

I know a thing or two about crooks. And I've been in the game long enough to know Deon Ivanov is as crooked as they come. Which means I need to be prepared for *anything* tonight.

Deon's dirty blonde hair glows like a misplaced halo as he saunters through the riled-up crowd to stand beside me at the starting line. He runs onyx eyes over me, like he's seeing me for the first time, and winks wickedly.

I suppose he thinks he's got this in the bag. I would do too, if I was the reigning Hide or Dye champion, if my opponent was a scrappy nobody from the Pits, if I was too focused on the *physical* parts of winning the game.

I smirk at him, baring my teeth, and rub my clammy hands against the spandex suit, which clings to me like a second skin. Beneath it, my muscles thrum in anticipation of the race ahead. Deeper still, my blood runs hot with the need to win this.

Twenty stories stand between me and the Hide or Dye trophy on the rooftop of Pits 10, one of the first buildings to go up in *Pitsbury Hills*, or the Pits – the more appropriate nickname for the home of *Mirage City's riffraff*. The burnt-down husk of Pits 10 is where we'll face off against each other in the last round of Hide or Dye, a grown-up version of hide and seek. Only you're hiding from other players and their dye darts while searching for hidden rings – all within 90 minutes.

If you get shot, you're eliminated. If you make it to the top without the rings, you're eliminated. If you're caught cheating, you're eliminated. Deon knows these rules. I'd bet good money he plans to break at least two of them.

Commented [CS1]: I like this as an opener. It says a little about the MC, it says a little about something they are worried about so we have instant conflict and interest in Deon. Cool.

Commented [CS2]: nice

Commented [CS3]: huh, where are we?

Commented [CS4]: nice

Commented [CS5]: ...why would you want to break the first two?

Maybe we'll find out.

Only, I'm not placing bets tonight, despite the bookies making their way through the raucous crowd. Betting is for the hundreds of people crammed against each other or for those watching from their apartments. Most of them don't have enough money to put food on the table. Tonight, it doesn't matter. Tonight, there's a chance it can all change with a bet on the right player.

The air crackles with their energy. I feel it in the way my heart's beating a little too fast and the way my fingers curl and uncurl, eager to reach for the dye dart at my hip, which beckons to me. Unlike my hand-held dye dart, Deon went for a rifle-style one—big and showy, not unlike him.

Deon waves his dye dart in the air, earning a roar of cheers from his adoring fans...and he has a lot of them. It's what happens when you win Hide or Dye three years in a row.

But I'll do whatever it takes to change that tonight. Not because I care about beating Deon at his game or wiping that arrogant smile off his smug face. Or because I like the thrill of the game and the way it makes me feel *something*.

Commented [CS6]: interesting

Tonight, I'm racing against *the Demon* because of the 1,000 federales on the other end of Hide or Dye. The prize money is nothing short of a small fortune in the Pits...and the thing that'll keep my life glued together for a while longer.

Commented [CS7]: ?

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The announcer's gruff voice echoes across the packed parking lot, silencing the crowd's din to a murmur. "Welcome to the last leg of Hide or Dye. Our players have made it through six grueling rounds, and tonight they take on Pits 10, which has been rigged for your viewing pleasure." The crowd's cheers and hoots become deafening.

I glance up as two drones descend above our heads and shield my eyes from the blinding light focused on my face. When I can blink my eyes open, I watch as our faces flash side-by-side on one of the many monitors set up across the parking lot and on the side of the building. Deon's unbothered by the light and the attention; I fight the urge to turn my face away.

“On one side we have the reigning champion, Deon the Demon, who's obliterated competitors over the last three years.” Deon's square shoulders pull back, and he spins in place, waving at his fans. Beneath the white suit, his muscles ripple with the movement. The crowd chants his name, eating out of the palm of his hand.

Commented [CS8]: Ah. I guess the connection wasn't made earlier so when she called him that, I hadn't seen that name for him yet? Might be something to look at.

Commented [CS9]: Watch out for cliches

“On the other, we have The Phoenix, the underdog who's surprised us all. She's beat out some of the strongest Hide or Dye challengers over the last few weeks.” Nervousness skims down my spine at the sound of my nickname echoing across the crowd. I hate the way a small part of me wonders if anyone's going to cheer, if there are people in the crowd who are rooting for a nobody. A nobody who only recently decided to compete in Hide or Dye...because desperation can make you do crazy things.

From the corner of my eye, I see what everyone sees—a feisty 20-something who's got her work cut out for her. I'm easily a foot shorter than Deon, and my small frame pales in comparison to his bulky one. I've painted the wings of a Phoenix with red-orange around my eyes and taken extra time to draw in black feathers.

While I'm hidden behind the Phoenix's mask, Deon is himself—face deceptively handsome, despite a crooked nose and eyes being set a little too far apart. His smile is snakelike and charming at the same time. Next to him, my green eyes—my Dad's eyes—squint in the

Commented [CS10]: Seems like she actually knows him...but he isn't acting like he knows her? It could be either one which is why it bothers me—I don't KNOW if she knows him from outside this stuff or if she has more reason to think he's stupid than because she has to beat him and it's easier that way?

Commented [CS11]: Like, all of this seems pretty personal, as if she has reasons for a grudge.

light of the monitor, my shoulders are pulled taut. I look nervous and small—like I don't stand a chance.

What they can't see is that beneath the white Hide or Dye suit, my muscles twitch with the need to get in and find the rings, to do what they were gruelingly trained to do for so many years.

It's as if the crowd is holding its breath, waiting for a sign. I lift a fist into the air and the corner of my mouth unwinds into a crooked smile. And the crowd breaks into another deafening roar.

A group of young girls from my building, Pits 62, cheer at the edge of the crowd. They're gathered among other kids out way past their bedtime. Despite telling them time and time again to leave me alone, they still showed up. *I know a thing or two about stubborn girls.*

"So who's going to wear the championship ring?" The announcer's question riles the crowd.

"We're about to find out!" With a loud click, the lights across the parking light systematically turn off. Silence follows as they dim, leaving Pits 10 shrouded in nothing but the faint light of the monitors and heady anticipation.

"Racers find your entrance."

Tonight, I start at the coveted front, a privilege won through the decisive flip of a coin toss. Deon does a good job of pretending it doesn't bother him to start the race from the back of Pits 10, several hallways and rooms away from any staircase that'll get him into the heart of the game.

Ignoring his glare as he passes, I check my dye dart and bullets to make sure they're in place.

When I glance up at the monitor nearest to me, Deon is at his starting line, with his dye dart now slung on his back, like he doesn't even need it.

Commented [CS12]: "what they were trained to do" read a little awkward for me. Her muscles, I get it, it just took a couple of reads.

Commented [CS13]: I thought this was a recent development, deciding to compete?

Commented [CS14]: This response is maybe a little far from when they announce her?

Commented [CS15]: Woah, he seemed to jokey/oily suave to openly glare at her before, maybe I misread how seriously he's taking her?

“Darters ready?” The announcer’s voice booms across the dark lot. Deon and I simultaneously lift our right arms in the air. The signal.

“Let the countdown begin.” The crowd obliges, counting down. *3, 2, 1.*

“Go,” the announcer commands.

I don’t look left or right as I slip into the abandoned building. I’ve memorized every part of its blueprint—the hallways, the box-like rows of rooms and common areas.

At the stairwell, I glance up at the cameras set up to follow the competitors as they navigate the labyrinthian Pits 10. I imagine I look like a sprite, a white shadow darting through the hallways and rooms of the building, which once housed 1,000 residents before it burnt down. The smell of smoke quickly fills my lungs, making me gag and tugging me to a mental place worse than the hottest fire in hell. It’s one of the ways this game throws you off.

The trick to winning Hide or Dye is a combination of outmaneuvering your opponent and being prepared for other traps. With each round, the game intensifies with added challenges—boxes loaded with traps, rogue drones armed with dye, and rooms void of hiding spots. Sometimes, it’s entire floors that smell of singed skin and death.

I’ve made it so far because I’ve kept my eyes on the prize...and relied on competitors like Deon to shoot the opponents while I’ve sought out the rings. In all cases, we’ve both made it through the races. But this time, there’s only the two of us, and the first thing most likely on Deon’s agenda is to eliminate me.

Once on the first floor landing, I listen for Deon. His footsteps are faint as he starts up the stairs, and I duck into the first room off the hallway and listen. He pauses just outside the door. I hold my breath, finger curled around my dye dart, and wait.

Deon does the same. I raise my dye dart. If I have to, I'll shoot him five minutes into the game, spoil the game for the crowd and expedite my return to the real world.

But he starts up the stairs and I exhale. When his footsteps fade, I rush through the first floor, looking for a ring, but come up with nothing. The cameras follow my every move as I climb, listening for Deon and other traps.

Three flights later, I sneak into the fifth floor with no sign of boxes or Deon. The air here is more acrid and more stifling, and I swallow down bile. Smoke unfurls beneath the doors of memories best left locked, and I force myself away from them. To the present.

To the soft whirring of a drone. *Shit.*

Too late, I throw myself into a room right before a dye bullet zings into the wall, red color spraying in all directions. I scurry to the other side of the room, dodging from pillar to pillar. The drone turns into the room, seeking.

I scan the room for my hiding spot, and then I see it. A box. *Finally.*

Behind me, the drone nears, on the hunt. When the whirring is loudest, I jump from behind the pillar, slide across the floor and take a shot at it. The bullet finds its mark, sending the drone into a tailspin, and it crashes to the ground. *Yes.*

Wasting no time, I kick the box to the side, anticipating a trap, but it's just the ring. Instead of slipping it around my finger, I hide it inside a pocket I've sown into the hem of my suit and tuck it inside my boot. Somewhere safe. Somewhere Deon wouldn't look.

Sweat beads on my forehead by the time I reach the seventh floor. My heart pounds so loudly I can't hear myself think, and most concerning, there hasn't been any sign of Deon. Maybe, he's not so predictable after all. Maybe I should have shot him five minutes into the game.

I pick across the dilapidated floor, avoiding glass and broken floorboards. Through a doorway, there's floor-to-ceiling tiles and broken down stalls, the remains of an old bathroom. Usually, I don't bother with the bathrooms. They reek so badly not even the game's organizers bother with them. *Usually.*

But it's the championship game and this time, I decide to check each of the stalls. I'm about to give up, but...there, in the last stall, a box hangs from a hook in the wall. As carefully as possible, I disengage the box, place it on the floor and kick it to the side. No booby trap. I take the ring and repeat my process of hiding it.

I cut across what remains of the bathroom toward the back stairwell. Before I'm out, a hand clamps over my mouth and solid arms pull me back, into a dark corner – a blind spot for the cameras. **Deon sneers down at me.**

I hate it when I'm right about shit going wrong.

Wresting out of his hold, I kick him in the groin. Deon doubles over with a grunt, and I dart to the side, but not fast enough. He grabs my arm, twisting it. I bite back a scream as he uses the bulk of his body to drag me onto the **ground and away from any cameras.** **With one arm planted**

Commented [CS16]: Blocking-wise I'm not sure how he's got hold of her, is covering her mouth and she can also see his face?

Commented [CS17]: Why away from the cameras? What are the rules? It's been teased that he'll cheat, but why does he need to if all he has to do is shoot her with the dye?

on my chest, he straddles me, and with the other, he slams my head against the tiled floor. My vision blurs and my gun sails out of my hand, sliding beneath a stall.

I bite my lip so hard it almost bleeds. I won't scream. I won't alert the judges. I won't be any less of a competitor.

Commented [CS18]: ...not sure I understand this. If we had a bunch of backstory, maybe, and I suppose this could be a tease about story to come, mostly it just makes think there's something I don't understand.

"Now," Deon whispers, mere inches from my ear. I will my lungs to take in air as the length of him presses me onto the cold floor. "Be a good little firebird and tell me where you've hidden your rings."

"Has anyone ever told you that you smell like bologna that's been in the sun an hour too long?" I smile sweetly at him.

Deon's thin lips spread into a malicious scowl. "Oh, you think you're tough." My skin crawls at the dark gleam in his eye, and I squirm, like a fish on land. He changes tactics and wraps a hand around my neck, cutting off my air. I still, any feigned attempt at humor dissipating.

With panicked eyes, I watch him reach into his suit and hold out a stick-on patch—one in the shape of a flower. Bloom. *Shit.*

"If I had the time, I would put you in your place." Deon licks the side of my neck and chuckles when he sees my eyes have gone wide and wild.

"Nnn—" I struggle to get a word out. His hand tightens against my neck, and with the other he affixes the Bloom onto the place he's licked. I shudder as the drug begins to seep into my skin.

"It has been fun playing with you, little *firebird*, but this isn't your game. It's mine, no matter how much you might think you're better than the rest of us." He squeezes his meaty hand around

Commented [CS19]: ?

my neck. “Remember one thing: a little birdy’s neck like yours is all too easy to snap.” I know I should be more afraid, but the Blooms dulls the fear. I smile stupidly at him.

When he feels my body succumbing to the drug, he loosens his hold and runs his hands down the curves of my suit, searching for my rings. Deon’s eyes gleam as his hands curve around my hip, sliding over the spandex suit in a way that will have me scrubbing him off of me for many showers to come. But then he stiffens. I follow his line of sight, to our left, and then I hear it—a drone.

Deon jumps off of me, eyes going toward the hallway. He wipes his hands down the length of his white suit, as if to remove any trace of cheating. His bulky form morphs, blurring, as my body begins to feel heavier and lighter. Still, I smile. He bares his teeth. “Next time, I will have to show you how **little birds are dealt with**.”

Even though he’s built like a log, Deon is quiet as he slips out of the room, leaving me behind.

The drug swirls its way through my system, and I lay there on the floor of the abandoned bathroom, as the clock ticks away. Moonlight slips through the broken windows, and I can make out the water circles on the ceiling. Water drops form and drip and land on my face, cool and hot.

Bloom has a funny way of affecting people—it mellows you out and makes you feel high. It morphs reality so life doesn’t seem so shitty. It warms you, sometimes to the point where you feel like you’re melting into your surroundings, becoming one with the world.

But Bloom, like most other drugs, only has a fleeting effect when taken in regular doses. And Deon is too much of a cheap-ass to have used the good stuff – the kind which would have been more effective on someone who uses Bloom as a regular escape from reality.

Commented [CS20]: Might be one too many bird references in here? By the time I got to this one it felt a little like cartoon villain territory or Marvel at its marveliest 😊

Once the hum of the drone passes, I push myself up to my feet, acclimating to the lull of the drug. I wait until it settles, like a heavy blanket around my shoulders. Then, I grab my gun and get back into the game.

Renewed focus courses through my veins, even if it's dulled by Bloom...which makes it slightly more difficult to be agile and focused. But Deon's focus has shifted, too. His loud footsteps on the floor tell me as much. He thinks he's won. And it's exactly where I need him.

I smirk at the cameras as I climb to the 20th floor, taking my time. The crowd is probably confused by the turn of events. There's no more hiding or seeking. There's only waiting. I ease myself onto the stairs leading up to the rooftop and listen for Deon. Minutes later, he stomps onto the landing a hallway away. He clatters through the rooms with thuds and curses.

He probably couldn't find all the rings.

Commented [CS21]: Like, all the ones in the whole game including hers? We know he couldn't because he doesn't take hers, right?

When he enters this room, I separate from the shadows, gun pointed between his eyes. They're no longer gleaming. Before he can mutter a single sound, I lower the gun and fire three shots. Chest. Groin. And groin.

Deon doubles over, coughing at the impact. I chuckle mirthlessly as I step onto his chest, sprayed crimson red, and look into his confused eyes.

Commented [CS22]: Blocking? He doubles over still on his feet...then she steps on his chest? Is he on the ground somehow? On his back?

"You fucked with the wrong kind of bird." I dig my boot into his chest, and he coughs. "The thing about a Phoenix is no matter how many times you break its neck, it keeps coming back."

He sputters something as I crouch over and take two rings from his right pinky. "And this little bird has come back from much worse."

Commented [CS23]: nice

Things we like:

- This is a great place to start your story! Very exciting.
- Hide or Dye is really interesting. Extra fun that it's being filmed. Feel very Hunger Games-esque, which I love.
- The way you slipped in a physical description of Phoenix is nice.
- The ending is very triumphant. The dialogue about phoenixes coming back is great. I liked it too.
- I really like the pacing--things move quickly in these pages and you give a lot of information in quick bursts. A good way to lay some worldbuilding foundation without bogging us down too much in details.
- I also love the voice. Feels very YA but in an adult way (NA? I'd love to see that become more of a thing)
- I (once again) forgot to put that this is adult fantasy. The game and the hints at the world and character are pretty cool. I liked the opening paragraph especially.

Things that might need a second look:

- It would be awesome to have more of a sense of the main character in the very first page. We get a pretty good look at Deon and a pretty succinct explanation of Hide or Dye, but we don't know who our main character is or why they're doing this until the second page. From a reader standpoint, it's hard to care about Hide or Dye or Deon until we care about the person caring about them. One example of us knowing a lot about Deon but not about Phoenix is right on the first page: "If you get shot, you're eliminated. If you make it to the top without the rings, you're eliminated. If you're caught cheating, you're eliminated. Deon knows these rules. I'd bet good money he plans to break at least two of them." But I wondered about Phoenix--how does *she* feel about the rules?
- I wanted to know at the start of the game how many rings Phoenix needs to find so I could tell how well she was doing. I wondered about the rules too. I mean, is the reason he doesn't have enough rings at the end because he couldn't find and take hers? Are there a limited number and they have to find and take all of them, or do they just have to get to, like, ten, and then they can go up?
- I was confused about the difference between the bullets and the darts. Phoenix says she only has one dart, but then she uses the bullets on Deon instead of the dart, so I'm not sure what the dart is for.
- We don't find out that the rings are literally rings you can wear on your finger until page 6--I had been picturing diving rings or something a little bigger. Me too--I was almost thinking video game-y even though it's obviously not.
- Similarly, I had a moment of confusion on page 5: "At the stairwell, I glance up at the cameras set up to follow the competitors as they navigate the labyrinthian Pits 10." This sentence made me think there were more than two competitors but we find out there's just Deon and Phoenix. Maybe change to "we"? That might help. (Yes that's super nitpicky. Sorry!)
- When Deon traps Phoenix, I didn't understand why he didn't just shoot her. Wouldn't that make him the winner by default? If he's close enough to surprise her by physically attacking her, he's definitely close enough to shoot her. Yeah, I wasn't sure why he felt like cheating was necessary--why pull her away from the cameras at all? Also, she says

she isn't going to turn Deon in for cheating because that would mean she's a bad competitor? So confused.

- I also wondered about the plan with Bloom--surely that's a really obvious way to cheat since it leaves a stick-on patch behind as proof. On the one hand, I like the characterization it does for Phoenix that she doesn't decide just to turn him in for cheating and win that way. On the other, Phoenix doesn't even think about it as a possibility, which made me wonder if I was missing something.
- The lines "If you get shot, you're eliminated. If you make it to the top without the rings, you're eliminated. If you're caught cheating, you're eliminated. Deon knows these rules. I'd bet good money he plans to break at least two of them." It's a cool set of lines, but logically they sort of threw me for a loop--why would Deon want to get to the top without rings or get shot? Or get caught cheating?
- There are a few places where I wasn't sure about blocking. She shoots him in the chest with a dart and he bends forward (I wasn't sure if it hurt btw...like...is there a physical danger here other than contestants assaulting each other off camera?) and then suddenly she's walking over him and stepping on his chest.
- So there are a few times where she identifies things happening with Deon based on his facial expressions--it seems like she knows him personally and there's history and a justified grudge and reason to think he's not very smart there...but HE doesn't seem to know HER at the beginning, and then when they actually interact (?! is that the right word??) it seems like it's maybe the first time they've spoken? But then he says "you think you're better than the rest of us..." which opens up so many other doors. I was pretty confused about the characters and who they were in relation to each other. She mentions that competing in hide or dye is a new, desperate sort of move for her, but then later it says she's been training for years? **Yep, I wondered about that.**