.

Garmula loved listening to others' conversations. He'd never forget the time she let certain information slip. The three of them were swimming in the Wiruni Pool and Garmula blurted out a detail of his night-before sex play with Hellé.

A detail she could only have gleaned from eavesdropping on his intimate exchange with Hellé.

He crumpled the cellophane from the orange sucker in his left fist. If anyone made a wrong move on Hellé they'd deal with worse than the devil.

As he took two steps closer the front door, Garmula sprinted from the hallway leading to the back room. "Going somewhere you shouldn't?"

The bushy fake black moustache lay on the counter. He picked it up and flicked it at Hellé's nosiest friend. A vibrator buzzed into action. "Only out in the hallway where I can think straight."

"You can always join us if you're lonely." Garmula ran a couple fingers through the strawberry-scented goo someone had painted on her tits and nipples. "Watching us will give you some good ideas for when Hellé returns." She sucked off the pink paint and waved at him.

"Hellé and I are never short on ideas when it comes to sex, or anything." The door chimed with a push of his hand.

Every step she made toward the front desk bounced her full breasts and widened her grin. "What you need is to lie down on that table and let me put a couple hot stones on your back. That'll make you feel better. Ease all the tension."

He stepped into the hallway and braced the door with his shoulder and arm. A vacuum cleaner's rumble drifted up from the suite a floor below him.

What he really needed was a dead body.

And a kiss goodbye from Hellé.

Staying here and waiting around while she taunted Jared Strong was foolish. "I'll be back shortly."

Garmula feigned a pout. "Hellé won't be happy if you steal her thunder."

"Thunder?" The word came out louder than intended. "She's already been hit by a ball lightning. I doubt anything I do can compare."

Hellé's closest girlfriend blinked and retraced her steps toward the lovers shouting for her presence. "Still... Well, do what you must but make sure to tell her I tried stopping you."

"I promise." The door slapped closed behind him, the bell glancing off the one-way glass. At reaching the elevator he stabbed the down arrow button until it glowed.

But he couldn't promise standing around idle while Hellé went head-to-head with a man who might deal a death card to women who got in his enterprising way.

Chapter Five

If Jared controlled his empire as poorly as he controlled a whip and paddle, his competitors had no cause for alarm. They could best him without half trying.

True, the office in which he thought he was holding me a sexually willing captive was plush.

But plush offices didn't make up for what a man lacked otherwise.

Wood and leather were sturdy in their own right but a hell-child's flesh toughened fast from the heat and rough terrain in Hades. The band of restrictive nylon secured around my midsection crackled at my latest heave of breath.

Whatever he'd paid for this sexual restraint, he'd paid too much.

The latest smack made him moan. "You like this, don't you?"

"Do you entertain all your female guests this way?"

"Only those I find attractive." He dragged the smooth, rounded edge of the paddle handle underneath my breasts. "And those from whom I need cooperation."

Now we were getting somewhere other than acting out his sexual fantasies. "You believe I came here to cause trouble. That I mean you malice." True, on both counts.

He flipped the paddle behind me and snatched the plastic bottle of massage oil from beneath my dangling feet. "You're a beautiful and calculating woman. Confident you can charm me into meeting whatever your demand."

So he wasn't stupid. Sloppy but not stupid.

"I'm a woman of many desires but few needs." And Mama would agree a half lie wasn't as bad as a total one.

The lid clicked open and he squeezed a quarter-sized portion of clear citrus-mint shimmering liquid onto his palm. His thumb closed the bottle and tossed it in the same direction as he had the paddle.

Swish. Swishswish.

Each glide of his palms spread the zesty-sweet oil over his thick fingers. A light flashed on the phone but no ring or buzz resulted. Maybe that snooping gatekeeper was trying to alert him to the arrival of his next appointment?

Or possibly interrupt the indecent time he'd chosen to spend with someone who wasn't on her schedule or his?

"I'd like to get to know you better, Hellé. You're complex. I admire that in the ladies with whom I keep company."

Company? Good thing I had quick reflexes and clamped my teeth over my tongue or I would have laughed in his sweaty but clean-shaven face.

If this is what he called keeping proper company with a lady, hard to tell what he had in store otherwise. "Only time will tell."

His hands cradled my buttocks. From the curve to the fullest part of my best asset he worked the oil into the places he'd paddled. "I'll have to change some things if that happens."

Didn't take much to decipher his code or the underlying hint in that comment. But I could play dumb as well as anyone. "Change? What?"

Bolder finger stroking followed his growl and he plugged his thumb into my tightest hole. "You want to wiggle out of your lease." He jiggled his thumb inside me to accentuate the point. "And what you've just endured is part of the way I get cooperation. No woman resists me."

Well, wake up and meet the first one who does, dumbbell. "You have that much magnetism?"

He pulled his finger out and stopped massaging. "I have power. Women love powerful men. Can't get enough. I'm not one who has any problem finding plenty of women who enjoy time spent with me."

Yet I'm not one of them. If I bit my tongue any harder I'd be able to wear a stud, like Shenda. "You shouldn't assume I'm a troublemaker."

My tormentor retreated and fished a deep purple plush hand towel from the bottom desk drawer. "No, and you stood up pretty well against my game."

I swallowed warm spit. "You haven't seen my best side." On bending my knees, I bucked backward and the swing responded by propelling me forward.

He folded the towel and laid it beside the cobalt-blue Mont Blanc pen and a yellow notepad cube. His left hand again disappeared for a moment and removed a medium-sized tube from the same hiding place. Antibacterial hand gel squirted from the hole in the top of the container. If I didn't know better I'd swear the manufacturer had combined Casanova's cologne with the muck hell-helpers removed from the Wiruni Pool after countless orgies and water parties.

He'd catch more from me than germs if he didn't come to my terms in the lease matter.

Humming Vivaldi off-key, he finished his hand cleansing, replaced the tube and put his clothes back on. His cock was still hard but softening.

Menlikus' balls were so much fuller and delicious. Once we prevailed in perfecting a new batch of elixir, I'd have emotional and sexual satisfaction for eternity with my Grecian best friend and soul mate.

"Oh, I've seen plenty." He splayed my legs apart and licked my pussy from front to back, nipping my clit before backing away. "You look and taste perfect. But I have a lunch appointment. When I return in an hour and a half we'll pick up where we left off."

A pack of lions roared inside my brain. Women born under the sign of Leo didn't take kindly to neglect or self-serving persons. "What if I'm not here when you get back?"

The middle button on his suit jacket thrust through the hole and he patted my cheek. "You will be. You're starved for good sex. And you won't go to the police. You've too many secrets you're keeping from them and everyone else." His teeth caught my nipple and his tongue lashed it for a couple seconds.

I'd profiled this clown down to his rotten soul. The building magnate fond of games and intimidation tactics would soon be on the receiving end of my surprise.

At reaching the office's doors, he paused. "Think long and hard while you're hanging there. If I ever find out you're telling tales about our fun you'll be the loser. I'm sure the police would love hearing more about your Halloween parties, not to mention that line you're feeding them about identity theft."

* * * * *

Once Jared's footsteps faded and he left the floor on which he'd tried seducing me, I cursed him aloud. I'll be the loser? With my knees tucked against my chest I heaved upward and struck the ceiling with my full weight and six inches of killer heels. He would be the loser and much more when I finished with that paddle-wielding fuck puppy.

The steel grid work above me split and bits of ceiling tile rained over me. I dropped to a dangling position, took a couple centering breaths and waited for the next surge of adrenaline.

Starved for good sex? That imbecile wouldn't know good sex if it bit him on the balls and drew blood. Repeating the maneuver I'd practiced so many times on the gym rings friends and I had rigged over the Jhara Path, I swung harder, high kicked and smashed the remaining overhead barrier. A large section of metal whistled past my left ear and slapped against the carpet.

My body landed only a few inches from the main pile of debris and more tiling sifted onto my scalp. One glance up made my week.

I'd rendered a gaping hole in Strong's ceiling.

His lame knots proved far easier to slip than DuSade's wire cuffs. I stood up, put on my clothes, gathered my handbag and shoes and posed in front of the narrow mirror decorating the wall behind the leather sectional. A quick combing with my fingers removed the remaining pieces of tile board. My air kiss hit the mirror and steamed the polished surface.

Not bad for a woman who'd lost most of her powers on the ascent to Earth. Strong counted on me hanging around here and being sapped of all but the most miniscule bit of strength. Then he could Dominate me.

Damn him for leaving me strung up and staring at a closed door. After gathering the twisted orange nylon cords I dumped them on his desk. There was definitely pleasure to be had by messing with his sense of order and control.

Score some major points for me for persuading Jared to let me wear my stilettos.

Have shoes will rule. With them I could kick ass or anything else.

A gentle push of my hand worked the door lever and I peeped into the hallway. A fax machine was receiving some documents. Fresh-perking coffee made my tongue tingle. The copier churned out more copies.

Miss Nosy kept herself busy. So much the better for me. I didn't need her questions or interference. The fact Strong had placed his office a good ways from the reception area and gave great attention to soundproofing his office domain, made my wrecking moment undetectable by human ears.

But what a damn din echoed in my eardrums when that steel split. Not since Daddy's hellhounds got loose and wrecked Caligula's cave did I wish for earplugs and an end to the racket.

A thousand times keener than vulpine ears, mine used to pick up gossip or compliments even when many feet of rock and mineral deposits separated me from those speaking.

I stood in the doorway. If my instincts could still be relied upon, Stuck-on-himself Strong hadn't left the premises yet. A soft sneeze carried my way from another floor.

But there was no getting past that front desk and into the elevator without being spotted and Jared's secretary alerting him to my wandering.

Maybe he'd even invited her to join us later? The laugh tickled my tonsils and I swallowed hard. Imagine her, dressed in bondage gear and fishnets, wielding a whip or paddle.

I'd have more fun trimming my toenails than playing with those two.

Jared Strong had many lessons to learn, foremost among them how to properly treat women. Likely none of his other love interests had dared tutor him in those finer points. At least not any who'd succeeded and remained around to tell about the accomplishment.

If I saved one mortal woman from his callous treatment it was worth tolerating his pathetic teasing for a short time behind closed doors.

With my shoes off I crept down the hallway. A double ring-chirp stopped me in my tracks.

"Yes, Tom. He's in the lounge on the third floor. Mmmhmmm." Mrs. Deverly cleared her throat. "I'll tell him you'll meet him there in about fifteen minutes...mmhmmm. 'Bye."

Perfect timing. If I didn't waste another second I could snag the necessary face time with Jared before his lunch guest arrived. The stairwell door to my immediate left would grant me access to him without his secretary's awareness.

As she answered another phone call, I slipped through the door and closed it softly. The descent pumped blood harder through my veins but my skin no longer rippled as it did when I'd lived below ground. Quite an ugly manifestation anyhow. Glad to be rid of such a nuisance and bodily betrayal.

It wasn't anyone else's business, especially my enemy's, when my system was shoring itself up for battle.

At reaching the floor where my foe hung out, I emerged from the stairwell and veered left. No secretaries, sentries or security guards posted to impede my progress. Various offices and storage rooms lined the corridor. But as with Strong's office, a matching set of double doors bearing his initials in gold lay straight ahead at the end.

If anyone questioned the reason I carried my shoes I could always claim sore feet. Wasn't true, but lies were told all the time here on Earth.

The cranberry-red carpet absorbed my steps and none of the doors opened at my passage. I paused in front of the door where I caught Jared Strong's scent. As I reached for the knob, a ribbon of white heat wound up my spine.

If he'd locked himself in here I was sunk. Kicking in the door was possible with the level of strength I possessed but that would only bring helpers to his side and thwart my plan.

I needed him alone and a captive audience. Only then would my message have maximum impact.

The left side of my brain argued that Strong wouldn't likely lock the doors when awaiting a friend or business associate. No need to erect barriers against his buddies.

A slight turn yielded a click and I opened the door wide enough to slip through without announcing myself too boldly.

His back facing me, Strong stood at the supersized wet bar stocked with top-shelf liquors and Baccarat crystal. The malachite-inlaid ice bucket was a nice masculine touch. He dragged the tongs through the ice heaped within.

He poured liberally from the bottle of J&B. "Here so soon, Dixon? Then again, you're always about surprises."

Fortune was on my side in that he was away from the phone and the room was as soundproofed as his office.

"Dixon doesn't like wearing six-inch heels but I sure do. And I'm here to show you how well they walk over any man who does me wrong and doesn't finish our playtime. My turn, powerbroker."

* * * * *

Menlikus cursed the concrete. For the past ten minutes he'd stood outside Strong Enterprises, walking the same stretch of sidewalk so many times he knew every damn dirt stain and crevice. Every inch of his being signaled Hellé was still inside. Inside and possibly into her confrontation deeper than planned.

He smacked his fist against his palm. That beautiful, headstrong woman would never learn. She had to realize she was now on Earth. Stripped of most of her hellish powers.

At the possible mercy of men like Jared Strong who meant her and others malice.

She'd raise more than a little Hell if he went in there and rushed to her rescue. Never a damsel in distress, the love of his other-life and beyond.

Two suits stepped out of the cab and pointed toward the front entrance of Strong's empire. Respectable. Clean-shaven. Each likely with a net worth over seven figures.

Both men who'd woo Hellé from sunrise to sunset if given half a chance. But she'd never give them a second glance. Hellé and he had been through a lot together and he wasn't about to surrender her to any rich guys on the prowl for trophy wives.

His next swallow burned. He should never have come here. A flex of his fingers calmed the adrenaline surging beneath his nails. As the businessmen passed, the lighter-haired one nodded at him.

The commuter bus squealed to a stop at the designated area. Exhaust belched from the tailpipe and burned his nostrils. He raced toward the yellow and red sign. The transport's door slapped open. At reaching the curb's edge he glanced up and into the kind blue eyes of the graying driver.

These wheels couldn't head him back down the Strip fast enough. He stepped inside and paid the fare.

Hellé preferred taking care of business herself. He had to respect that.

When he got back to Comus the girls would probably still be on lunch dates with their eleven o'clock massage clients, and he could prepare for Hellé's return.

Brainstorming and body contact.

Two things they did best together.

* * * * *

Sloan flopped into the leather lounge chair. "How did you get loose?" He patted his leg and motioned me over.

When I finished with him he'd have more than wrinkles in his couture collection trousers.

Violent pulsing erupted beneath my red-lacquered fingernails. If ever there was a time to give thanks to a supreme being now was that time.

My razor nails remained despite the fact I lacked other powers that once made me a force in Hell with which few reckoned.

Slivers of a proteinaceous compound heartier than steel pushed into view beyond my manicure.

The armless chair wheeled toward the wall as I landed on his thighs.

"How did I get loose?" On wrapping my legs around him, I squeezed him until a flush rose on his face. "Because you aren't man enough to hold me or any other decent woman captive for long. And you aren't currently in any position to argue."

"Well, I'm holding you now, aren't I? Like to have lunch with one of my structural design team and me?" He licked his lips as though he'd been stranded in a desert for days without finding an oasis or cacti.

I clutched his neck, the armor-clad thumbnail tight against his carotid. "Get this straight. My rules. My lease. I don't want to do lunch or anything else with you. If you cross me you won't like the consequences. This isn't a lap dance in case you haven't noticed."

The more he struggled the more pressure I applied. So many thoughts were racing through his brain. And his sweat stank of fear.

"I-I'm sure we'll become good friends before it's all said and done."

A measured press of my finger made him gurgle. "Only if I'm doing the saying and my business with you is done. Forever."

"You want out of the lease?" His head lolled for a moment but he shook off the shock when I shifted the chokehold. "Fine. We can negotiate without any violence." His blue-black eyes blinked twice.

What fun, having the upper hand and hold on a slippery con like Strong. "No more talk of telling lies about me to the police?"

"Absolutely not."

I glided my nails down his neck and back up again, leaving a faint red line of damnation and demarcation. His carotid pulse thumped faster underneath my fingertip.

If Men and I succeeded in securing more zalendium from his old cave, Vegas could be my proverbial oyster.

And slippery Jared Strong would be the first specimen I'd shuck and ruin.

"Good. I like agreeable men." Him, I couldn't stand. "I've been through Hell and just want a little peace while I settle in."

Chapter Six

Leave it to Menlikus to cave in to his craving for fast food and find this foot-long vendor on the Vegas Strip.

"Hope you're able to hide from Daddy during your descent. Your appetite has gotten you in trouble lots of times." Hellé kneaded Menlikus' neck muscles.

"I should have gone straight back to Comus. But I couldn't resist. Another bus rider mentioned this popular lunch spot. Care to share one of these with me?"

"Share? Since when have I ever shared something a foot long?" I accepted the sandwich, pulled the meat free and passed him the bun.

"Certainly not at your eighteen-hundredth birthday party." Men paid the blonde who couldn't take her eyes off me deep-throating the latest foot-long cooked sausage to come off her rotisserie.

At my wink and release of the 'furter she nibbled her navy-blue acrylic nail. "Sorry." Her giggles pulled the white two-sizes-too-small t-shirt tighter over her chest. "But I've never had someone do that here before."

"Hellé is full of surprises." Men took back his hotdog, slathered the sizzling meat with chili sauce, cheese, onions and hot peppers. After wrapping some napkins around his lunch, he steered me away from the stand where a dozen people waited in line and chattered about my bold display.

My first bite oozed sauce and melted cheddar over my mouth and chin. "Can't resist prominent nipples and nipple rings, can you?"

His tongue cleaned off the mess I'd made and slipped into my mouth. He ended our French kiss and stepped back a few paces. "What's that you always say about window-shopping and not buying?"

I snatched the hotdog, split the sandwich down its center and passed half of the Strip Special to Men. "Strong won't be giving us any trouble."

Menlikus devoured the food in short order. "You set his ass straight?"

"Let's just say I got my point across. By the time I walked out on him he was shaking in his Blahniks.

"We don't have to relocate the spa?" He swiped the napkins over his hands. Tiny bits of paper rained toward the sidewalk but he caught them before they made contact.

What I wouldn't have given to witness him beating Daddy in that wrestling match.

"It's time we moved on."

"Your toes are pink. Dancing with Jared Strong, Hellé?" Menlikus knelt, slipped my left foot out of the sandal, lifted my lower leg and sucked each toe. As I balanced on one

foot a woman passing by almost dropped her white-framed sunglasses and vanilla-white toy poodle at his display.

Dancing? Hardly. "Hanging from the ceiling usually sends all the blood to a woman's lower extremities."

"Hanging?" He kissed a crooked path over the top of my foot and started massaging the calf. "What did you do that made him hang you from the ceiling?"

"Supposedly it was his way of getting to know me better. Playing around at some lame game in which only he found pleasure."

"How'd you get loose?"

"More of my powers remain intact than I originally believed. All those days of posing in Kama Sutra positions and learning martial arts paid off. I kicked my way out of the restraints. Made a mess of his office but that's his problem."

Men stood up and dangled my sandal. "Speaking of shoes, there's a great place not far down the street. I found something in there you won't be able to resist."

The sexiest stubble rasped over my calf at his nuzzling. "When it comes to guys you're my one and only. But a girl can never have too many pairs of shoes."

* * * * *

Of all the places I'd visit here in Las Vegas, this shoe boutique Menlikus tempted me with would likely remain my favorite.

And my current temptation was in the booted form of black patent leather with gold leather lacing down the calf. "These are delicious. Better than the ones Barden picked out in a catalog the other day."

"They won't mess up your silk sheets." A guy in wire frames walked our way, wearing a smile for which most women likely fell. He offered me his hand. "Reid Lynch. Pleasure meeting you."

An itch between my shoulder blades tracked to the base of my spine. We were in the company of a Zyr.

"Likewise." I curled my fingers loosely around his and shook the boot near his face. "Can't wait to try these on."

"The showroom won't due for such a special fitting." He briefly squeezed my hand and headed toward the rear of the boutique. "This way."

Menlikus swatted me. "You'd no more trust him than you'd trust your father, right? He's a stranger. We don't know a damn thing about him or his motives."

"You found my next pair of bed boots." I leaned closer and licked Men's earlobe. "And a Zyr."

"You think?" Men grabbed my handbag and slung it over my shoulder.

"I'm almost positive." Latching on to Reid's heat signature, I struck a path straight for the purple-and-silver glass-beaded curtain behind which lay a glass barrier. "But even if he's not a connection we'll leave here with these boots."

Reid punched in a code sequence and the panel of beveled glass disappeared into a recess above the entrance. The curtain swayed and clicked as he walked through and parted the strands. "You can try those boots out in here. See what they look like from every angle. Take your time." He emerged and winked. "I'll be back in a moment with the other boot. Then I'll leave you two alone for a while."

Bathed in pink light, I stepped into the mirrored fitting room and Menlikus followed. "Talk about a narcissist's ultimate fantasy."

His warm breath whistled past my cheek. "I'm glad you're not like that."

"Not like what?"

"Caught up in yourself so much you don't have time for others." Two of Men's fingers marched up my spine. "Let's do like he said. See how the boots feel from different angles. All kinds of angles."

Reid strode into the playroom-cum-dressing room, boot in hand. As he passed me the shiny accessory, his fingers skimmed the top of my hand. "I'll close the security panel on leaving. When you're finished, push the silver button on the wall."

"No rush for us to decide?" Men fondled the metallic leather lacings.

"A satisfied customer always comes...back." Reid turned toward the entrance as a chime sounded in front of the boutique. "Don't forget to pick up your keys before you leave."

"Keys?" Men and I blurted at the same time.

"Yes. Keys that will give you passage to a place where you're guaranteed to find satisfaction. Nine o'clock tonight. Bring your keys to my club, Cadence." Reid walked away humming.

Only the hush-slap of the beveled glass panel sealing and our breathing.

"If you don't stop grinning your face might freeze that way." While my sexy lover stared me down I snatched the boot.

"First things first, honey. Give me the boots." His mouth mimicked that of a famous comic book prankster, except for the fact Men's lips weren't painted a garish shade of red or his skin a sickly white.

"Stop looking like you've fallen into a vat of toxic chemicals."

He stroked the boot heel. "There's only one way to fit test these beauties."

He'd planned this. My hottie had been a plotter long before he masterminded a way for us to escape Daddy's detection while on our second date.

Capable of holding our breaths underwater for an amount of time that would find most on a mortuary table, we'd closed our lips and swum through the pleasure portal at the bottom of the Wiruni Pool.

Hell had the best hedonistic grottos.

He pried my fingers away from the boots and dropped them on the floor beside us. "You're getting hotter, Hellé. Something's on your mind and I'll bet it's mostly about sex and little about shoes."

"The portal in the Wiruni Pool. Remember how we swam through and entered the cove?"

"And that merman tried turning our date into a threesome? I remember." His tongue tickled my shoulder. "He was lucky we let him watch."

"Well, watch this." Faster than his cock hardened on that second date, I stripped down to my cheetah-print thong panties and slapped my ass.

"That won't work." Men knelt and kissed my silky crotch panel. Hooking the first two fingers of each hand into the narrow black elasticized waistband, he shoved the designer lingerie to my knees.

I stepped free and moved closer his face. "Tongue my clit and then I'll model for you." Legs spread wider, I guided his face toward my pussy.

"Even if you don't I'm happy." He squeezed my buttocks and the sting shot to the balls of my feet.

His tongue alternated pressure, sometimes tapping, sometimes circling while lapping away my cum. The more I swayed and bucked the more his hands and tongue kept me a willing prisoner in our small glass-and-mirror palace sans furniture.

He bit a path down each thigh and licked behind both of my knees. "Your right foot, please."

Why not? A woman can't do everything for herself all the time. Well, maybe she can but she shouldn't.

I raised my foot even with his slick mouth and he sucked the big toe.

When both the right and left boots were on my feet he fed the supple laces through the gold grommets.

Leather, cum and Menlikus' body musk.

Total bliss.

My lips lost no time finding his. Chili sauce lingered in the corner of his mouth and on his tongue. With our fingers intertwined we stood and eyeballed each other.

"There's one way to really put these boots to the test." He stripped off his jeans, t-shirt and sandals.

"And that would be dancing naked?"

He hauled me off the ground, pressed my chest against his and rained kisses over my mouth and chin. My breath whooshed out and fogged the mirror panel behind us.

Those bed boots certainly weren't made for walking in this room.

"I know what you want. Your favorite position." I locked my legs around his waist.

"You got that right." While his right hand and arm balanced me, his left hand slapped my thigh. "Don't get too comfortable."

"Why not? I've never had sex in a public place on Earth."

"Decide whether or not you want the boots. I have to get back to Hell tomorrow. We have to find a body for my transport."

My fingers mussed the waves in his hair. Tears burned the backs of my closed eyelids. I might not ever see him again if our plan failed.

But I couldn't let him see me bawling. A couple deep breaths. A couple swallows.

I silently cursed the gnawing in my belly. "Our Zyr friend might prove of assistance in that matter."

"Slide down me. See how good you can hold on."

I blew him a kiss. What Menlikus lacked in grammar skills he more than made up for otherwise, especially when it came to pleasing a woman.

But my sweaty palms weren't good for gripping shoulders. The slick leather crackled as I straightened and pushed my legs down the outsides of his. Our crotches remained in contact. So delicious. No man could compare to Men.

As my boots reached his calves, I pushed up again and repeated the motion usually capable of curling my tongue and setting the roots of my hair on fire. Not to mention draining every drop from his thick cock.

But this time he wasn't deep inside me.

He set me down and dipped me as though we were in Lucretia's hellish ballroom dancing and kissed away my next breath.

My guy knew all the right moves. "I'd say you made the perfect find today."

The same hands that had rinsed every bubble away during my last bath in Hell pulled me upright. "Today? Nah. My perfect find was the day I met and fell in love with you. Can't wait to see what satisfaction we find together tonight at Reid's place."

* * * * *

If Cadence lived up to the reputation people around us in the queue talked about we were in for one wild ride.

Some men owned clubs simply for the prestige.

Reid obviously also owned this hedonistic retreat to fulfill some of his darkest fantasies.

When it came to Vegas hot spots, the white lights of Cadence's sign and those twisted around the topiaries at the entrance barely hinted at the high temperature and high energy housed inside.

Barden pinched my butt. "Can't wait to meet Reid. Imagine your passion for shoes getting us all an invitation to this party."

"Reid's single." I pulled out Comus' business card and passed it to her. "You might be his type."

Ulevi adjusted her baby blue peekaboo lace belly top. Leave it to her to wear something that showed her nipples. "Not that I don't love you all." She motioned us together and orchestrated a group hug. "But we should split up and mingle once we're inside."

"Couldn't agree more." Garmula puckered her red glossy lips and patted the ass of a cute bouncer as he returned from showing a patron to the curb. "So much to see and do here."

Menlikus cuddled me from behind, tapping his tongue against the dangling gold balls on my earring. "Suits me. As long as this pretty woman doesn't get the urge to sharpen her talons against some new wood tonight, I'm up for almost anything."

"Imagine the day you aren't hard just being within a million miles of Hellé." Ulevi linked arms with Garmula and Barden. "We three won't have any problem hooking up. They have orgies here?"

"According to Reid. By special invitation." My elbow glanced off Men's rib cage. "Interested?"

"Not in the slightest." He pulled me close, his hard-on burning through his jeans and my black silk halter. "You?"

"We came here to have a good time together. We'll soon be apart again. Probably for a day or so." When the couple ahead of us moved forward I hugged the handsomest man ever born, unzipped his jeans and stroked his bare bulge. "No way I'm ever sharing you with anyone else."

Shoe soles clicked and tapped. I zipped Men's jeans and followed the faster-moving key holders.

I'd been given many things in my hellish life but never the key to a nightclub.

Though the tiny bit of stamped metal wouldn't open any door lock, the idea was novel. Elevated the bearer's mood and status on this balmy night in Sin City.

Men traced his entry token up the crease of my ass. "Think this can turn you on?"

"I'm not into artificial stimulation."

"But toys can be awesome." Garmula giggled and waved at someone farther up in the line.

"Who's that?" Ulevi and Barden asked in unison.

Garmula stretched but the tiny buttons on her snug platinum satin top remained closed. "A guy who was at the Pussycat Dolls Club. He's one of the guys who told me I was born to be on that stage."

"You just want to shake your stuff before strangers." Barden leaned over and bit Garmula on the shoulder. "Wearing panties tonight?"

My three best girlfriends lined up beside us and lifted their skirts. Bare pussies. The guy in front of me gawked and licked his lips. His date for the evening remained silent and smiling.

Okay. Note to the waitstaff. Save a play area for those five and order a pitcher of dirty martinis.

They were ready for balling the night away.

Posed in the doorway was a sexy bald guy wearing only a gold jock and glittery camouflage paint. He shoved a wooden jewelry box toward me so the lock opening lay near my left hand. I slipped the key into the tiny hole and turned it. The lid sprang open and everyone behind me cheered. Mimicking the process observed by the couples ahead of me, I removed the key, opened the lid all the way and laid my key on top of others. Our doorman nodded and another step of my gladiator sandals activated the buzzer encased in the front mat. A panel of steel and glass swung open and I stepped inside.

Gold foil coins and hot-pink lips rained over me. Pulses of softer pink light aimed over and around my body. A samba track reverberated and a familiar whistle came from behind.

Menlikus scooped me up and into his arms and carried me toward the bar. "Sure beats brainstorming back at Comus. At least here we can enjoy a dance or two."

The *click-clack* of ice rubbing up against the sides of a martini shaker blended with Men's indecent proposal. *What's up with this? Reid playing bartender at his own club?*

He set down the shaker and motioned us over. "If Cadence doesn't meet your highest expectations you can have a lifetime membership for free."

Before we got too cozy with the guy who sold some of the trendiest shoes in the city, I had to know for certain whether or not the blood of a Zyr ran through his system.

I settled into the clear blue acrylic barstool in the shape of a hand. "This place is hot enough to set feathers on fire."

The contents of the shaker spilled into a cocktail glass fashioned as a globe. Reid speared a plump kalamata olive and splashed it down near Africa. "Hot enough to burn a man's balls. Just like a strike of lightning."

I sniffed the vodka mixture. Reid was on my side.

Only Zyrs spoke of bolts and balls because they wore a flash of lightning on top of or underneath their testicles. A disco classic's intro found my friends tugging Menlikus onto the dance floor.

"Come on, hot stuff." Barden grabbed his right arm. "Hellé won't forget what you look like if you go away for five minutes."

Garmula took his left. "She doesn't forget anything."

Ulevi pushed him from behind. "You got that right. She still reminds me about the time I tongue-kissed a certain guy she was considering."

A slight shove of my hand against the glowing fuchsia counter pivoted me in the French kisser's direction. "Considering *before* I met Menlikus."

Reid tossed the mint-green bar towel to a Kirsch-pouring woman close by. One section of the uncluttered pink glass counter swung open and he stepped through. He spun my seat around and offered his hand. "Let's dance and talk."

* * * * *

Reid sure focused a whole lot more on dancing than on talking. But then all the men I knew said far less in a day's time than I or other women did.

Two more couples, both extremely good-looking and with great bodies, moved onto the section of dance floor to our left.

Familiar giggles floated my way and I glanced in their direction. If Garmula bumped hips and Ulevi bumped asses with Menlikus once more I might be tempted to forget our friendship for the time it took me to find them other dance partners.

But when it came to hustling, Reid better hadn't try playing me tonight.

He shimmied even closer to me. Zyrs rarely broke a sweat unless they were being roasted by Daddy when they got to Hell for disobeying something or other. "Give up that spa and come to work here. You and your boyfriend. The crowd loves couples sex."

Couples sex? My next turn took him out of others' earshot. "You stage sex shows here?"

"Anything goes in the Libertine Room." Tabasco and Worcestershire sauce carried my way along with his words. "You and that guy have great chemistry."

And my chemistry flub brought Men and me back together. "You watched us in the fitting room?"

"No. That room is off limits to all but the rich and famous. Guess you've figured me out for a Zyr by now. And I figure the devil's daughter ranks highest on my admissions list. What happens in those Vegas rooms stays in those rooms."

"No video or audiotapes of shoe fittings?"

At the tilt of his head the diamond stud in his right ear winked at me. "I prefer using my imagination." His hand sneaked down my spine and came to rest near the swell of my butt. "I'm willing to give you all a place to stay. Those sexy friends of yours would be perfect in a feature act. Covered in bubbles and tossing kisses to the crowd."

"Bubbles as in taking a bath?"

"My homage to a famous stripper. A solid gold tub and endless bubbles in the scent they choose."

"Room and board is part of our payment?"

"Consider that on the house." He licked his full lips.

"Can I ask what you did to please my daddy?"

He nodded and backed a few paces away from me. "I spent an entire day with three friends who were fifty-something virgins."

"Not just any middle-aged virgins?"

"Nope. They were pretty nice ladies. The place we chose for our sex was the stretch of beach in front of their rental property."

"Nothing unusual about that. Plenty of people have sex while on vacation."

"Not if they're renting next to a chief of police."

Barden twirled away from Menlikus and aimed her perky self at the male centerfold wearing a red shirt and designer jeans sitting two seats down from where I'd been.

Reid grabbed my hand. "Hey, you're supposed to be dancing in front of me for this song."

But I could better watch Barden from behind him. "Don't worry, I won't miss a step."

The good-looking guy motioned her over, lifted her top and toyed with her belly ring. He hauled her off her feet and set her down near another patron. Barden's zebra-print wristlet hit the glass countertop. A tube of gloss and a compact spilled out. She grabbed the tube of pineapple-mango gloss and small heart-shaped mirror. Drink orders were placed by the stranger. Club soda and a twist of lime for Barden. Bourbon and water for Mister Melt-In-Any-Woman's-Mouth.

Reid stepped sideways. "You seem more interested in what's happening back there than in my offer."

Adrenaline and the remaining potion flashed through my system. Barden's prime catch squeezed the lime wedge. Juice squirted into her tumbler and onto her wrist. He swished the misshapen rind and remaining pulp in the ice and club soda.

Despite the agitation of ice the clear beverage assumed a shimmering cast.

Damn it. "Excuse me, Reid. I'm interested in your generous offer but I have something to take care of first."

"You ever slept in a king-sized bed in a penthouse suite, honey?" Tall, dark and hard-on-more-than-the-heart played his hand over Barden's knee.

I shoved myself between Sleeping Beauty and Prince Harming. "Doesn't matter, but you'll be sleeping behind bars in a short while."

My fist impacted his jaw and spun him away from the counter. With my hand cupping the back of his head I pushed him to the floor. The crack of his knees hitting the floor tiles blended with his groan.

"What the...?" Barden pointed at me and then at the stranger who didn't stand a chance against me.

"Barden, don't touch that drink. He was trying to drug you."

She leaned over the cocktail glass and sniffed. "Looks and smells okay."

I caught the collar of the guy's designer shirt but he stayed put. "Not to me. And I'm never wrong about those kinds of things."

Reid caught the patron by his right arm and together we pulled the date-raper to his feet. Reid snapped his fingers at the closest bartender. "Holly, put that drink aside so the police can have it analyzed." He nodded to me while I consoled a pissed-off Barden, who was still convinced she'd met the man of her dirtiest dreams. "If this woman says something's wrong, I believe."

Chapter Seven

Back lots were creepy but tonight I preferred this one and its near silence to the noisy club from which I'd emerged a couple minutes ago. At least Men and the girls had honored my request and stayed inside the club. I simply needed some time alone. The cops would soon arrive and I'd have to answer more questions than on the day Daddy found out I'd become a woman in more ways than one.

As long as no one came out here to smoke, empty the trash or use the building for a sexual propping post my thoughts would have time to untangle. Reid's offer would solve our problems. Provide us another place to work and live.

I didn't need to use Comus for a cover.

A couple more steps put me in the path of recyclable litter. My sandal connected with a crumpled can and sent it aloft. Liquid sloshed from the opening and caught the glow of mercury vapor for a moment.

A shadowy figure swaggered over and erected a blockade on the stretch of concrete ahead of me. "Great hands and legs. And not wearing any panties."

"Thinking about scheduling a therapeutic massage, Van? I'm sure the girls would enjoy doing you." My feet dragged a couple inches before leaving the sidewalk.

His nose bumped mine. "Not necessary. Especially since *you* won't be there."

And just how did he know that?

A quick check of the walkway revealed no scratch or scuff marks.

Any man who messed with my heels messed with me. "You always seem to show up at the oddest times."

"I get around more than you think." After setting me down he straightened the collar on his crisp white dress shirt. White-gold chevron cufflinks flashed. "You intrigue me, Hellé. One look, even one thousand years in your company, wouldn't be enough."

"Remind me to take a Polaroid pose. Barden can give it to you at your next massage session."

His mouth opened and the long tongue flicked at me. "I'm not interested in what your hands can do."

"Then what?" A winged creature kissed my cheek before flying away.

He crouched at my feet and tapped both ankles. "Spread those legs a little wider."

"If you're into looking up women's skirts you'd accomplish more where there's some light."

While his fingers climbed my calves he stared at my crotch. "That's where you're wrong."

Okay, this guy was likely a freak whose fantasies didn't match mine. One stomp of my right foot set him on his ass. "What do you want?"

His palms lifted and pushed at the air between us. "Relax. I'm here to help you get what you need."

"I took out that guy at the bar and I'll do the same with you."

Almost as long as Men's and a bit thicker, Van's tongue snaked up my left inner thigh then repeated the same on the right. "He was only a hindrance. I can help you. Help you regain your strength. Regain the powers you lost coming here."

He traced a downward path and tongued circles around each ankle. At reaching my chain link anklet he sucked the celestial dangle charm into his mouth and tapped the jewelry against the backs of his teeth.

The powers I lost? How on Earth did he know about my special abilities? He wasn't a Zyr.

What business did he have butting into mine?

And he could take that tongue and put it away. Up and down my calves. Behind my knees. Spicy breath.

His hands remained behind his back but his mouth did things most men never mastered.

Night air drifted over his kisses. Callused fingers closed around my thighs and electrical impulses shot throughout my body.

"What's the matter?" He reached up and patted my ass. "Am I holding you too tightly?"

"Uh no. Bad day all around." And the badness wouldn't disappear until I learned more about this man who made my pussy wet and knew more about me than a stranger should.

Someone who might be in league with the devil.

The opening of his hands calmed the crescendos of sparks underneath my skin. The dumpster lid slammed.

He teased his fingers between my toes. "Bad day? Bet I can make it better."

* * * * *

Menlikus hugged Barden. Why wasn't Hellé in here with them?

It was at her insistence he'd agreed to come to Cadence instead of fucking her in front of a certain hotel on the Strip. "Hellé saw what she saw. You know she wouldn't call attention to us if it wasn't necessary."

After tipping the bottle of cherry-flavored water, Barden gulped almost half the contents. "That guy was the sexiest I've ever known." She wiggled against the big hard palm holding her in place. "I could have done some pretty kinky things to him."

Two policemen entered and approached the restrained date-raper. He put up little struggle, spouting something about contacting his agent and attorney and that someone else could have tampered with that drink to set him up.

"You know who that is, don't you?" Reid emerged from an office behind the bar. "He's one of the hottest fitness models. Paul Blake. Competes professionally." The club and boutique owner jotted a couple notes on a legal tablet before heading toward the cops. "Pretty impressive bench press and dead-lift stats. Takes someone with a lot of guts and muscle to bring him to his knees."

Menlikus leaned over and put his mouth near Barden's ear. "You see where she went?"

Barden fluffed the left side of her hair over her face. "She went back toward the bathroom. Hasn't come out *yet*." Her hand relaxed and she hopped down from the stool. "Guess I better go over there and tell them what I know?"

Reid ushered Barden toward the officers who were already staring in their direction.

Ulevi and Garmula abandoned their drinks and followed Menlikus toward the lounges.

A scuffle erupted before he reached the brown leather couches.

Blake started swearing.

When would this night end? "You two girls stay in here with Barden. I'm going to find Hellé."

"Maybe she's primping or had a full bladder?" Ulevi steered ahead, still swaying in time to a pretty lousy tune. "You all missed it. Paul took a swing at the one cop. They've got him under control and are cuffing him. Poor Barden. She always picks the wrong types."

Garmula stayed hot on her friend's high heels, slapping Ulevi's shoulder and knocking her off-kilter.

"Like Reid said, anyone who could take down that weightlifter had plenty of guts and muscle." He brushed past them, paused and turned to two of the prettiest and most persistent women ever to play in the halls of Hell. "Hellé has both. In a situation as tedious as this her bladder muscles wouldn't interrupt. Something or someone is keeping her outside and I'm going to find out."

He veered left and continued down the carpeted hallway. Two young women emerged from the ladies' room. Both shifted into a flirting mode. Who could possibly be interested in them when the best woman in the human world or anywhere else had given her body and heart to him?

Another left-hand turn revealed a doorway. The knob turned easily and he stepped onto the concrete walkway. Somewhere close by a woman cleared her throat.

Hellé's scent.

A scent far more potent than that possessed by any woman on Earth.

The low rumble of a man's voice. Husky laughter.

He turned toward the noise. Acid spewed in his stomach.

There at the edge of the front sidewalk stood Hellé with that bastard Van gnawing his way up her right leg.

Putting his filthy mouth on the woman *he* loved.

* * * * *

I shuffled backward and lost contact with Van. Headlights flashed in my face. There were footsteps in the lot behind me. Someone had come out the club's back entrance.

Male musk.

The familiar stomp a certain man always assumed whenever pissed-off about something or other.

And that gnashing noise.

A slight overbite caused the undersides of Men's top teeth to grind against the front of those on the bottom.

"Coming with me to the party upstairs?" Van pushed to his feet and stared past her. "Unless you like three-ways?"

"How about a one-way? You go fuck yourself." Men rounded her and swung on Van.

The early morning massage client jumped back. My snapping fingers took Men's attention and I kissed him hard on the mouth. Olive tang lingered on his tongue as it touched mine.

Dirty martinis always were his favorite.

Shuffling feet and muffled words carried my way. The cops had come.

Mister Perfect muttered a few obscenities as they put him into the back of the police car.

"I'll be back." I caught the attention of the tallest officer, a blond guy who personified law and little about disorder. "Have to give my report of what I saw."

"We'll be waiting." Van tucked in the tail of his shirt and headed toward the action near the cruiser. "At least I will. Don't forget to join us for the fun upstairs."

My wave seemed to suffice and Van slinked back inside, following close on the butts of three young women who didn't mind the extra attention and ass pats.

What a jerk. I turned to Men, who'd come up beside me. "Wonder why they brought that guy out here before questioning me? After all, I was his accuser, not Barden."

"He swung on the police. According to Reid, he's some big name in the world of power lifting." Menlikus grabbed my hand and walked us forward. "How will you explain your keen vision aided your crime solving?"

"Just mentioning I saw him stirring Barden's drink will suffice." I matched Men's stride. "Won't take long for them to analyze that club soda."

"Seems you and Van are getting pretty close. Did he lick more than your leg?"

Okay, I knew that was coming. "He knows more about me than he should."

Men stopped a couple feet before we reached the cruiser. "Such as?"

The roaring in my head surpassed the decibel level of my first heavy metal concert in Hell. "He brags about helping me get stronger and regaining the powers I lost. No human could know anything about that part of me."

The rear passenger-side door slammed on a sedan owned by the city's finest.

With the heel of his hand Men kneaded the tension between my shoulder blades. "You trust him?"

"Absolutely not, but I have to find out who he is. If he's in cahoots with Daddy."

"I got your back if he tries anything." Men sneaked his hand around my waist and squeezed. "What if you're wrong about that guy and the drink?" His words came fainter on the balmy breeze.

"I'll return to Hell, kiss Daddy's feet and beg his forgiveness." A slight stretch put my lips in contact with his. "And I'd give up sex forever."

* * * * *

After a bit of one-on-one with Men in an empty hallway downstairs we climbed up to the second floor.

Better find out what my friends were up to. Probably up to their perfect eyelashes with handsome men doing their sexual bidding.

We reached the top of the steps and hung a left.

Sure enough. Those hedo-loving hussies were in their element dead ahead.

Barden, Ulevi and Garmula lay naked on a pile of fluffy white feathers. I swatted bubbles away from my face.

What irony. The devil's daughter attending a party with angel food cake, naked men and women painted with gold glitter and wearing angel wings and several cupids dashing around the large playroom either plucking harps, tossing pink and white rose petals or aiming plastic bows loaded with flimsy arrows at everyone possible.

"Get down here and enjoy yourself for a while." Ulevi plucked a white petal from her belly and blew it at Men and me.

"Hey, you two can't be up here without wearing a heart." Reid wove his way past a tongue-kissing couple and sidestepped the downy goose and peacock feathers upon which my friends lay.

His left hand balanced a tray of cheddar-stuffed mushrooms with bits of bacon crumbled over the top and a crystal dish filled to the rim with beluga caviar. When his right hand opened, a small plastic gadget rested in the palm.

What did people get out of playing with toys? Cocks and tongues were far better and got me off.

"Wearing a heart?" Men accepted a wand from Barden and blew a couple bubbles into my face.

Two spearmint-scented bubbles splashed down on my cheeks and one exploded on my mouth.

Tasty and playful.

Men's cock head pointed at me.

Maybe his arousal was due to the fact people in all stages of undress surrounded us? People stroking, poking and pulling out all the sexual stops.

"Right or left?" Reid passed the tray to a busty redhead and sucked her nipple. He toyed with her for a moment, turned and pointed his self-inking stamp at me.

Men's hand came down on my left buttock. "Put it there, but only if Hellé wants."

Splitch.

The bitter odor of drying chemicals and a slight tingling.

I'd been inked.

Menlikus chose his right buttock for the temporary love brand.

Reid winked and placed a tattoo on the butt of a brunette while she fingered her clit. As he removed his hand, she stuck her first two fingers in his mouth.

He sucked them down to the bottom knuckles and smacked her unmarked cheek. "This babe belongs to me. Off-limits to everyone."

Van approached us, eyes intense, cock hard. Around his waist he wore a steel chain that bound him to two crimson-haired twins. The women wore their metal links around their wrists.

Less than a foot away from where my girlfriends tossed feathers and played with glass dildos he stopped, took his arms off their shoulders and kissed the twin to his right. Once they parted he stuck out his tongue. A tiny metal key lay near the tip.

He pulled it off and opened the lock that lay over his navel. The chain fell away from his body and hit the carpet in halves. "You girls play dirty somewhere else." He pointed at me. "I'll be busy with Hellé for a while."

* * * * *

Tropical punch poured from the mouth of a sylph and pinged the side of the gold-plated punch bowl. Slices of orange, lemon and lime floated over the top, wearing maraschino cherries.

Van filled a cup and passed it to me. "You don't trust me and I don't blame you." He aimed his cup under the stream of citrus-sweet liquid. "The devil's only daughter isn't a fool."

Very clever, passing me a beverage containing mostly liquor. Nice try but it wouldn't work. I needed a clear head when dealing with this possible disciple of the devil. While the harpist played a pastoral selection, more banging filled my brain than would a factory.

Eyes narrowed, I raised the cup and watched him over the rim. No mortal's eyes appeared that glassy in certain lighting unless they were under the influence of some illicit substance.

And I detected no traces of any drug or alcohol seeping from his pores on or his breath. I walked toward the only booth with an empty cherry-red leather bench seat. "Devil's daughter? You must have me confused with some actress."

He wound a finger through a section of my hair and gave a slight tug. "I'm not confused and you aren't an actress. You don't play at a part, you *are* the part."

Chapter Eight

Another bubble burst against Menlikus' arm. He skirted the pile of feathers and Ulevi. "I'm not in the mood for having fun. That guy is up to no good. Hellé should ignore him."

"If you ask me, I think he's gorgeous. Look at that body." Barden turned on a toy that appeared to be someone's bizarre idea of casting a pizza cutter in plastic, miniaturizing it and marketing it to unsuspecting women as a pussy pleaser.

Each spin of the tiny wheel and the pathetic buzzing kept him soft. The things women put inside themselves for pleasure. "I'm not worried about his body. More about what's on his mind."

Garmula sucked and pulled caramel taffy from a cardboard stick between her lips. "Hellé can handle him. She's brought a whole army to their knees."

"Yeah, but only because they were sexually drawn to and smitten with her." A wing-wearing server pranced by bearing a tray of stuffed cherry tomatoes. Menlikus snagged a couple hors d'oeuvres. She only had to stand still for a moment to get those men's undivided attention. And that stand didn't involve danger. Or a guy who's capable of heating up her massage stones to a point well past scalding.

Barden glided the toy over her thighs and belly and flipped it across to Ulevi. "If you insist I'll take him off her hands for a while."

His extended arm stopped the siren dead in her hip-swaying tracks. "I'm on top of this."

Combined squeals came from the bed of fluff. Ulevi and Garmula abandoned their toy and sweets and each grabbed one of Barden's arms.

Barden shrieked and skidded along. "What's the rush? I'm thinking about laying claim to a new boyfriend."

Garmula smacked her friend's ass, shot her a sideways glance, bared her teeth and growled like a jungle cat. "Check out the group collecting in the far corner, Barden. There's a chocolate fountain and bowls of whipped cream." Her tongue swiped over her full, pink, glossy upper lip. "I've never resisted chocolate or group playtime and I'm not about to start."

The threesome joined a dozen or so already dipping fingers and brushes in the melted candy. Pussies and cocks bare. Insatiable appetites for sex and sweets.

Hellé's friends were as far from angels as it got.

They always fell hard. Couldn't resist satisfying cravings. He closed his fingers into fists and cut a straight path for Hellé and Van.

Hellé turned away from Van, palms out and pointed straight at him. Green eyes unblinking and flecked with gray.

The same gray as storm clouds.

On blowing her a kiss, Menlikus silently cursed Van. While he might keep a distance from their conversation, he would keep a watch on Hellé from a proper vantage point.

Getting his ass inked to mingle with people who were only about pawing each other bordered on tolerable.

But leaving this room wasn't an option unless Hellé was at his side.

* * * * *

My fork tines split the puff pastry. Leaving Hades hadn't affected my appetite.

After all, even the devil's daughter couldn't exist on man candy alone.

Chicken gravy, pieces of white meat and veggies spilled onto the cocktail plate.

Van's teeth split off over half of his deep-fried cheddar appetizer and one swallow took the treat down.

"Who exactly are you?" I picked up and nibbled the mini éclair. Creamy filling squirted onto my lower lip.

He edged closer, the soft of squeak of the leather seat competing with his deeper breaths. "I'm someone who's watched your every move since you arrived in Sin City."

Van's tongue made short, slurping work of the custard mess and also swiped over my upper lip in an odd kiss.

A kiss that sent a barbed-wire-fence jolt to my toes.

"You aren't human." And he wasn't from Hell. If he had been I would have known.

Men from Hell tasted a certain way, complements of the atmosphere as well as the food and drink consumed down there.

His fingers tickled up my thigh, slipped underneath my skirt and teased over to the sensitive place a couple of inches from my pussy. "If Menlikus doesn't get that zalendum you won't be long for this world or any other."

Sweat seeped from places on my body it never dared before. I popped a chocolate-covered cherry into my mouth. As I closed my mouth, the candy crust split and oozed sugary goop over my tongue. Another bite pulverized the plump fruit and splashed maraschino juice over my palate and tonsils.

My throat muscles clenched and I grabbed the glass of ice water. Two gulps cleared my throat and would have otherwise brought me gooseflesh if it wasn't for the heat pouring from every inch of Van's body.

Heat that intensified as soon as he mentioned Menlikus and the zalendum. "Why should that concern you?"

Each shift of his hand nudged my skirt hem up my legs. The soft hiss as his zipper opened. Van turned toward me in the booth, his boot planted between my feet. His rough hand pushed my skirt higher. Something hot, hard and definitely male musky tapped against my leg.

Something Van used to gain the upper hand over his feminine victims.

Flesh slapped against flesh.

"Why?" Van's calloused palm and fingers pumped and squeezed his cock. "Because I don't want anything to happen to you. Because I care. Pick up your water glass and hold it tight."

I maintained eye contact and lifted the glass to my cheek, resting it there while my heartbeats catapulted toward my tongue. He was up to something.

But his eyes registered nothing. Cold as coals in a long-dormant brazier.

Steaming liquid splashed over my thigh and trickled down. I closed my eyes tight. Such a potent animal. Musk that would overpower all other scents in this room or any other.

He'd cum faster than my travel-sluggish brain could process his intention.

No wonder he wanted me holding the iced drink. To offset the burn of his release. I was slipping. Weakening. Dazed and aroused by this decidedly demonic man or whatever he might be once analyzed by a woman with a clearer-thinking mind.

Get a grip, Hellé. "You always care about strangers?"

A nubile party slave in chains delivered him a margarita and kissed him on the mouth. He pinched her butt and whispered something in garbled French. She giggled, balanced another lime wedge on the rim of his glass, plunked down a handful of cocktail napkins and swished away.

But not before bending over, spreading her legs and showing everyone close by her bare pussy.

Van dabbed cum off my leg and the seat. He excused himself but returned shortly after having discarded the wadded, wet napkins. After licking his lips and tickling my mouth with his lizardlike tongue he finished two more appetizers. Only crumbs and the pimento from his martini olive lay on the crystal snack plate.

"Now where were we?" He leaned over and brushed his nose against mine. "Oh yes. You asked me about strangers. Strangers usually mean nothing to me. But in your case I've made an exception." Each swipe of his strawberry-pink tongue bared more of the margarita glass's rim. "Mmmm. Precious agave nectar." His briny breath struck my face and he downed a good portion of the drink. "Meet the man who's the real reason Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt."

Finally, peace and quiet. Too bad the only place I could find that was here in the ladies' lounge.

Water gushed from the gooseneck faucet and over my neck and shoulders.

I'd sure run into some real winners in Vegas and in Hell.

Lot's wife? Real reason she was turned into a pillar of salt? What on earth was Van babbling about?

What did he know about that unfortunate woman from Biblical times?

That long-tongued tormentor took every slice of cake on Reid's silver serving platters and then some.

What made him think I'd believe his bullshit?

While I might have lost some of my powers I hadn't lost my mind. Yet I couldn't deny some of my faculties skewed when around him. No matter how many times I replayed his boasts the same resulted.

He might be feeding me a line about Lot's wife but knew about the zalendium and about my being Satan's daughter.

And if he knew of any part of our plan to get more of that mineral so might Satan. I had to find out if Van and Daddy were friends or even foes allied for the cause of destroying me.

During my time in Hades I'd never heard of or seen this hot-handed man making the most exaggerated claims. Up until the moment I put my feet on the transport platform I knew the identity of every beast, domesticated animal and dead mortal playing with the devil's fire.

What made Van think I'd leave the party and meet him alone in Reid's office?

A slight reach shut off the abbreviated sink shower. As I straightened and stared in the mirror, cool water streamed down my back and I let my hair fall into place. I really needed to get out in the desert sun.

Van knew his bold statement couldn't help but spur my curiosity.

He sensed I wouldn't rest until I made him explain his connection to Lot's wife.

My sigh fogged the vanity mirror. There was no denying my lover and best friend was beyond provoked at my paying attention to Van. But at least he gave me some space to learn more about the man who'd knocked me back more paces than I cared to count since his visit to Comus earlier this morning.

The restroom door slapped open. Barden, Garmula and Ulevi stumbled in, doubled over from laughing so hard.

"Look what we found. Hellé's finally coming up for air." Barden pointed at me, wagged her tongue and slipped into the closest stall.

So much for peace and quiet. "You found me but I found something more interesting."

"Yeah?" Ulevi traced her tongue around her first three fingers. "Like what?"

On waving goodbye I flung open the door. "The guy who just might be able to help us get Men back to Hell before it's too late."

* * * * *

The party-cum-playroom had filled significantly by the time I returned. Not five feet from where Menlikus and I stood a handsome sable-haired guy gave his playmate at least ten thick inches from behind.

If he took the time to slow up his strokes I could tell if there were more inches I'd missed.

The guy, whose name groaned out of her mouth as "Trevor", slapped her ass and rode her harder. Her palms rested flat against the floor and her flowing blonde hair swished over the carpet.

Menlikus hugged me and the mint patty I'd tucked in my black lace bra created a chocolate-and-foil shield over my nipple. I grabbed his hand and headed us into the hallway.

Men's eyes narrowed. "That guy gets off on feeding you lies."

I backed up until my butt touched the wall and lifted my top. After I'd smeared the melted candy over my nipple, I crumpled the wrapper and guided his mouth onto the chocolate and mint cream. "I don't think he's bluffing." But I dared not mention the fact Van masturbated against my leg while revealing information I couldn't discredit or ignore.

Reid didn't need any more slugfests tonight.

At least not if we five wanted a new place to live and possibly work.

Men's mouth went to work on my sexy artwork. Only after he'd sucked off every bit of candy did he come up for air. "I'd sleep in a pit filled with serpents before I'd trust him. Matter of fact, I'd trust the devil before I'd trust Van. And don't forget your father is fed up with you and me." Men finished tonguing me and kissed me so hard that not only a few stars but also enough to make several constellations appeared on his face when we parted. "No telling what Satan's scheming to do since we figured a way out of his immediate range and hellfire."

Although my nipples were hard, no other telltale signs remained of our embrace. I walked away from the man wearing a smile appealing enough to turn any woman's head. "I'll be back shortly. If Van doesn't spill more about his identity he's history."

"Good luck." He removed a rose-pink silken blindfold from the back pocket of his jeans. "I hid this from Barden. The guy who gave it to me to put on her didn't appear decent. No safer than the one who drugged her drink."

Of all the men on Earth and in Hell I'd fallen in love with the ultimate protector. A man to have, hold and never let go—unless he started tickling me.

"Thanks for looking out for her. But I don't need luck." Two taps of my forefinger loosened some of the glitter on my forehead. "This will see me through." A slight push of my hand released the lever on the adjacent office door.

The same door from underneath which Van's scent seeped. "I've lost some of my powers but I don't believe I've lost my ability to get what I want from any man here on Earth."

Instead of bathing us in a silvery glow the overhead lights flashed four times.

"Hellé! Are you coming in here or not?" Van cleared his throat. The *thunk* of glass glancing off wood reached the hallway. "My offer to help you won't stand forever."

* * * * *

Screw this meeting men in offices. Each step forward I took into the room scented with white musk crushed my heels into the carpet.

Three cups of punch were arranged at precise intervals on the round-topped glass table beneath which gleamed a smiley face.

I slammed the door shut and approached Van. To my left a closed-circuit screen blared a scene with Barden, Ulevi and Garmula.

Immersed in a golden tub brimming with bubbles, my girlfriends puffed foam at each other's faces. All wore their hair on top of their heads, secured with pairs of sassy red chopsticks. They giggled and traded sexy taunts and innuendo.

Ulevi swam around Garmula and Barden. "Like my ass?"

"Can't see it." Barden jumped from the suds and showed everyone her naked breasts.

Van kneaded his cock bulge but kept his linen trousers on.

Ulevi shook her finger at the nipple-tweaking Barden. "Wait a minute, you will."

"I wouldn't mind fucking all three of them and you. At the same time." Van raised the centermost crystal globe cup and held it out for me.

I accepted and swirled the contents around. No shimmering or telltale chalky odor as would be present in Rolegite, a poison unknown to humans but popular with demons and hell-dwellers.

The most evil beings preferred using this pulverized ore to render their victims unconscious for hours while they took their sexual fill.

My tongue tingled and I set the cup back where it belonged.

Better safe than sorry. "You'll have to ask them but count me out."

The wispy fog swirling in front of the tub dissipated and a section of the floor opened. The girls and their oversized claw-foot revolved on the platform before lowering. As they hugged each other, licked lips and blew kisses at the audience a panel on the tub opened and sluiced the water into the floor cavern.

A clap of manmade thunder sounded and artificial rain streamed down on them. They stroked the foam from their skin, cupped their hard-nippled breasts and cocked their hips for the cheering partygoers.

Another *boom* from the sound-effects' team and the screen blackened.

Van's thumb teased the divot on his chin. "That's what it looked like for a short time when God shut off the lights in Sodom and Gomorrah."

"Just what are you selling? That you were there when Sodom and Gomorrah fell? That your role was forgotten or not taken into account historically?"

"Exactly." Faster than Henry VIII quaffed a tankard of ale, Van downed all three cups of punch. "Your father and I knew each other. Very well. Both archangels sent on missions. Archangels who failed and fell from grace. But I fell way before he did."

"You're not telling me anything I didn't know about my father." I perched on the edge of an overstuffed loveseat. "But he never mentioned you."

His fingers stroked and plucked his pants legs and his cock lengthened beneath the loosely fitted fabric. "Satan doesn't talk about Heaven and being one of God's chosen. What purpose would that serve him? He's all about being the almightiest. He never embraced being sent on missions of salvation."

"And you? Why did you cause the desiccation of Lot's wife?"

"On reaching Sodom I was tempted by a comely whore. Hair as long as yours. Black as night. Wet between the legs when she pulled open her gown. I became caught up in her charms, forget to warn Lot and the rest is ancient history."

"Not the way I learned it."

"History books and lectures are rife with inaccuracies. Now that I've set you straight, know that I can help you and that bull you call a boyfriend. I know where he can find a body for his transport." He stood, circled the table and surged at me. Laying his hand on top of my head, he massaged in gentle circles. "You need me. You can't afford to turn your back on a sure thing. On a man smarter than Satan. Ten times as strong and ten times as potent. You got a taste of my power when I hit you this morning."

"Hit me? You flirted but never *struck* me."

His grin widened. "Think not? Don't forget about the ball lightning."

Chapter Nine

Dawn's peachy light caught underneath the fleeting gray of night.

I stamped out a yawn with the back of my hand. The central air-conditioning whirred into another cycle inside Comus.

My dreams and days of operating a successful spa for men were numbered.

My fingertip squeaked down the window glass. How did Van manage such a feat? And not a single burn mark on the sill where the ball lightning had entered.

He might be strong but he'd lost too many marbles. What man in his right mind would claim his part in history as a fallen angel?

And those wild claims he'd cavorted with a whore and neglected to warn Lot and his wife...

Was he certifiable, some supernatural being or a beast capable of transforming himself into a fierce ball of energy who could have struck me dead?

Men wrapped his arms around my waist and pecked tiny kisses on my ear. "What's on your mind, as if I didn't already know."

"The fact I don't entirely trust Van. He even knew about the shape and placement of scars on Daddy's back. No one outside of those in Hell, or who'd known him before his fall from grace, could possibly be privy to those details."

"Good thing we didn't buy more stuff or start redecorating." Barden bundled the final cream-beige body-sized towel and shoved it into the trash bag. "I'll look like Mrs. Claus carrying this stuff."

Garmula fondled two of the granite massage stones before tucking them into a towel she folded this way and that to keep them from clacking together. "Bet you'd let that handsome computer programmer we met last night up your chimney."

A white marabou slipper lofted from Barden's hand and barely missed Gar-Gar's head. "Not funny. You'd make more money stripping or pole dancing than you would as a stand-up comedienne."

Menlikus hauled the boxes and bags over to the front entrance and lined them up. "Just make sure you watch your back, Barden. Hellé might not always be around."

After finishing the last sip of mocha latte, I bear-hugged Barden. "Maybe not face-to-face but she'll know where to reach me."

"You and Men will blaze some path in the desert. Forget we ever existed. We'll never hear from you again." Ulevi pulled the phone cord from the wall. "There. At least we won't have to deny any more clients. I'm looking forward to our bathtub routine at Cadence."

"Me too." Garmula and Barden chimed in unison.

Menlikus rapped his knuckles on the door glass and flipped up his middle finger. "You wanna deal with the asshole standing out there, or should I do the honors?"

A responsive knock sounded. Van stood in the hallway wearing one of his trademark shit-eating grins.

During his other visit to Comus Van had to have noticed the main and only entrance to our suite wore a panel of one-way glass.

We saw everything – and everyone – coming and going in front of our door.

Van licked his lips.

Without a doubt he wasn't here to help us move this morning.

"Well?" Men shot me one of those let-me-show-him-the-street looks. "We gotta get going."

Barden and Gar-Gar pointed past us.

Garmula sucked her forefinger. "Think we'll have time for one last rubdown?"

"Don't think so." This time Men and I were in sync.

"Open the door and let him in, Menlikus." My fist crushed the small, laminated cardboard cup and I sank it into the bag destined for the dumpster. "I'll hear him out first. If he's up to no good then I'll take him out with the trash."

* * * * *

Standing several feet behind Menlikus, I twirled a pencil around the fingers on my right hand. This morning notes of vetiver and patchouli camouflaged Van's signature stench.

Figures he'd show up with a hard-on.

Ulevi swished past, fastening herself to Van tighter than the tiles on the floor in the Noba Temple. "We'll miss you."

Damn. Where was that ball gag when we needed it most? Once her lips opened it took either chocolate or what Van wore below his belt buckle to close them.

Instead of embracing her, the supposedly fallen one patted the back of her hand and peeled her off as easily as one would the skin of a roasted tomato. "I've made a deal with the devil."

With those words everyone stopped and stared.

No one on Earth, except for Zyrs, had a direct connection or audience with Daddy.

Men's foot impacted the fullest trash bag and several towels spilled out the split in the side. "Fuck off."

The soles of Van's tooled leather Western boots flattened the carpet fibers in his path. He stabbed a clawed forefinger above Men's heart. "Interesting choice of words."

His looked past Men and at me then back at my lover. "If you want to fuck any woman ever again you'll go back to Hell and stay there."

Pins jabbed my skin from the inside out and the acid in my belly boiled. "Menlikus and I aren't playing games with you. If you can't help us, get out."

"That's why I'm here." Van drifted his grayish-golden gaze over everyone and winked at me. "To help you all."

"You can do something so we won't die?" Garmula careened around the desk and crouched at Van's feet. Her fingers walked up his left leg and paused at reaching his cock bulge.

"I can and will." Van's jaw tensed. "But I have terms."

And tenement buildings had cockroaches. "Which are?" My nostrils burned with the next breath.

There was that sulfuric odor again.

"As I started explaining before I was interrupted," Van growled, gritted his teeth and trained eyes that wore amber rims around their irises on the only other man in the spa, "the devil and I reached an agreement in this situation, Hellé. Satan will give me Shenda for you. If you refuse to accept this offer, and if your Greek lover goes to back to Hell and succeeds on returning here, you must cut off his balls. If you can't do this I'll gladly perform the surgery."

Various comebacks came to mind but my lips refused to speak them.

Mere words wouldn't defeat this devil on Earth.

The odds were stacked almost completely in Van's favor. Someone had snitched. Either Shenda, my former friend and the devil's favorite lap dancer, or Tony, Satan's special chemist who mixed up more than potent love potions in his lab down in Hell.

Or Van had read Men's mind.

Or overheard our conversations.

After laying a hand on Men's forearm, I shot him a sideways glance. One more word from his kissable lips and Van might close them forever. "I don't believe you. Daddy cares too much about Shenda to lose her. We have no proof you ever met with the devil. And what do you want with Shenda when there are lots of willing women right here in Las Vegas?"

Van fished in the rear pocket of his jeans then extended his closed hand to me. He turned his forearm so that the fingers faced upward and he opened them one by one.

Daddy's favorite knife lay on his palm. The head of a viper with genuine rubies for eyes carved in relief on the handle.

Bizarre razor-like pulses slashed at my belly and legs. "Where did you get that?"

The grin faded from his full lips and he stroked the serpent's image. "From Lucifer himself. He knows I don't want it and will give it back. He also knows nothing that happens here on Earth escapes me. Especially not his gorgeous daughter in those sexy high heels."

Van wanted Shenda for some reason. A reason he likely wouldn't reveal. "Shenda must mean something to you. But what if you don't get her back?"

"Then I'll take you." His exaggerated air kissing incited Garmula and Barden to whispering and giggling. "That hot pussy of yours will satisfy me. I'll give you all the strength and powers you need to survive the ages. You'll be mine forever." Van raked his foreclaw over Men's nipple. "This one can go fuck himself or whoever he wants to put in those manacles in what used to be his cave."

More hellish details.

Hellishly accurate details only those dwelling in Hell or visiting there would know.

Another flick of Van's claw exposed a blade. The skin on his arms undulated and the faint sound of the cotton fibers on his shirt ripping under the strain of his expanding biceps filled my ears

Neither Men nor I were likely strong enough at this point to do battle with the beast claiming to be our friend.

Only one thing would give me a chance at squaring off with him, whether or not he knew of the connection between the zalendium and my chance of survival.

My glance sent Ulevi back with the others where she continued packing.

On insinuating myself between Menlikus and Van, I knelt and unzipped Men's fly. He unfastened the waistband button and fed me his cock. The moment his hot flesh grazed my lips, blood flashed from the base of his cock to the tip. Each nudge and drag of the hardness over my tongue found me sucking him deeper into my mouth. His heavy balls filled my palm and I gently rolled them. His moans and Van's growls competed for airspace.

The heat emanating from Men's thigh, despite the denim, drove up my body temperature. He knew the reason behind my impromptu lip service.

Zalendium that Menlikus had added to and consumed in the formula before leaving Hell still remained in his cum. Once I swallowed the zalendium this rare mineral's properties would spur every system in my body, including my adrenals. A quick blowjob would bolster my strength and temporarily stave off my sexual hunger.

Back and forth I took him in and surrendered the best-tasting man ever born. His heady musk filled my nostrils. I sucked him back into my throat, kneaded the spot beneath his balls and milked his shaft. Men's sac tightened. His hand tangled in my hair and he mumbled endearments.

"Mmmmyeeaahhhh." Men pressed tighter against my mouth and rocked his hips.

A milky flood sprayed down my throat.

Steam swept over my muscles and piped along the veins with my blood. My skin stretched tighter over my bones. My adrenaline hissed at encountering the zalendium and streamed throughout my system.

Menlikus had indeed found the key to my regaining strength and likely remaining alive above ground.

I licked him clean, backed away from Menlikus and offered him my hands. He clasped them, pulled me to my feet and kissed away my next several breaths.

No more wobbly knees.

No more putting up with people trying to intimidate me either. I sucked Men's tongue for another couple heartbeats before breaking our embrace and staring at Van. "Did my father send you to spy on me?"

"No." Van tapped the nail blade tip against his front tooth. "I knew nothing of your desire to come here. The moment I spotted you, you were lying on the floor near that clothes rack. It was then, after seeing you, knowing your identity, that I contacted the devil with the hopes of making a trade of you for Shenda."

Damn the devil and his deals. My lungs and vitals expanded. "What does Menlikus have to do with all this? Why not leave him alone?"

Van straightened his arm and swatted at his Greek rival. "He's an annoyance to Satan and me. I've no use for him but I do have use for Shenda."

"And if you can't get her, then what?"

"I'll take you." Van slapped the knife into my hand with the blade pointing at his chest. "Are you going to do the honors, or am I? We both know he can't go to Hell and back again without being captured. And I'm not willing to wait any longer to be reunited with Shenda."

Chapter Ten

Each jog of the slim, black second hand ticked off more than the golden-cased oval timepiece mounted on the wall beside the spa's front desk.

Van and Men paced, circling one another at times but maintaining a close proximity. The Siamese ruby eyes burnished into the knife handle flashed at me. Van was many things, among them a sneaky bastard. Coming on my leg. Giving me a knife. Telling me to castrate the man I loved most.

Not a chance of that happening but I had to focus on outfoxing my father's latest ally.

I could, instead, use this blade on the man who'd borrowed it from Daddy.

The men brushed shoulders, both snarling and muttering obscenities. Garmula, Ulevi and Barden remained silent in the waiting area.

"Your hearing must have been compromised during the trip." Van wheeled, smacked the backrest of the blue-tweed desk chair and set the leg casters spinning. The squeaks and clicks chased around inside my skull.

"I've heard every word you've spoken." My fingers tightened around the weapon. "Damn you. I cannot do what you ask."

Using his first two fingers, he combed the bangs off my forehead. "You'll more than damn me when his blood is spilled. All because of your decision to leave the place where you were born and belonged."

"It wasn't my decision to leave Hell. But I guess Daddy failed to divulge that detail." I lunged and knocked Van off balance and against the desk's edge. The keyboard and adjustable tray rattled. "I had no choice."

Van disappeared behind me and dragged the knife blade up the crease of my ass. "One last chance. You want to cut him, or should I?"

One quick maneuver of my fingers and wrist and the knife thumped against the carpet, bounced and lay near my right foot. I pinned it to the carpet with my heel. "Let Menlikus return to Hell. You and I will work this out some other way."

Van looked me up and down. "Follow me. The idiot can come along too."

* * * * *

A few lights twinkled in the distance. Cemeteries were sadder than the darkest caves in Hell. I cupped my hand near the dancing flame of the lighter Menlikus held. Leaned against the towering elm, a faint glow cast over his sullen face, he could have used me cradling and rocking him and whispering of our love.

But he wasn't the kind of man who sought babying when a situation required bravado.

Here in the section farthest from the front gate, Van sank the knife blade into the softened earth of a new grave and walked backward. Bits of earth skipped off the knife's edge and sank into the grass.

"Damned if I like the idea of being bitten. Especially by him." Men's kiss stilled my quivering lips. "He could kill me just to have you all to himself."

"Won't happen. He's not my type." My bear hug brought out Men's fondness of tickling me.

"Guess you're right." He licked my chocolate-mint gloss off his lips. "You two are like oil and water."

"More like reverse polarities." My laughter hit my lover's broad chest and I bit the place on his black cotton t-shirt where his left nipple poked.

Even without my old level of night vision, I found all the tempting spots on Menlikus' amazing body.

A stone sang past my head and parted blades of grass on landing.

Faint muttering and more digging. "Standing there kissing and rubbing all over each other isn't accomplishing much."

Men nuzzled my ear. "Except pissing him off. Bet you've pissed off your share of men over the centuries?"

I sure had. The devil's daughter loved putting losers in their place. "Only six thousand thirteen but who's counting?"

"Not me." He tongued my earlobe and nipped my neck. "Maybe I should tell donkey dick to go bite himself?"

My fingers tangled in his thick hair. "No use. He probably gets off on pain."

"Something tells me you'll have a harder time dealing with him than you did with the devil." He rolled his head and unseated my hand.

"I'll do whatever it takes to avoid you losing your life or manhood." After lifting his t-shirt I licked his taut nipples. "Even if it means engaging Van sexually."

"Regardless of what happens." Either tears or love-light shone in Men's eyes. "Know I love you and always want to be with you."

A deep breath swelled my chest and my heart twisted so much the venous and arterial moorings strained.

Men's own blood-pumping organ thumped against my palm. "I feel the same way."

"You had all day to say goodbye," Van snarled, and approached, his right hand gripping the knife handle while the blade pointed toward the grave. "My way is the only way. If you want half a chance at succeeding on a half-assed mission of mercy."

Our tormenter wore his possessive nature more proudly than a well-dressed man wore an Armani suit.

A leaf landed on top of my head. The crisp, zesty flesh rustled as I ran Nature's offering over Men's cheeks and chin. Boots stomped behind me.

The dull clicking of a claw stretching farther out from the nail bed.

Heat streaming from the hand closing in on my shoulder.

I pivoted away from Menlikus. "If you don't mind —"

"But I damn well do." Van's heels trampled and ripped the blades of grass beneath them as he halted. "I have better things to do than fool around here until sunrise. My generous offer won't stand for much longer."

And I wouldn't stand for his foul mood any longer. The leaf sifted from my hand and swished against the ground. "Give us another minute and we'll join you."

"Join me?" Van huffed. "I'm not going to Hell. Wouldn't be caught dead, alive or any other way down there."

"Then how did you get Daddy's favorite knife?"

At his bidding the steel blade grated over the tenuous bit of protein comprising Van's claw and throat, and he cleared his throat. "That's for him and me to know."

Clasping hands with Men, I nudged my brave best friend toward an adjacent tree. "Just watch Shenda. She's tricky. Like someone else. Actually, like two someone else."

Men's feet plodded along as though this were his last mile. "You got that right. But she and I have already been over what will happen."

"As long as Van hasn't gotten to her since and shifted that plan." I let Menlikus go and backed up a few paces.

The sliver of moon paled his tanned skin. How he forced his next smile. "Hard to say but we have to hope for the best."

With my hands on his shoulders I pushed up on the balls of my feet and fitted myself into my favorite groove on the good-looking Greek's hard body. "Know I'll be thinking about you. Doing my best to get things squared away for us all up here."

"I know you will." He squeezed my buttocks and traced hearts over each.

Our lips met. Chocolate from the milkshake we shared before leaving the Strip. Salt from the French fries.

I could gobble him up and ask for seconds and thirds.

My heaved breath flowed into his open mouth and he returned my sigh with a warmer one of his own. "The Gierhona exchange. May my ability to extend this protection still remain and may it keep you from harm as you pass through Kellion and into the hellfire."

Van muttered and tramped toward the grave. We followed him, our hearts thumping loudly enough to stir the slumbering birds. Our bodies tingling. Hailstorms competing with tropical winds in my vitals. His palm clinging to mine.

Both of us wondering if we'd ever see each other again after tonight.

The fluted cuff of Van's white poet's shirt skimmed a hair's width above the disturbed earth as he carved deeper. "You won't have any trouble passing through here." Still crouching he turned to us, fangs bared. "But after you break through the rest is up to you."

"Menlikus won't become a beast such as you?"

Van sliced the surrounding air with broad strokes. "No blood exchange will occur. Depending on his healing abilities, he may or may not bear my mark." He leaned out and cut a larger swath in the atmosphere closer us.

A hot current of sulfur-scented air hit my face and caused a burning in my toenail beds.

This hearty specimen who'd disgraced Heaven lived to control others.

Men stroked my hand and I glanced at his crotch.

I had to have one last taste before I let him go.

My sexual appetite required sating and the extra strength would come in handy when dealing with a former friend of the devil's.

I crouched in front of Menlikus. With only a few pumps of my hand clear droplets rolled from his cock head and I licked him clean. Several sucks and massages of his balls brought a warm flood over my tongue. On swallowing his powerful gift I replayed events from the past two days.

Shhhink.

Van no longer held the knife.

If I could plant fear in the bowels of Jared Strong my power could probably hold the same sway over Van.

But if that blood-sucking beast dared harm Menlikus or me I'd sink my heel so deep in his heart the world's most skilled thoracic surgeon would have more than Hell to pay removing it.

Men helped me up and zipped his fly. We clasped hands and walked toward the man who could bring us eternal happiness—or send our romantic plans up in smoke.

From the pouch fastened to his belt Van removed a flacon and passed it to me. "Hold this while I kill him."

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

Nothing in my power could prevent the loss of Men's life. But unless he surrendered his mortal form, returning to Hell wasn't possible.

The dark-blue glass clung to my fingers. Each cycle of Van's menacing words burrowed them deeper into my gray matter. Wispy fog floated in front of my eyes. Stench such as that from sulfur deposits clogged my nostrils and throat and coated my tongue.

"You feel like watching?" Van turned and flashed me a fanged grin.

I'd missed the latest sale at Saks due to this graveside agenda but Van missed a conscience and good manners from birth. "I've seen far more horrendous sights when in Hell."

"Come over here to the portal." Van stared us down.

At reaching the narrow trench I stepped away while Van posed Men with his feet close the burial mound, straddling the open ground.

Now to see if Van possessed the ability to read minds. No sense going any further with this game if he did. The blackness behind my closed lids formed a swirling vortex. The Brekennium barrier—a protective shield that prevented brainwashing and mind-reading and was possessed only by Satan and his offspring—lifted around my brain. Only by intense focusing could we hellish beings temporarily remove and later reconstruct this unique magnetic field inside our skulls.

Menlikus is far sexier than you. You couldn't fuck me a hundredth as well or as deep.

With my eyes open I concentrated on Van's closed lips and recycled the thought.

Not a single twitch.

Fang-Face heaved a breath toward the close-to-midnight sky. "Are you finished praying or whatever it was you were doing?"

Van wasn't a mind-reader. Or if he was, one of my precious powers still remained—I could prevent others from getting inside my head and learning my thoughts.

Without answering I squeezed Men's hand. "Quite."

Caught in the moon's glow, the claw on Van's forefinger shone bluish-white. "Not so close to him. I have to prepare the Skave zone."

Skave zone?

Men and I shrugged.

From the pouch positioned near where the knife lay buried to its handle in dirt, Van removed a small cloth bundle. After laying it on his left palm he unfolded the edges until all four corners hung over his hand. His right thumb and forefinger sank into the pile of reddish-brown powder and pinched together. He dusted the faintly sweet-smelling dust onto his tongue and took another measured portion between his fingers. Three times he performed the ritual, bending over the furrow and sifting the powder into the opening. A sneeze teased the back of my throat. I closed my fingers over my nostrils and caught the outburst but pitched forward. On removing my fingers the air in front of my face lay heavier than that a couple inches behind me. Cloying citrus-sweetness soothed the thumping in my temples and unknotted the muscles in the back of my neck and I righted myself.

"The flaçon of eshlew." Van snapped his fingers.

Barely did I extend my arm before he snatched the fluid from me. A soft pop floated toward the sky as the stopper was freed from the neck. In the same way Barden

drizzled oil over her garden salads, Van spread the cod-scented contents along the ground rift.

He slapped the stopper into place and dropped the empty bottle into his pouch. "Where's the lighter?"

When I remained silent he fished in Men's back pocket and produced the device. His thumb incited the strike wheel and a flame flared. He crouched and touched the dancing oval of energy to the edge of the trench. A blue flame leaped about a foot above the ground and tracked down the man-made furrow to the end. Van closed the lid and tossed the lighter behind me.

What at first resembled fish oil morphed into the aroma of roasting nuts.

Van's laughter blanketed us.

The fence of fire climbed to within a couple inches of Men's ten inches of glory. Van beat his hands toward the flames and they lowered by half.

Daddy would love that trick.

The longest claws adorned Van's forefingers and he pointed the left one at Men's heart. "Straddle the flames as I'm doing. Then you'll be ready."

Men started toward me but Van drifted between us before my lover made a third step. The sexy Greek with the heart of gold sought the pyre that might mark his own funeral if malice or a mistake prevented Men from reaching Hell and returning.

At the base of the flames a bubbling erupted. Sparks shot into the air. Glassy amber orbs formed as the bubbles shrank.

Without a doubt, Van wasn't playing with all his marbles. And if this was his way of playing a sick practical joke, I'd deal with him in a way he wouldn't like.

The madman's amber marbles swelled a bit and hissed. Their surfaces clouded and the crackling intensified.

My nails gouged my palms and my throat muscles clenched. Menlikus posed over the pyre, wearing a smile I'd always remember.

"Good riddance. Hope you stay down there." Van chanted a few phrases in Latin and pierced the tip of Men's right middle finger.

He milked a few drops of blood, turned Men's hand so the palm pointed down and slapped the backs of my boyfriend's fingers. The blood hit the fire and flared the blue flames a few inches higher. A ferrous tang replaced the roasted aroma.

Van swept around to Men's right, grabbed a fistful of his hair and tipped his head toward his left shoulder. The walls of my veins cleaved closer together and more heartbeats launched toward my tongue.

Menlikus' neck flesh.

Bared for a fallen angel's bite.

Van's snarl trained on me for moment before he sank his fangs into Menlikus' jugular. The ripping of flesh and the rush of blood filled my straining ears and drowned out a distant horn honk.

More of the ferrous component of Men's life broth blended with the intensifying sulfur odor.

Blood dribbled down Van's chin for a few seconds. His head lifted. "Come here and hold him up while I finish."

"Finish? You said there was to be no blood exchange."

"There wasn't. I merely had to inject his body with a compound from my own. Prewga from my saliva will spur molecular changes." He pointed to the fire. "The resulting compound will chemically react when exposed to the intense heat of the fire. This chemical change will allow your lover's body to enter the dead man's and pass through the portal."

My gentle jostle failed to rouse Men or elicit the simplest of responses. "Is he dead?"

"Mortal examination and scrutiny would deem him so. But the prewga acts as a preservative in a way I'm not sure even you'd understand."

"Try me."

Van brushed the knife handle over the back of my hand as I braced Men's back. "Pinch the end of his right forefinger."

My unmoving lover's finger remained warm and I secured the tip. Van touched the blade to the plumpest part.

He milked two drops of blood onto the marbled remnants at Men's feet, and the sizzling glass balls glowed purplish pink. "Let him go. He'll join that body in the casket and fall along with its shell."

No compassion whatsoever in Van's voice.

No placing value on something that once lived, loved and breathed.

As my hands left Men's body, the earth drew him downward. His form appeared softened, shimmering and seeping into the furrow as though succumbing to the will of an underground vacuum.

Several tears tumbled down my cheeks and sizzled at hitting the spot beside where only the top of his head remained free of the soil.

Black smoke roiled toward my face and I stared up at the sky. The earth mound shifted underfoot. "How can you be sure this will work?"

"You watched them shoveling in the dirt, didn't you?"

"I saw them bury the corpse here if that's what you mean. But I've always thought a body decays over time. Even over the short amount of time we've spent waiting to perform this ritual. The only thing spared the rotting process is a person's soul. That precious part of a dead creature either ends up as aromatherapy for the devil or goes to the kingdom above. Otherwise—"

“Well, you thought wrong.” His fangs extended. “So did anyone else who believes that stuff.”

Nothing remained near my feet except for the marbles. They swelled and burst, popping like fireworks on the Fourth. Shards of glass sprayed into the air and settled onto the grass and soil. The scent of molten glass, charred wood and Men’s body musk came in with my next deep breath.

I sniffed and blinked back the tears. My heart muscles twisted and volleyed the next beat into my throat.

He was gone but never forgotten. His bravery, his loving ways, would always remain in my memory.

And now I was left to do battle with a man possibly more formidable than my father.

A man from whom carnal energy poured faster than wine from the casks in Hades.

A man who scoffed at scruples and dined on deceit.

Fallen angel or foe?

On looking Van’s way, I smiled. To find out more about him and his motives I’d invite myself into his world. Like Jared Strong only far more powerful and potent, Van got off on playing games.

And I never played a game I didn’t win.

* * * * *

The sour wind slapped Menlikus’ cheeks as he clung to the craggy wall. Mila bugs swarmed and pelted his body. Damn creepy ceremony back there with that Van.

But at least he’d made it this far.

He descended a couple feet and stared into the swirling golden-bronze lights blaring up from the place many knew as Purgatory but Hellé called Kellion. Cries of those caught in between God and the devil corkscrewed up the rock surface, bending at certain points as would ill-played notes on a piano.

Hellé played the piano.

With eyes closed he replayed the image of her kneeling and feeding from his cock. She would need a supreme amount of wit and strength when dealing with that screwball Van.

The wall’s uneven shelf proved treacherous while wearing another’s body, despite his superhuman strength. Hopefully Shenda hadn’t played him for a sucker. She and Hellé were friends for a long time.

Friends didn’t fuck with other friends’ lives, not even if they were in bed and everywhere else with the devil.

One by one he released his fingers and hurtled downward. More screams smashed against his eardrums and coupled with cries and moans of restless souls. Trapped and

tormented beings whose hands now reached for the falling body of the young dead man whose flesh suit was bursting at the seams.

As the strange suit sloughed off, he continued falling. His own skin bore down on the underlying muscle and the ache deepened in his bones. Scalding air currents pelted him with fetid wet pellets. The loud cheers became muffled and a sweet mist enveloped him.

Definitely not the same path Hellé had followed, according to her detailed description.

Something jostled him upward for a short distance before his descent resumed. His glide slowed. Breaths came easier.

Calcite and bluish-black mineral deposits lay to his right and left.

The laboratory.

Hellé advised keeping his legs posed in a natural position, his feet about three inches apart. A clanging filled his head and he glanced past his toes.

Less than a hundred feet away lay the platform.

He closed his eyes and drifted himself toward the warmer pocket of air to his left. Hints of Hellé's spicy perfume lingered there, caught in time.

A scent marker suspended for him above the place from which she'd catapulted herself to freedom.

Freedom from the ultimate despot.

His lungs squeezed but his spasming gut was right. Hellé had left behind her heat signature. He opened his eyes and fitted himself into faintly shimmering shroud of heat. No sign of anyone, including the chemist Tony. Heels first, he made contact with the polished surface where she'd stood days earlier. He straightened and splayed the toes of his left foot wider to accommodate her admitted misstep.

Only the sound of his heart and breathing. Sweat dripped down his chest and he hopped off the platform. From a crouch, he slipped his hand into the space between the floor and the platform's edge.

No zalcidium.

He continued sweeping along the floor with his fingers until he'd traversed the circumference of the platform.

Damn it. That bitch Shenda couldn't be trusted.

"Looking for something, Menlikus?"

Chapter Eleven

My stiletto heel pulverized another of the plastic beads. "If you don't stop moving that lamp around you'll tear all those delicate strands loose."

Reid has surpassed generous and gone straight to super magnanimous with the living quarters he'd provided us here above Cadence.

Barden deposited a girly pink-and-gold gift on the farthest end table of our living room. She puffed on the fixture's black eyelash trim. "You're just mad because Reid didn't have a housewarming something or other for *you*."

Ulevi smacked the zebra-print pillow against the back of Garmula's head. "Anyone for more of those roast beef sandwiches like we had the other day?"

Another celery stick made its way to my stomach. "I'm not really hungry."

"No, you're in love. Don't worry." Garmula tossed the tasseled pillow onto the black leather couch where Reid had supposedly fucked her earlier. "Menlikus will be okay. In the meantime let's enjoy this plush place. Sure nice of Reid, letting us stay here."

Three gulps drained my water glass. "Have you forgotten this apartment is part of your pay?"

"Always the sensible one, Hellé. Pointing out every last detail." Barden sucked on another watermelon-flavored lollipop. "Tonight's our first performance." She bumped her hips to a rhythm playing only in her head. "Can't wait."

"It's one in the afternoon." A couple blinks cleared the blurred hands on the smiley-face clock. "There's no reason Men shouldn't have returned by now. He's been gone over thirteen hours."

Ulevi aimed the can of room spray at the ceiling and depressed the nozzle. "He's a big boy and can take care of himself."

Lavender blended with the celery tang on my tongue. "Not if Van did something to prevent him from reaching Hell. He might not have reached the platform."

Barden stripped off her sage-green t-shirt, slipped out of her skintight khaki shorts and ran her hands over the pink lace bra and matching panties. "We made Reid promise to save you the best seat in the house for our performance tonight. Boy, did he enjoy the way we coaxed that promise – and some awesome cum shots – out of him."

I set the empty glass on the wet bar. "Sorry, girls, but I won't be able to attend your opening-night splash."

"Why?" Garmula stopped polishing the coffee table and fluffed the red terrycloth at me.

"Because I'm going to pay Van a visit." My purse lay on the recliner. I snatched the strap and slung it over my left shoulder. "It's time I found out what I'm sure he knows."

* * * * *

Who is this guy? Sure as Hell wasn't Tony.

Menlikus stood and offered his hand to the young man wearing wire-framed glasses and a striped shirt two sizes too big. And Tony didn't let people in his lab without special permission.

Unless they happened to be Hellé—the woman Tony always wanted but never had.

"Thought you left here the other day?" Instead of shaking hands, the stranger removed his glasses and peered at something under a microscope.

"Nah." An itch flared between Menlikus' shoulder blades. Happened every time he told a lie. "Never made it up far enough." Damn, where was Tony? "Something interesting over there?"

"Sure is." While keeping his face close to the eyepiece, Big Shirt motioned him over. "Tony couldn't cut it down here. The devil took care of him. Since I took over here I've shown Satan what a major difference superior intelligence makes. Discovered something awesome. Something that will make Satan happier than when he's doing Shenda."

This nerd was clueless. The devil was always in his best mood when buried to the root in Shenda. "Something that could be useful on Earth?"

"Guess so." The chemist glanced up, his jaw working and his breathing deeper. "My trace-element cocktail will bring His Horniness the ultimate in potency. His cock will stay hard for a week if he uses a certain dose. Logan Metheny will be at the top of Satan's A-list."

Quite a fitting gift for Hell's ruler.

For as long as Menlikus had been down here, the devil often thought with his dick instead of with his brain.

Menlikus approached the cluttered workstation and stole a glance at the vials arranged in the black wire rack. Wonder Boy Metheny obviously hadn't conferred with Shenda on the matter of his return or this shortsighted lab replacement would be shouting him out to the devil. "You see Shenda's pet boa anywhere?"

After removing the slide from the microscope's platform, Logan placed it beside several others smeared with dried specimens. "Try looking in the Neeshoe corridor. That nasty squeezer ends up there a lot lately."

Probably because of all the warm bodies hosting orgies there on a regular basis. "Will do. She loves wrapping her snake around her before sex with Satan."

Logan spun on him. His skinny arm flailed and sent the reading glasses skidding across the ceramic countertop. "I'll keep quiet about seeing you back here in Hell if you do me one favor."

Wouldn't hurt to hear the guy out. "Which is?"

"Play lookout while I fuck Shenda."

* * * * *

My heel caught in the black shag carpeting and I toppled butt first into the canary-yellow velvet deco chair shaped like a glove.

A thick-fingered glove.

Hell knows I'd love giving Van my middle finger.

Who better than King Creepy to own such a suggestive piece of furniture? Everything in this cracker box-cum-studio apartment, including the renter, was beyond bizarre. "You're telling me everything."

Van waved a licorice-scented sugar stick under my nose then sucked on it. "I checked the grave after you left. Only bones and hair remained. No skin. Don't believe me?" His next slurp took all but the very tip of the candy into his mouth. He puckered and pushed the sucker into view. "We'll check it out together."

Black rock candy for a black-hearted man. "No thanks. I'm not into desecrating final resting places. You're a good friend of Reid's?"

"Don't know about that but I love parties and he loves hosting them. On occasion I stay over here. He owns two other apartments. Guess you've already figured this seventies look doesn't appeal to me."

After removing my shoes so I wouldn't plow up a section of Reid's shag, I hauled myself out of the chair and approached the desk in front of which Van stood.

Heat billowed from his body and bathed me much as would my favorite sauna not far from the Wiruni Pool. Each inch closer to him stirred sweat and a pleasant, spicy citrus aroma.

Saffron from Madagascar and lime from the Far East.

Either he was capable of traveling the world at warp speed or he simply got off on aromatherapy.

A miniature pinball machine featuring comic book antiheroes lay on top of the desk. I pulled the plunger and the silver ball shot up the chute of beige plastic. The flippers activated at my taps and billeted the ball past clanging bells and sections that flashed golden and green lights. Another slap of my hand struck the pinball against a bell-shaped protrusion and red lights blared along the machine's base. Another ball loaded in front of the plunger.

Pingbbbiinnngbing. Chonggggbinbing. Cherrring.

My score already measured six digits. "I didn't come here to play games although this is a lot of fun."

He toyed with the end table's horseshoe-shaped imitation brass handle. "If I have fun you will get what you want."

"All I want is for Menlikus to get to Hell and back with the zalendium."

"And we both know why you need him to succeed." With his fingers looped around the handle, he yanked the drawer open.

Inside, a Beretta gleamed against a bed of black felt. Surely he knew bullets were useless against me. A rivulet of sweat ran between my breasts.

At least they always were when I dwelled in Hades. "You eavesdropped on our conversations back at Comus."

"Had to." His right forefinger tapped my forehead. "Can't read your mind. Damn shame too. Bet your thoughts rival the devil's."

"Hardly. He's deviant, I'm not."

He slammed the drawer closed with the heel of his hand. "You got lucky getting out of Hell. Menlikus won't escape Satan a second time."

I raised my right foot and he back stepped several paces. "Wrong. I'm smarter than Daddy." My words hit his back.

A bossa nova tune swept out from the high-tech speakers and surrounded us. Van whisked me into his arms and spun me around.

His cock already hard.

His teeth bared and gradually gaining razor edges.

His eyes emitting a sinister lavender-blue light.

He brushed his lips against mine. "You have two choices."

One well-placed jab of my knee and I'd gain freedom. "What are they?"

His hands walked up my back. As his laugh rumbled out he grabbed my ass and squeezed. "Not since Shenda has a woman completely drained my balls. Do that and I'll help you in any way I can."

Well that choice sucked in more ways than one. "What about Menlikus? And Shenda? You don't hold out any hope he'll get her out of Hell?"

A shake of his head heightened the blaze in his eyes. "None whatsoever. Hope is futile."

My staring him down deflected his laser gleam and hopefully beat it back toward his scheming brain. "What's my other option?"

Lips once stained with Men's blood parted and his long tongue flicked at me. "If Menlikus can somehow beat the odds and make it back up here I can continue helping him and you. And if for some reason you two can't make it here on Earth I'll get you both into Heaven."

No sense letting down my guard.

But it took all I had not to laugh in his handsome face.

Get us into Heaven? Yeah right, Fallen One.

My last choice for a dance partner was likely more poisonous than any hundred snakes. "I'm still listening." More adrenaline flashed to my fingertips and toes.

"You have to break all romantic ties with Menlikus once he returns. You cannot bring yourself to castrate him and I know why. I will work against you two if your love bond isn't broken." He took a section of my hair in his mouth and tugged. "Give me sexual pleasure at my bidding and forget all about Menlikus. Or shun me and my help, gamble that he will return and then you must give him the kiss off and the cut off. The decision is yours."

* * * * *

Menlikus paused at the cave's drafty threshold. No sign of Shenda but a feminine, floral scent filled his former cave.

If he didn't tell her about the Logan's sexual demands soon that goofball would come down here and make even more trouble.

Hssst. Hstttttt.

On occasion devil dogs and hell-cats got under his bed but they didn't make that much noise.

He reached down and grabbed the spacer bar Shenda sometimes used on Satan. "Shenda?"

"Yeah, it's me." The top of her blonde head appeared and she wiggled out from underneath the marble-based bed covered with layers of feather-stuffed pallets. Clad only in a pink towel whose ends barely tucked together, she finger combed wet strands of hair off her face. "I saw you coming but Logan was with you. That's why I was pretending not to be there."

Sometimes women showered before sex, sometimes after. Which was the case today with Shenda? "How much time to we have?"

She cupped her breasts, pressed them together, parted her pink-nailed fingers and caught the tiny nipples between them. "Plenty."

A faked cough sifted her towel to the floor. Damn fine body. Full tits and ass. Flat belly and bare pussy off of which the devil ate most of his meals and came back for seconds.

Logan and Satan could have Shenda.

He tossed the spacer bar onto the bed, picked up the towel and passed it to her. Hellé was everything he wanted in a woman and more. No one rocked his world and heart like the devil's daughter.

She fluffed the towel from the Zaixa Spa over her body until the skin shone a paler pink than her pussy. "The devil left here a short while ago. Won't need to worry about him. He's down checking out the World Screen and some porn star's performance."

Like the devil would watch anything not related to Domination or sex. "Logan knows something's up. That I shouldn't be back here. He's made me a deal I couldn't refuse but you might not like."

A tug of her hand pulled the strawberry-red satin coverlet off the bed and revealed crisp white cotton sheets. "Meaning he wants to make it a threesome today."

"No. He wants you all to himself." A quick survey of the corridor revealed no one lurking despite shouts carrying from the cave a couple tunnels over. "After you and I finish our business."

"Business makes it sound so...not very intimate." While fingering herself, Shenda sashayed over to the wall where manacles hung from heavy iron chains. She raised her arms and waved her slender fingers. "What you need is behind my ass. The devil arrived earlier than expected and stayed with me all night. There wasn't time to slip away."

So she hadn't double-crossed him. At least not yet.

He closed his eyes. Another breath brought back memories of Hellé's pussy musk and their first time together.

Hellé rattled the manacle chains at him and stuck out her tongue. "Fuck me and make me forget about all other men, Men."

Hair coiled on top of her head. Diamond studs sparkling in her earlobes. Licking her lips. Nipples hard even before he sucked them.

The deep pink of her bare pussy and her cum wetting her thighs...

He lifted her hips and Shenda wrapped her legs around him. The gorgeous woman with hair swishing below her ass moaned. Repeated his name over and over. Worked her juicy pussy onto his cock. Her breasts bounced as he drove into her and her cries lofted toward the cave's high ceiling.

Shenda made a production of clearing her throat and then sighed. "Are you going to stand there daydreaming, or do you want to finish what I started?"

Dammit. Shenda should be talking sexy to him. "I'm going to make you come like never before, honey." How to chisel into that wall without Logan overhearing... He captured her wrists, first her left and then her right, and closed the quarter-inch-thick steel bondage bracelets.

"Today I need a man to make me squirt." She heaved a long, bubblegum-scented breath at his nose and pressed as close to him as possible. "I managed to loosen a large enough rock and slipped some shards behind it." Her voice lowered with each word spoken. "Don't know if there's enough or not."

A couple steps closer and her body heat enveloped him. He placed his mouth near her ear. "Those mineral pieces will fit in your pussy?"

She nodded. "With plenty of room to spare." Her next stretch bumped her tight nipples against his.

Naked was not a position to be in with this she-devil.

Not if a man wanted to preserve his romantic relationship with another.

Shenda scooted sideways while he worked the rock loose with a chisel. Around a dozen rock shards lay inside the recessed spot she'd managed. More than enough zalendium to provide fortification for the four girls and him once pulverized.

When every precious bit lay in his hand he replaced the outer rock. "You sure you're okay with this? If so, I'll put them inside you."

"I'm sure. Won't hurt a bit." She thrust her hips at him. "Remember, I play with the devil. He's not the gentle type."

As he parted her pussy lips, cum spilled out. He pushed the first piece of zalendium into her. "Doing okay?"

"Yes."

"Thanks for doing this for us. You're a brave woman."

"Not a problem." She sniffled and tears welled in her eyes. "Hellé was such a good friend. I should have gone with her and the girls."

One after another he hid the zalendium fragments. Shenda's inner heat would help the mineral retain its potency.

"Don't I get a taste of that stuff?" She bucked and shook her restraints.

"Be my guest." From tip to base she took his finger in her mouth and sucked.

The tramping of someone's big feet sifted into the cave. He laid his hand over her mouth and jerked his head toward the entrance. Shenda nodded. He peeked into the hallway.

Sure enough.

Logan stood at the end of the hallway facing the opposite rock wall, his hand closed over his cock and pumping away.

Menlikus rejoined Shenda. "This is purely for show. Nothing else. Once Logan gets here put him in the manacles and I'll meet you at the platform."

Her wink touched the curled edge of the false purple eyelash to her rosy cheek. "It'll take everything I have to squeeze these rock pieces while we transport. But I'll do anything to keep my friends alive and happy."

Thankfully those manacle chains were pretty long. He lifted her until she was able to maneuver her legs over his shoulders. With all her squirming her slick pussy rested less than an inch from his mouth.

"Mmmmm. Oooohhh. Damn you taste good." He made slurping noises above her crotch.

The chains clattered and she groaned. "Yes, you sexy fisherman. Stick that tongue deeper inside me."

Slap. Slapslap. Slap. Slap. "Looks like I got here in time for the party." Logan planted himself beside them and stroked Shenda's cheek. "You like to play with me for a while?"

A sharp turn of her head unseated Logan's hand and she snatched his forefinger in her teeth. After milking his digit for a short while she set him free. "You bet. But I have to take care of one thing first."

Menlikus peeled her body off his and released the manacles. "She can't get enough."

Logan cupped his balls. "I'll fill her up for as long as she likes."

Fine by him as long as Logan kept the devil off Shenda's and his asses while the two of them escaped.

Shenda massaged her wrists, shackled Logan and headed for the cave entrance. She blew Logan and him a kiss from her glossy red lips. "I'll get wetter thinking about what's next for us. Two men are always better than one when the devil isn't involved."

Chapter Twelve

Van emerged from his bedroom wearing a black-and-red-striped satin robe. "You need a backup plan, Hellé. You need me."

Blood thrashed inside my veins. I was about to be another notch on his bondage bedpost. Once of that, with the Marquis, was enough. "I believe in Menlikus and his ability to return to Earth a second time." The razors beneath my nails pushed out from their fleshy beds.

"The devil might end your lover's life but he can't take yours." His barefoot approach silenced by the coral-bronze shag carpet, he paused at reaching the breakfast nook. "While you're on Earth, while you're with me, you're safe. Satan cannot harm you."

From the small refrigerator he secured a roast beef sandwich slathered with horseradish and wearing a sesame-coated bun. His fangs ripped off sizeable sections of the bread and medium-rare beef.

Wouldn't take but a nanosecond for him to turn that snack into mush.

But at least he chewed with his mouth closed.

After accepting his offer of a banana, I peeled the half-ripe fruit and stuck it in my mouth. "I'm not afraid of anyone, including you."

And he missed not a second of my deep-throat performance. "You better watch your ass and everything else." The remainder of the sandwich disappeared between his leering. He munched for a moment, swallowed and tongued away the stray seeds from the left corner of his mouth. "Come with me. See where I live and *rule*." The room temperature ratcheted.

Despite proper chewing a clump of banana wedged in my throat. Several swallows sent the tangy-sweet glob to my stomach.

This game was all about playing for keeps, and control. "Rule? Are you royalty or simply another dictator like Daddy?"

He downed the dregs of a plastic liter of ginger ale, crunched a chocolate chip store-bought cookie, gulped it down and pointed at my heart. "My kingdom is unique. One you will recognize as soon as we arrive."

I pivoted away from his reaching hand. "Arrive? You're assuming I'm going along with your plans."

I stared at the drawers. My vision remained keen and penetrated the wooden panel.

Now to really turn up the intensity and see how many more of my otherworldly powers I still possess.

I focused harder. Spoons, forks and knives jumped from the sectioned tray and crashed together before settling. The refrigerator motor whirred faster, shut off, repeated the racket then stilled. The stench of burning sulfur filled the air. Lavender-blue light beamed from Van's eyes and prickled my flesh.

The plastic container he gripped with both hands melted quicker than my blink and dripped onto the linoleum. A searing wind whipped past me and stung on impact.

My cheeks weren't meant to be chapped – unless I succeeded in snagging a little slope time at Steamboat Springs or Vale.

Although I'd done a lot of things and a lot of men in my life, playing in snow wasn't among them.

His step forward loosened his robe's sash and he ripped it free of the keepers. At reaching me he stuck out his tongue and teased my earlobe. "You have no choice. Stay here in Las Vegas and you won't live much longer. Your friends are weaker. They will perish first. Think about it, Hellé. You'd be forced to live out the rest of your limited days with their blood on your hands and staining your conscience. One of those you can never wash away."

* * * * *

Menlikus stepped onto the transport platform and positioned his toes over the lingering heat. Shenda had better get here pretty damn quick. He thumped his right fist against his thigh.

He'd managed to con Logan into believing he'd left the cave to relieve his bladder. But that geek would start making noise if Shenda and he didn't return for the promised sex play before too long.

A long, smooth leg stretched past the laboratory threshold. The rest of curvy Shenda followed. "Sorry, but Logan insisted I lick him. If not, he threatened to yell loud enough to rouse the devil's best friend who always sleeps in his sarcophagus." She juked behind the laboratory table but emerged upright after a few moments.

"We can't waste time. Hellé might be in trouble."

"Hellé? In trouble?" Shenda spread her legs and pulled out a pink cylinder. "Never liked the pulsating beads inside this toy so I took it apart one day and tossed them out. Always knew this thing would come in handy and today it will. It's a perfect place to store the zalendium and won't hurt one bit. Sorry it took me longer than expected to get back here."

He pointed to a place beside him on the platform. "Pretty clever but let's get going. Hellé's being tormented by this guy named Van. He's the one who helped me get back down here."

Her face matched the alabaster tiles in the Mewuigl Room. "A guy named Van?" At her fumbling the toy disappeared inside her pussy.

"Yeah. He's a strong, arrogant bastard. Shows his fangs a lot. And he wants you."

Her eyes widened and she clasped her shaking hands together. "He also has this purplish-blue light that comes from his eyes when he stares? And he smells like rotten eggs?"

"You know of him?"

"Vaniel was my lover for a short time. In another life. A fallen angel who lives only to satisfy his lust and control those who serve in his ziggurat. He'll kill someone as just soon as look at them." Shenda gnawed her lips. "Hellé better watch her step or he'll cut her off at the ankles. I'm not kidding." She stepped onto the platform and snatched his hand.

At the contact of their fingers he swept toward the ceiling and took Shenda along. No matter that he spoke, the surrounding air erased his words. Her fingers locked around his and she dangled below him.

Damn it. This happened too fast.

Without swallowing any of the formula she wouldn't make it past Kellion.

Sweat dripped from his legs and back and sizzled at hitting her. A chilly wind whipped him sideways and her moans corkscrewed past his face. Every hair strained against its root. He glanced down as she blinked away his perspiration. Strands of hair clung to her cheeks.

Mila bugs swarmed around them and he shot through their gray-black curtain. This route wasn't the same one he'd descended but closely matched that described by the woman he loved.

A silver-frosted cloud hovered inches above him. As the top of his head touched the shimmering layer the upward drag ceased.

"What's wrong?" Shenda sobbed, and tugged him sideways.

He strained left and right but no opening appeared. The cumuluslike barrier bore no holes.

"We're trapped." Bile surged up his throat and splashed onto his tongue. "We can't break through the portal."

"I-I can't—" Her fingers lost contact with his and Shenda hurtled down the windblown shaft.

* * * * *

Hellé settled against the lumpy plaid-patterned couch's backrest and aimed the remote control at Van's relic television. The screen remained black. "Only once I see the place you call your kingdom will I believe your silly claims."

He pointed and snapped his fingers at me. "Get rid of that. There's no time for replacing batteries, skeptical beauty." Van stripped off his robe and strode naked to where I sat. "My display of power in the kitchen, my possession of your father's knife and my ability to transport Menlikus aren't enough?"

The acid in my stomach stirred the banana. "Not by half."

He reached for me, appearing as human as any other man who walked the streets of Sin City. But one with a better body than most.

His lips pursed and popped softly on relaxing. "Let's take a trip together."

"You've no time for replacing batteries. I've no time for vacations. Especially not when the man I love might be in danger." Once the tingling in my legs subsided I stood up and crossed to the door.

A vise of flesh and bone closed around my waist, lifted and dangled me a couple feet above the dusty carpet.

His slow ginger-cocoa-scented licks warmed my triceps.

"You'll be back in time for the evening news." He kissed a tender path up to my shoulder. "Or not. Whatever you desire."

My kick drove the tip of my heel against his kneecap. "I'll miss the girls' show at Cadence tonight."

Most men would have fallen and dropped me.

Not this laser-eyed louse.

Not a groan or a wobble from him.

"Spirited women arouse me." He rocked my body against his and rubbed my belly over his bare, hard cock. "Choose, Hellé. I'm not a patient man and I'm not a foolish one either."

A scalding funnel cloud twisted inside me and stirred every erogenous zone between my neck and toes. I had to find out more about this man and his world. "Matter of fact I am hungry for something different."

"Close your eyes and trust in me." After hauling me into his arms he kissed away my next several breaths.

Thoughts burst like bubbles inside my brain. The aroma of roasting fruit, possibly figs, filled the air. "Aren't we going to grab a bite before leaving?"

His teeth captured my right nipple and a section of beige cotton material. "Once we reach our destination I promise to feed you well."

A thump of my fist between his shoulder blades tightened his tooth hold but didn't break my skin. "If you cared about me you wouldn't have almost killed me a couple days ago."

"I knew you could survive a battle with ball lightning." While his left arm held me his right hand sneaked underneath my skirt. Hot fingers dragged over the damp crotch of my black lace panties. "The devil's daughter has many talents and strengths."

Despite those strengths and talents I couldn't resist the sexual appeal of certain men. "I'm getting hungrier."

"And I'm getting harder." He kissed my eyelids closed and chanted in Latin.

Violent spasms erupted beneath my flesh. Gnashing and grinding noises filled the room. Van howled and we lifted, an unseen force buffeting us upward and sideways.

Dust settled over my face and coated my lips. Flying and stinging particles swiped my cheek.

The scent of decayed and sun-baked earth came in with my next breath.

Click – heech. Click – heech.

Something snapping open and closed.

Slithering across a surface that shifted at its passing.

“Keep your eyes closed, Hellé Hawthorn.” The same voice that croaked at me after the lightning strike spoke now.

A swift arid wind tossed us head over heels.

* * * * *

Shit.

Menlikus followed Shenda’s crooked descent path.

She would kill herself if she hit that platform the wrong way.

The harder he swam against the waves of hot air the harder they lashed him. Halfway to the bottom he caught her wrist. A fierce updraft yanked them upward again. Searing pain tore at his muscles. He gritted his teeth and continued toward the impenetrable cloud.

He squinted at the blinding glow. Faint cries swirled past. About five hundred yards to the left might be the way into the center of Kellion. If they remained there, Hellé could possibly find them.

And Satan wouldn’t bother.

Why couldn’t they penetrate the portal?

His blood pumped at a furious pace, stretched his veins and its din filled his head. He’d checked the math on his formula countless times. Once that formula had delivered him to Earth.

Why not now?

No matter. On glancing down at the whimpering Shenda his heart seized.

Linger here a bit longer and they’d risk discovery. Logan was probably screaming for Shenda by now.

Bit by bit he pushed through the dense vapor curtain. The wails of a woman whose soul danced the limbo between Satan and Savior intensified. Sweat rolled down his arm and chest. Shenda moved only at his bidding and even then very little.

He forced through the strange tunnel and an acrid wetness covered him. Words of those trapped in Kellion were now audible. As were the pings of a guitar string as someone played.

Thumps of hands on drums. Cackles.

All louder.

Another intentional shove sideways brought them in front of a reddish-black wave of heat. Moths wearing diaphanous orange wings flitted in front of his face. He puffed them away and pierced the entryway.

In places farther along wisps of fog wafted up from the rock floor. He pulled Shenda deeper into the neutral zone and stood. A few of those left in limbo glanced his way. Hair clinging to their flushed cheeks. Dancing like dervishes. Some repenting to others who remained selectively deaf and seemingly uncaring.

Shenda shook her hand free of his, padded forward and picked up her left foot. Tinges of blood smeared over the rocky pathway she'd left behind. "Shouldn't have walked so close to that lab table."

"I'll take care of your wound." He bent and lifted her foot. "What did you do?"

"Someone must have knocked that big old thermometer off the counter. I stepped in the glass without realizing."

He swallowed the profanities and a scream.

Damn Van and his desire to reunite with his former lover. Where there were glass-cased thermometers there was also mercury.

Mercury's weight and molecular structure were the very reason penetration of the portal proved impossible for Shenda and him.

* * * * *

Hellé's feet sank into shifting granules. The pungent odor of sulfur brought stinging tears and a coughing spasm.

Propped against Van, I opened my eyes.

While I wasn't a woman toting a tiny dog, this surely wasn't Kansas.

And although we were in the desert we weren't in Nevada anymore.

The lay of the land and placement of the sun supported that observation as much as my mother supported equal rights for women.

Every breath brought tears to my eyes. No wonder Van reeked of rotten eggs.

"I'm not a nomad." A sneeze worsened the burning in my nostrils. "And I'm not into making sandcastles."

What made him say that? What the hell did I care?

Heeessh – clink.

If not for stepping backward my exposed toes would have been targeted by the scorpion scuttling past. The straw yellow arthropod with a five-striped tail continued on at a left angle.

Van doubled over laughing. "Imagine that. You're scared by a puny scorpion."

"A scorpion with a stinger at the ready."

His body gleamed with sweat. "How could you tell?"

"I heard the stinger shifting forward underneath its body. Heard it scraping the sand when the stupid thing paused."

Hard to tell which was more of a menace – Van or that vile desert creature.

A scant layer of sand coated his beefy thighs and broad upper back.

"Good ears." He pinched my buttocks. "Even better ass." His slap sent me sideways and I stomped his solar plexus.

I turned around and gasped. No mistake about where we were. "That's Mount Sodom behind us. Now I know the whispered rumors in Hell are true. This original 'Sin City' isn't buried under the Dead Sea as some have contended over the centuries."

Taking my hand he guided me over a small dune and steered us past more venomous toe-pinchers. "What better place for you?"

"Back in Las Vegas with my friends." Breath rushed from my half-open mouth and hit his cheek. Too bad I couldn't work up some spit to follow.

He lifted and balanced me in his arms. "Don't want to risk one of my guards biting you."

"Guards?" My flailing hand sent a buzzing winged creature darting in the opposite direction. "Those scorpions aren't human."

If anything bit me today I'd bite back.

Mounds of earth marked the surrounding landscape. Not far ahead of us lay the ashen remains of the debauched and destroyed city.

"Let's not waste time out here in the sun." He tramped toward the mountain. "I've a pathway to my kingdom no mortal man will ever discover or penetrate."

A deep breath made my mouth water.

Just like when eating a hard pretzel only without the dough.

Wind and sand slapped my face as he headed us toward a towering sculpture of salt. Once perched on a ledge Van secured me with his left arm while pressing all five of his right fingertips into a calcified cluster.

A force mortals would compare to a vacuum sucked us into and through the ossified layers. My skin stretched taut enough but remained connected to muscle. The grinding din pummeled my brain and dried my throat and tongue.

Unlike the desktop version I'd played back at Van's home away from home, we were two otherworldly pinballs being tumbled down a chute leading somewhere only Van knew. My vital organs cleaved to their surrounding supportive tissue.

He bounced down onto a surface whose patina resembled slate. A ziggurat lay ahead to our left. I swiped the dust and bits of salt from my cheeks and eyebrows. We'd reached a civilization preserved and buried somewhere prying eyes and scientific minds couldn't venture.

Heeeeesh-clink.

Two scorpions skittered around Van's feet.

Van's ziggurat was an ornate structure cast from sand and water. Comprised of intricate networks of steps and platforms, ledges and crevices lined with hissing scorpions, their antennae waving at sensing human presence.

He climbed the vitrified ash steps but his gaze remained on me. "Deathstalkers guard my Sodom. The Sodom I've sustained after God sent down that burning sulfur and destroyed a land of pleasure. Those creatures' protective powers far surpass that of any being with blood running through its veins. Some of them might be as old as you."

Few things took my breath and stopped me from talking but Sodom was more than a grand spectacle. What level that former majesty must have transcended. Moving my tongue stirred some saliva.

He set me down.

"Your kingdom hardly rivals my father's." I kicked a few sulfur marbles over the step's edge. "Only little boys play in the sand and dream of kingdoms made from rock and other remains."

"I already told you I don't play in the sand."

His hand clenched mine and he pulled me toward an opening in the ashen castle. I wrested from his grasp and raced him to the entrance. Few times had I witnessed a man attempting to sprint with a hard cock but Van accomplished the mad dash with ease and beat me by a nanosecond or two.

Loose sulfur swirled underfoot and I stumbled. On bended knees in front of him, I stared at the part of him pointing straight at my mouth.

He teased his fingers through my hair and a few grains of sand and sulfur rained onto the tops of my flattened hands.

"Go ahead. Suck me and see what happens." Laughter laced with a moan rattled in his throat. "You know you want to taste me."

Fellating this fiend was small price to pay for survival. I swallowed his cock to the base and his coarse pubic hairs tickled my nose. The faster I worked my mouth and tongue over him the more he growled and loosened sulfur chips from the overhang. I stopped sucking his cock and filled my mouth with his balls. Blood vessels not far beneath the testicles' surface swelled and thumped against my tongue. His groaning grew in pitch and I set his sac free. I avoided eye contact and pumped his hardness. As I opened my mouth, hot tangy liquid erupted from his cock head and hissed at hitting the back of my throat.

I had barely gulped down his load and he pulled me upright and pointed overhead. No need to read his mind to figure the next act in our sex play.

After fitting me around his hips he held me steady while I braced my hands against the doorway to his domain. The ash crumbled for a moment but granted me a handhold

and I leaned slightly away from his slick body. Once I shimmied a bit closer his cock head pressed against my opening and I worked him into my wetness.

His slap on my left buttock bounced my head close to the uneven doorframe, and my pussy consumed every thick inch of him. The more I clenched him the more heat seeped from his hard body.

Here we were, two slippery people bound in a bizarre sexual ritual that would hopefully get Menlikus and me some help.

"I'd always wondered what you looked like." Van's thumb pushed into my tightest hole. "You're more beautiful than my wildest dreams."

I clenched over him and we moaned in unison.

This guy might be malicious but he knew how to please a woman. "Too bad I'm already taken."

"Not if Menlikus doesn't make it back." He nuzzled and nipped my neck. "Or you decide he's not enough man for you."

Blood thrummed faster beneath my fingernails. I let go of the doorframe and grabbed his shoulder with my right hand. "He'll return. He's a math genius."

"So am I. Won against Vegas odds many times. No formula he's devised will feed his system well enough to get to Hell and back again."

"If I were a betting woman I'd see your bet." Rocking my hips harder against him, I settled my left hand on his opposite shoulder and stared him down.

Much as though I were the rind on a ripe tangerine, Van peeled me off his hard body. He helped me into a crouch and fed me his cock. "Okay. We'll forget that bet. But I will bet you won't know what hit you once I come."

His words hit the top of my head at the same time that his scalding cum splashed over my tongue and ran down my throat. My lips massaged the distended veins along his steaming shaft and the flood came faster. His fists beat against the uppermost part of the entryway. Glassy orbs clattered at our feet and pulverized sulfur sifted over our bodies. The rotten cloy and musk of his cum filled my nostrils. I opened my mouth slightly and stole some air.

He held my head steady but gently and whispered my name over and over. With every synapse firing fierce and rapid I sucked him, his piquant milk filling my mouth faster than I could swallow.

By moving my hand over his balls I coaxed a slower stream of cum. A quick fondle found his sac almost dry. But had he the ability to summon a sexual reserve?

I started at the faint giggling emanating from another wall opening behind us.

Someone was in the corridor watching us. A woman. Possibly one of his lovers here in Sodom.

One more suckle and I freed him. On standing, I stretched and bumped my hands against the craggy lintel. Van whisked me out of the way as denser chunks of ash broke loose. I stomped my foot and split the rock flooring.

He grinned and tweaked my nipples. "You see? Even without Menlikus and that zalendium I can make you strong. My cum can sustain you forever, Hellé. You don't need anyone else."

Wrong, buster. You've just pushed my hottest button.

I want and need Menlikus and his love.

Fat chance I'd rely on a louse like you to save and sustain me.

What a pathetic existence that would be. Being your sexual slave.

Tolerating your bad manners and bed-hopping.

Being told when to talk and when to keep quiet so your big mouth could brag and bring about more boot-licking and butt-kissing from your sand-sweeping whores.

I'd rather burn in Hell than suffer such a fate.

Let's see if I can set your world on fire and show you that you aren't the only one who possesses mild-boggling powers.

Let you know you aren't dealing with some weak woman.

And I don't give a damn if you're reading my mind.

A few centering breaths failed at ebbing the cresting waves of adrenaline.

Hopefully I could still do this cool party trick.

With my eyes trained on the steps, I focused on one section and set it ablaze. Flames sterner and hotter than those in Hell leaped up the pathway. As I lowered my eyelids the conflagration shivered and cowered closer to the rock incline before snuffing out.

One of my most precious powers had returned.

Was this due to my sexual feeding on Van, or had I simply needed more time to adjust to being away from Hell to see the return of my most amazing hellish powers? "Could be some sort of trick. I'll reserve an opinion on your powers until I'm more certain."

Van took my hand and kissed each fingertip. "The woman who will become mine. My queen. The woman who tapped me sexually as only Shenda has done. She escaped me but you won't." He gave a pantherlike growl and a titian-haired servant girl wearing a gunmetal mesh bra and thong swept into view. "Take Hellé to her chamber and prepare her for the ceremony."

Chapter Thirteen

Menlikus cursed under his breath, picked up Shenda and carried her toward an empty wooden chair. Just his luck, relying on a woman who'd already let Hellé down once.

While a bald lady laid tarot cards on the gold satin-cloth-covered table in front of them, Shenda sobbed.

"It's okay." He set her down and settled her onto the seat. "We'll find a way out of here. You'll have a chance to be with Van."

A bit of raspberry-red gloss had somehow smeared onto Shenda's chin during our journey. "I don't care about him. But I don't want anything happening to Hellé. Or to Garmula, Ulevi or Barden. I should have gone with them when they asked."

The medium tapped the edge of the table with her pointer finger and nodded at the cards.

Menlikus swallowed a pretty lame excuse. They hadn't exactly come here to have their fortunes told but since she insisted...

Shenda squirmed forward on the wobbly chair and studied the nine cards.

Each one wore a different picture. Meant absolutely nothing to him but evidently entranced the woman whose misstep in mercury prevented them from piercing the Earth's surface and rejoining Hellé.

"You have great change ahead. The loss of a loved one. And the devil waiting for you to make another mistake." The seer passed her thumb over her lower lip and squinted at him. "Should I continue?"

"No, but thanks." He rolled some of the stiffness from his shoulders. "We already know our situation is fucked up. Just trying to figure a way out." Something silver flipped in the air in front of him. He reached out and caught the dollar piece from days gone by.

Not far from the table, a wizened man wearing the shabby gray wool coat and patchwork weskit forced a smile and tipped his hat.

Menlikus turned the silver piece over, mouthed his thanks and flipped the coin back to its rightful owner. Minted in 1883. Poor fellow had likely been down here a long time, tossing around, his soul restless and body weary.

Wasn't right, taking that guy's money. Money would do them little good if they never got out of here.

He stole another glance at the good-natured lender. Funny how he bore a striking resemblance to that aged man appearing on Earth's most popular board game.

No chance of buying their way out of Kellion.

Only a miracle or a brainstorm in a billion would lift them along the path out of what most knew as Purgatory.

Swussshle-blub-blub.

The melodic rush of three soft notes from Nature.

Water traveling over rocks and pebbles.

Somewhere a stream ran through Kellion.

Menlikus patted Shenda's shoulder and she heaved a sigh toward the craggy far wall. "I'll be back in a few. Have to find some water to bathe your wound."

"She's fine here with me," whispered the seer, her voice growing hoarser with each word spoken.

Menlikus headed in the direction of the bubbling sound. About a thousand feet away—far from where he left Shenda—he happened across a man sitting cross-legged on the floor. Before the man lay three boxes—one wrapped in gold paper, one in red and a third in silver. At picking up each one, the openmouthed contortionist shook the parcel then set it down. Time after time the stranger repeated the process, his movements orchestrated as well as a symphony.

The people down here were forever guessing. Forever in limbo.

Damned if he'd let the same Fate fall upon Shenda and himself.

The stream traveled behind the box-shaking soul.

Twins standing in the stream paused and splashed each other. Men removed his shirt and swished it through the running water. The taller child, a boy with pale blond hair, skipped a pebble at him. It plopped down a few inches from Menlikus' hand. He smiled, gathered a marble-sized stone and skipped it so it landed near the boy's sister.

He returned to Shenda with his sopping shirt. A laughing woman swished a broom behind him, scattering the fallen water.

Shenda lifted her foot and grinned. "No wonder Hellé loves you so much. You're thoughtful and handsome."

Compliments were nice but paying too much attention to those Shenda doled out usually found men in her bed or bondage room.

Crouching, he draped the shirt over his leg and examined the bottom of her foot. "Thanks. I don't like people being in pain."

"Doesn't hurt much. You know, I can stand on the Jhara Path without blistering my feet." Her right hand swiped over her left breast and the nipple peaked.

He tapped her scabbed wound. "That's exactly why you might have glass embedded in your calloused sole."

She popped her thumb in her mouth. On pulling it out, she giggled. "Do you still suck Hellé's toes?"

Despite his close inspection and moving her foot up and down, no glass particles glistened in cavern's the intense light. With his thumbs, he gently pressed the perimeter and center of the wound. "Any pain?"

"No, but you didn't answer my question." Her heightened laughter separated her foot from his hand.

"I won't be doing anything with Hellé unless we get out of here." His swat to her opposite leg brought out her tongue.

Each swab of the waterlogged shirt over her wound made her sigh. At the next sigh her body jerked upright in the chair.

Eyes open wide and hair standing on end, either Shenda bore the brunt of a mysterious shock or the card-reading woman possessed more powers than he'd perceived.

The devil's mistress drifted off her chair and levitated vertically about a foot above the seat. "What's happening? Get me down."

Every card left the medium's hands. The colorful bits of laminated paper flipped skyward and scattered over the table.

"It's okay, Shenda. Stay calm. We're in luck."

No need for alarm. This time she'd done something right. Shenda had solved their problem by touching her foot with the same hand that touched the zalendium. The hydrogen molecules in the water bound with the zalendium and mercury and caused a reaction capable of... He snatched her leg and together they soared past the crying mouths and eternally trapped souls still wearing flesh suits.

"What's going on?" Shenda's hands scratched at the humid, fetid air and sent stinging fragments of an unfamiliar element down into his face.

"We're finally going up the same way I came down here." Hand over hand he climbed her leg and torso until they faced each other.

Her gasp ricocheted off the passage walls. "That's a good thing, right?"

Once his fingers touched behind her back he hugged her close. Steamy cork-scented vapors enveloped them.

A sneeze cleared the tingling from inside his nostrils. "If it were any better I'd think the man up in Heaven was behind our stroke of luck."

* * * * *

What made Van think I would consent to being his queen?

Especially while tied up on a table.

Double rows of deathstalkers surrounded me in this kingdom of a crazy man. More bile burned my throat and I choked it down. Black cord laced between the scorpions and created loose tethers. If one or several of those nuisances moved too fast or too far,

the bindings would snap and hard to tell how many of the deadly demons would choose me as their next target.

Faint hissing and clicking blended with Van's footfall. Their stingers remained at the ready while Van awaited a chance to pounce on me after crowning me his royal sexual companion for the ages.

A redheaded young woman wearing only a few crimson scarves strategically placed over her breasts and crotch fitted me with a headdress of wilted roses smeared with myrrh.

Each time I exhaled thorns grazed my scalp and the sides of my head. "You'll regret not waiting for Shenda. I'm sure Menlikus will get her to Vegas."

"You seem so sure. Just as I was sure she'd always remain at my side. Love and lust after me." Van slammed his fist against the polished wormwood table on which I lay. "That surety proved in vain, didn't it?"

At the slave's urging I opened my mouth wide. My body warmed considerably from the nectar she drizzled over my tongue. I swallowed and declined further nourishment. "Shenda might have had a good reason for fleeing here."

"No explanation was given and we found her at the base of the Azrenian Arch, a dagger plunged into her belly. A self-inflicted wound administered by a self-centered woman."

That explained the scar Shenda always tried concealing with the skin bronzer my mother fashioned from various roots and berries.

Now I was marked for the same Fate that cost Shenda her mortal life. Cold chills chased from my neck to my kneecaps. "She was likely overwhelmed by the reality of what lay ahead. After all, only one woman had the good fortune of becoming the center of attention for a man more powerful than Satan."

Van bent over me and sucked my nipples until they hardened. Two of his fingers toyed with my pussy before pushing deep inside. "Well put, my love."

Clever man. If I showed any sign of balking at his bizarre proposal he'd incite me to hip thrusting and orgasm.

My sexual frenzy would release those poisonous crawlers. "Let's say she returns. Would you forgive her and accept her into your heart, life and bed again?" The pair of scorpions near my right biceps thrust out their stingers.

"She would never become my queen. But with your approval I will allow her to sexually satisfy our needs whenever we desire." His tongue traced over and underneath my breasts and he followed this with a nip to each nipple.

Blood flared to the bitten spots and also between my legs. "I'm not into sex with Shenda."

"Fine. Then I'll have your pussy all to myself." He gently pulled out his fingers and sucked them clean. With the tip of his left middle finger he teased my clit. "Nothing

would please me more. Simply by breathing the sulfur down here you will remain the most potent and powerful woman anywhere, living or immortal."

In his quest to make me his queen he'd eventually become careless.

And I'd seize more than a moment. "Power has its perks." More of my cum seeped out and onto the table. All he lacked in sense he made up for in sexual skills. "Tell me more about the ritual."

Flame-colored velvet robe sleeves flapped at Van's arm, waving. "Showing is better than telling, spawn of Satan."

Spawn? He made me sound like a fish or some sort of mutant. Not the way a man spoke to the woman he loved.

A naked female supplicant struck a small metal hammer against a metal rack fitted with multiple lengths and thicknesses of a copperlike metal. Notes crisp as a winter morning in Maine rang throughout the chamber room into which water flowed and bubbled along narrow crevices. Van snatched a scepter and dunked it into the water flowing near his bare feet.

As he flailed the steel relic over the table, floral-scented water sprayed over my belly and legs. "I am mightier than the man whose blood mark you share. Let us never know a moment of displeasure once our bond is complete."

Gold bracelets jangled on the arms and ankles of the woman who'd serenaded us. She set down her instrument and approached me, carrying a steaming gray crock. Van stirred his finger inside the vessel and stuck the same one in his mouth. His smile spread and the flesh on his face assumed a ruby-blue cast.

A drop of water beaded above my navel. "Looks like you're wearing some kind of war paint."

His palms hissed and steam poured forth as he rubbed his hands together. "I don't want to fight with you, Hellé. Quite the contrary. What is about to happen next will make you a believer. A believer in my power and our potential for love."

Chapter Fourteen

Menlikus puffed the winged creatures away from Shenda's face. "We're getting closer. There are fewer mila bugs and the cloud cover is less dense."

"My whole body hurts. Even my teeth." She flashed him a crooked grin. "Hasn't hurt this much since Caligula's party last March."

Oscillating noises surrounded them.

The gnash of blades impacting air and beating it around them.

Now a bizarre humming.

The pulling force ceased its dragging of their bodies.

Would Shenda succeed in conning Van? "You might have to create a diversion for Van. Make him think you're still interested in him until we can get Hellé out from under his influence."

She hiccupped and thin blue fog floated past his face. "Easier said than done. But I'll do my best. He doesn't miss much. Makes the devil look like a saint."

Great. He really needed to hear that news. "Think he'll harm Hellé?"

"No. She's too beautiful. He's likely gotten it in his head to make her his queen."

"Queen?" His outburst hit her nose but failed at forming more fog.

"Oh yeah." The tip of her tongue touched her button nose. "Once Van sets his sights on a woman, it's more than hell to pay to change things."

One section of cloud above them formed a slight funnel at the base. A sudden updraft forced them higher and farther from the deviated fluff.

Slowly he leaned back, still holding Shenda. Something about their half-horizontal position allowed them to drift over to the possible escape hatch.

On his upright push, sharp icy particles showered over them and Shenda left his grasp. The funnel forced opened and devoured her squirming body.

Fuck it. All that risking and planning for nothing.

Hellé's survival hung even more in the balance.

He jerked himself to the right and ascended. His face hit a warmer frothy layer and total whiteness surrounded him.

Jackhammering obliterated all else for a couple heartbeats before silencing. A hinge creaked and he shot upward faster than before. He pushed headfirst through a humid tunnel and crackling noises came overhead.

What might have been a hundred giants yawning echoed in Menlikus' ears. Nothing appeared in his field of vision. Only marshmallow blankness.

* * * * *

Twelve women wearing only garlands of herbs and dried flowers rushed into the ceremonial room and scattered. I turned my head enough to keep my nose out of the scorpion's way. The slaves formed a perfect zigzag, each spaced about a foot from her naked neighbor.

Great. My gut spewed more acid. Van had his own drill team down here.

The Sodomettes.

Too bad one of them didn't *drill* him in the side of the head or jaw.

Van paused at the foot of her table and opened his robe. "You know your father Lucifer was a fallen archangel."

"Of course. I was born and raised in Hell but I know a good bit about his fall from grace and the Bible." Warm, grain-scented oil dripped onto my belly and pussy.

The beauty who'd played the mysterious musical passage smeared her hands through the glistening liquid. Some trickled into my navel and her thumb massaged it around.

"Rewiba, I will finish." Van stabbed a finger in the direction of the silent, feminine formation. "Join the others."

"You still could be conning me." A drop of oil slithered down my pussy and brought shivers.

"I'm the archangel never mentioned. Holy ones and historians of the time loathed me. While I amused myself at a brothel with the finest whore Lot's wife wasn't warned properly."

"But there were two other angels there at the time." Something more than sulfur was rotten in this fiefdom.

"It was my duty to watch over Lot's family. To ensure no harm befell them. I failed." He swiped some of the oil off my labia and spread it over his lips. His tongue snaked out and lolled below his jaw. "And the rest is history the way some wanted it recorded." He leaned over me and kept his gaze on my face while his tongue lengthened farther and licked my pussy clean.

When I gifted him with another flood of cum, he groaned and lapped it up. After teasing my clit for a few seconds, his tongue retracted.

Quite a confident man, Van. His tone wavered not in the slightest. No sweat on his brow. No fumbling of his hands.

No outward signs he'd told lies.

And a tongue that stretched over two feet, possibly more.

Several swallows loosened the clench in my throat. "Why are all those women assembled?"

The ends of his robe opened wider as he pumped his cock, wiped off the cum drop and painted his musk over my mouth. "For my pleasure and yours."

Damn this, playing games. If only those scorpions weren't at the ready. Otherwise he knew I could break free of my bonds and serve him up a wrestling match the likes of which he'd never experienced.

He'd have a hard time prying my legs or hands loose before they shut off his breathing.

Cold water rained down on me and I steeled against the icy barrage. Funny thing that wake-up call happened when I was thinking about choking him to death. I sputtered more than a few choice words his way. Maybe he could read minds?

Pearl-sized water droplets shone on my belly. "I fail to see how I can have any pleasure tied to this table and surrounded by scorpions. One wrong move and they'll sting me."

Van twisted Rewiba's hip-length red hair into a tight coil and slapped her full ass. "When in Sodom, Hellé, you must learn to enjoy the delights such a precarious position always yields."

Okay, so he got off on binding me and going deep into those women's butts.

Big deal.

Messalina and I could tire him out without half trying. "Aren't there any men but you down here?"

As he released her hair Rewiba bent at the waist and rubbed her bare buttocks against his crotch.

Three of his fingers pushed into Rewiba's anus and worked like a piston. "Not a one."

Twenty-two hands clapped out a choppy rhythm and the eleven slaves chanted. They'd positioned themselves much as would the members of a choir. First sopranos all the way to the left, including the big-mouthed blonde who showed all but her tonsils. Second sopranos next, led by a silver-haired siren who wailed with the best. The alto section was sparse, even more so with Rewiba being finger-fucked by Satan's former friend.

The women's moans mimicked those of the Gregorians and added a bit of primal scream to the mix.

The shelled creature closest to my ankle strained at his pathetic restraints. What a place down here. Décor dating back a lot further than the Stone Age. Sulfur dust everywhere. Women bending over at their king's whim.

But not one scorpion skittering over the floor. Probably because he'd put them all up here with me.

Van ceased his handjob and grabbed her hips. He played his cock head down her crease and retraced the path. Her head snapped up and created a curtain of red hair over her back. Eleven slave heads turned at her howl. While connected at the hip, Van and fuck-of-the-moment traded body blows.

"Bet you can't stand competition from other men. You're afraid of losing these young women to another."

"There's nothing for which I need to compete." He covered the top of his sex partner's back with loud kisses. "As for fear—I don't know the meaning."

He would once I got done with him in a little while.

His cheeks turned ruddy and he backed away from Rewiba. His cum spray hit the middle of her back and sizzled. The last slave in line grabbed a shallow basin filled to the rim with water, a clean cloth and a bar of soap that was surely scented with the oil of many olives. Van cleaned himself, tossed the soiled cloth into a basket draped over the attendant slave's arm and set the soap near his feet.

Another whore, a willowy sort, crept over and faced him on tiptoe. He took in a mouthful of her black hair and puffed it back out. They kissed for a couple moments and he laved her nipples. Van lifted her so her crotch bumped his mouth. Her legs split wide and a strand of cum stretched between them. He licked her pussy, moaning more than he had with Rewiba. She brought her left leg over his shoulder and he lowered her slowly. Her heel pressed his shoulder and he squeezed her ass. For quite some time he licked her pussy while she raked her fingers through his hair. But as he'd done with Rewiba, he entered her from behind. I blinked and they came together, both groaning and laughing like lunatics.

After every sexual encounter he performed his own toilet by dunking a clean cloth into the basin, washing his soft cock and discarding the used cloth in the basket. His mind might be dirty but his body was clean.

Each time he played with and anally penetrated a different slave, I came. If he kept up this carnal circus I'd slide right off the table.

Penetrating the final woman's ass, he looked my way. "Now you have an idea as to my skills. You're next, beautiful lady. I promise you will have my undivided attention and cock for as long as you please."

Sorry, you fallen fruitcake, but I'm not into sharing a lover with anyone else. And Menlikus is all the man I'll ever need. "You promise rapt attention but force your queen to watch you screw other women. Maybe I'm not into that."

His fangs flashed. A tanzanite glow emanated from his eyes. "Maybe I'm not into caring. And you're not yet my queen."

Fierce rumbling shook my table and Van lost his hold on Mama Long-Legs. She hit the floor and lay there nursing her knees.

Not far in front of them the rock ruptured and a yellow fog seeped from the crevice. The saffron-scented mist swirled and settled not far from me. A feminine form materialized, torso first. Her graceful back grew a full ass.

Both of her ass cheeks wore a small pink heart and an arrow.

I swallowed my laughter.

Arms and legs filled the void and the reddish-blond hair trailed midway down her back.

"Hold your cock and tongue, Vaniel." With her feet wide apart and her left hand propped on her hip, Shenda pointed at the fallen archangel and his fallen ride. "'There's only one woman you really want as your queen. I'll fight for that crown and place beside you here in Sodom."

* * * * *

Shenda stood at the top of the sturdy table, stroking my cheek and hair. Van brandished a pair of golden shears. Syncopated snaps of the blades coming together beat into my brain.

"The devil's only daughter will soon be mine." He opened and closed the cutting tool near my nose. "A major coup, wouldn't you say?"

"If I say anything remotely contrary to what you do I might learn how crude your plastic surgery techniques are."

"I'd never mess with perfection." Van rapped the handle of the left blade against a scorpion's back.

The scorpion closest my face.

"Tormenting me won't make me wetter." Only ready to rip every hair out of your scalp and crotch.

"Why won't you consider me for your queen?" Hips swaying, Shenda circled the table and returned to my side. "Am I not good enough now?"

Van leaned over and sucked her nipple. "You'll always be a fine woman. That's why you will serve as Hellé's *jati*."

"But I don't want to be a handmaiden or personal assistant."

"You'll be what we want you to be. Or you won't be at all. Go back to Purgatory and join Menlikus. Tell him Hellé's found a better man." His tongue protruding about an inch from his lips, he slipped the shears underneath one section of cord. "Now we'll see how strong my bride-to-be really is."

The shears whispered at slicing each of the slender tethers. Sick bastard. I closed my mouth. By not inhaling, I could hold my own for quite some time without oxygen exchange.

At least I hoped I still could.

Van looked toward the blackness far above us, his laugh sweeping up the craggy column. One of the middlemost slaves, a thick-waisted wench, stepped out of line and yanked open a fogged glass panel. She reached inside and removed a wooden bucket that she carried over to the table. Her bracelet-covered arms remained steady as they balanced the bucket at elbow height beside Van. A metallic cuff in the likeness of an asp wrapped above her biceps.

His Supreme Stupidness chanted gibberish.

Stingers rasped. One by one his stinger-wielding soldiers marched on me. In short time I wore a dozen Sodom denizens. Each heartbeat catapulted toward my tongue. The bucket-bearing woman shuddered. How my left leg was tempted to lash out and kick the groin of the man who got off on this skin-crawling game.

He'd eat more than his late lunch once I got up and off this mortuary slab.

The creepy-crawly on my belly shook from side to side. The stinger pierced my flesh. A flaming invisible knife rammed through me from navel to spine. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck. Once he scampered off me a bead of bluish-red blood rose above the puncture. But the rest of the deathstalkers remained at rest. Starting at my right hand, Van plucked off the shelled demons and tossed them into a bucket, where a low screeching emanated as one hard body struck another.

Too bad they didn't rebel, pop up out of that bucket and bite him on the balls.

Maybe the blow of impotence was the ultimate way to end his mean streak?

When the last creature clicked against the rest his helper scurried away. At reaching the point where the water bubbled up and the narrow stream began she tipped the bucket. The scorpions emptied into the sedimentary floor or whatever lurked beneath the water's surface.

A long sigh whistled from his half-open mouth. "They'll go back home now."

And I'd like to do the same and hit the Strip. "To the desert."

He nodded. "Yes. They'll find their way through the Adsiini Falls and Nurae Gorge and back into the dunes."

"Never heard of those falls and gorge."

"Don't suppose so. The devil and his descendants have no clue what happens in my world." As he swiped his hands together, pinkish-white sparks flashed between them. He licked a zigzag path from my pussy to my nipples. "Only the woman meant to be my queen could survive the sting of a *Leiurus quinquestriatus*."

"I survived a night with the Marquis Du Sade." I worked up some spit and licked my lips. More saliva lay in my mouth but instead of giving in to temptation I swallowed. "Your sand critters are the least of my worries."

"Bedding you will be my second priority. And speaking of the Adsiini, prepare to be amazed. You are about to witness a spectacle far more dazzling than any in Hell or on the World Screen."

Chapter Fifteen

Not smoke, not fog. Menlikus brought his hand close to his face but it remained invisible. What propelled him into this damn dimension? At least if he'd remained in the former channel he could have returned to Kellion or forced himself back down to the platform.

He sifted sideways and somersaulted. Nothing to block his limbs or impede his movements. Probably a place where the devil, with his warped sense of humor, sent people who defied him.

But if that held true, why wouldn't he have caught Hellé up in this marshmallow nothingness?

And how did Shenda slip through? Surely losing her lap dances would have pissed Satan off enough that he'd banish her to a point of no return like this one.

Faint whispers circled him. The more he swatted at them the louder they grew until they pounded against his eardrums and sent him hurtling backward. Nothing lay in his path.

Some bizarre force kept him suspended.

He walked through the milky void. Jumped. Lunged. Sparred with what seemed a whiter space where cooler, wetter air lay.

His eyes burned. With his palms flattened against his face, he blinked. Even moving his hands away slowly resulted in no visible image. Not even a hint of color or form.

Satan had stricken him blind. No other logical explanation.

His yawn slipped out and bounced back to him.

Clearing his throat brought warm air into his nostrils and an identical noise rattling in his throat.

From a crouch, he hurled himself upward, his rise into the nothingness accomplished in increments as opposed to a fluid ascent. So much damn blank space around him.

If the devil was behind this clever, atmospheric trap, shouting or saying anything would alert others as to his whereabouts.

Others who were likely in league with Satan.

He foraged at his feet but only air met his hands. Maybe the force weakened as the sector descended?

Hand over hand he swam downward. Before he'd traveled less than fifty feet a swift current repelled his strokes and sent him onto his side. From there he crawled along the void, buffeted by the whiteness in the same way waves would carry him on

the ocean. Icy breaths blew against his bare skin. The faster he moved, the colder the breaths became.

With his teeth clenched, he struggled harder against a stern updraft. Warm, invisible fingers fondled him. His heartbeats lifted toward his tongue. Sweat poured down his arm with each glide forward. He blinked but only chalk-whiteness remained.

Somewhere above him someone plucked the strings of a harp. Hellé's mother played such an instrument. But she generally straddled her harp at nighttime.

While the devil straddled Shenda or some other hell-whore.

The saliva he swallowed burned as though the sternest acid was heading toward his gut. Surely not that many hours had passed since he'd stepped onto the platform? It had only been around five o'clock when he and Shenda first traveled the route to freedom. Not more than an hour or two could have elapsed since then.

Unless Satan had stolen his sense of time and place?

A woman's wailing and a man's maniacal shrieks carried along the topless, bottomless, sideless chute in which he swam. Had to be the commotion made by some of those trapped in Kellion.

Dammit.

He pulled harder against the sudden opposing force not far beyond his face. A hot wind slammed into him and enveloped his flailing arms and legs.

A scream and repetitive creaking similar to the rusty hinges on a trunk echoed around him.

Bullets of scalding air struck his chest and legs. He curled into a tight ball and closed his eyes.

He'd found a pathetic place where he'd likely spend the rest of his life. His lungs squeezed in on themselves and allowed only the most miserly of breaths and exhalations. No one to hear his cries for help. Invisible. Impenetrable.

He was trapped in a sinister dimension more damning and maddening than Hell.

* * * * *

"Hope you like the place where we'll come together many times over the centuries. My bedchamber is second to none." His kiss set my lips to throbbing.

"I'm quite capable of walking." The more I struggled the more Van laughed.

"No doubt." His lips teased over mine, kissing them gently then deeper until my breath caught. "Consider this my carrying you over the threshold."

Rock walls from which dripped a cloying, syrupy liquid surrounded us. The splash of water came louder. A stream? A fountain around which nymphs flirted and reclined?

"I don't see anything remotely resembling a threshold." A ping of my forefinger against his nose brought out his fangs. But the fleeting nip didn't draw blood.

"Quite a tough hide on you, sexy one. I would have thought a woman with your level of intelligence would have grasped my meaning."

His meaning wasn't what my hot hands wanted to grasp and twist.

Now or ever. "You mean I'm on the cusp of a new life. A new beginning?"

He smiled widened and the gold-capped fangs morphed into the same canines worn by mortals. "Exactly."

Instead of scorpions, glowing red serpents slithered around his feet. He stepped on one and flattened its shiny underbelly against the oily rock. Its yellow tongue flicked out and froze in position. As we passed I peered over his shoulder. The reptile continued on its way, unabashed and tongue again flicking.

Great. Was everything down here indestructible?

Golf-ball-sized gray porpoiselike heads jutted from tortoise shells. Dozens of the creatures far from the sea dotted the sandy expanse to our left. A few stirred in the pinkish-white granules while others simply lolled around as though waiting for someone to pick them up and play with them as one would a puppy or kitten.

Van nodded and delivered a sloppy smooch to my forehead. "Those are my *zlaivs*. A product of genetic experiments."

Genetic experiments? If he tired of a mate did he cross her with another to invent another mind-boggling hybrid? "The surprises never end."

"That's what I'm hoping, sweet Hellé." He tickled my thigh with a cool puff of air. "And this surprise is one you'll never forget."

A waterfall erupted from nowhere and spilled into a large rock basin. No matter how many times I shook my head, opened and closed my eyes, the gravity-defying wonder remained.

Even Daddy didn't have something that grand in Hell. "It has no beginning."

He rocked me so my face neared his. His lips parted mine and his tongue plumbed my mouth, teasing my tonsils and inciting ripples of heat beneath my belly.

On breaking our liplock, he grinned. "It has no beginning, just as our love will know no end."

* * * * *

Shenda sprinkled *mellingu* petals over the bathwater she'd hauled for Hellé. A tap of her finger submerged a melon-pink fan-shaped petal. She had to get Hellé out of here pretty soon. Van wasn't the kind of man a forthright woman like Hellé could ever love—or even tolerate—for more than a couple seconds.

She set the sigh free. So many wonderful times she'd shared with Van before he became so cold and controlling. If he hadn't changed and gone cruel-hearted all those centuries ago she would likely have been the one whose body Van now bathed before they indulged in rituals far bolder than any most mortals dared. She would have been

his queen. Her eyes closed and she dunked both arms to the elbows. The citrus-cinnamon essence of the *mellingu* flower came in through her mouth and nose. So soft and delicate, unlike Hellé.

She flexed her vaginal muscles. Fabulous. The toy containing the zalendium was still in place deep inside her pussy.

Whatever it took, whatever dangers she had to face, she'd make sure to lead her best friend to safety if they managed to elude Mister Cock-A-Doodle-Doo. Hellé didn't flinch when that scorpion shoved its stinger deep into her belly. Instead she lay there smiling as serenely as Giancarlo Lentini's nudes as they posed for portraits in the Ojue Studio near the devil's favorite watering hole.

Van had brought her to climax countless times. Far better than Satan. But his quest for the ultimate in sexual fulfillment turned sadistic.

If she hadn't escaped his insanely unique kingdom she would have been immersed in the bubbling tub of red becolo wax. Always one searching for new sexual props and experiences, Van had pioneered a special wax using the gunk secreted inside the shells of the *zlaivs*.

He claimed coating the body of his lover and queen with the wax would bond them together at the perfect moment for the ultimate sexual release.

Every time he coaxed those grotesque creatures from their shells and floated their slimy bodies in metal pans of sulfured water she spurned food for at least a day.

Gooseflesh rose on her arms and neck. She swiped her hands over the brown towel fashioned from *fennshu* root. Twice as absorbent as cotton and far softer on the skin.

Van hadn't ever used one of these on her after she emerged from the pool beneath the waterfall. But he'd made sure to have one ready for Hellé when she emerged from her bath.

She abandoned the bathing room and walked into Van's master boudoir. After turning down a corner of the silken burnt-orange coverlet, she sprinkled pure gold dust over the pillows stuffed with *greesha* bird feathers and also over the place where Hellé would lay naked while awaiting her beast-husband.

When she'd finished her task, some of the dust clung to her fingers and she sucked it off.

Hellé was smiling far too much when Van carried her away.

What if Van had successfully seduced the devil's daughter?

She climbed into the sling of canvas draped between two stout poles. The last time Hellé exhibited such outward glee was after she'd mud-wrestled Caesar's army and pinned every last man.

* * * * *

Van sloshed through the pool and stopped at reaching the waterfalls. His robe clung to his legs and buttocks. The silken black sash floated to me.

I picked it up and dragged the fabric between my thumb and forefinger. Strange, but this water held a temperature of 98.6 Fahrenheit. The droplets rolled slowly off my fingers. But the liquid in which our legs now bathed wasn't the same as what flowed from faucets and rushed through waterways on Earth. Water here in these falls bore a heavier specific gravity.

Van spouted more endearments at me, his command of Latin flawless, and faced his palms to the spilling wetness before him. The falls frothed for a moment before a verge formed between them.

A pinch on my hand proved one thing—I wasn't dreaming. "You parted those falls. And you've altered the water's molecular structure."

With his back facing me he walked toward the twin curtains of curious liquid. "I knew you were a far better choice than Shenda. A brilliant woman, Hellé Hawthorn." He peeked over his left shoulder. "Or should I forget all about that Zyr-invented surname now that we're together?"

Together? You delusional devil. We're about as close as the planet Mars and me.

Light years are mere fractions of the emotional distance that divides us.

Each step forward I took failed at raising the water's temperature even a millionth of a degree. "I'm Hellé to everyone. Even you. But your scientific genius piques my interest."

He stood in front of the falls and stuck out his arm. Water sprayed over his fingertips and splashed onto my face and breasts. I licked away the wetness. No salt, but a bit tangier than fresh water from above. No chlorine or other chemicals tainting the composition.

He spun around and fitted himself into the space between the water spills. His hard cock, fully blooded and veins engorged, pointed at my pussy. "I take that as the ultimate compliment coming from a woman whose intelligence surpasses most."

Correct, though it would prove some task thwarting him and his notion of a happily ever after with a Hell-bred woman.

Only one way to learn more about his motive for showing me this spectacle. If that failed I'd plunder his brain.

I milked several cum drops from his cock head, crouched and sucked them off. "Tell me more, Van. Tell me about how you ended up in this secret kingdom."

* * * * *

Something poked his ass. Menlikus spun and grabbed at the void behind him. Searing pain sliced through his hand and into his lower arm.

Warm liquid dripped over his palm. "Show your face, Satan. Stabbing me while I'm blind is a coward's way. You claim you are braver than any. If so give me a chance to fight you again and prove this true or false."

He swiped his hands together. His fingers met only with dry skin. Damn. Reduced to a blind, hallucinating, bellowing fool.

He'd won a wrestling match against the most evil man-beast. Hatred had driven him to challenge the devil. Hatred of the hellish ruler—the fucked-up fallen angel—who'd caused him to lose his true love Hellé.

Razors or blade flicks came against his arms, legs and torso. He snatched at the invisible instruments but his hands came up empty. The stabbings intensified, now claiming his belly.

After cupping his cock and balls, he hurled himself backward against the strange cushion of hot air. "Show your faces. Provide me a single knife so I can slay at least one of you demons."

He tucked his limbs tight against his body and rolled in the same direction from which the plucked harp notes sounded. Masculine chuckling drowned out the dulcet melody. The devil's voice was far deeper but he also possessed the ability to alter his tone at whim.

He'd never surrender to Satan. That would make him less a man than the eunuchs.

A bonfire caught in his belly. His stomach rumbled and more acid washed up and onto his tongue. Stopping, he straightened and lay still. From his neck to his crotch he guided his hands. His skin lay flat. No seeping of blood from wounds. He flexed his arms and legs.

No pain.

Once he'd closed his eyes his ears strained at the bubbling noises in the near distance. Couldn't be Ziri's cauldron. She always clanked the stirring rod against the pot's side and disturbed even the devil on some days.

Had to be running water. A brook or stream.

The stream that wound through Kellion and from which he'd obtained water to bathe Shenda's wound. Perhaps this was the place where the undecided experienced a bizarre "layover" until being flown into the fitful cavern comprising the Land of Spiritual Limbo?

Flashes of silver played against the blankness of his eyelids. He opened his eyes. The image shimmered and stilled.

A knife.

The sharpened edge sliced into nothingness. And each downward stab was delivered with greater force.

Not the carving knife Hellé's mother used when serving roasted fowl.

Not the cutlass used by a cavalryman during a battle.

But a vision containing the same knife Van had somehow wrested from Satan. Every detail intact down to the notches on the ivory trim.

Chapter Sixteen

"Ever wonder what happened right before Sodom fell?" Van slapped the falling columns of water and splashed my breasts.

"Of course, but I'll never know. No one will." Turning around, I bent over and offered him access to his favorite sexual position.

Sorry, Menlikus. I'll find out more by fucking him than by playing other time-wasting games.

Water lapped against my legs and Van grabbed my hips.

Starting at the lowermost curve of my buttock, his tongue teased upward then over to my crease and finally down to the tip of my coccyx. "For a bitter-tempered woman you taste sweeter than a mouthful of sugar."

"I'm not bitter." Only pissed-off at being spirited away to some underground sandcastle kingdom ruled by a ding-a-ling despot.

He came around in front of me and pushed my legs open wider. More splashing and gentle waves cresting my thighs. His mouth formed a seal over my pussy and he sucked hard. The tip of his tongue parted my labia and flicked against my clit.

What he lacked in decorum he more than made up for with tongue tricks.

Adrenaline surged and blended into my zalendium-laced blood. Heat more intense than that of hellfire flooded the lower half of my body. His tongue stopped tapping and circling my budded clit and tucked inside my pussy. His head bobbed and guttural noises rattled in his throat as his tongue stretched inside me and stroked all my sensitive spots. Coiled and grazed my G-spot. Reached up and struck a tender place that almost brought me crashing down on him. In heels I could stand up to any tongue job. When barefoot I teetered more than a toddler taking her first steps.

He broke our bond and floated on the rippling water. "Ride my lap."

Yeah right. He'd sink like a stone once I straddled him and started the gallop.

As I climbed his body, each touch or massage of my hands drove his skin heat higher.

And he remained afloat.

Each time he pumped his cock a fountain of cum erupted. "As God's once-favorite archangel I won't sink."

"You never cease to amaze me." At reaching his crotch I took his cock deep into my throat.

He growled and nodded toward the falls, the whites of his eyes now blood-red. "Let me go and turn around. I want you to watch what happens next."

Sitting up, he remained on the surface, his muscular legs stretched out and toes wiggling.

The ocean had a "floor" on the bottom but this was bizarre.

My shove laid him down again and I climbed off.

And Alice thought her fall down the rabbit hole defied explanation.

"I want to lick you again." He flicked water at my face.

I churned water at him but he lay still as a corpse. A few backstrokes brought me to the edge of the basin. Without warning I stopped, rose out of the water and hurled myself forward. As our bodies collided, I met the living, breathing version of Mount Vesuvius.

The cliffs above us beat his laughter back down. "Nothing will move me unless I want to move." His pinch on my ass tracked to my toes. "Well, your lap ride might."

As I faced away from him, straddled his lap and hovered over his hardness, the falls tamed their liquid fury. The fingers of his right hand split the pool's surface. A lasso fashioned of shells emerged from the rippling depths along with his hand. The tether bound around my upper body and his slight tug cupped the ocean treasures against my flesh.

All of the shell edges were rounded. Saucer-shaped and similar to those worn by mollusks but larger and stark white.

The water churned faster and so did my belly. Where was Menlikus? Various forms of torture chased around my skull. If the devil hadn't detained him, what else could have prevented my lover's return?

"Take me deep, Hellé. You're the type of woman I've always craved."

Another deep breath slipped the strung shells to my elbows. I lifted my arms and dropped the decorative rope to my hips. With the slack he'd given me I yanked the loose end of the tether from his hand, arranged the restraint around my waist and passed him both ends.

The things a woman had to do to survive on Earth, in Hell and in Sodom. "Now you have reins. I've always wanted a man to guide me and ride me to sexual release. You can be that man."

If he believed that bullshit he'd believe the devil capable of doing a good deed.

Van's thumb plugged my anus and pulled out. He repeatedly slapped my ass, each time applying more force. "I love you."

"Me too."

Once my palms pressed against his thighs I lifted off him and worked my pussy down his thick cock. The deeper I took him the more he swelled. My pussy quivered wildly and our moans slipped out. The harder I milked him and dragged my nail over his balls, the more he gasped of his affection and lengthened inside me.

Soft slapping and rubbing noises came from the shells as they shifted on my wet skin. He reared up and moistened my shoulders with steamy kisses. My topknot

loosened. The crimson chopsticks, a gift from a famous geisha, lofted from his hand and splashed down near the falls. Hair tumbled over my back, clinging in the spots he'd kissed or water droplets lingered.

He pulled the shell reins and jerked me backward. I countered his tug, regained my lost ground, brought my face close his lower legs, licked his right calf and squeezed his cock harder. On leaning back I laid my legs on top of his.

Too amazing that we remained afloat.

His fingers tiptoed over my belly and rolled my nipples. He plunged his hands into the water and took the tether ends along.

I ground against him, repeating his name so many times I lost count. When I shot upright we remained together but the shell bond broke. His cock stretched me wider and my groans lofted toward the rock ledges.

If we weren't careful we might cause an avalanche.

With careful positioning and a bit of squirming I lay my upper body over his legs. He grabbed my hips and I grabbed his ankles.

He half growled a few endearments in French. "Only you could do such fine tricks."

"My pleasure." And, funny enough, being coitally connected to Van was better than fighting him to get what I wanted.

"Aaaayyyyyyaaahhhh." Van rose out of the water a couple feet and took me along. We splashed back down in the same spot.

Van bent his body against mine.

His warm cum pumped into me and his lips kneaded the rippling flesh of my back. My body swayed and his did the same in unison with mine. Blood beat underneath my fingertips as I held on to his ankles. Roaring filled my head and the falls spilled faster. The columns of water then closed upon each other and assumed a gray glassy sheen that gradually whitened.

His tongue tickled a path toward my shoulder. "Bet you Menlikus screwed Shenda several times."

Why don't you just slash my belly and pack the wound with salt from the Mikona Path? "If he did, his actions were in the name of preserving our love. Of getting us back together again."

"Hmmp. Say what you want. Denial and excuses aren't your style." Van splashed water onto my back. "Never would have thought Satan's own would become delusional."

"I'm not, simply stating the truth."

Colors seeped from the grayness on the water screen and took shape. People clad in ancient garb. Ziggurats. Structures grander than castles of today. A marketplace where a man bartered for a loaf of bread. A braying donkey, his rope bond clutched in the hands of a young boy wearing a breechcloth and hemp sandals.

Two diaphanous figures, both men, conversed and pointed toward the sky. I let go of Van's ankles and heaved us upright. His husky laughter blocked the spirits' banter and the scene shifted to an opulent room filled with men and women in various stages of undress. Many of the naked city dwellers lay on slabs of stone, being ridden or being fed by a slave girl.

Van was also in the room, sitting on a skin rug, biting grapes from a cluster held by a black-haired whore. She giggled each time his teeth claimed one of the plump purple globes. When most of the stem lay bare she squatted over his mouth while he licked and supped at her pussy.

As his tongue extended she rose up on her toes. His fingers teased her lower legs. She slapped his hands away, kissed her way down to his crotch and eased herself onto his cock as a queen might settle onto her throne. As she nodded her long braid flipped toward his face. He caught the shining length in his teeth and tugged.

Her hands slapped his tight belly in a syncopated rhythm during her ride. For every bit of him she'd surrender her hips would change direction and again devour his thick inches. She worked a feverish dance on his lap, leaning forward and slightly backward depending on how much of her braid his mouth freed.

Strange rumbles erupted. Screams filled the brothel. Feet pounded the stone floor and many tripped over each other in their quest to find a way out. Flashes of lightning made their way in through the narrow windows and lit the fleeing fleshmongers. Thunder boomed and drowned out cries and moans that were likely pouring from the yawning mouths.

Dust rained from above and coated Van and his hussy. As they separated and embraced, another report of thunder brought one of the sturdier columns crashing down. He held her close, rocking her and whispering something I could barely hear but that made her body quake. His fingers twisted her nipples and they rolled over the rug until reaching the crude shelf where the remaining couple clung to each other.

Van stood and helped his trembling partner to her feet. Hand in hand they picked their way through the flying debris and others' debauch. A hefty urn on a higher shelf tipped over and smashed against the whore's head. She swayed and sank to the ground. Van knelt and kissed her face, her blood covering his lips and hand.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her over to a remote corner. After propping her still body against one of the intact walls, he made his way to the entrance. Only a few steps into the open he dodged the columns of fire flashing down from above. Hunks of ash pelted the flesh of those fleeing souls. In the near distance a feminine statue stood, her arms outstretched as though beckoning someone lagging behind.

Five bolts of lightning swept down and parted at reaching the city. Each found a separate target. Hunks of stone and mortar scattered in all directions. Bodies lay wounded and trampled. Pathetic cries. Van holding his head in his hands as though to block out the din. A torrential downpour of fireballs. Flames shooting toward Heaven and meeting more descending ash and lightning bolts.

He sank to his knees on a pile of rock fragments. His own blood seeped over the stone and the images swirled into a muddy, sanguineous oblivion.

No amount of swallowing quelled the burning in my throat. I rolled off Van and stood in the water facing him.

“Now you know what happened because I failed.” His pallor matched the ash strewn about the decimated sinful city pictured on the waterfall screen. “Vaniel let so many innocent souls down that day but I won’t fail you, my love. Once we’re together in my bed you’ll never have a need for any other man.”

Chapter Seventeen

The ice-blue comforter drifted off the master bed and onto the floor with a slight tug of Shenda's hand. I lay down on the black satin sheets. Who was I to criticize his color choices for linens?

No need for me to worry about coordinating stuff here in Sodom. "What's making you walk so funny, girlfriend?"

Hell's best lap dancer massaged her crotch. "I've a special delivery stashed in a special place. Don't want to risk losing it."

"Pure genius. Only you could pull that one off." I pointed at Shenda's pedicure. "What happened to your foot?"

She perched on the bed's edge and propped her injured foot on her leg. "Someone knocked the thermometer off the lab table and I stepped in the glass and mercury."

An invisible awl bludgeoned my belly. "No wonder Menlikus couldn't follow you."

"Why? He traveled with me into Kellion where he nursed my wound." She sighed and hugged herself. "You lost a special man there, Hellé."

When the stabbing in my belly stopped, bile washed over my tongue. "Mercury allowed you to slip through the portal but it wouldn't do the same for a man who'd lived in Hell for very long. Certain chemicals are expelled from the rocks and water down there. Menlikus' system absorbed enough of those chemicals to cause an adverse reaction with the mercury. He was simply too heavy to follow you up here."

Shenda spread her toes wide and stuck her fingers between them. "In other words, if he would have let my foot alone he might have gotten up here with you?"

"But there's the twist." No sooner did that word slip out than my vitals quivered. "He would have but you wouldn't have. His touch to your wound spurred your transport. And you are part of the bargain with Van. More vital to my survival than Menlikus this time around. Don't worry. We'll get him up here with us."

She straightened her leg, grabbed my shoulders and stared me down. "He didn't mess with me any more than it took to convince that whiny Logan. Your man is faithful to you."

Someone might as well have pulled the bed out from under me as my soul joined in the internal-organ game of Twister. "Logan as in Logan Winthrop?"

"Yeah." She stuck out her tongue and poked her forefinger into her open mouth. "He took over when Tony died."

"Tony was in perfect health when I left. And he never kept that large thermometer lying around. A friend of Galileo's gave Tony that as a birthday present."

She gasped and jostled the mattress on leaving the bed. "You think someone was behind Tony's death and that broken glass?"

My teeth snagged the inside of my cheek and blood seeped out. "Absolutely."

First the gazing ball and then the geodes switched position on the bedside table at her fussing. "The devil certainly had some choice words for Menlikus once the wrestling match ended the other day."

I reached out and teased my fingertip over a crystalline amethyst. "I can believe that but I don't think Daddy is behind trapping Menlikus in Hell."

"You believe Van is the culprit?" Shenda lit the tiny white candle nestled inside a sizeable chunk of laboradorite, leaned over and pressed her lips close my ear. "You have a plan to knock him out?"

I formed a circle with my thumb and forefinger.

She tossed the black-tasseled decorator pillows onto the pomegranate velvet chaise and posed there on her knees. "You do know what is going to happen next, right?"

"Not a clue." Each time I fluffed the top sheet she giggled. "Just have to hope Van won't want to have sex with you. Can't risk him poking around in a certain place."

"Seriously." After climbing off the plush bench she scampered over to the entrance and peeped into the hallway. "He's quite a beast. I found that out early on." With her legs spread wide she waddled over to the bed. "Lots worse than Satan. And I didn't even participate in the Beva."

"Beva? What's Beva?" Something told me this four-letter word spelled T-O-R-T-U-R-E.

Domination at its most deviant.

Shenda twisted her hair onto the top of her head and let it fall. "Vasha, the slave who played the *gotem*, once told me some of what goes on. "

"How does she know?" On sitting up I knocked the *bora*-skin bolster pillow onto the floor.

A blonde curl dangled at the end of her twirling finger. "A short time before Van and I hooked up he had the hots for another woman."

"Big surprise there." Monogamy and longevity weren't part of that beast's sexual lifestyle.

"He'll make me part of the ceremony since I'm your personal servant."

Shuffling noises carried from the corridor. Van strode into the master suite wearing only an onyx-inlaid gold medallion around his thick neck. Behind him trailed Vasha, hands filled with shiny cords and *flacons*.

"Prepare her." He pointed at me and Vasha scurried to my side, still carrying the sex props. "Shenda, there is your place." His forefinger designated the chaise.

Her lips quivered but kept any words behind them. She lay down on her left side, facing us, and propped her arm on one of the bed pillows. Giggling, she sucked her finger and then pointed it at Van.

If only he'd take her for his queen. Or settle for Vasha.

Regardless, I had to get him flat on his back on these black sheets before the final act of our passion play.

I sprang out of bed, turned away from him, spread my legs and touched my toes. Something told me his favorite color was pink.

He unwrapped the smallest *preewood* paddle from the bedpost and landed it soundly against my right buttock. "I'll have the finest queen in the world. The best woman ever born."

"But not a woman you can control."

Shenda made a strange squeak in her throat. *Yes, my friend since we were two-hundred-year-old hell-tots. I'm tired of the dominating ways of beasts and demons.*

Almost as tired of them as of Van's sandcastle shenanigans.

Van licked where he'd spanked and slipped several fingers into my pussy. Vasha popped the corks from the flacons and passed each one under my nose. Gardenia. Rose. And almond.

I nodded at the last one and sneaked another sniff before she corked the other choices, set them aside and upended the sapphire-blue glass bottle. Aromatic oil glistened on her hand. Van snatched the empty vessel and tossed it onto a straight-backed chair.

Vasha swiped her palms together. Her strong hands massaged the essence over my upper back and shoulders. When her palms failed to glide freely she spilled more oil from a different flacon and blurted something to Van.

His palms slapped against hers. On removing his touch he wore most of the oil. Vasha spread what remained on her hands onto her breasts and nipples. As her slender fingers traveled over her belly then lower, Van growled. She stopped touching herself and snatched the pile of cords.

Shenda leaped from the chaise and dragged a high stool over to us. How she kept from losing the container of zalendium... She climbed onto the seat and sat down. Vasha placed her tiny feet on the rungs and managed to mount the seat in a standing position facing Shenda, her feet straddling my friend's hips.

More slaps came upon my ass, followed by gentle licks and oily rubs from Van.

On extending her arms, Shenda turned up her palms. Nimble Vasha maintained her balance while fitting her feet into the flesh-and-bone cups of Shenda's hands. One flinch or sneeze and she'd topple and split her skull.

Four thick hooks, situated about a foot apart, hung from a metal crossbeam somehow braced in the rocky ceiling. Two lengths of chain dangled a foot and a half below the endmost hooks over which they were fitted. Soft sighs wafted my way as

Vasha shook out the tangled crimson cord. She tugged the hooks and lowered them to a more comfortable-reaching distance. Silent as she worked, she wove a swing of cord among the hooks. After double-checking the end knots, her slaps sent each hook flying a couple more feet away from its neighbor.

She climbed down from the stool, scampered over to the farthest wall and claimed a tall metal pole at the end of which lay a hook. On loosening the metal coupling at the pole's center, she telescoped the sections another ten feet. The cool whisper of steel on steel mingled with the slurping of Van's tongue over my pussy.

"You are wondering what I've planned for our Beva." Van stood, wrapped his arms around me, kissed the back of my head and pulled me to my feet. "Climb into your soft nest and see for yourself."

A warm downdraft swayed the hooks and the makeshift swing of silken crimson cord. Vasha braced her left foot on a bottommost rung as I climbed up. Tugs on the apparatus proved it would hold at several hundred pounds before splitting. Van skirted the stool and posed in front.

I bent down and kissed away his next breath. "You can't join me."

"Not in the swing. I prefer the bed." He sucked the nipple I rubbed across his mouth.

After his suckling stopped, I sought the place Van called a nest. The network of silk warmed at contact with my skin and I leaned back slowly. My swing wouldn't mark my skin with weight bearing or frenzied sexual activity.

How thoughtful and arousing of my self-designated lover.

I parted my legs wide and slipped my feet through two of the wider openings. Van grabbed both chain ends and jerked them toward the floor. The swing and I shot upward. Chalk-and-mineral-scented air filled my nostrils. On licking his lips, he released the chains and I hurtled toward him.

On stopping, the swing swayed and twirled against its metal moorings. This was outstanding. Totally unique in a techno-wild way. More wetness flowed from me and Van's open mouth caught the remnants of my excitement.

"You enjoy this ceremony, my beauty?"

"Yes. Very much." And this time I wasn't lying.

He waved his right hand at Vasha, who hastened over and hooked the pole onto a section of chain well below my feet. She marched to the right and took the swing and me along. My body stretched flat. Quite a relaxing position actually, with a gentle rocking motion.

Flower petals rained down on me and bathed me in their luscious fragrance. Roses. Calendulas. Orchids. Jasmine. Several rare blooms from the Orient and tropics. A dust sifted onto my skin. Another breath brought the delicious scent of lavender.

"Close your eyes, my love." Van traced his fingers along the cleft of my ass.

As my lids touched, soft clinking and clanking filled the air. The swing spun around, gaining in momentum with each breath I took. Hot air slapped my body and drifted some of the petals over my face. I puffed them away and burrowed into the nest of laced cords. My clit pulsated and more of my cum spilled. The swing switched course and now spun counterclockwise.

Love. Love. Love.

The word beat into my brain. Van knew how to seduce a woman. How to arouse her sexually. Make her feel special. Shower her with pretty things to set her heart beating faster.

But he wasn't Menlikus.

The man I'd probably never see again. Trapped in Kellion or somewhere else and doomed to live out whatever time the devil dealt him.

My love nest lowered and the spinning slowed. Masculine hands cupped my buttocks and Van's long tongue licked along the middle of my back.

"Open those pretty eyes and join me in our bed. There you can forget all about Menlikus. Forget the man I've trapped in Kellion so he'll die a slow but agonizing death. His mind will go long before his body. He'll be reduced to a babbling idiot. Chasing his voice around the place. Unable to differentiate between words he's spoken and the ones playing only in his mind." He scooped me from my nest of cords.

Though his hands were empty on touching me, he might as well have wielded Daddy's favorite knife and bludgeoned my body until I bled out every last hell-drop.

Forget the man? Forget Menlikus.

Never.

Shenda and I had to find that portal. I'd rescue Menlikus. She could resume her place on Daddy's lap and live out her wildest fantasies in Hell. Satan would forgive her. He had no choice. Shenda satisfied him unlike any other.

My gaze connected with Van's. Leave my dearest love to rot and become a raving lunatic? My fingers curled toward my palms but I forced them straight.

Van could kiss my ass and any chance at my ever reciprocating his feelings goodbye.

He'd pay for what he did to Menlikus.

Van tapped his forefinger from my left cheek to my right, lingering a short while on my lips. "Were your brief dreams pleasant?"

"Quite." With my hands resting against his damp chest, I kissed him.

He bent me over his leg, paddled my ass then swatted me toward the rumpled bed. "Spread yourself out so I can behold every bit of your beauty."

Vasha propped the pole against the wall and hurried out. Shenda remained, gawking at us as a child might gawk at a passing parade.

Once I lay flat on my back I toyed with my clit and noisily sucked my fingers. "Such a special time deserves a special toast. Some of your finest red wine, please. Your choice."

He stomped over to Shenda. "Have Vasha bring the bottle of Chateau La Mission Haut-Brion Pessac-Leognan 2000. That will satisfy my bride."

Quite a connoisseur. Nothing but the best for this beast.

Only biting my lips kept the laugh behind them. *Oh yes, Van. Drinking a toast will satisfy me more than anything else.*

We'll drink to our Beva and your impending death.

* * * * *

An artificial sun blared from a spot on the wall and cast its mandarin-orange light on a sundial.

For almost three hours Van mapped and tapped my body with his tongue, fingers and cock.

Not too shabby for a guy who got off on bragging about his ancient exploits.

But I was far from satisfied and he was far from my type.

If I didn't get out of this bed soon I'd run the risk of dying from boredom.

He poured a bit of Bordeaux into my navel and lapped it out. "Getting quite used to the good life down here, aren't you?"

With my fingers knotted in his hair I pulled his mouth away from its suckling. "Men who take time to find out what makes a woman happy make me happy."

"Unlike that weakling you thought you loved." A bead of Bordeaux glistened on the tip of his fang before he tongued it off.

"Let's not discuss him." I lifted my hips, poked my finger inside my pussy and smeared cum across his mouth. "Tonight is all about us."

He lifted the loving cup to my lips and I sipped. "Surprised you haven't tried fighting me. Not like you to cede power so easily."

"Why fight attraction?" My fingers closed around the gem-encrusted chalice and I tipped more onto his tongue.

On swallowing, he set down the cup and teased my pussy with his cock and tongue. Our cum soon soaked the sheets along with our sweat. Shenda lounged at the foot of the bed and wafted cool air over us with a fan fashioned from emu feathers.

She plucked one of the fluffier feathers and tossed it onto the bed. It floated onto Van's head but he kept his mouth on me.

I snatched the feather and kissed the quill. "Let me make you feel as good as you do me."

The mattress shifted as he reared up, mouth wet and grinning. "What are you going to do with that?"

I patted the wrinkled sheet. "Lie down here and find out."

He moved toward the headboard, yanked the sheet loose on his side and flopped onto his back.

Cock hard for the fourth hour of our time together.

Shenda's breathing came fainter but my heartbeats didn't follow suit. If he picked up on the thumping he'd blame it on our Beva-night passion.

At my first glide of the quill from the base of his balls to their fullest point he groaned and thrashed. His right fist pounded a divot into the feather bedding and my pillow bounced onto the floor.

As I took his balls into my mouth he stroked the top of my head and whispered endearments. More blood swept beneath his soft skin and his musk coated my tongue. The scents of wine and sweat slipped in with my next breath. I let him go and tickled him with the feather fluff. His ass lifted off the bed and I devoured his cock to the base. A tangy flood washed down my throat and burned at reaching my belly.

Freeing him, I straddled his lap and pebbled his nipples with the quill.

After sucking the flesh nubs I locked my legs against him. I tossed the feather off the bed. He turned his head to follow the tickler's descent and I swooped. At my kiss he opened wide and I stroked my tongue over his. Before I drew another breath he shot upright, still wearing me.

His violent spasms shook us apart and sent him back onto the bed.

No air hit my hand as I passed it underneath his nose. At pressing my ear to his chest no heartbeats sounded.

I rolled off the bed on the opposite side, slipped into my clothes and motioned Shenda toward the entryway. "Show me the portal."

Shenda glanced at Van and grimaced. "What did you do to him?"

The room and furniture blurred as I sprinted into the corridor. "The formula I swallowed to reach Earth contained ameniorite, a rare crystalline mineral. The fact he consumed red wine sealed his fate. Once ingested, ameniorite is secreted only in saliva and only in trace amounts. Once my saliva combined with the sulfites from the red wine on his tongue it was quickly absorbed through his oral mucosa. The resulting chemical and enzyme reaction seized his system and stopped his heart."

"So he-he's gone." Shenda's facial skin tone matched the ash deposits in Sodom. "Damn, you're smart. You gave him the ultimate kiss-off."

Didn't take her dancing legs long to make short work of our escape route once she reached the hallway. I followed, striding alongside the woman who'd probably swallowed the wad of gum she chewed while surveying the bedroom spectacle a bit earlier.

"I spied on Van once." She slowed a bit and grabbed my hand. "Watched where he walked in order to penetrate the portal."

Shaking off her damp grip, I forged ahead. "There's a special path?"

"Must be."

After putting my finger up to my lips I turned a slight left and took her along. "Vasha is filling those ceramic water jugs. She was kneeling at the stream with her back turned to us. But if we leave this spot she'll likely hear or see us. Probably both."

Shenda waved off my words. "No problem. Follow me on a shortcut."

Through proscenium arches festooned with grapevines and dried flowers and corridors barely wide enough for us to fit through single file, we reached a room where individual sex shelves were laid out, six on each side.

Beds, or more accurately propping places for the sexually starved, carved from marble slabs filled the cubicles where Van's sexual supplicants laid in wait. An eellike creature slithered past, its body stretching over three feet from top to bottom. Each undulation of the slender snake brought acid-green flashes from the brilliant scales on its back.

She pointed at the eel. "Van ate those sometimes. Said something in them made his cock stay harder longer."

Wonderful. We needed a fast way out of here and Shenda decided to pursue trivia.

We turned another corner and the splash of water carried to us.

More magical than Mama's harp playing to my ears. "You knew Van was once an archangel?"

Shenda steered a sharp left and falls lay dead ahead. "Yes. That's part of the reason the devil delighted in making me his. He hated Van. Called him a boastful bastard who should have fallen from grace long before he did."

My heel squished in mucky remains of what appeared to have been a zlaiv's head. "But Daddy and Van were once friends."

Her mouth pulled into a clown cringe. "Not for too long according to Lucifer, I mean Satan. You must really love Menlikus."

"Why do you say that?"

She pointed between her legs. "Because I have the zalendium. You could render that into powder on your own. Pick any man to share it with. Save yourself and the girls. But you're choosing to risk your life going back for him."

"He's risked his life for me. Twice. When you love someone no sacrifice is too great. If we can't be together then I don't want to go on without him. I'll take my chances on what happens next. Besides, I don't know the way back to Vegas even if I do have enough zalendium to sustain my friends and myself."

A couple dozen live zlaivs lolled in the sand near the falls. I stepped out of my stilettos.

Shenda padded through the sand with me in tow. "Hold on to me, that way you won't veer off the path."

And I'd once doubted Shenda's ability to memorize anything other than the moves to every dance ever known to and performed by mankind.

While earlier Van had floated on the weird water filling this beast-made pond, our legs now sank upon contact. Shenda sloshed ahead, silent, her hands behind her back and clasping mine.

Sure enough each step forward sank my feet into the faint indentations made by someone who wore at least a size fifteen shoe.

Definitely Van's imprints.

At reaching a spot about a foot from the left edge of the falls, Shenda shoved her hand through the cascading water. She peeked over her right shoulder, grinning as though I'd just gifted her with a million-dollar shopping spree at her favorite girly boutique.

Invisible burrs raked over my nerve endings. "Did you find the portal?"

Almost the entire left half of her body slipped through the liquid curtain and she tugged me forward. "Score some major points for me—the woman who's good for more than coordinating the clothes in Hell's closets."

Chapter Eighteen

My butt hit a shiny bed of spangles. Shenda touched down beside me and started flinging handfuls of cherry-red and purple glitter into my hair and the air surrounding us.

"This is a fantastic idea, don't you think, Hellé?" She puffed more of the cocoa-scented metallic fragments my way. "Oh, and before you ask, I still have the zalendium."

"Awesome." After some slippery maneuvering, I managed to make it to my knees. "But there's nothing fantastic about reaching a dead-end in a life-or-death situation."

She dusted her hands but the sparkling specks remained. "Sorry. Think I missed the right portal?"

Sizzling noises floated our way. For each foot I tackled of the shifting glitter sand, the depth became shallower. "No. The change of temperature and pressure were definitely those one experiences when entering another dimension."

Remaining hot on my bare heels, she sneezed and sent some of the pretty stuff flying ahead of me. "Looks like we ended up in some sort of maze. Just like Van. Everything was a game to him."

"Yeah. And he always wanted to have the last move." A deep ache settled into my leg muscles but I continued down the passageway.

At least to my vision there appeared two walls, one to the right and one to the left, in this tunnel. A deep breath brought the warm notes of a flame and the smokier notes of something burning. But no sign of the fog wisps resulting from such an event.

No way of turning back either.

Shenda's fingers closed around my ankles as I dug through the sparse covering of glitter and my knees impacted a solid surface. "Keep low, take shallow breaths and remain silent."

"Mmmhmmmm." Her reply squeaked out as though someone had squeezed her around the middle as soon as she opened her mouth.

While a fire possibly lay ahead, the smooth tiles underneath my hands and knees registered well below a freezing temperature in Fahrenheit terms. The crackling of a wood-based object traveled down the chilly corridor. A whip sang into the air before thumping flesh and slinking to the floor.

It was for the best that my friend's senses weren't as keen. Otherwise convincing her to forge ahead would be harder than Caligula's cock at the height of his hell-iday bacchanals.

Her fingers held as I quickened my pace and paused at the first bend in our bizarre journey. Infinite whiteness. Not Kellion. Kellion's various passageways lay bathed in a bluish-black haze and were far more humid. In this hallway we existed more as frozen girly treats than anything else.

I veered right and took Shenda along. My glitter-encrusted palms picked along the floor. No tiled segments met my hands, only a polished solid surface. At least in this milky void no one would pick up our trail, even though we had to be leaving glitter behind. Stopping yet again, I extended both arms to their fullest reach.

Only air.

Damn this optical illusion.

Feminine laughter floated not far from my face and the white glow intensified. Wisps of fog swirled and parted.

A pair of black-velvet strappy sandals from which peeked ten red-painted toenails posed less than five feet away from me. The right shoe tapped and sprayed gold glitter toward us. One whiff of her potent mixed floral essence and my temples ached.

Slender fingers sporting matching blood-red nails reached toward me. "Look what we have here, Moose. Some playmates from Sodom."

* * * * *

Satan sucked the hunk of casaba melon from the golden fork held by Claia. Swallowing, he leaned forward and tongued her nipples. Good slave. Came to him a damn sight quicker than Shenda today.

With Hellé out of the way Shenda hung around his fire pit more than usual. Claia fingered herself and he licked her fingers clean. Mori was too busy entertaining some of her favorite hellions. That temptress spent more time hosting galas than keeping him company the past couple hundred years.

Probably because he'd feasted on more flesh than hers.

He pushed away Claia's offering of a cluster of grapes. The din overhead continued. Someone rooted around up there. Not quite at Kellion, although nowhere else up there would sustain those who'd dwelled here in the lower depths of Hades.

More scratching and shuffling. Maybe only a new batch of indecisive souls? No wailing or lamenting though.

At his patting of his lap, Claia set down the bowl of fruit and approached him. Legs spread wide, she straddled his hips and worked her pussy onto his cock. She locked her legs around him and groaned.

Not bad. Not that damn good either.

Couldn't compare to Shenda.

His snarl caused her to blink.

If Shenda didn't soon make an appearance and join Claia at sucking him off he'd storm her cave and shackle her to her wall for a hell-night. Possibly longer.

And if that damn racket above didn't soon end some fool would pay dearly for daring to disturb his evening meal.

* * * * *

The simpering woman who'd referred to Shenda and me as playmates licked the ear of the man beside her. She put her tongue away and patted his ass. "These two are perfect. Don't you agree, Moose?"

Moose, an evident bodybuilder wearing a toothy grin, poured two glasses of clear liquid, passing one to Shenda and one to me. "You'll like spending time with Juri and me. We won't disappoint."

"Where are my manners?" Juri sucked her forefinger for a moment. "You are welcome here. Welcome to stay with us as long as you like."

My hell-given instincts shifted into their highest gear. Something about this particular meeting smacked of the devil's way of thrusting me into impossible situations to see if I could figure a way out. "How did you get here?"

Juri smoothed her hands over her full breasts. "One day Moose and I were tattooing a client at our studio in Chicago. The next thing we knew the place caught fire. Went up in flames all at once. No escape was possible."

Moose set down the carafe, coughed and rubbed his nose. "Yeah. Really strange. Our burning bodies ended up in this hallway."

Nodding, Juri toyed with her belly ring. "Before we got down here I screamed and said I'd do anything to be put out of my misery."

"And then something put out the fire. We were lying on the floor, gold glitter all over us, but we weren't burned at all. Our bodies looked as though they had never been through the fire." Moose winked at Shenda.

"We've been down here ever since. Don't know how much time has passed." Juri combed her fingers through Moose's hair. "Actually we don't give a damn about time. We only care about getting each other off."

I had to find out what they'd done to satisfy the devil. "So you were basically conducting ethical business, not doing anything wrong, when your studio caught fire?"

"We were the *best* at what we did." Moose nipped Juri's shoulder. "But once we started working on that guy's arms, we both realized we hadn't properly sanitized the equipment. We walked away for a minute and talked about our mistake."

Although I could guess the answer to my next question, I had to ask it anyway. "You returned to your work and weren't going to tell him about the dirty tattooing needles?"

"Are you crazy?" Juri squared off with me. "That guy's tat job was costing him a small fortune. If we would have told him about the unsanitary equipment—that he might become infected—he would have sued us and ruined our *reputation*."

I shot a glance at Shenda and then at Moose. No further explanation was necessary.

This pair fit the prototype of those chosen to spend eternity with the devil.

They were bad to the bone and down into the marrow.

Shenda made a funny squeaking noise. "We have to—"

I clapped a hand over Shenda's mouth and her hand lost contact with the amber drinking glass. But no smashing noise resulted. "We're quite thirsty." Raising my glass, I clinked it against the air.

"Let her speak for herself." Juri snatched a slender wooden hoop from the fog near my feet. "You and I can play while *she* does Moose."

Only I wasn't in the mood for playing. "You dwell here?"

Moose glided a talon over his bushy mink-brown left eyebrow. "Yes. This is our haven, where passion and life are never-ending."

"Interesting." *Not.*

A silver patent leather crotchless catsuit hugged Juri's willowy body. Moose tossed her a flacon that she caught midair. At removing the stopper she spilled the citrus-scented oil onto her palm before applying it to the hoop. Once the vial lay empty she flung it down and approached a chubby five-foot-or-so-high black pillar made from beeswax.

Moose pulled a slender branch from the left sleeve of his emerald velvet peasant shirt and placed it in Juri's outstretched hand. She touched the stick to the candle and set the tip on fire. One tap of the flaming willow bough to the hoop ignited the oil. A flame chased around the hoop's circumference. As the fire reached her hand she puffed out her makeshift willow torch and struck it against her leg. A slim welt rose on her creamy skin.

They had no clue they were dealing with the devil's daughter. That flaming hoop was child's play compared to coals lining the Jhara Path.

I stifled a yawn. Moose bound a yellowish-brown rope around Shenda and propped her on his lap. The more she squirmed the more her bonds tightened.

An invisible blade tip dragged down my spine. "You must become bored. There are only two of you."

Moose's sudden howl made Shenda scream and Juri snicker. His body convulsed and shimmered. Once the pulsing of his flesh subsided a blond-haired version of Moose stood on his right while a black-haired copy flanked him on the left.

All three stared me down then winked.

The centermost Moose figure blew me a kiss. "Continue what you were saying about there only being two of us."

Juri slipped the blazing circle of wood over me. "Come now. Play nice with us and your time here will pass more pleasantly."

My hands found her throat and we crashed to the floor. Shenda's yelp traveled past.

Air gasped from the Dominatrix's nose and mouth and I locked my legs around her neck. The harder she struggled the tighter I compressed her carotid.

"Enough." Moose stood behind her, his feet wide apart and his hands reaching for me. "If you don't want to stay here you can move on."

Every synapse in my body fired. My flesh rippled. "Where is the escape hatch?"

He pointed behind me. "Back there. Feel around through the ground fog. You'll find the brass loop. Pull it up and see what lies ahead." He fisted his thick cock and squeezed clear cum into Juri's gasping mouth. "The choice is yours."

Shenda approached us and slipped out of the loose rope bonds. At reaching her feet the woven cord vanished.

More optical illusions?

Juri bucked and I squeezed until the pulse all but ebbed in her throat.

"Let her go." Moose kissed Shenda's shoulder.

"Fair enough." Removing my leg lock, I pushed to my feet.

On my hands and knees I picked a path across the floor until I reached a spot where the fog parted. A heavy brass handle lay atop the hatch. At first touch it proved scalding but quickly cooled to a temperature level closer that maintained by a human body. My tug creaked the hinges. Owlsh screeches carried to where I crouched. Shenda's breaths hit my ear and neck.

Sharp clicks and sounds that mimicked bubbling grease followed.

Something red, salty-smelling and wet lashed upward and barely missed my hand. I peered below and into the grayish glow.

Shenda tapped my arm. "Tell me what you see down there. I'll bet it's not as bad as what's up here."

A twelve-headed viper flicked a dozen tongues at me. Puce liquid spilled down its scales. I inhaled, held the breath for a moment and heaved it at the creature. The misshapen skulls over which stretched a gauzy skin shook harder.

I flipped the hatch back and it crashed against the solid walkway. On my glancing back, Juri mounted the blond-haired twin and the black-haired one rode her from behind. Moose approached her, his steps measured, his hands wringing.

"Jump now, talk later." After grabbing Shenda I toppled us down the hatch.

Moose's wild laughter followed us toward the wagging tongues.

* * * * *

Sapphire-blue butterfly wings tickled my lips and cheeks. I fanned them away and poked Shenda. She lay in a heap beside me on the mound of sand but roused.

Water splashed somewhere close by.

Hrrsshh-grrrrll. Hrrsssh-grrrl.

Her eyes bugged and her mouth opened. No words came out.

Then, again, the gargantuan serpent emerging from a pit of bilge water likely wouldn't hear her for all the noise it made. The creature's segmented yellow tail shot from underneath the water and flung a curtain of water toward us.

"Don't be afraid. Stick close to me."

Shenda pushed closer and clung to me. "What else am I supposed to feel? That thing is going to devour us. You'll never get back to Menlikus."

"I wouldn't bet against it." With the back of my hand I wiped the warm tears from her cheek.

"Never thought I'd doubt you but right now I do." She drew her knees up to her chin and rocked back and forth.

"Did any of that water hit you or the floor in front of us?" I crawled over and rubbed my hand over the exposed slate floor. "Dry as bone."

Behind me the serpent continue its charge, its hefty body churning and parting the dark water, the heads bobbing and almost impacting each other.

"Get us out of here, Hellé." Shenda pointed at the menace and covered her eyes.

"Put your hands down for a moment." I knelt at the edge of the serpent's pit, dragged my hand through the water and sniffed. Rock silt. A bit of salt. Similar muck to that gathered on an Earth pond's surface. Nothing more.

She cupped her knees and stilled her rocking. "I don't want to see you killed."

A small, smooth white rock lay near my left foot. I picked it up and hurled it at the seventh head. My missile whistled through the air, struck my target and splashed down behind the hissing apparition.

"How did you do that? I mean, you hit that thing but it didn't flinch." Shenda clambered to her feet and hugged herself.

"Easy. That snake is a mirage put there by someone intent on scaring interlopers to death. The image is simply being projected over the pit. Snakes have a particularly pungent odor undetectable to humans. When I couldn't get even a hint of that scent when the hatch opened, or since we've been down here, I knew something was up."

Shenda gnawed her lips and slapped the remaining glitter off her elbows and forearms. "Didn't it scare you just a little?"

"Wondering whether or not we'll find Menlikus alive or not frightens me more." On leaving the snake pit more white-lighted hallways lay ahead.

Narrower than the one we'd traveled to reach Noose and Juri, these channels provided no clues as to which led to Kellion and which led nowhere.

I sat down in the sixth hallway. No icy wind whipped along this corridor. No scalding tiles underfoot to possibly blister Shenda's soles either.

"While there's no one around, push out that case containing the zalendium. I'll guard it from now on."

Shenda got on her knees, her back to me. I stared into the distance and created a vision of Menlikus.

She tapped my shoulder. "We've shared some strange stuff in the past, even a couple of guys before you met Menlikus. But this is really bizarre."

Once the zalendium supply lay deep inside me I heaved the held breath. "And unfortunately necessary. Your bravery will save us girls."

Shenda flopped beside me on her belly. "We're going with this corridor?"

The whoosh of distant breathing filtered toward me. "Follow me." Standing, I set a slow but straight path toward a human or beastly presence.

Instead of dense fog, fluffy clouds floated around us. One skimmed the top of my head. Petite Shenda fared better. Something swooshed through the air. I laid my finger on my mouth and turned toward my friend.

More slashes of an object meeting nothingness bounced off the tunnel's walls and pounded my eardrums. Picking up the pace, I steered around a right-hand turn and squinted against the cerulean glow. Twinkles of more intense whitish light filled the atmosphere between the walls. As I walked past one of the brilliant spots a star sizzled at impacting my forehead.

My fingers and toes tingled. We'd bypassed optical illusions and entered a realm where everything experienced was based in reality.

"Mmmm. Ahhhhh." Strange voices repeated the murmurs.

Flesh slapped flesh.

My deep breath brought the tang of human sweat and cum onto my tongue.

Longer strides brought me to the end of the hallway, with Shenda following, and I braced my hand against the wall. "Once we turn this corner I think we'll be close to Kellion."

Shenda finger combed her blonde tangles. "Might be another trick." Her fingers toyed with her anodized belly ring.

"Hard to say for certain but there's only one way for us to find out. Take my hand and hold on tight." I steered us into the adjacent tunnel.

Bluish-white forks of lightning stabbed around Shenda and me. I blinked a few times and they subsided.

But what remained in my field of vision rocked my world and then some.

I'd met plenty of bronzed gods in my hellish lifetime but the mouthwatering guy being ridden crossways by a redhead beat all but Menlikus.

I swallowed and approached the sweaty couple. He possessed the perfect male body. Muscles in all the right places. His teeth clenched against his lover's frenzied movements. Titian hair scattered over her naked shoulders and clung to her pale skin in certain places.

The lusty woman took in his last inch and settled against his crotch. She pointed at me. "Want to try this? Paolo here loves fucking lots of women. Making them scream his name until they can't talk anymore. Too bad his gigolo days in Rome were numbered."

I'd try anything once—as long as I remained in control of the situation. "Russian splits are simple."

"And so are you if you don't do what I ask." She bared silver fangs and licked them.

Her pussy let him go but she remained squatted a couple of inches above his thick cock.

Another passably pretty playmate who'd remained on the sidelines at our arrival crawled over, tongued the hunk's balls and slapped my antagonist's ass. With each slurp of this tart's forked tongue more cum trickled down my left leg.

Hell would more fully appreciate her talents and the sex appeal of the guy with lots of inches to ride and suck. "If I prove I can ride your man better and harder than you you'll let us pass?"

A toss of the vixen's head whipped her hair at my arm. "I would if you were woman enough to satisfy Paolo."

Chapter Nineteen

The woman Paolo called Zora spat at us and yanked against the rope binding her wrists and ankles.

She should have kept her mouth shut and kept out of our way. People who pissed me off found I had no patience for them but lots of tricks to make sure they learned a proper lesson.

I kissed Paolo and massaged a spicy balm into his chest and nipples. Despite Zora's snapping jaw and formidable fangs, Shenda managed to place the red ball gag in Zora's big mouth. Shenda joined me where I played with the man who should be a centerfold.

A delicious perfume of ground ginger, cinnamon and clove came in with each breath. But even this couple's aromatherapy experience didn't conceal Menlikus' scent. My love wasn't far away. No layers of rock or earth separated us. Not with me tasting him every time I moved my tongue.

Skiisssh. Swassssh.

More slashes of a sword or knife but the blade met only with air.

We were getting closer to Kellion or whatever place Menlikus had reached.

Paolo sucked my middle finger and squeezed Shenda's breast. "You two are welcome to stay here with us."

"Mmmmpphh. Ffrrrrmpphh." Zora slammed her bare heels against the stone tiles.

That bitch had a high tolerance for pain.

"We appreciate your invitation but we have other plans." And would be on our way once I bound tall-dark-and-easy-on-the-eyes.

Shenda didn't balk when I pulled her away from his cock and aside. Paolo whimpered but stopped when I winked at him.

Though fog swirled above the floor farther down the hallway, there was no mistaking the way it shifted downward slightly about two feet from the end.

Once I turned Shenda away from her hard-bodied admirer, I placed my lips near her ear. "I'm pretty sure I know where the portal is located."

"You want me to create a diversion so you can check it out?" She swiped a tear off her cheek. "If I don't make it through it's no real big deal. It's more important you and Menlikus are together."

"I'm going to stay behind and keep toying with Paolo. When I raise my hands overhead you make a break for the fog. You'll fall through. I'll follow as soon as I can."

More tears spilled down her puffy cheeks. Thank goodness she always wore waterproof mascara.

"What should I do now?" Her wet lashes touched together.

"Join me in licking Paolo. You take his toes, I'll take his nipples."

She wiped off her cheeks and grinned. "Paolo, you won't believe what we have in mind for you."

"Get back here so I can find out." He flung a whip our way. It slapped down close behind me.

I picked it up and flicked the end at him. "Maybe you'd like a taste of this?"

"I'd prefer a taste of your pussy." He licked around his mouth.

One pinch to Shenda's arm sent her scampering in Paolo's direction.

This could prove fun. Make a good memory while getting me off.

Sorry, Menlikus. Some evils are necessary.

I want to be with you more than anything.

While facing Zora and Paolo, I crouched over Paolo's face. His tongue parted me and the tip pressed into my pussy. Shenda's toe-sucking blended with his groans and Zora's muffled growls.

If looks could kill I'd be flat-out cold on the floor.

Each time Paolo tongued my clit visions of Menlikus and me enjoying the foot-long hotdog floated above Zora's head. A shimmering cobalt-blue haze enveloped the vivid memories and they exploded.

Whatever had spawned Zora, she possessed powers far keener than many in the underworld.

Damn her for destroying my pleasant daydream.

I rocked my hips forward and Paolo snatched at my ankles. His hands met with air as I widened my stance, took two steps backward and stretched.

My friend's tiny feet slapped against the slick flooring. *Go, Shenda!*

"What's she doing?" Paolo reared up. "Get her back here."

Hot air forced from his mouth and parted my bangs and my butt bounced down on his chest. His head struck the floor and his groan echoed around us. I fitted my heels against his neck and squeezed.

Red definitely wasn't his color.

He struggled against me, his heartbeats thumping against my buttocks. Shenda yelped and his gurgling intensified. As his eyes closed his body went limp. I climbed off him and sprinted down the empty hallway. The gag trapped Zora's curses and I tossed more than a parting few her way.

Warm and wet, the marshmallow-fluffy fog climbed my legs. More heel thumps sounded behind me.

My left foot met with air and a vacuum sucked me under. Fog churned around my face.

Knife slashes came near my right cheek.

* * * * *

Menlikus crawled toward the screaming woman. "Stay still and I'll find you."

Damn this hellhole of a void.

"Men? It's Shenda." Her words sputtered out as though someone were strangling her.

"Where's Hellé?" His arm bumped soft flesh and brought a gasp.

"She's up above. Wrestling with some guy."

"Guy? You mean Van?"

"No. She killed Van and we escaped his place in Sodom." Her fingers tapped his cheek. "There you are."

"I've been stuck here since you left. If only Satan knew you were here he might clear our way and at least let me into Kellion."

"Hellé doesn't believe her daddy is to blame for this mess you're in." Shenda hummed a something that sounded like a lullaby.

He needed the woman he loved, not sleep. "Only the devil would do something like this."

"Not the devil but Vaniel." She sneezed and banged her forehead against his. "You've no idea the strength he possessed. Hellé tricked him though. Killed him in their wedding bed."

"Then if he trapped me, his hold over me should have ended when his life did."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Reaching down, he grabbed her hand. Better chance of them surviving and finding Kellion if they didn't separate. "You said something about a wedding bed. Hellé would never go through with such a stunt."

Her damp cheek rested against his chest. "She would to save you."

Here they floated. Carrying on a damn conversation but unable to see a thousandth of a millimeter ahead.

More acid spewed in his gut. "Tell me more about the guy she's with now."

"He's another part of the maze."

His sigh cycled with the slashing sounds. "Start at the beginning."

Her tears trickled down his chest and belly and onto his cock. "Hellé and I found a way out of Van's kingdom in Sodom. Then we ended up in a maze. People played there with flaming hoops. We escaped the first couple and ended up in a snake pit. Well, it wasn't really a snake pit only a mirage. Hellé figured this out and got us back into the maze. Then we met this sexy Italian guy and his big-mouthed bitch."

"Hellé is facing off with two people."

"No." Hiccups bounced her body but his grip held. "Hellé tied up the Domme with fangs and had the guy in a chokehold right before I fell down here."

The burning in his belly subsided and the muscles in his neck unclenched. "I'd do anything, give anything, to see her again."

"She knows that." Shenda hugged him. "That's why she let that guy tongue her pussy so I could escape."

* * * * *

A sour stench emanated from the creamy void around me. I continued falling.

Hell definitely had more passages than any mortal could count.

Bits of grit chafed my skin and solid objects pelted my cheeks. Reaching out, I snatched one of the falling objects and fondled it. One pass of the six-pointed star under my nose brought a metallic tang. Four of the spindled ends were rounded.

Jacks.

Some trickster was hurling jacks at me.

Another current spun me around. As I corkscrewed down the passageway gossamer wings flicked against my face and tiny spurts of salty liquid struck my skin.

Mila bugs.

I swatted the swarming insects and kicked at the jacks striking my legs.

"Ouch." A masculine outburst filled the void.

Someone's thick hair shifted underneath my flailing feet and I pitched sideways for a short while. "Who's here?"

"Hellé?" Menlikus' voice.

"Hellé! You've found us." If the devil didn't hear Shenda's squeal he'd soaked his head for far too long and far too deep in the Wiruni Pool.

Following the direction of his voice and hers, I reached into the whiteness. Men's calloused fingers grabbed mine as another force pulled us under. Glass clicked at touching metal below us. My vision proved useless in this mess but my ears weren't mistaken.

Test tubes were being placed in a stainless steel lab rack.

We were above the transport platform.

Broom bristles swished over floor tiles. Shards of glass hit the plastic dustpan Tony always kept in the worktable's cabinet.

Menlikus' grip held and kept me dangling despite the unrelenting vacuum. "Hang on, honey."

More mila bugs flirted with my forearms and thighs. "Shenda, do you want to go back to Hell?"

She sniffled. "That's where I belong."

"Are you holding on to Menlikus?"

More sniffing and a hiccup. The same hiccup Shenda got when unsure whether to move right, left or stay in the center. "Y-yes."

No barriers lay to my right at arm's length. "I've stepped across the threshold between whatever level we're on and the platform." My words catapulted upward. "Shenda should fit in here and be able to pass by me without problems. Tell Logan or whoever's in the lab you were messing around with something you'd found in my old room. That's what took you where you didn't belong. Daddy will believe you."

"I'll miss you and Menlikus." The sound of soft kisses and more of her hiccups.

Two hard swallows cleared my throat. "We'll miss you too. And I'll never forget how you've risked your life to help us. We'll always be friends."

"How do I get back down there?"

I straightened my body and let it go limp. "Hold your breath for a moment. The composition of the air around you will change once you do this. Then take one slow step at a time. But keep hold of Men's hand. When your foot touches any part of me let go of him."

"Okay." Her body heat and sugary vanilla cologne bore down on me.

"Ready?" The next heartbeat pinged my tonsils.

"Yes. Byyyyyeee..." Only her toes touched mine as she descended.

Menlikus' toes bumped my nose. "You still here, Hellé?"

"Uh-huh. Bend your knees and dangle your left hand. I'll try finding it." After coming up with a couple handfuls of air I latched on to his fingers. "On the count of three pull up with all you got. One. Two. Threeeeeeeeeee..."

I sprawled at his feet, my lips touching the hairy front of his shin. Strange how I lay sprawled on my stomach while he remained standing.

His wiggling digits tickled my palm. "Make like you're going to do a backflip. That'll bring you up here to me."

"If that's what it takes." At reaching overhead and bending back, my body lifted toward his voice. I bumped to a stop where his hot breath fanned from his nostrils. "Thanks for the tip. I see you've had some practice here."

His hand found the small of my back. "Where are we?"

A place more frustrating and disappointing than my first kiss. "In a limbo zone far different than Kellion. I made a lot of trips to Kellion and never experienced anything like this impenetrable fog."

He pulled me close and grabbed my buttocks. "Any ideas on how we can get back to Vegas or Kellion?"

No matter how hard I stared at the solid walls of white not one spot afforded me a different view. I could touch Men. Taste him. Hear his breathing.

But my eyes beheld only nothingness.

"At least we're together." His mouth somehow found mine and our tongues touched.

The tingling in my mouth mimicked that in my nipples. Bending my knees, I floated. Our lips remained in a delicious lock.

"If I could find us a way out I would." Sizzling noises began and mimicked grease bubbling in my mother's cast-iron skillet when she made conch fritters for her Caribbean lover. "Oh God..."

A swift wind swept us upward. I locked my legs around Menlikus and pressed my face against his heaving chest. We spun and tumbled. Flashes of golden-pink light replaced the white. The orbs expanded and oscillated. A strange and calming noise came from out of nowhere—white noise capable of lulling me to sleep if I closed my eyes.

But why do that when I could finally see something?

Menlikus stared at me and grinned. "Thought you didn't know how to get us out of that hellhole?"

"I didn't."

We tipped over and rocked upright. My hair slapped his face and he puffed it away. A vanilla-lavender scent filled the thinner air around us. I gulped in the fragrance and held it in my lungs for a moment before exhaling.

While no water lay around us, our bodies bobbed along the new corridor. A brilliant silvery flash erupted not far from us.

Another six-pointed star cast from metal.

This one a larger version of the child's toy that had hit me in the face during my descent earlier.

The jack remained suspended and shivered, and each rounded tip glowed reddish-pink. Short bursts of light came from four points and the metallic structure melted.

Before I took another breath a black marble floor, onto which silvery liquid spilled, materialized. Another form took shape. Feet in woven sandals. The flapping ends of a silken white robe. A braided golden sash whose tasseled ends reached below the figure's knee. Human hands with long fingers reaching out for us.

I drifted my gaze higher and my heart squeezed.

We'd ascended far too fast.

Now I was seeing people wearing fluffy wings.

Everything around me went black.

Chapter Twenty

I blinked several times and the faintly hummed serenade calmed my thumping heart. Menlikus stood beside me, his mouth agape.

"How long was I unconscious?"

Men shrugged. "Hell if I know. I wasn't aware you'd passed out."

A couple swallows took my honest reply back down my throat.

The vision wearing wings remained.

No way. Couldn't say I'd died and gone to Heaven. No such situation possible for a daughter of the devil.

The fog at our feet drifted upward, glowed a purplish-bronze and parted into nothingness. From his blond hair to the muscular chest beneath those fancy toga folds, the guy wearing the wings was every woman's answer to Heaven.

Blue eyes.

Kissable mouth.

I glanced at Menlikus and wrung his hand. But still running a distant second to the real man of my wettest dreams.

Beatific and beddable stepped forward, his thick sash swaying. "I'm Yorael. Here to guide you back where you belong."

Men let go of my hand. "Remember what happened the last time you trusted an angel, honey?"

"Yeah." The hunk's fluffy feathers glistened at my tweaking. "But this one has real wings."

Yorael's wings flapped and wafted the scent of rainwater my way. "I'm not Vaniel. He chose evil. I chose holy."

My lover spun to face me. "If you go with God he'll add another sin to the slew you already have."

"Sin?" Stubble on Men's unshaven chin pricked my stroking finger pads. "What sin?"

"Coveting an angel." The words hissed out through Men's clenched teeth.

A tap from my first two fingers relaxed his jaw. "True, I get some pretty kinky ideas. And have a history of sexually entertaining Caesar's army. But don't put me in bed with one of God's soldiers."

Yorael lifted my left hand. "A spitfire with a pure soul and a conscience."

After curling his fingers into a fist, Men wheeled on Yorael. "And you want to get your hands on those parts of her and a lot more."

Much as I loved Men, his jealous streak was more obvious than if people wore red underwear up in Heaven. "Can you get us back to Vegas?"

"It's a trap." Men's fist impacted his left palm. "No one outsmarts Satan."

"God can." Yorael skirted me and placed my arms around Men's shoulders. "Why do you think he's—?"

Men heaved his hot held breath at Yorael. "And you'll probably come on her to avoid penetration. Angels don't have sex."

"You're right." He clapped Menlikus on the back. "Angels experience pleasure on a much higher plane."

More heat poured from Men's body now than on our first date.

My kiss couldn't even coax him to smile. "And they don't have an argumentative bone in their bodies."

Yorael flashed me his pearly whites. "Arguments serve little purpose."

Men squinted much like the apparitional serpent in the pit. "If you aren't here to help us, go back to where you came from."

The man who might save us laid a finger on his lips. "I heard Hellé and want to help you."

Heard me? The only thing I said before we met Yorael was—

My heart pumped faster and the muscular walls stretched to its limits. Time to face the truth. In a moment of desperation and panic I'd put out a call to the man my heart and soul truly believed was the supreme ruler over everything, everywhere.

Take that you, bloodthirsty tyrant bathing in the Wiruni Pool.

Yor's downy feathers rustled and the wings stretched and enveloped Men and me.

Yorael said a brief prayer, asked for protection and guidance and looked my way. "Next stop Vegas?"

"Second Floor of the Cadence Club. The sooner the better, Angel Baby."

His eyes glowed the same shade of blue as morning glories. "Are you sure you both don't want to embark on another journey?"

Men looked at me and shook his head. Heaven helped us out this time. But spending time above the clouds wasn't on our itinerary.

"He's sure. And I've never been more certain of something." I rested my cheek against Men's sturdy chest. "Unless it's that I want to love this guy for eternity. Take us back where we belong."

* * * * *

My wish was the lickalicious angel's command.

Quite an updraft he'd conjured. Now I knew how a milkshake felt when someone turned on the mixer.

Our three bodies thumped down and dust flew up from the carpet fibers.

My girlfriends might have turned-on umpteen men since coming to Vegas but they hadn't turned on the vacuum cleaner in our new apartment over Cadence.

The tip of Yorael's wing tickled my nose. I lay on top of Men and our heavenly rescuer. Men sprawled facedown on the bronze carpet. Garmula's left black patent leather bed boot toppled over and swiped the top of Yorael's head.

He brushed it aside and grabbed the casino brochure. "Looks like we found the right place."

Rolling off the guys, I stared at Yorael. A couple feet away from us his golden sash lay in a heap near the leg of the cactus-green boudoir chair. His robe gaped open.

Naked as the day he was...reborn.

Other than Menlikus', a more perfect male body than Yor's didn't exist.

A smattering of pale blond hairs covered his chest, trailed over his belly and ended in a delightful thatch above his hard cock.

Heaven on Earth.

What wouldn't Ulevi, Barden and Garmula do if they had him in their hot clutches?

And our rescuer wasn't a bodybuilder but an otherworldly entity with great muscle tone and skin tanned a couple shades lighter than the way I liked my morning toast.

Men groaned, rolled onto his back and sat up. "Don't care much for the way you look at Hellé but thanks for getting us back to the Strip." He stood, helped me to my feet and steered me toward the bathroom. "Time to get rid of all reminders of our ordeal."

And by that he also meant Yorael.

Hot-and-bothered-and-born-in-Crete let me go and stomped through the bathroom door. Water sloshed into the tub bottom for a short while before the spray hissed from the rainfall showerhead.

A few profanities faintly spoken in Greek floated our way. "Are you coming, Hellé?"

Not yet but hopefully soon. I flexed my pussy muscles.

Once I got rid of these life-sustaining rocks.

Yorael crawled over to me. "You're quite a strong woman. Didn't lose that precious package."

Not simply sexy but also a mind reader and all-seer.

Naughty, naughty, winged perfection.

A slight push landed the plastic case in my palm. Yor remained facing me. No hint of blush on his cheeks but his heart thumped harder than normal for a man or an immortal.

Sorry, God. Not my fault Yor's taken a bite out of the proverbial apple.

After closing my fingers around the zalendum, I headed toward Men's sighs. With my left foot on the cool tiles, my right still on the carpet, I paused and turned to Yor. "Want to join us?"

Now I'd committed a real sin.

One that ranked right up there on the sinful index with air pollution and global warming.

I headed into the cocoa-scented bathroom and Yor followed.

Men stripped off my clothes and pulled me into the shower.

Yor posed on the Day-Glo floral fuzzy bathmat. His wings flapped a couple times but his feet remained in place.

Vigorous rubs of Men's hands and the purple shower sponge lathered my breasts, crotch, back and butt.

He sucked my nipples and took my breath with a deep kiss.

I grabbed the hand sprayer and passed it to Yor. "You want to do a final good deed?"

Another ad-perfect smile from Angel Baby. "That's my mission while down here."

Men muttered something I couldn't make out and smacked my ass.

"Better take care of this first." Yor aimed the sprayer between my legs. "Then you two can get each other dirty all over again."

Funny how those words made Men grin.

Luxurious soap bubbles sizzled and burst at the rush of water. Yor glided the pulsing jets up and down my legs before passing the flexible-corded device to Menlikus.

"You can't be tempted to make it a ménage with us?" No sooner did I stick out my tongue than it caught some of the warm spray Men aimed at my mouth and chin.

"Tempted to play with you two? Never. Your love for each other is something for which many couples strive but never achieve. It's not my mission or desire to come between two such perfect lovers." Yor scooped a clump of suds from the side of the tub and puffed them at me.

Girlish laughter and a stampede of heels sounded not far beyond the open bathroom door.

"Hellé's brought us a playmate." Garmula howled like a she-wolf. "Wait'll you see him. My pussy's already wet and I'm not near the tub."

Barden pushed past Gar-Gar and planted herself beside the toilet. "What a sexy costume." She touched Yor's wings. "Or are you real?"

"I'm one of God's messengers." Yor propped his left hand on the clothes hamper.

"Then take me straight to Heaven, honey." Ulevi cupped her bare breasts and tweaked the nipples. "Your bed or mine?"

Clothes piled onto the floor. Garmula stepped out of her pink high-heeled sandals. Barden followed Yor and stroked his wings as he marched out of our steamy spa.

My slick fingers lost contact with the shower sponge. "Just when I was starting to enjoy their show."

Menlikus lifted me so our noses touched. I locked my legs around him and smeared the remaining soap between us.

He slapped my ass and kissed me hard enough to loosen my hell-caps. "Enjoy this instead."

"Can Yor stay with us for a little while?" Ulevi's shout carried from the living room.

"Not in this lifetime. Maybe during your next one." A slight lift of my hips brought my pussy into contact with Men's hard cock.

"We promise not to do anything that'll make him fall too far from grace. Does oral sex count?" Now Garmula was getting into their wicked game.

Men pushed into me, his hands cradling my ass. "Think he'll return to Heaven?"

I laughed, shrugged and kissed some sweet, dripping foam off his forehead. "Not since he's met those three wild women. I'd say he's here to stay." My tongue battled Men's and we shared another breathtaking kiss. "Here to stay like the man I love who went to Hell and back for me."

About the Author

Since childhood, Shawna Moore has delighted in creating fantasy worlds and fictional characters. After many years of working in the medical community, she traded clinical and clerical duties for a full-time career writing fiction.

When she's not writing, editing and researching, Shawna enjoys reading, listening to the music of The Beatles, shopping for shoes and visiting the interesting destinations on her must-see list. Of course, she also dares to be divalicious every day of the week.

Shawna welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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