

A HARMONY  
OF +  
*Procellarum*

SACRIFICIAL LAMBS BOOK FOUR

C.A. RENE

# *A Harmony of Procellarum*

*Sacrificial Lambs Book 4*



*C.A. Rene*



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C.A.'s Renegades

For Rach,

Thank you for being a shoulder to scream my frustrations  
on.

This one is going to hurt

## *Quote*

“Onstage, I am a devil. But I’m hardly a social reject.”

-Freddie Mercury

# *Foreword*

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*Squall*

LOVING BEGINNINGS  
ORPHANAGE - 1987

“IT WILL ONLY BE for a little while, Sval. Until I can get back on my feet.” *Lies.*

My mother is a master manipulator, a pathological liar, and she knows *I know* she's lying. I've never been a loved and coddled child. Not only was she too young when she had me, but conceiving me after being raped really was the cherry on top of a crumbling cake.

She was thirteen years old, trying to shine men's shoes for money, when a man decided she could be useful for other things too. She was kicked out of her house, forced to live on the streets, and then decided sex work really was lucrative.

She still believes that.

I look up at the looming building with its chipping paint and broken shutters and begin to seal away any and all emotions. I won't miss her, I won't cry for her, and I'll forget I ever had a mother. Where she is a manipulator, I am a delusionist. I have been dreaming up a perfect facade my entire life and I will continue to do so without her.

My hand cups around the door handle as I grab my backpack, refusing to look the woman who brought me into this world in the eye. I hear her sniff and I know it's more likely from an oncoming cold than it is for my departure. *For my abandonment.*

Her hand lands on my shoulder as she whispers, "It'll only be for six months, a year at most, and then I will come back for you."

I shrug her hand off me as I shove open the door, the brisk winter air stinging the exposed skin of my cheeks. I step out of the taxi, my head tipping up to look at the building, and I exhale a breath in a puff of white.

"Sval," Mother calls. "It's nice here. The place is run by nuns, you know them. We used to see them at the food drive each Sunday."

I slam the door on her words and begin to walk up the stone path toward the front door. It's a monstrosity of weathered and cracked wood with a rusted metal sign.

*Loving Beginnings Orphanage.*

I let the name wash through my mind, letting each syllable sink in, and then I close my eyes. The place screams of neglect and is eerily silent for a place which houses children, making none of it feel holy. If my mother could live on the streets, running tricks for cash, then surely I could live in an oversized dungeon at the same age.

In five years, I can leave this place anyway.

I grab the handle of the door, letting the cold metal seep into the skin of my palm, and when the taxi's engine sounds behind me, I chance a glance over my shoulder. I wish I could say she was watching me from the rear window, her hand to the glass in a silent promise, but that's not the case. She's running her thin fingers through her white-blonde hair and looking straight ahead.

Looking toward her future as an unburdened mother.





# CHAPTER ONE

## *Tiny*

**N**EW YORK IN THE winter is the most beautiful place on Earth. Snow falls in a slow descent to the ground and each flake is illuminated by the multitude of lights emanating from streetlamps and the warm glow of apartment windows. It blankets the cracked and weathered concrete, cushioning your boots as they leave a trail of footprints behind you. All of it telling a story of where you've been and where you're headed.

When I was a child, I would spend eleven months out of the year counting down to December, my favorite month. It was the cheerfulness of the season, the spirit of giving, and the love and comfort of family. Not that I had much family. I was the only child of a single mother and I never really knew who my father was, but she worked hard. I never felt the loss of not having a man in my life to raise me because Marlena Charles was able to fill both shoes.

None of that affected me during my childhood and adolescence. If anything, it made me strive to be better than most children from conventional homes. I was the funniest, the

happiest, the smartest, and always the most popular. I was class president, taught dance lessons, and tutored in my spare time. I filled every block of free time with an activity so I would never have to face exactly what it was I lacked.

Until there was no other choice.

My mom was a superwoman to me, someone larger than god itself, and maybe it was me putting her on such a high pedestal that made her fall so far. The year I turned sixteen, three things happened in quick succession. My mother lost her job, became an alcoholic, and we became homeless. I didn't know about any of it until I saw the eviction notice sitting on our kitchen table one day after school. I blame it on filling up all my spare time and not being able to see the pain my mother was in. Not until it was too late.

I vowed that day to never neglect my family, whether it be the one I share blood with or the ones I choose. We packed up our meager belongings and sold off what little furniture we had, then we started living out of our rusted Station Wagon.

I began to lose that shiny exterior I had built for myself, the one that persevered regardless of my weight, my troubles, and my lack of experience with relationships. Soon I found myself a shell of the girl I used to be. Our first Christmas after becoming homeless rolled around and we were still living in that small vehicle, nearly freezing to death, when my mother surprised me again. She handed me a small box wrapped in newspaper and told me she had two gifts. The one I held in my hand and then something she had in her pocket.

I remember being so angry still, not even wanting any of what she was offering me, but I plastered a smile on my face and asked her what was in her pocket. Her mouth stretched wide into a brilliant smile. For the first time in a long while, I really took in her features. The eyes that were usually glossed over and unfocused were bright and clear. Her skin had a pink hue running along its surface and the bags under her eyes were losing their bruised coloring.

She pulled her fist out of her pocket and held it out in front of me, slowly uncurling each finger, gradually exposing a red chip in her palm. “What is that?” I asked.

“It’s my thirty days,” she said, dropping it in my lap. “Thirty days of being free of the decay that gripped my insides. Thirty days of unpacking the damage it left behind.” Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at me apologetically. “I’m so sorry, baby. I promise you, tomorrow I’m going to go hunt for a job and I’m getting us out of here.”

The woman hunted every day for a few weeks, and I will give her credit for that. Getting up before I had to go to school and going to every place in New York City, even the fast-food joints, begging for a job. But the thing about being homeless is you don’t have a place of residence and the risk of hiring such a person is too high, especially after the holidays, the slowest time of the year.

It was clearly left up to me, and even though I was a straight-A student and the world my oyster, I dropped out of

school and stumbled across what was always meant to be my future.

The Temple.

During the day, those neon lights aren't on, casting a beacon to any hot-blooded male. The street in front is quiet without the music pouring from the open door. To an unsuspecting, teenage girl, The Temple looked like a restaurant, and the now hiring sign on the front window was a rarity in the city. So I went in.

I was hired by Carl Sr. practically on the spot. He first asked me if I was eighteen. I had just turned sixteen, but if getting this much-needed job relied on being a certain age, you better believe I lied. He never questioned it, didn't ask for ID, and when he asked if I had bar experience, I lied again. I mean, I kind of did. I could tell you every kind of liquor and the fucking bottle it came in, thanks to my mother. He told me I could start that night and to dress in something sexier than what I had on if I wanted any tips.

You better believe I wanted tips.

I remember leaving and thinking the restaurant was pretty dull for mid-day because the place was empty. But I shrugged it off and counted my lucky stars that I had found a job. My first shift started at eight that night to set up the bar, and again, I know that's late for any restaurant, but I was a kid. I knew I could do sexy because my mother had a few outfits she wore on dates and I could take one without her noticing. She didn't

notice much those days, not with a bottle back firmly in her hand.

With a white lace dress that should've looked understatedly sexy was downright sinful over my curves, and when I worked that first shift, after getting over the shock of being inside a strip joint, I came back to our Station Wagon home two-thousand-dollars richer. Within six months, I was on stage, hauling in obscene amounts of money. I got us a motel room to live out of, or for my mother to pass out in, and continued to make bank.

I saved everything, and when I finally felt like we had enough money to rent our old apartment again, my mother suffered a stroke. Her hospital bills ate through most of my savings, but it pushed her to try sobriety a second time. With her head clearer and her focus back on her daughter, she began with the questions. I was never one to lie to her, so I told her exactly what I was doing and how long it had been since I dropped out of school.

She didn't argue when I told her I would continue on that path. How could she? I was paying all our bills. She left me to my own devices and I to hers, which soon enough went back to the bottle. Eventually, we got our old apartment back, which wasn't too much of a shock. It was empty because the place was more rundown than the motel we were staying in, but it was home to us.

The cold gust of wind brings me back to the present as large snowflakes collect along my shoulders. I'm standing in front

of our apartment building and staring in through the glass door, willing my mother to still be on the wagon for what must be the twentieth time on her road to recovery.

When I left for Nevada, she handed me another red chip. Another thirty days to add to my growing collection of thirty-day chips. I love my mother, but we switched roles a long time ago. Back inside that rusted Station Wagon to be exact. I became the provider and she was the dependent. Nevada was an escape for me, a way to put a little distance between the stress that was mounting here, only I stumbled into something much darker than I ever imagined.

A shiver skates down my spine and I quickly look over my shoulder at the darkened street. *He's not here*, I tell myself as I exhale my breath in a thick plume of white. Nor do I want him to be here.

My hand absently presses to the spot just under my chest. The injury has healed, but the ache remains as a reminder to never put my life on the line for anyone who doesn't deserve it. *He doesn't deserve it.*

With renewed determination, I pull my key out of my thick winter jacket and open the lobby door. I may be apprehensive about what I'll find upstairs, but I'm more terrified of what I've left behind.

## **SQUALL**

After ensuring Torrent was safe inside the walls of his very own hell, I came here to the address Raiden had texted me without context. Not that I needed it. In my heart—in my very soul—I knew who it belonged to. I told myself I was coming here to make sure she was safe, to see where she was living, and then I would walk away, never to bother her again.

Never to love her again.

My love equates to danger, something she's learned firsthand, and if you love someone, you have to learn to let them go, especially if you're the reason they live or die.

She almost fucking died.

As much as I want to lay the blame at Torrent's feet, I know it's just as much my fault. This is what happens when your soul rips in half and each tattered piece belongs to a different person. Because of me, the two people I love most in this world are lost and in danger. Now I understand how Hail felt. His constant denial wasn't just because he couldn't face his feelings of unworthiness. He knew the danger our lives pose to anyone we bring inside.

So I let her go, but I had to see her one last time.

Martina Charles is standing in front of a rundown apartment building in one of the roughest neighborhoods in New York City. Her body is concealed beneath a thick winter jacket, but her honey-blonde hair shines with brilliance under the multitude of lights. The snow is falling around her in perfect synchrony, giving the illusion of her standing inside a snow globe. A perfect angel in a snowstorm.



My chest stutters with emotion as I suck in a breath, willing myself to turn and walk away. To make sure she survives, I need to leave, but at the very moment I lift my boot to move, she looks over her shoulder. I know she can't see me, just like I can't see the perfect hazel of her eyes, more green than brown, but we can feel each other's heartbeat. We're tethered together, the string taut from one end to the other.

Her heart and mine are one and the same.

She quickly rips her keys from her pocket and hurries inside the building, leaving me cold and alone once again. That's okay, I've been alone plenty of times in my life. I can survive it one more time.

Once Tiny is out of my sight, I let out the breath I've been holding in my chest and force myself to turn away. Eleven slow steps and I finally lift my head from my feet, forcing myself to look forward and not behind.

That's when I see him. The large hood sits on his head, ensuring most of his face is obstructed by the low-hanging front. The trench coat that covers the length of his body, the hem brushing the gathering snow on the ground. His hands are nestled in the pockets, but I know exactly what's hiding in their depths. An engraved knife and a gun.

My first thought is Luciphia sent the Order to trail me and another wash of guilt comes over me for leading them here to Tiny's home. But the more I watch his purposeful strides, I understand it's not me he's heading toward... It's Tiny.

Panic, pure and volatile, slams through me as I turn on the spot, my quick, panting breath coming out in white puffs. I slip into an alley and grab my phone from my pocket, hitting redial instantly.

“Squall,” Raiden answers. “Where are you?”

“Brother,” I force out through my anxiety. “They found her.”

“You know what you have to do.” His voice is clear and firm. “We’ll meet you on the tarmac in seventeen minutes.”

“Raiden, it takes that long to fucking get there,” I snap as I pace the opening of the alley.

“Then you better get moving.” The line cuts dead and I growl out a curse as I peek out around the brick to find the man standing in front of Tiny’s building, his phone screen illuminating his face.

I glance up and down the street, making sure he’s here alone, and then I laugh at the situation. If he was indeed sent here to harm or take my girl, he will be sorely disappointed. Tiny would and could fight this one off on her own. She’s a prissy girl, for the most part, but I watched her take a knife to the ribs to protect the ones she loves.

This guy wouldn’t stand a chance.

With my hand wrapped around my knife in my pocket, I walk toward the man waiting with his head down, staring at his phone and that fucking hood covering his face. Then I see her, making her way down the stairs in a rush, her jacket

unzipped and flying out behind her. Her eyes are on the man, her mouth turned down in a scowl, and all of it makes me feel sick to my stomach as I break into a run.

A blacked-out sedan speeds past me, the tires having difficulty finding traction on the road and the tail end of the vehicle fishtails. My mouth dries out from the pure fear settling inside of me and for a few seconds, that car blocks my view of Tiny's apartment and of the man standing out front.

"No!" I hear her scream. I get close enough to see her thrown over the man's shoulder and rushed to the car now idling in front of the apartment.

"Tiny!" I scream, and just before she's thrown into the backseat, she looks up at me.

It's not fear or surprise I find in her hazel depths. It's anger and hatred. The look halts me in my steps as I watch her thrown into the backseat by the man who was standing in front of her building. His attire is undisturbed as he flicks his jacket out behind him and turns to get into the passenger seat, but before he does, he tosses his middle finger up in the air. Clearly directing it at me.

My pocket begins to vibrate as I memorize the license plate, knowing that won't do a fucking thing to help us. I yank the phone out of my jacket as the car pulls away, the tail lights slowly being eaten up by the snow.

"What?" I bark into the phone.

“I’m guessing she was taken, considering your fucking attitude,” Hail huffs. “Get to the tarmac. We need to figure out what we’re doing next.”

“Did they take Tiny?” I hear Sky scream in the background as I hang up.

It’s bad enough I’ll have to deal with the guys’ disappointment at my failure, but those two females are like screeching sirens when they get going.

The car is long gone, but I continue to stare at the road, the tire marks slowly being covered by the heavy snow. No one is out on the streets during this icy-cold night, and that means no one to bear witness to a kidnapping. Not a single person to call the cops and report a woman being taken by a sadistic cult hellbent on decimating me and my bandmates. Not that it would help in the slightest. Every cop precinct here in New York is under the Order’s thumb.

Thankfully, Torrent is safe inside the walls of the institution. At least I have something to be happy and relieved about. I won’t have to worry about his feelings as I hunt down Tiny.



# CHAPTER TWO

## *Torrent*

I STARE UP AT the ceiling and at the fan slowly rotating, doing absolutely nothing to move the stale air around the room. My head turns slightly to look out of the window, a small square hole in the concrete wall decorated with bars. I can see the snow falling outside, the white flakes beginning to gather on the window's ledge.

It'll be Christmas soon, and even though Raiden and I had a few good Christmases with our parents, I can't remember them at all. No, the only ones I remember are from Loving Beginnings, and needless to say, those weren't festive at all.

Before I killed Father Robert, our Christmas Eves were spent on our knees, servicing the lord through his disciple here on Earth. Christmas morning was rising to a bitter cold room and forcing down lukewarm porridge. Then I took it upon myself to rid the place of evil, discarding the demon who walked the halls and tormented us children. At least I thought I did.

The demon only jumped from one host to another. Me. I can still feel it deep inside, like heated coals simmering in a cool

breeze. He whispers in my ear of things I wish I could ignore. How much of a burden I am to my brother, how much I torment Squall, and his loudest proclamation: How much they all need to die.

Maybe I do need to be monitored around the clock and doped up on hardcore meds to be a safe and functioning part of society. The doping up part I can manage on my own, I have been for the past forty years, it's the functioning in society bit I can't master. That responsibility has fallen on my bandmates to take care of for as long as I can remember.

So when the demon taunts me about being a burden, I know he's telling the truth.

Raiden now has a mate, Tempest Skeigh, and even though I hate the whore, I know he deserves a life outside of the Order and if she's the one he wants, I can't do anything about it. Believe me, I've tried.

Hail found his mate too. Sky Martin may be an unassuming female in all of this, but she's more entangled in the Order's web than we are, being her aunt is the new Luciphia. All the females are connected and each of them is more annoying than the last. But the one who takes the fucking cake? Tiny Charles.

She's sank her claws so deep into what's mine, or what used to be mine, and she's my biggest failure. I tried to kill her, tried to free my love's heart from her greedy clutches, but I failed.

I let out a long, exasperated sigh and turn back to face the ceiling. I had one chance to bring him back to me and I let the

ball drop by trusting another inside the Order. Kenny was fucking useless and I should've known that, but I needed the help. I couldn't do it all on my own and keep up the farce of being the faithful brother and drummer of Deluge. My mind was slipping more and more under the pressure, and I let the demon take over when I needed to release the stress.

It left a trail of bodies in its wake, but I was freer because of it.

Now we're trapped inside this room together—my demon and me—and I have no other choice but to listen to his goading and provocation. Sometimes when I let him spew his insults, I can see how Father Robert was swayed to do the things he did. If only because it promised a moment's reprieve. I can see how he was driven to shut this thing up when it became too loud, even if it was at the expense of the children he was meant to protect.

Would I do the same? No. I don't have the same proclivities my old caretaker priest had, but I do enjoy watching a beautiful woman bleed at my hand for the entity I believe in.

The door to my room opens, disrupting my peace filled with blood and still-warm hearts.

"Torrent James," she purrs, her voice like a soothing balm over my tortured soul. "What are you thinking of in here?"

"Am I late?" I sit up, dropping the hood off my head and shaking out my shoulder-length locs. I try to mull over the things I needed to do today as her warm chuckle slips through my ears, stalling my thoughts.



“No, you did good today,” she assures as she sits on the bed beside me. “Do you need more rest, or are you feeling up to another task?”

“How could I deny you?” I grin. “You freed me from hell. I am indebted to you.”

“Torrent, what I am offering you is monumental. There can be no mistakes and you must let go of your ties to your family. I need you to be one hundred percent here. Can you give me that?”

The lure of power is like the most potent form of drug. The way it slips its hold around your throat and claims your breath for its own is intoxicating. I’ve always been just out of reach of its grasp, narrowly escaping its pull for all these years. Not by choice. I’ve been hunting power, salivating for just a touch from its corrupted fingertips. It seemed the harder I pushed, the farther away it got, and I craved it all the more.

Or maybe none of that was me. Victor James was once a boy, unstained by the extended hand of God, untarnished by the cruel facade of fame. All of that changed when I became a host to an unwelcome guest. One I’ve adapted to, and in some instances, used its power to feed my needs.

“Torrent.” She snaps her fingers in front of my face, pulling me from the inner workings of my villainous mind.

“Sorry.” I smile and lick my bottom lip, watching as her eyes drift down to the forked ends of my tongue. “What were you saying?”

She throws the mask to my lap, the eerie double-faced metal giving me a gleefully sorrowful look. “I need another task from you. Are you feeling up to it? Can I count on you?”

My fingers brush over the cool surface, the chill seeping through my skin and creeping along my arm. I can feel the omnipotent power emanating from its design. Its weight in benevolence is so much greater than the slight form containing it.

“Yes, Luciphia.” My eyes never waver from the Melpomene face. “I am yours to use however you wish.”

“Vanquisher, I have a target for you.”

## TINY

I am a fucking fool!

When will I ever learn that responding to anyone associated with Deluge means I could die, or be kidnapped? What’s worse, I responded to *him*. After everything he’s done to me, after all the shit I endured at his hands, all he had to do was text me to make me come running.

“Stupid fucking bitch!” I snarl, my fist hitting the concrete wall of my prison with the force of my anger.

“Now, now.” A *tsk* sounds behind me as I spin to find him standing there, his dark eyes twinkling with mirth. “That’s no way to speak of yourself.”

“Where’s Squall?” I rush forward, my fists curled at my waist, my right one throbbing with the motion. “You said he was in trouble.” My chest feels like it’s ceasing in my chest, adding to the list of pains coursing through me at the hands of this man ... again.

“Made you come running, didn’t it?” he sneers, his back bending to position his face directly in front of mine. “See what love makes you become? A fool. Love makes you look fucking foolish.”

Torrent James looks nothing like his older brother, Raiden, but I can see the same evil tint in his eyes and the same privileged tone of his voice. But that’s where the similarities end. Torrent has locs the color of granite grazing his shoulders, and his eyes are deep pools of graphite, shining with every evil intention. His left eyebrow is decorated with two rings, and I know when he opens his mouth, his tongue is forked like a snake’s.

“Weren’t you supposed to be in a hospital? Huh?” I taunt him, my fists landing at my waist. I may be tempting the devil, but if he already wants to kill me, I won’t be able to change his mind. “Did you escape the looney bin?”

His eyes harden, the twinkle of mischief snuffed out and something sinister replaced as his jaw ticks beneath his graying beard.

“Watch your mouth, stripper,” he snarls as his hand wraps around my throat to haul me into his hard body. “With one twist of my wrist, I could break your fucking neck.”

“Do it.” I shrug, my throat working beneath his palm. “That’s why I’m here, right? Am I your next sacrifice, you devil humping bastard?”

Those long, tatted fingers tighten around my throat, the tips digging into the tender flesh and cutting off my air supply. His handsome face comes in closer, his nose bumping against mine.

“Martina Charles, you will die soon and I hope it’s by these very hands, but it won’t be today. Besides,” he growls as he releases me with a shove. I stumble backward until my ass hits the wall as I claw at my throat for air. “You’re not good enough to sacrifice.”

“You tried to once before,” I choke out. “You had me on an altar and everything.”

His ample lips widen over a devious smile as he lets loose a husky chuckle. “Tiny, I wasn’t sacrificing you. I was hoping to display your dead body to the man I love, hoping he would see just how much of a waste of breath you truly are.”

“The m-man you ... the man y-you...” I stutter through my words, my voice hoarse from the pressure of his fingers.

“That’s right, Tiny. Before you came along with your loose pussy, I was his all. We were childhood sweethearts. As much as we could be in that fucking place,” he spits out. His lips continue to move as his brows hang heavy over his eyes, the look of disgust written all over his face. But I can’t bring myself to hear a single syllable.

“You and Squall—”

“Sval!” he cuts me off as spittle flies from his mouth and lands on my cheeks. “His name is Sval!”

My hearing may be failing me, but my eyes aren't. Torrent is in love with Squall. Everything that's happened right up to this point is starting to make sense. I stepped unknowingly into a secret love affair and created a treacherous triangle. I understand why he wanted me dead, because the same look he has right now is one I've seen in Squall's eyes when we're together.

He raises a fist between us and I ready myself for the impact. If he's going to hit me, then so be it. Maybe I fucking deserve it for not seeing what was clearly right there in front of my eyes.

“He and I swore our souls to a love we knew was doomed from the start.” His voice cracks as I open my clenched eyes and watch as his fingers slowly unfurl, exposing his palm.

It takes me a few moments before the faded points start to appear. My heart lurches up into my throat when I begin to connect all the dots. I know this mark. It's the same one etched into Tempest's stomach and burned into Sky's back. I know what it means, and the sight of it on the palm of the man I hate, for the man I love, makes me sick to my stomach.

“I know what that means.” The words are ripped out of my throat as my eyes blur with unshed tears. My heart cracks in my chest, the sound echoing through my ears. “I didn't know.”

His hand drops back to his side as his body deflates, the tension bleeding out of him within seconds. “I know you didn’t know. No one does.” His hand scrubs down his face as he inhales a loud breath. “We did it when we were barely out of our teens, after we endured the most horrific things.” His obsidian eyes meet mine and in their inky depths I see only agony. “I will not kill you, and most days,” he taps his temple, “I can think clearly enough to remind myself of what you don’t know. But it doesn’t make me hate you any less. You inserted yourself inside his heart and you pushed me aside. Whether you knew it or not.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper because it’s the truth, but that’s not the only reason. I say it because there’s nothing I can do to change it. I’m in love with Squall. “I tried to leave it all behind. I wasn’t going to have anything more to do with you guys. I was done, Torrent.”

“Maybe.” He nods, his lips tipping upward into a sad smile. “Maybe you were done, but I know he wasn’t. He was there, outside of your apartment tonight. I know you saw him too.”

“You know how he is. He probably needed to make sure I was where I was supposed to be.” I shrug my shoulders, but I can’t help how my heart warms at the thought. He was there watching me, and it gives me a sick satisfaction knowing Torrent saw it.

I hate that we have this foul competition between us, but it’s there, and regardless of how I feel about their situation, I want

to win. I can't change who I am on the inside and she's a fierce competitor, always has been.

“Well, we can get reacquainted as Deluge tries to figure out exactly who took you and why.” He walks to the small armchair in the corner of the room, across from a queen-sized bed. He drops into it as I slowly spin, taking in my surroundings. “You're in the holding area of a place of worship,” he supplies as he leans forward, his elbows hitting his jean-clad legs. “Not a church in the sense you're thinking of.”

“Why am I here?” I exhale as I sit on the bed. I should be scared and I know I should be feeling something beyond this heartbreak, but I can't. Being at the mercy of the Order again feels like nothing compared to the devastating revelations about Squall. “I thought the Order was out to kill you guys. Are you as much a prisoner as I am?”

“More so,” he mumbles, but then his eyes meet mine. “You're here because it was ordered for me to do so. I am here because I was deemed more useful here than inside a mental institution.”

“You're working for them again?” I shake my head. “Why are you always deceiving the people who care about you?”

“Because I have something inside of me.” His hand presses to the center of his chest. “Something possessing me and telling me if I do as I'm told, I will be eternally worshiped. Who wouldn't want to be revered forever?”

He's making no sense and it's adding to the apprehension I'm feeling about how we ended up here. Why am I being pulled in if not for nefarious reasons?

"Why am I actually here?" I ask again, this time the words are spit from between my clenched teeth.

"Because where you go, he's sure to follow," he says as his forked tongue slips along his lips.

"And what do you want to do to him? Or is it all of them?" I swallow down the fear that's collecting in my stomach and working its way up my throat.

"To be honest," he shrugs, "it's probably all of us. I don't know, I don't care. I'm tired and I'm ready to meet my fucking maker, whoever it may be."

### **Loving Beginnings Orphanage - 1988 - Torrent**

It's been five weeks since I killed Father Robert and watched the demon leave his dead body and slip into mine. Five weeks of very little sleep and not wanting much to do with my brother or the others.

Haynes spent a week in the hospital afterward from trying to kill himself. He says he felt like everything was his fault, that if he hadn't even come here maybe things would have been different. I suppose he could be right, but honestly, I believe I was meant to kill that evil bastard. When he got back from the hospital, I was obsessed with his wounds for days. Just looking at them proved to me how weak we are as



humans, how the thin skin of our bodies does nothing to protect us from a blade. It reminded me how mortal we really are, but with this demon inside me, I believe I am stronger than them all.

Haynes has been spending all his time with Shereen, trying to repair the damage Father Robert caused, but she's looking like an empty shell. Just like the rest of us. Sval has been quiet, but he sits with me every day, paying more attention to me than my own brother does.

Don't they see what's now living inside of me?

I scoop a spoonful of my gray porridge and shove it in my mouth, forcing the slimy gruel down my throat. The orphanage has been quiet since Father Robert has been gone, and even though I can see we're all relieved, we're still sitting on pins and needles, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The nuns watch us with masks of contained anger. I can see it shining in their eyes. Especially Sister Jane. She found me that night, covered in the priest's blood and brains, and when she dropped to her knees to pray over his body, I laughed and walked back to my room. Now, whenever she looks at me, I can see the wheels turning in her mind. She wants to punish us, but she's fearful.

She should be.

"They watch us all the time," Sval murmurs as he tips his head forward to swallow another mouthful of porridge.

“They’re worried we’ll kill them next,” I boast as I give him a small smile.

“That’s not funny, Victor,” he scolds, his head snapping around to look at me. “You can get in trouble at any time. You never know what they have planned.”

“I don’t care if I get in trouble. He deserved it.” I drop the spoon into my bowl and curl my hand into a fist. “I would do it again and again.”

I will never forget what that man did to me and my friends, what he put us through because he was a nasty pervert. I will let no one do that to me again.

“Sister Jane looks angry,” Sval continues, raising his voice a little to be heard over the children’s chatter. “Yesterday, she turned off the shower early and I still had soap in my hair. When I said as much, she told me to deal with it.”

“Do you want me to kill her, Sval?” I ask just as Raiden sits across from us, his face darkening with anger.

“Stop talking like that, Victor,” he hisses. “We have a few years and then we can leave this place. We’re finally free of him.”

“Because of me,” I remind him. “I did that for us, remember that.”

“Victor—”

“I killed that asshole! Not any of you! I did what my older brother didn’t have the balls to do!” I begin to raise my voice, the room quieting around us.

Raiden stands up, his jaw ticking with anger as his green eyes fill with fury. “Shut the fuck up!” He reaches across the table to grab the front of my shirt, the material nearly ripping in his grip.

“Hey!” Sval stands and shoves him back, forcing Raiden to let me go.

“Boys!” Sister Jane comes running over. “That is enough!”

She grabs onto Sval’s arm and tugs him from the table, her face looking just as thunderous as my brother’s. “You boys need a time out!”

She doesn’t let go of his arm as she drags him from the room. “Wait!” I call out. “Where are you taking him?”

Sval looks back at me over his shoulder, his eyes wide with fear. I hate seeing him afraid.

“Victor,” Raiden says, his hand landing on my shoulder. “It’s fine. The nuns are different. They’re not him.”

“Don’t touch me!” I snap and step away from him as Haynes stands beside Raiden, his eyes flicking back and forth between us. “This is your fault. Both of your faults! You are both useless!”

I storm out of the room with my stomach growling in protest. I didn’t even get to finish my fucking breakfast.



# CHAPTER THREE

## *Squall*

“IT WAS THEM,” I groan as we sit inside the plane at the tarmac. “I could tell it was one of the Order’s fucking minions.”

Raiden and Tempest were supposed to head back to Dominica, and Hail and Sky were supposed to get back to The Sanctuary in Las Vegas. But now that Tiny has been taken, we’re not going anywhere.

“Are they still in New York?” Tempest asks as she paces the front of the plane, a bottle of Grey Goose in her hand.

“They have a main headquarters here and in Nevada,” Hail informs her as he absently brushes his fingers along Sky’s neck. Just watching them has something inside of me tugging with need, I just don’t know who for.

“Nevada?” Sky asks. “Was that the place we went to? Where Tiny was—”

“Stop!” I yell out, unable to hear all the different times I let harm come to the woman I care about. “What are we going to do about this?”

Tempest stalls her pacing to tip the bottle up to her painted red lips, her throat working on a swallow as her eyes narrow on me. I know she and Sky blame me for all of this, and I don't fucking disagree.

“We need to get a message to Luciphia,” Raiden supplies as he stands from his seat to walk to Tempest and gently takes the bottle away from her. “And we need to remain sober.”

“Then you guys can deal with the consequences of me being sober and scared out of my mind,” she snaps as she falls into the seat Raiden just vacated. Raiden stands in front of me, one hand around the neck of the Grey Goose bottle and the other pressed to his temple.

“I will have to go to headquarters and demand her myself,” he finally says on an exhale as he puts the bottle back on the bar.

“No!” Tempest stands. “They will kill you!”

“And would that be any less than what I deserve?” he asks her as my head throbs. “I brought you all into this. Is it not just I deal with the consequences?”

They begin to argue as Hail and Sky tip their heads together, their murmuring voices being drowned out by Tempest and Raiden's argument.

“Enough!” I bellow over them and get to my feet. “If anyone is sacrificing themselves for the things they've done, it would be me. They grabbed her to get my attention.”

“They grabbed her to get our attention!” Tempest snaps back. “We all love her.”

“Torrent was in with them at one time,” Sky speaks up, halting our words instantly. “He worked for them. Maybe he could help us and contact someone there?”

“Kenny was using him, and now Kenny is dead. You heard Luciphia, we’re all her enemies. Torrent wouldn’t have connections.” Raiden paces now, taking Tempest’s spot at the head of the plane.

“I can’t put him in danger as well,” I mumble as I drop my face into my hands. “He’s safe in that institute, getting the help he so desperately needs. He’s the only one out of us four who couldn’t face what happened to him. The youngest of us and the first to suffer through a violent death at his own hands.”

“Father Robert, right?” Sky asks as the plane falls silent. Anger courses through me at the sound of his name, but it also pains me to know these women are privy to what happened during our childhoods.

Then I breathe through the anger to realize if I didn’t have Torrent to hear my agonized screams at night, or to listen to me as I raged through another flashback, I would’ve told Tiny everything as well. She had a way of looking at me and truly seeing me. Not as Squall, but as Sval. The kid who was abandoned by his mother to a place of wretched horrors.

These women are to them what Torrent has always been to me, and I can’t let them knowing our pasts affect me. What’s done is done and we have a bigger fight on our hands.

“Yes, at the tender age of ten, Torrent slammed a hatchet into our abuser’s skull, freeing us from his torture,” I say out loud.

“Ten years old,” Tempest breathes. “No wonder.”

“I’m going to call the institute and see if I can speak with him anyway,” Raiden surmises as he pulls his phone out of his pocket and heads to the bedroom.

“Yes, he’s troubled and instead of feeling glorified for killing a monster, he’s always been convinced the monster escaped Father Robert and entered his body. I’ve always wondered if it was his way of dealing with the gruesome murder, or if there is some truth to it.” I don’t know why I’m spilling my thoughts like this. Maybe it’s to keep me from going insane with worry, or maybe it’s because I feel like my family—the one I chose—doesn’t really know the deep valleys of my mind and how much it fucks me up daily.

“He always thought Father Robert was a demon,” Hail says. “We used to talk about it during our meals. He was convinced Satan sent his worst soldier to parade as a priest.”

“He wasn’t fucking wrong!” Tempest exclaims, her voice low and filled with anger. “He was a fucking demon!”

“Torrent believed the night he killed Father Robert, he became the new host for the demon, and even though I’ve spent most of our lives convincing him otherwise, he’s never strayed from that.” I fall back into my chair and stare at the ceiling of the plane. “We were all running from that place, trying desperately to find a way to escape, and Torrent has



been doing that with his own mind for years. He's living in his own Loving Beginnings nightmare day in and day out where he is the villain."

The silence of the plane gives me the much-needed reprieve to sort through everything I saw a few hours ago. The blacked-out sedan, the sound of Tiny's voice, and that motherfucker's middle finger in the air.

The middle finger.

My mind hyper focuses on that middle finger, the way it curves a little toward the first. The nail slightly pointed at the tip, nestled into dark sepia skin.

I pop up in my seat the exact same moment Raiden comes barreling out of the room and we both exclaim at the same time, "Torrent!"

"He's not there, is he?" I ask as I slowly stand, not needing to hear his confirmation because I already have the proof.

"He was released into the care of his aunt yesterday afternoon," Raiden growls, his fists clenched at his side.

"Aunt?" Tempest stands as Hail curses under his breath. "Which aunt?"

"We don't have any family," Raiden tells her, as Sky gasps.

"My aunt Sherri, isn't it?"

"That's my first guess," Raiden nods as he continues to curse.

“It was him,” I mumble, my voice straining to rise above the emotion clogging my throat. “He took Tiny.”

“You saw him?” Raiden’s eyes narrow on me. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t see anything but his fucking middle finger,” I groan. “And I just pieced it together.”

“Fuck!” Raiden screams, and a part of me crumbles with him. He’s had to chase his little brother and keep him in line for years. It’s always been on his shoulders.

“Could he be working for them again?” Sky asks as Hail runs his fingers through his hair.

“Of course he could be,” he says to her. “He was always trying to get back in with their good graces.”

“We don’t know that.” I shake my head and head for the door. “I’m going to find him and Tiny both.”

“Wait! Squall!” Hail calls out, but I’m already halfway down the stairs and on my way to find the two people who mean the most to me.

## **TORRENT**

I fall onto the bed with a loud exhale as Tiny scrambles away from me, my closeness probably making her skin crawl. She leaves behind a cloud of musk and fruit, making my mouth water unexpectedly.

“Let me out, Torrent. You can’t think you will get away with this,” she growls as she strides for the door.

“It’s locked,” I call out, my words ending in a yawn.

She tries to turn the knob, then yanks on it for good measure, her blonde hair swinging with the force. I lean up on one elbow to watch her, grinning when her ass sways with each yank. I can see what Squall found so appealing.

“Unlock this door, Torrent.” She turns and puts her hands on her waist, her face looking downright murderous, and by the hand of fucking Satan, I grow hard just watching her.

“I can’t.” I shake my head. “I don’t have the key, Marigold.” The name slips from my mouth, but as her eyes narrow and her mouth pouts, I decide it really does suit her. She’s like a pretty, yellow flower.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Torrent?” she huffs as she strides closer. “Stop playing games. Who is Marigold?”

“No games, I’m too tired. I’m a prisoner too, don’t you see?” I fall back onto the bed as my eyes sink close. I don’t know when the last time I had a good sleep was. “You’re like Marigolds, all pretty and yellow.”

Her groan reverberates off the wall as she stomps her foot in frustration, the sounds making me grin.

“Get some sleep,” I tell her as I pat the bed beside me. “I need some peace and quiet.”

“I am not sleeping with you!” she exclaims. “Get out!”

The shrill sound of her voice sets something off inside of me and I lose all patience as I get up from the bed and stalk toward her, making her retreat until her back hits the wall. Her eyes are wide as I would imagine she sees something familiar radiating from my face. My fucking rage. She's seen it once before and nearly didn't survive it. My fist hits the wall beside her head, making her cry out in fear as I bend down to look into her face. "I said, get some fucking sleep. Do you think for one second I want to be in this little room with you? Do you think I want to hear and smell the very thing trying to ruin my life? You're lucky I'm not smothering you with a pillow as I fuck your tight asshole. Am I understood?" She gives me a tight nod as tears slip down her cheeks, and I can't fucking help myself as I lean in and lick one off, making her suck in a fearful breath. "I would stay as quiet as I could if I were you," I advise. "Unless you want to wake him." I pat my chest. "I may be an asshole of epic proportions, but he's downright diabolical."

I shove off the wall and walk back toward the bed, the mattress no more than a double. The thought of being in such close proximity to this bitch is enough to make me lose my control, but I shove it down, knowing it's my only way out of this mess. If I kill the pretty, blonde love of my love's life too soon, the whole plan will be fucked-up and I don't have time to formulate another one.

I fall back onto the bed, my stomach bouncing off the mattress as I gather a stiff pillow under my head. There's no point in fighting with her because she would never see reason,

and I don't have time to sit here and remind her of just who's holding us hostage. If she's that fucking stupid, then I won't have to kill her. She'll do it all on her own.

A few moments later, I hear her settle into the one armchair in the room as her stifled sobs swirl around my head, pulling a small smile to my lips. Her melancholy symphony is much needed as it guides me into what I hope will be a dreamless sleep.

### **Loving Beginnings Orphanage - 1989 - Torrent**

Sister Jane throws me into the same room Father Robert used to bring Haynes and shuts the door behind her as her face thunders with anger. I followed her and Sval to our bedrooms and I found her screaming at him to stay in his bed for the rest of the day. When I came in, her sights turned on me.

“You children are the devil, you know that?” she spits out as her hands clench by her sides. “You think you can just take the life of a disciple of God and not be punished?” Her words have me growing cold as I look around the room, finding nothing to protect myself with. Right now, Sister Jane has the same evil look Father Robert used to have and I suck in a long breath.

“He punished us enough while he was alive, and you knew all about it!” I scream at her. “You knew he was hurting us and you did nothing!”

She comes forward quickly and slaps me hard across the face, my head snapping to the side with the force. Immediately my cheek stings and I lift my hand to touch the aching spot. I'm no longer surprised by the actions of the adults in this home who are supposed to be taking care of us, and to be completely honest, I expected worse. Is it terrible that I'm relieved with just a smack?

She must see it in my eyes, the way I'm glaring at her. She knows I'm not sorry for a single thing, and her face darkens. "You're evil," she growls. "You and those other three boys are nothing but evil."

"You guys are evil!" I fire back. "And you're going to Hell for the things that happened to us here."

"Is that right?" A nasty grin swims along her mouth as she reaches forward to grab the top of my head. "We can do whatever we want here. It's God's will." Then she throws me down on the bed and rips my pants down over my ass.

*Not again.*

I struggle against her, but I'm rewarded with a hard hit to the back of my head, making me fall to the bed with a cry. Then her hand slaps down on my ass, over and over, the hard hits beginning to feel like lava on my raw flesh.

"Stop!" I scream. "Don't touch me!"

She doesn't let up. Her hits become harder, and I begin to slip off the bed as her palms hit my back and then shoulders. I stare at her black skirt as it moves with her movements, like

the robe a Grim Reaper would wear, then I stuff my head under my arms to protect it from the blows.

“Help!” I scream, the sound muffled by my arms as she continues to hit my shoulders and back. I want Raiden to come and help me. He’s supposed to be my big brother.

But no one comes, and when she’s finally winded and drained of energy, her hard boot slams into my ribs for the last attack. Then she heads to the door in a flurry of heavy footsteps and heaving breaths.

The door slams closed behind her as I succumb to the sobs I’ve been holding in my chest. Once they begin, there’s no stopping them as they take over me, shaking my body with each cry. I thought with Father Robert gone, I would be the most dangerous in this place. Especially because of the demon inside of me, but I was wrong.

It likes when I’m hurting and in pain, and for the first time, I feel utterly alone.



# CHAPTER FOUR



## *Tiny*

**A** SHOUT HAS ME bolting up from my sleep and groaning when my neck aches from the position I was in on the chair. I massage my fingers into my throbbing muscles as I look around the room groggily. Everything comes rushing back in stunning clarity as Torrent lets out another yell from his place on the bed.

This asshole took me from my home and handed me over to devil worshippers without a single regard for my life. So I stand and walk over to the bed, my mouth itching to smile at the discomfort he's clearly in as his legs thrash against the mattress. He whimpers as if in pain, and a shot of guilt hits me at the sound. It's exactly what Squall used to do when he would fall asleep beside me. I can sense the same desperation emanating from Torrent's very pores. I know they were abused inside of that orphanage, but for all of them to have this level of PTSD after all these years tells me it was atrocious.

As much as I'm reveling in his pain, my heart begins to take over the anger and I feel sympathy for the child who endured years of terror. I reach out to touch his shoulder, my hand

shaking as I near. It's like approaching a wild animal. It'll either accept the touch or strike.

Flight or fight.

Just as my fingertips touch his sweater, he lets out a loud gasp and his eyes snap open as his brows come together. He's quick, quicker than I am when he grabs my hand and yanks me down to the bed. My back hits the mattress in seconds and he's on top of me with a knife to my throat.

"They let *you* have a weapon?" I gape up at him in surprise. "Do they really not care if we survive?"

The fog clouding his eyes clears as he wakes up completely, his brows relaxing as he takes me in under him. His mouth tips down as he slowly rises and shuts the switchblade before stuffing it back in his pocket.

"It makes no difference whether I have a knife or a gun or nothing at all. I am a weapon." His voice sounds anguished, as if he's still living inside his dream, unable to remove the veil of unconsciousness.

"I can't imagine everything you guys went through in that place," I begin as I push myself up to my elbows to peer at his dropped head and slumped shoulders. "But I'm here if you ever want to talk about it." I can't believe I'm even saying this.

"Did he talk to you about what happened there?" he asks quietly, his voice so soft I can barely detect the tone.

“A little. Or not much at all. Just that it was horrible and what pushed you four to change your beliefs.” I slowly rise from the bed as I make my way to the end to sit beside the man who once tried to kill me. Someone who would try again if given the chance.

“Tell me about your relationship with him.” He looks up at me then and I wince at the pain radiating from his eyes. “Tell me how he is with you.”

If I ever had a doubt that Torrent and Squall had a relationship before now, it’s easily squashed by the heartbreak staring back at me.

“He’s mean,” I huff as I link my hands together and rest them on my knees. “He’s always had this edge to him, a dangerous side I was always flirting with. When we were,”—I look up at him and see genuine curiosity—“*together*, he would say the most terrible things. Call me the worst names and I *loved* it.”

A dark chuckle escapes his lips as he listens intently, his eyes never wavering from my face. “What else?”

“There wasn’t a lot of time to explore anything of meaning,” I stumble over my words, and even I can hear the lies in them.

“Yes, you did,” he retorts. “He was willing to die for you.”

“Look, we felt things.” I press my hand to my chest. “But I’m not lying when I say we didn’t speak of it. I knew where his limits were, and back then I was living in agony,

wondering why he didn't want to be with me." I give him a slow once-over. "Now I know why."

"Does that make you angrier?" he asks, his mouth tipping upward. "The fact that I had him before you did. That I still have him?"

"Shut up, Torrent." My hands curl into fists as I move away from him. "You truly are evil."

"Here," he says as he tosses me his knife. "Go ahead. Kill me."

"I'm not a killer!" I exclaim as I scramble off the bed. "I'm nothing like you!"

Torrent gets to his feet slowly as he stalks after my backward stumbling. I hit the wall at my back, but he doesn't stop, keeps right on coming until he's directly in front of me, his chest brushing mine. His hand skims up my arm, the touch almost reverent feeling, although it's nothing but a ruse. Torrent is an apex predator who clearly likes to play with his prey.

"We're nothing alike," he hums, his hand now gliding along my shoulder. "That's why I'm trying to figure out exactly what it was about you that caught his attention." His hand brushes against the column of my throat as he bends to look me in the eye. "Because, stripper, I can't tell if it's the loose pussy he likes, or the fact this body,"—he looks down at me—"can take a beating."

His fingers tighten around my throat as I pant through my distress, trying to grasp onto any bravery I have lingering inside of me. When I hit a bottomless well of fear, his eyes finally glide back to mine with cunning prowess.

“Stop!” I choke out as Torrent’s fingers tighten further, making my lungs scream for air.

“Stop,” he whines in a mocking voice, then finally releases me. “I already know what he sees in you, Tiny, and I agree. It’s something I could never give him.”

Even though I’m heaving for breath, I look at him and raise my chin. “Go ahead, Torrent,” I suck in air. “Tell me what it is he sees.”

“You probably remind him of his no-good mother. The bitch who left him on the orphanage’s doorstep so she could go off and be a whore without having to take care of him.” His face becomes one of mocking despair. “That’s why when he fucks you, he calls you filthy names, because all he can see is her.”

“That’s not true.” I shake my head as he takes a step back, his snake-like tongue coming out to slip along his bottom lip.

“She was a blonde, on the fuller side, and she was a cunt,” he sneers, the words like bricks in my stomach. “I’d say you’re a dead ringer.”

He turns away from me, his shoulders swaying as he walks back to the bed and flops onto the mattress, his stomach hitting the blankets with a *whoosh*. Torrent doesn’t know the hole he’s

punched into my heart; doesn't understand how I am bleeding out all over the floor with his simple words.

Squall has made it no secret of how much he despises his mother for what she did to him as a child. For abandoning him to a vile and evil place. So hearing that I look like her, like the one person he was supposed to be unconditionally loved by, but instead discarded, makes me feel like I'm about to be sick.

"I can hear your panic." He rolls over on the bed to look at me as he props his head up on his arms. "What did you think it was? True love?" And then he's laughing at me as I spiral into the depths of despair, not caring how fatal each of his blows are. "Any way you could keep that shit to yourself? I need rest for tomorrow."

"What's tomorrow?" I dare to ask as I approach the chair again.

"A target I need to take care of," is the answer I get before he falls back into a deep sleep, not feeling threatened by me at all.

Or he just doesn't care whether he lives or dies.

## **SQUALL**

The sign on the outside of the building says Enlightened Records, the same looming structure the four of us stared up at when we were barely adults. Now that I'm here alone and wiser, it doesn't feel so omnipotent. It's no different from the other commercial buildings lining this street, but it's what's

inside that sets it apart from the others. I can feel the energy seeping out of the structure, the waves of power all-consuming and begging for my attention.

It's what drew us in from the beginning, and now we stand more broken than when we were in possession of our souls.

I try to dig deep inside of me, to see if I can feel Tiny in there anywhere. I'm hoping that even though we aren't bound by the sacred mark, that maybe our hearts are intertwined regardless of silly belief. My hand instinctively presses against my left pec, knowing there's nothing silly about what's carved there. I've always been attuned to Victor, his thoughts, his feelings, and all of it is a jumbled mess of emotions. I have tried my best over the years to be his grounding point, to make sure his mind stays here in the present, but I've been failing these last few years.

My own memories are beginning to resurface, the ones I've kept buried inside and forgotten so I could survive. It's hard to wake up in the morning with the lingering fear of my teenage self still working its way through my mind, or to force myself to stay awake so I don't succumb to new tortures from past experiences.

I know each of my brothers suffers in silence. We all have our demons, and then there's Torrent who believes he is one. I can honestly say the foundation of abuse was built in that orphanage, but this building in front of me fostered it further into our adulthood, manipulating us to believe we needed to kill or be killed.

I'm no longer that man who first stood here with a smile on my face and hope in my heart. I've become a ruthless killer, a depraved man, and it's time I used that to my advantage. I reach to grab the door handle when I hear a loud *tsk* behind me, making me pause as a chill runs up my spine.

"I wouldn't go in there unless you're looking to get yourself killed. If that's the case, I'll do it for you."

I turn at the sound of his raspy voice, my heart thudding with heavy beats as I lay eyes on the man who has a claim on my heart. He's leaning against the brick, wearing the same trench as the night he took Tiny, and his hood obscuring most of his face. But when that tongue slips out from between his lips to wet the plush surface, I nearly groan with need.

"In here," he says as he motions for me to follow him into the alley.

My eyes eat up his form. The way he walks with an exaggerated swagger, his hands buried deep in his pockets, and how he smells, are all intoxicating. I fist my hands to keep myself from reaching for him, to haul him into me, and to let my senses be overrun by all that is Torrent. My heart longs for his turbulent storms, but my body is weary of the destructive aftermath.

Still, I follow the stone-cold killer into the alley and the shadows drape over us immediately. If he was instructed to kill me, he could do so easily and with little resistance from me.

"What do you want, Squall?" His voice is laced with exhaustion and it's on the tip of my tongue to ask him if he's



sleeping okay. We all suffer with the past and we all find it manifests when we're at our weakest points. During sleep. "Well?" He crosses his arms over his chest and I swallow at the sight of his long, tattooed fingers.

"Pull down your hood," I demand as I step closer, my eyes squinting to see past the shadows dancing along his jaw.

"Squall, if you want your stupid woman to wind up dead, then you are doing everything right," he sneers.

"Is Tiny in there?" I point toward the front of the building. "If they have her to lure me, then here I am. Let her go and take me instead."

"I don't know why she's here, but no one wants to lure you guys." He shrugs a shoulder just before it hits the brick wall. "No one speaks of you here."

"Why are you here? Can you get her out?" I take a step toward him, hoping he hears the desperation in my voice and takes pity on me.

"I was brought here too," he simply says, his voice low and even. "I have work to do, and no, I cannot free your woman. Unless, you would like to see me crucified?" His head tips to the side as a dark chuckle escapes his mouth. "Would you want that, Sval? Then you could be free of our branding to be with *her*."

"I don't want either of you to die," I try to placate him. "But I need to understand what it is you're doing here and why you took Tiny. Don't make me choose, Victor."

“Because it wouldn’t be me you’d choose. Am I right, Sval?” he whispers as his arms drop to his sides and he steps closer. “Answer me,” he hisses.

“You know how I feel about you, how I’ve always felt about you. That will never change, but she doesn’t deserve to be punished for our mistakes.” I want to reach out and run my fingers along the graying stubble at his jaw, to grip the beard on his chin and drag his mouth to mine. I never did have much restraint when it comes to him.

“She told me you call her names when you’re fucking her,” he says, his body stiffening. “Sounds all too familiar.”

“It’s just ... what I like.” My heart pounds at the knowledge that he and Tiny are speaking and about me. “So you see her? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine, Sval,” he huffs. “I told you, she’s not there to be harmed.” Then I can feel the smirk coating his lips rather than see it. “Unless I do it.”

I react to his words with little thought as I grab him around the throat and slam his back against the brick with a growl. “Don’t do anything you’ll regret, Torrent,” I hiss into his face. “If so much as a hair is out of place on her pretty little head, I will kill you.”

“There it is,” he coos as his hands slip around my waist to drag me in closer, aligning our groins. “There’s the love you have for her. There’s no denying it now, Sval. You want the stripper bitch more than you ever wanted me.”

“You know that’s not true,” I moan as his expert hands push into the waistband of my pants, making me grow hard against him. “You and I have something I cannot compare to anything else.”

“Prove it,” he breathes against my ear, that tongue of his flicking the lobe. “Forget about her. Be with me.” He pumps his cock into mine and I nearly explode in my pants. “Tell everyone it’s me you love.”

My lips find his as if the space between us is a well-worn path, one my mind has mapped to last in my memory forever. Every inch of my body knows every inch of his, and when we touch like this, there’s no denying why we bear the marks. He was meant to be mine, and I was meant to be his. His mouth opens under mine, permitting me entrance into his warmth, giving me a taste of what it feels like to be home. He’s the only home I’ve ever known.

But too soon it’s over and he’s pushing me away ... always pushing me away. “I need to get some shit done today,” he tells me, like he didn’t just have his tongue down my throat.

“What stuff?” I ask, watching as he walks away. “Torrent, I need you to release Tiny.”

He stops at the end of the alley, the sunlight creating a halo around his body as he stands stock-still. “She was never mine to release. I don’t have that authority.”

Then he does something that shocks me to my core. He pulls the Vanquisher’s mask out from inside his trench, the

metal gleaming in the last of the sun's rays as his fingers tighten around it.

Before I can say a single word, he's gone from my sight, leaving me with a chill I know will coat my insides forever.

Torrent James is the new Vanquisher.

### **Loving Beginnings Orphanage - 1989 - Squall**

He looks small and scared, curled up in the corner of the room, his head still tucked beneath his skinny arms. His back moves with each breath, the sound of his gasps breaking my heart further.

I bend down and gather him against my chest, his eyes flying open to look at me, but I don't know if he actually *sees* me. They rove over my features, but the dark brown irises look void of feeling, of any emotion besides pain.

"I'm sorry," I murmur as I carry him into the common room, then to his cot. "I heard her screaming at you, but I was too scared..." I clench my jaw, preventing the words from slipping through my lips.

I put him on his bed and drag the thin blanket up and over his small body, watching as he curls into a ball and buries his head in the flat pillow. A warmth gathers in the pit of my stomach as a chill races down my spine. He's been left to fend for himself. I understand we all have our battles here, but he is the youngest. We are meant to protect him. I can't speak for the others, but I feel like I've failed him.

I won't fail him again.

I turn to head to my own bed beside his when I feel his hand grab my arm, the fingers cold like ice. "Sval?" He sounds so small, nothing like the fierce boy who killed our tormentor. "Can you stay with me?"

I swallow down the lump in my throat and turn back around to face him. I've never had a little brother to look out for, and suddenly the mounting responsibility is like a bucket of icy water being thrown over my body. What if I'm like my mother and fail?

"Please?" he whines, his body beginning to tremble. "It's cold, and I'm hurting all over."

My body moves before my mind can catch up with my actions, and I slip under the blanket to lie beside him. He moves into my warmth, his cold nose pressing to my arm as he sniffles.

"I miss my mom," he whispers. "I forget what she looks like. Am I a bad son?"

"No." I swallow down the lump forming in my throat. "You're not a bad son. Your mom is in a place where she wishes she could help you, but can't."

"I hope she doesn't see the things happening here. I hope she doesn't know." He curls in closer. "Is that where your mom is, too?"

A dry, sarcastic chuckle escapes my lips as I shake my head. "No. Mine is off being a whore somewhere without having to

worry about finding her kid food.”

“Your mother is a whore?” Victor asks, as he lifts his head.  
“Like a prostitute?”

“She was.” I shrug. “I don’t know what she is now. Maybe she’s dead.”

“Do you hate her for leaving you here?”

His question gives me pause as he settles back down on the bed beside me, his cold cheek pressing into my shoulder. “I hated her long before that,” I admit. “But her torture was different. I knew she didn’t love me and that was fine. I went to school, I was fed, and mostly I was ignored. I could handle that. Now I’m here in this Hell and I’m helpless to do anything about it. It’s her fault.”

“I’m sorry your mom left you in this place, but I’m glad you’re here.” Soon after he says the words, I can hear his breathing deepen as he finally finds sleep. I envy him for the security he finds with me and that it’s enough to help him sleep soundly, because I don’t know the last time I had a full night’s rest.

He lets out a soft noise in his sleep when I slip out of the bed. Even his subconscious can sense my absence. I grab the blanket from my bed and cover him with it, hoping the two blankets together will keep him warm.

I leave the room to find Sister Jane storming down the hall, her eye intent on the room she left Victor in. She’s probably going back for round two, and I can’t have her discover I

moved him and he's sleeping. We have chores we're supposed to be doing. So I imagine she's my mother and I blurt out everything I'm feeling.

"You're a useless whore," I snap as something dark and slippery uncoils inside of me. "You're fucking useless and I hope you die a lonely death with no one by your side."

She stops suddenly, as if being struck in the face, and her features are coated in shock as she watches me with wide eyes. Her mouth hangs open, but no noise comes out.

I step forward as I continue, "One day, I will watch you burn in the fires of Hell while you scream for your God, who hates you as much as we all do."

Her face darkens into something menacing as she comes forward, her jaw hard and pulsing under the clench of her teeth. "You're just as evil as your other friend, and I believe I am here to show you the path back to God." Then, as quick as lightning, her fist slams into my temple, throwing me off balance as I hit the wall. I try to push off the filthy wallpaper, but I'm met with a hard kick to the stomach, the force making me double over in searing pain. "I guess it's up to me to finish what Father Robert was doing," she growls as she grips my ear to haul me after her.

I heave through rolling waves of nausea as she drags me to the basement door, the same place Victor killed the priest, and I'd be scared if I weren't doing this to keep him safe.

From now on, I will always keep him safe.

She opens it and shoves me inside, forces me to look at the altar where Haynes was tortured, where Victor was abused, and then my eyes roam to the pews where Victor slammed a hatchet into Father Robert's head.

“If you keep up your shit, I will tie your little friend to that altar and continue what Father Robert was doing. Am I making myself clear?”

I nod as I struggle to swallow. I can't let Victor come back down here. I don't think he would survive it.





# CHAPTER FIVE

## *Tiny*

I WOKE UP THIS morning to an empty room and a tray filled with breakfast. After I dragged myself from the small chair to the equally small bathroom to freshen up, I ate the food provided. If I die of poisoning, so be it.

Now I'm pacing my holding cell, wondering just why I'm here and what the purpose of my confinement is. If it's to force Squall into some rescue mission, then they'll be disappointed. I saw his eyes the last time we were face to face. He told me he cared, but he couldn't give me anything more. He said he was emotionally void, that his insides only craved blood and depravity.

But now I know he was lying. He also craves a psychotic man.

Where is Torrent? How did he get out? Did they let him out?

I run my hand through my long hair, cringing when I feel the oil from a few days without a shower. My eyes skip to the bathroom, seeing the small corner unit shower and wishing I

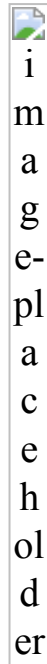
could hop in there, but I don't have any other clean clothes. I must smell like the dead.

Which is a very real possibility.

I look longingly toward the rumpled bed and bite into my lip at the prospect of getting some sleep in it before Torrent comes back. *If* he comes back. I drop my jacket to the chair and remove my boots that have been on for almost twenty-four hours, then I crawl up the bed as a moan escapes my lips.

"I'm so tired," I whisper as my head hits the pillow, causing Torrent's scent to plume up around my head. He smells like a forest of pine in the dead of winter, making me envision a small rabbit running from a timber wolf.

I don't even have to decipher that analogy to know exactly what it means. I'm Torrent's prey.



The click of a door permeates my fitful sleep as I quickly sit up to look around me. I'm still in this small room with a double bed and a single chair. I turn to look at the window sitting high on the wall, the one-foot by one-foot square covered by metal bars and reminding me of my prisoner status. Through the dusty pane I can see that it's dark out, the sun having long gone down, and I am still here alone.

Maybe Torrent really is dead.

A delicious scent wafts under my nose as I inhale deeply, making my mouth water at the aroma of rich spices and bread. I get off the bed and head toward the door to find yet another tray with a pile of folded clothes beside it. The sight has my heart skipping a beat as my eyes widen. I spin on the spot, looking in each corner for signs of a camera. I'm being watched. There's no other explanation. I know how I felt this morning coming out of that bathroom with the same clothes on my back as the day before, and I know it must've been written all over my fucking face.

"Fuck," I growl, wanting nothing more than to throw the fabric on the floor and stomp all over it. I would've done it if I didn't want to shower so fucking badly.

Satan humpers - 1, Tiny - 0.

I lift the cover off the tray and nearly moan out loud for all of Hell to hear me when I see butter chicken and garlic naan. This is my favorite fucking dish. So not only am I being watched in here, it would seem I was being watched before as well.

The sight of the meal has me tearing up when a memory strikes me fast and hard of the last time I ate this. Squall was with me in his motel room and I forced him to try something new, laughing when he acted so surprised over how good it was.

Maybe I wasn't who they were watching then, maybe they've always had eyes on Deluge and those guys just think they're ahead. It's probably always been a ruse, letting the aged rock stars believe they were slick when really they were nothing more than puppets.

The thought makes me smirk as I grab the tray and sit back in the chair. I dig into the meal as I mull everything over. If the old Luciphia knew what the guys were up to and sent her Vanquisher—which was Sky's aunt—out to hunt them, maybe that's where they fucked up. I remember, as I laid in pain on that dais, looking up into her face as she looked at her niece. There was no outward show of affection, but I could see her eyes soften. If she was sent to kill them, but found out Sky was involved, maybe she pulled the plug.

She killed the old Luciphia, taking over the role for herself, and now she's on a mission to free her niece. My heart beats when I lift the last of the naan to my mouth. Could it be possible that I'm here to attract Sky? Would Luciphia be out to kill the men of Deluge for fucking with her and now her niece?

With a sigh, I let go of all my theories and get up to grab the clothes. There's a long-sleeved cardigan with a tank top and

track pants. I should shower now while I'm alone here, in case Torrent does show up again. The bathroom doesn't have a lock and I don't want him to walk in on me naked. Not that I'm his type.

I'm quick to start up the shower and strip off my clothes, the need to be clean overpowering any apprehension lingering inside of me. The hammered glass shower slabs begin to frost as steam coats the surface, the sight pulling me into the stall like a magnet. As soon as my head is under the hot water, my muscles turn to liquid and I lean against the tiled wall, letting the steam surround me in comforting warmth. If I close my eyes I can imagine I am anywhere else but here, trapped in a room with a demon.

I grab the shampoo bottle, noticing there's no conditioner, but I don't care as I squeeze a dollop in my hand and work it through my scalp and hair. It's a generic shampoo, the smell dulled and not as aromatic as my usual ones, but honestly, it's as close to Heaven as I've ever been.

My head is tipped back under the spray as I work my fingers through my long strands and moaning as the soapy water cascades down my body, washing away the stress of the last few days.

Until I hear a low whistle.

I stall, my fingers tangled in my hair and my eyes clenched closed as water runs over my face. I know I heard it. I'm not imagining it. I rub the water out of my eyes and slowly open them to find Torrent standing in front of the stall with the door

wide open and watching me earnestly. He's completely naked from head to toe, his locs looking darker than usual and his face a little drawn, like he's witnessed something horrible. When my own eyes peruse his body, that's when shock really settles in. He's covered in blood.

"Torrent!" I scream and try my best to cover my privates from his scrutiny. "Why are you covered in blood?" There's so much of it dripping off the ends of his hair and hitting his shoulders, explaining the different color.

"I need to shower, Marigold," he says, his voice monotone and low. "We're sharing, or you're getting the fuck out."

Without giving me much time to move, he steps into the shower stall with me, his wide body taking up the extra space and then some. His bloodied chest begins to run with pink rivulets as he steps closer to the spray, and I press myself against the glass as I try my best to avoid touching him.

"Whose blood is that?" I ask as I slip around him, my eyes widening when his cock brushes my hip. His very *hard* cock. He groans at the contact, making me scurry quicker out of the stall.

"The blood of my target," he finally answers as he tips his head under the water, and I watch as the drain runs red. "Are you going to stand there and stare at it, or do you need an introduction?" His hand wraps around his cock as he strokes it, making me realize that's where I've been staring.

"Fuck!" I hiss as I spin to grab a towel and slip on the floor. I hear him chuckle behind me as I quickly wrap the fabric

around me and turn to find him now fully jacking himself off while watching me. “You’re disgusting!” I exclaim and leave the bathroom with my clothes tucked under my arm.

Just as I’m about to close the door, he lets loose a guttural groan followed by my name and the sounds light my body on fire, making my hair stand on end. I need to get the fuck out of this room and away from Torrent before something happens that will destroy everything.

I drop my clothes on the bed and rush to the door, hoping he’s been lying and he’s not trapped in here with me, but instead, reveling in watching me suffer as his prisoner. Maybe this time he forgot to lock the door.

My hand grips the cool metal handle and I press downward, but a sob escapes me when the thing doesn’t budge. I give it a look over and notice there’s no lock on the inside. We are indeed both being held here against our wills.

I shove off the door and stumble to the bed, my vision blurred by the tears coating my eyes and my heart cracking wide open, creating a rift in my chest. I fall onto the bed as the tears finally crest over my cheeks to soak into the pillow under my head. The water in the bathroom continues as I hear the splashes of Torrent cleaning whoever’s blood off of him, and I succumb to the despair that’s been floating around me since I was dumped in here.

## **TORRENT**



She's lying on the bed with just that towel on, the bottom riding dangerously high on her thighs. She has her back turned toward me and her marigold hair still tangled and wet, the fabric of the pillow soaking up the moisture. I can tell by her heavy breathing that she's asleep, and I envy her for what must be dreams of poles and music.

I head over to the two large duffel bags that I brought in, sitting at the end of the bed and opening one to pull out a pair of boxers. I look at the other one, knowing it's packed full of her clothes. It didn't take much to convince her mother that Tiny decided to have last-minute plans for the holidays, leading me to believe she's not very close to the only family she has left. And then I envy her that too.

To have a mother and to waste it is fucking selfish. Regardless of what the woman's vices are, she's still family. I showed up on her doorstep and explained to her I'd be taking her daughter on a surprise Caribbean trip, but I needed some clothes. She was all too happy to hand me the duffel bag that Tiny had dropped off mere minutes before she ran back out of the house to meet me downstairs.

The feeling of rage works its way from the pit of my stomach, heating along my limbs as I look at her over my shoulder. How much she's taken for granted, how little regard she has for the type of life she's led, and how lucky she's been... Until she met us, that is.

I pull on a pair of boxers and walk around the side of the bed to look down at her reddened face. It's evident she's been

crying, and again, it makes me want to slap her in the face for whining about being locked in a room. To be fed three full meals a day. To have a bathroom where she can shower until the water runs cold. Despite that, she'll lie here and cry as if she's being abused.

I run my fingertips along the soft skin of her leg, following the dip of her knee and then the full swell of her thigh. Much to my dismay, I begin to harden again. When I got home earlier and I heard the shower running, I knew she'd be in there. She was in there enjoying the hot stream and the privilege of having shampoo and a bar of soap. I wanted to make her uncomfortable, but when I stepped in there and saw her silhouette through the hammered glass, I wanted nothing more than to open up that door and watch her touch herself. So I did.

My reaction to her was visceral, almost primal, because I know Tiny is not someone I care about or desire. Maybe it's her connection to my soul, the one that lives inside Sval. He is the only one that's ever truly believed that I have a soul, but I think he's only given me half of his, and now this bitch is trying to destroy that.

Even as I seethe inside, my fingers continue their path upward and when they hit the edge of the towel, they drag it up to her hip. I watch as it falls down into the dip of her waist, exposing her ass. My cock jerks in response and I have to bite into my lip to restrain myself from touching her any further. I don't want the stripping whore, and I blame these close confines for the way I'm feeling. I'm used to being alone, not

sharing my space. So it takes much effort to pull back my hand and fist it at my side to ensure they are not inching toward her skin again.

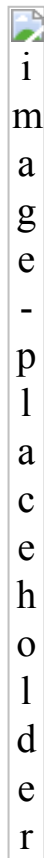
Exhaustion hits me and I look over my shoulder at the chair. None of it looks appealing. So I move around the side of the bed and lie down beside her, making sure not to let our skins touch. I'm unpredictable after a kill, but throw in a sacrifice and I become near delirious. She's lucky I possess the restraint I do because otherwise I'd have this towel ripped from her body and her legs forced open. I shake my head to force the images out of my mind and turn on my side away from her to stuff my nose into the pillow, stopping her scent from invading my senses.

I pray for an undisturbed sleep, one not filled with the bad intentions of adults. Instead, I hope to relive what I did tonight, and even as I try to piece everything together, I still can't figure out what Luciphia's plan is. I haven't spoken to her since she'd given me the mask and not from lack of trying, but every time I request to see her I'm refused. I'm having a hard time trusting Shereen and an even harder time separating her from the girl I grew up with. But now she's my superior, and she's given me my very last chance. I will acknowledge that if I fuck this up, it's over for me.

I don't have much to live for anyway, and the only reason I'm striving, pushing myself to keep going, is because I enjoy the kill. Or maybe it's not me. Maybe it's this thing that resides inside of me, because my very first kill was horrifying and I was scared beyond my wits, until he entered my body.

So now I'm not continuing to ensure I live, that's not an incentive for me. I'm doing it so that I may look Squall in the eye once more and witness the depth of his emotion for me, because he's the only one who has shown me a love that's unconditional.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to even out my breathing, hoping and begging for a dreamless sleep. Once the darkness engulfs me, I can't control the things I do or say, and with this bitch here beside me, I don't want to risk saying things out loud and giving her ammunition.



I slowly leave behind the empty halls of Loving Beginnings Orphanage. The peeling paint and the smell of bleach slowly dissipate, and then I'm surrounded by heat. Soft warmth

envelopes me, chasing the lingering chill of my dream and replacing it with the feeling of safety, of being protected. There's only one person capable of doing that and my lips involuntarily curve upward. I'm mad at him, but I can never deny how much I need him.

I open my eyes to find a ceiling so foreign just as a leg lands over the top of my thighs and slick heat meets my skin. I don't move. I barely breathe as I stare at the ceiling and try to work my mind around what's happening. Every one of my muscles locks into place as I work through the lingering dream to what must be reality. I fight to get myself out of the in-between before I do something irrational, and that's when a soft moan rolls up over me, hitting my ears and instantly hardening my cock.

The scent of her arousal permeates the surrounding space around the bed as she presses her wet pussy against my thigh, seeking the friction she's so desperately needing. Her hand runs from the bottom of my stomach moving upward, a sensual, light touch igniting my skin and making my cock ache with the need to sink into her warmth.

She grows wetter, her movements a little faster, and then her long, pink-painted nails sink into the flesh of my left pec as she gasps on a breath. Her thrusts become jerky, telling me she's coasting over that edge and flying into a euphoric oblivion. I lie here completely still as she slowly stops moving and her fingers relax against my chest, her palm lightly running over my nipple. When she feels the heavy ring pierced

through the peak, her whole body stiffens, telling me she's awake.

The mind is a funny thing in times of extreme trauma. It's able to shut down and feed you memories of times where you were happy, and even though there's a part of me that feels sorry for her, the larger part is reveling in her pain of being thrust back into the present.

She slowly peels herself off of me, her body still naked, and as soon as her warmth is gone, a bone-chilling cold settles over me. "Well, Marigold, it's nice to see that we've skipped right past pleasantries and dove headfirst into getting off on each other. I like it. Very much with the times."

"Oh, my God!" she cries out as she scrambles away from me, grabbing up her discarded towel from the bed and frantically wrapping it around herself. She runs to the bathroom while screaming, "Oh, my fucking God!"

*There's no turning back now*, I think to myself as my fingers find the wet spot on my thigh. It doesn't take much for me to sink into the depths of obsession, and once I'm fixated, I won't stop until I've taken everything I can.

I gather up her juices soaking against my skin and bring my fingers to my lips. Her scent is so heady and intoxicating. Without much thought, I'm sucking them into my mouth and letting her taste mark me from the inside out.

Maybe being trapped in a little room with Tiny isn't so bad after all.

## SQUALL

“Just leave it to me, Raiden,” I tell the man who’s staring at me from the other side of the hotel room. “They’re there together, and I don’t think Torrent will hurt her.”

“You sure about that?” His voice is low, the words barely detectable as he stares at me.

“I know what I saw, and he was holding that Vanquisher mask.” I scrub a hand down my face, willing myself to stay awake just a little longer. “He’s working for her and if his mission was to kill me, I have no doubt he would’ve.”

“Squall,” Raiden says on an exhale, dragging the syllables of my name out. “I can’t go back to Tempest and say, ‘Let’s head back to Dominica. Squall’s got it covered.’ I would be missing my balls and probably have my heart ripped from my chest.”

“I know Torrent...” I begin, only to be cut off by Raiden raising his hand.

“I know you think you know my brother, and trust me when I say I know why you do.” He gives me a pointed look that sends heat along my cheeks and makes my stomach quake with nerves. “But, Squall, he’s unpredictable, and at best, erratic. I need to ensure Tiny is rescued and that means calling a meeting with Shereen.”

“She’s Luciphia now,” I correct him, hoping to bypass his earlier statements regarding Torrent and me.

“She’s Shereen,” he repeats, his brows raising as he tips the rest of the amber liquid into his mouth, his throat working as he swallows it down. What I wouldn’t give to have a drink or two, to relax and not have to think about everything that’s happening.

“Shereen failed to exist after we left that home, just like us, Raiden.” I grab the fucking decanter of whiskey and tip it up to my mouth. *Fuck this shit.* “Most of us left there different people with different names. In case you’ve forgotten.” I drag my arm along my mouth, collecting the liquid resting against my lips.

“I have forgotten nothing, no matter how hard I try. If it’s not my nightmares reminding me, it’s my fucking brother and his antics.” The hard set of his jaw tells me he has more to say, but he’s holding it back. I know he’s felt the burden of Torrent and his behavior all these years, and I get what that must be like as an older brother. It’s the risk of being dragged down by someone because you share the same blood.

“He’s the Vanquisher now and Shereen is using him to do her bidding, knowing it’s causing a rift in our family.” I take another shot as Raiden continues to watch me. “And to send him after Tiny! Can you see what she’s doing? We need to find a way to take her out.”

“It is curious that she’s asked Torrent to grab Tiny, asking him to be Vanquisher.” He rubs the growth on his chin. “Almost like she knows something the rest of us don’t.”



“There’s nothing,” I spit out as I drop the decanter back to the cart. “Just stay out of this. She’s targeting me and she’s using how close I am with Torrent and my feelings for Tiny to disrupt our relationships.”

“Seems like you alone are the target. Why would that be?” Raiden asks, as he looks at me over the rim of his glass. “Why not all of us? Why hasn’t she made a move on Temp or Sky?”

“I don’t know,” I murmur as I look off out the window, watching the skyline of New York slowly light up with the last of the sunset. “I don’t know.”

*I do know.*

I think I know.

I can see the skepticism in his eyes as he regards me, and suddenly the room is a little too hot. My skin flushes as I get up out of my seat and begin to pace the length of his room. Its opulence isn’t lost on me and I know exactly why Raiden stays in the biggest suites. It has nothing to do with needing luxury. He’s needing *space*. How we survived inside that orphanage was something akin to fucking sardines in a can.

“Squall,” he begins with a heavy exhale. “I know all about it. The mark on your chest, the matching one on my brother’s —”

“Stop!” I cut him off, my chest now ceasing with the effort to breathe. This can’t be happening. This is not something I want to speak about, not when Torrent isn’t here to help me explain.

“Listen.” He slowly stands from the bed, his hands out in front of him, trying to placate me. “I know about you and Torrent. I think Hail has an idea, but he’s said nothing. We have eyes, Squall. We saw how close you were in that fucking home and I thought eventually you two would just come out with it.” I can hear how he’s slowing his words, hoping not to set me off, but all I’m hearing is a loud ringing in my ears as my vision pulses.

“Don’t...” My voice is hoarse, the moisture from my mouth completely absent.

“I appreciate what you did for him there, what I myself couldn’t do. He needed you, and I will forever be grateful for that. You were his protector while I scrambled just to make it each day. I don’t judge what you guys have. To be honest, I’m not quite sure what it is.” His words are garbled, and I shake my head to try to clear the fog. I stumble backward until my back hits the wall, making Raiden stop his advancement on me.

“Victor and I...” I try to swallow past the dryness, my throat working to get the words out. “We... It’s...”

“Whatever you guys are,” he says quietly. “I think it’s the link to whatever Shereen is planning. But to figure this out, and we will figure it out together, we need to go back there.”

“No...” I shake my head, wincing when it begins to pound. “I don’t remember everything. It’s hazy.”

“I know.” He nods as he sits in the chair I vacated and leans forward. “We need to try. I will stay here with you and send

the others back to Dominica, where they are safe. No one can touch them there, and Hail will be with them. Then, you will tell me whatever you can, and you won't be afraid to do it. Understand?"

It's the sound of authority in my leader's voice that has my head nodding before I've even absorbed what he's said. If my past with Torrent will help get Tiny released, then it'll be worth it, no matter how painful it will be to relive.

Raiden's piercing cell phone ring screams through the room, startling us both as he gets up from the chair to grab it off the bedside table.

"It's Edward," he mumbles before answering it. Edward is in charge of our estate in Dominica. "Hello, Edward."

I watch his face slowly darken with confusion as he turns to look at me, his eyes shining with surprise.

"Are you sure?" he says into the phone before shaking his head. "Okay, thank you, Edward, for letting me know. Keep me posted."

"What have they done?" I ask, as my heart palpitates in my chest. Edward is our eyes and ears in the Order as he has spies in each district.

"Magistrate for New York was killed last night. He was out to dinner with his family and they found him gutted in the bathroom. Sacrificed." His skin turns ashen as he says the words, knowing exactly what it could imply.

“Torrent is the Vanquisher.” I try to find a reason why he wouldn’t have done it, but I can’t deny how much Torrent loves the hunt and then the sacrifice. It’s the only way he enjoys killing. “Do you think he’s going against Luciphia?”

“We need to get them out of there, but first, let me call Hail. He needs to get the girls to the island.” I watch as he heads into the main room, leaving me here inside the opulent bedroom of the suite. I walk toward the bed and sit at the edge, staring at myself in the darkened TV’s reflection.

“How the fuck am I going to do this?”

### **Loving Beginnings Orphanage - 1990 - Squall**

It’s been two years of beatings and threats from Sister Jane and her friend, Sister Mary. Both of them have their eyes set on Victor, but whenever I intervene, they don’t mind including me in their abuse.

Today is Victor’s twelfth birthday and it’s anything but a happy day. His left arm is in a cast and his chest is wrapped in bandages to keep his fractured rib safe. When Sister Jane threw him down the stairs, I thought for sure he was dead, and then when I realized he was injured, my heart soared. This was our chance. I thought he’d be sent to the hospital where we could prove the abuse and beg for help, but again, I was wrong. The church provided a doctor to our home and he didn’t ask any questions as he patched Victor up.

I stood outside the door, and when the doctor was leaving, he looked at me and my very fresh black eye. Then, without as much as a second glance, he was out the door. The abuse here will never be acknowledged by the state of New York or law enforcement, but that's okay. One day they'll get theirs and die in an inferno of flames.

"What are you thinking about?" Victor asks, his voice cracking from puberty.

"How's the arm?" I avoid the question and slurp on the broth we were given for lunch, along with a buttered slice of hard bread.

"Fine." He shrugs, then winces. "A little sore."

"Do me a favor?" I ask him and wait until his eyes meet mine. "Don't provoke them anymore. Let your body heal. They threw you down those basement stairs, Victor. I thought you were dead."

"You know I don't always provoke them. They've been getting into the sacristy wine more often now that Father Robert is dead, and it's fun for them to come get me out of fucking bed to tag team me. But honestly, Sval, I'd rather be beaten than endure what Father Robert was doing. That was so much worse." I hear a *tsk* and look up to see Sister Mary at the next table over, wiping one of the younger kid's mouth, the motion rough and leaving the skin red.

"Stop spreading your lies," she hisses, giving Victor a heated look. This is where he would usually flip her off, or call her Jesus' whore, but today he just lowers his head in defeat. It

breaks my heart to see the fire inside of him extinguished, but the relief is immediate. I don't want them hurting him further.

When Sister Mary's footsteps fade, Victor lifts his head to look at me and say, "I tried to search for the hatchet last night in the boiler room. I wanted to get it and kill those bitches, but it's gone."

"What are you talking about?" Shereen asks as she sits at the table with us, Haynes not too far behind.

We've all been separated for chores lately, and Raiden is usually the last one to eat since he helps with daily mass at the church across the street. The children from the home aren't allowed to attend, but the new priest comes every Sunday to do mass in the basement, so we still have to endure the Word of God. At least we're not handing out blessings each night anymore.

"Killing those sister bitches," Victor says without much thought. I eye Shereen's face and see a fresh cut on her lip.

"What happened?" I point it out with my spoon.

"I wasn't quick enough with serving lunch yesterday," she says with an eye roll. "Got me a slap in the mouth with the soup ladle."

"So you want to kill them with us?" Victor gets that gleeful look in his eye that's been missing for a while now, and even though it warms me to see it, I'm worried about what he's trying to incite.

“Guys,” Haynes groans. “This treatment is ten times better than what we went through with the priest. Just take the fucking beatings and know we’re out of here in a few years.”

“You guys will be out before me,” Victor snarls at him. “I will have to stay here longer, and I’ll be damned if I deal with this shit alone.”

“You’ll be coming with us,” I vow as I push the empty bowl aside. “I will break you out of here myself.”

“Yeah, well, in case that doesn’t happen, I need to get rid of the evil,” Victor snaps as he tosses a look over his shoulder. Standing at the head of the room are the Sisters, both of them watching us with looks of contempt.

“I don’t want to fucking hear it,” Haynes retorts as he gets up from his seat, leaving behind half of his broth. “It makes me sick to my stomach.”

We watch him leave, his shoulders set in a firm line and his hands fisted at his sides.

“He’s had it bad,” Shereen whispers. His scars will last forever.

“We all had it bad,” Victor reminds her. “My scars may not be visible, but they’re there.”

“I know,” she mumbles as her hand lands on his shoulder, only for him to shake it off.

“They need to die and if I have to do it by myself, I will.” He sets his jaw and looks once more over his shoulder, the

Sisters still watching us closely. “It’ll be my birthday present to myself.”

We fall into silence at the table, and once we’re all done with our soup we stay seated, listening to the slurping sounds around us. The food here barely sustains us. There’s no flavor, and I can’t actually tell if any of it is nutritious. We’re weak most of the time, and when we take too long to complete chores, we’re punished for it.

Shereen is sitting quietly, her finger twisting a piece of her hair, and her eyes downcast. I know her abuse was atrocious and most of it was done with Haynes. That’s why they’re so close. I wonder if she has the same need to get rid of the Sisters, or if she’s fine with their treatment so long as it’s not as horrible as the priest’s was.

The door of the hall opens, and I look up to see an exhausted-looking Raiden slowly making his way toward us. Shereen glances over her shoulder, then straightens, her eyes briefly meeting mine before she leans in close to Victor.

“I’m in,” she whispers before she gets up to leave, passing Raiden on the way.

“Hear that, Sval?” Victor’s face lights up. “We’re killing them.”





# CHAPTER SIX

## *Torrent*

I'M ONCE AGAIN IN Luciphia's office. The room is shrouded in dark fabric, the walls looking decadent in dark red velvet. The blinds on all the windows are shut, keeping out the blinding sun's rays and keeping the room looking mysterious.

"I am proud of you and what you did. All without being caught," she praises, her eyes warm.

"You know I've always been good at killing people." I shrug, bringing her back into the past. I watch as her smile falls and her eyes glaze over with a memory, something so familiar to me because we all do it every now and then.

"Yes, I do know that." She finally nods, pulling herself out of the memory and firmly back into the present. "We are far from done."

"And the stripping whore I have to share a room with? What about her? When do I get to kill her?" I ask, my hand forming a fist with my anger.

“I told you.” She sighs and leans back in her oversized chair. “You can do what you wish with her when this mission is done. You could’ve chosen anyone as your prize, but you picked her.”

“I didn’t think I’d be forced to share a fucking room with her,” I growl, my stomach tightening as I think of what happened last night.

“No, I guess I didn’t make that clear.” She gives me a knowing grin. “But at least it makes you work quicker to get the jobs done.”

“What’s the next one?” I ask, lining my words with boredom. I should’ve known that with Shereen nothing is black and white. She says one thing, but the meaning is never clear.

“Ohio,” she informs me with a small smile. “You’ll be glad to know it’s an overnight trip. You won’t have to sleep with your lover’s girlfriend.”

The jab hits me hard in the chest, but I feign indifference as I shrug. “Cool.”

“This will close up the East. After that, you move to other districts.” She shuffles some papers on her desk, making the triangular pendant around her neck shine as it catches the light overhead.

“Are you going to explain why you’re doing this?” I inquire as I crack my knuckles.

“No.” Her answer is firm and direct. “And I need that girl alive until it’s done. I may need to send a video soon, ensuring to keep Sval away. I remember how bullheaded he can be.”

“Fine.” I stand, giving her a low, sweeping bow. “May I be excused now?”

“Yes.” She waves me off.

As soon as I open her office door, I am flanked on both sides by her guards. It’s the same drill every time I see her, and even though she likes to remind me how she freed me from that institute, she likes to make it obvious I’m still a prisoner.

They lead me to the elevator, the single car humming open when they press the button. This building is disguised as a record label, but inside is a labyrinth of Order activities spanning the U.S.A. Most of the people here live inside these walls so that they’re at Luciphia’s beck and call.

We step inside and they press the button for the ground level, thirty-three floors below. It’s a long ride, and the width of all our shoulders is making me a bit claustrophobic. Each floor dings and when we hit floor twenty-two, I remember the day we came here to sign our lives away. Then thirteen reminds me of when we used to bring the women here to sign NDA’s for Raiden’s parties.

But then there’s seven. The floor is held for gatherings and sacrifices. I itch to stop the car, to pry open the doors and force myself to join in any ritual happening at the moment. The need to touch and smell blood is overwhelming, and I know if I get

into back to that room and hear Tiny screaming, I'll fucking kill her.

All too soon, the doors open on the ground floor, and I'm led to my room in the darkened hallway. All the windows on the ground floor are high on the walls and sparse. It's the sleeping quarters and holding cells. You can imagine which one I'm in.

They unlock the door and wait patiently for me to open it and step inside. They seem calm and relaxed on the outside, but inside they're coiled and ready to fight. There's no point for me to bother anyway. It would be a waste of time and I'd be sent back to the institute without ever feeling Tiny's blood on my skin.

I step inside the room, letting the door shut at my back and listening to the sharp *click* as the lock is slid into place. Trapped, confined, and helpless. I promised myself after escaping the orphanage that I would never find myself at the mercy of another person, but here we are.

Tiny is sitting in the chair, her feet tucked up under her and her body so rigid with tension I'm afraid any sudden movement will snap her in half. Her eyes stay downcast, refusing to look up at me, but that blush staining her cheeks makes me want to throw my fist through the wall. I don't know why I react in such extremes with this woman. One minute I'm intrigued and achingly hard, and the next I'm filled with rage simmering with lust.

And now that I've had her taste committed to memory, I'll be fucked until I'm holding her warm heart in my hands as her blood runs over my head.

"I'll be gone for a few days." I don't know why I'm telling her this. I shouldn't give a fuck about her knowing my schedule. "But I'll leave my pillow behind, in case you need to get yourself off."

"Fuck you," she says it so quietly, the words lacking conviction. It's almost like she doesn't have enough energy to verbally spar with me and it's almost disappointing. "I hope you never come back."

"Well, that's unfortunate," I drawl as I pick up my duffel bag. "I'm the reason you're still alive. You're being used to keep me in line. If I don't come back, you'd be of no use."

"What do you mean?" she asks as she watches me open the bag and rifle through my things. "And how did you get my bag?"

"I mean exactly what I said, and that's that." I could tell her she will die at my hands, that she's my gift for obedience. She's my chance to rectify what I fucked up the first time, but I don't. That would take the fun out of everything and ruin the surprise. "I was at your apartment." I turn and look at her with a raised brow. "You know? Where I fucking kidnapped you?"

"But the bag was inside my apartment with my mother..." She trails off as she looks at me with wide eyes. "Please tell me you didn't hurt my mother." Those big, hazel eyes of hers

grow lighter as tears pool against her bottom lid, threatening to spill over her cheeks.

“Your mother is of no use to me,” I inform her as I pick up my bag. “I kill with purpose. If someone is dead by my hands, then they deserved it in some way or another.” I sling the bag over my shoulder and give her a pointed look. “Even sacrifices. They were done in the name of my Order, just like when Catholics eat the body of their Messiah and drink his blood. They’re just playing pretend, but the meaning is there.”

“You’re a monster,” she croaks, her words sounding as if she’s on the brink of tears, making it the perfect time for me to get away from her.

I stride to the door and lift my fist to bang against the wood, alerting the guards that I’m ready to go. The door opens as she calls out, “Off to kill someone else?”

I turn to give her a smirk, letting the manic energy inside me take over. “Better someone else than you... For now.”

## TINY

I stand from my chair as I watch him leave, eyeing the two guards whose size could give Squall a run for his money. There’s no chance of me escaping this place if that’s who’s standing outside our door. Embarrassment floods my cheeks again as I think about what I did last night. I can’t blame it on a dream I was having about someone else because Torrent was

the star of that as well. I don't know what's happening to me, but the longer I'm here, the more I lose myself.

As the scent of Torrent lingers, I begin to pace the room. Hints of mint and pine float in the air, making my stomach flip with nausea because last night, when I was using his body for pleasure, that was all I could smell. The bed is the strongest, the blankets and pillows holding his scent in deep saturation.

"Shit," I hiss to myself as I look at the door and then back to my duffel bag. If I ever get to see my mother again, I am going to throttle her for just handing over my stuff to a stranger.

I had barely stepped foot in the house, barely said hello to her, but in that two-minute threshold I took in her bloodshot eyes, the too-straight shoulders, and the arrogant tilt of her chin. All of it telling me that if she had taken one step, I would have witnessed the sway of her intoxicated gait. My mother is back off the wagon, and in the most fucked-up way, I am thankful I don't have to be there to witness it. I just would rather be with Tempest and Sky, living in a bubble of denial and not having to face the nightmare of what awaits me at home.

I don't know if her recent boyfriend is still in the picture, but if he is, he's clearly not the best influence. I understand alcoholism is a disease, and the cure is obtaining a willpower so strong it would take a bodybuilder's regime to maintain. So much hard work with little reward because it's hard to see through the haze of a drunken stupor and notice that you're not just wasting your life, you're slowly killing yourself. It's



equally hard to see through the pain of recovery, so I understand it all. I've been to meetings with her, to sessions where I've been told there's not much I can do to make sure she stays sober. It has to all be her. So I let the guilt go a long time ago.

I just wish that I could have at least spent a few hours with her to explain how important she is to me, because I'm afraid I won't ever get that chance again. I've watched documentaries of people living through the last days of illness and having a calming sensation wash over them as they accept their fate. They know the end is near and begin to filter through their lives, reliving the experiences through their memories. In a way, that's what I'm doing, only mine is filled with regrets. I wish I could have held my friends a little longer, told them how much I love them a little more, but at least if anything happens to me, I'll never have to worry about them wondering how I felt.

I can't say the same about Squall.

We didn't end well, and he's my biggest regret. Maybe I didn't fight hard enough.

I sit back in the chair, avoiding the bed and the memories it holds. The embarrassment is still fresh and the horror is etched into my consciousness. I don't think Torrent will ever let me live that down and if I think about it for too long, I'll have to force myself to come to terms with why any of it happened. The dreams, the subconscious actions, all of it I will have to face, and I'm not ready for that symphony.

So I curl up on the chair, knowing my body will ache, but unable to bring myself to care. This prison cell has become a mental type of torture because while I'm alone, I'm forced to go over everything, relive things I've long buried. If I do survive this and somehow make it out of here, I don't think I'll leave the same way I came in.

## **SQUALL**

I leave Raiden's hotel room feeling heavier than when I first came. It's hard to face guilt, especially when it comes from within, and I have so much of it I'm barely keeping my head above water. My obsession with Tiny started from the very first year I laid eyes on her and has led her to this very predicament. I've been selfish, wanting my cake and eating it too, but I never stopped to consider anyone else.

Even though Torrent and I are mated, bonded together by some unknown force, we were never faithful. I think we always knew there were things we needed beyond just each other, but neither of us ever felt threatened until now.

After Raiden got off the phone with Edward, everything shifted. I've never felt so small, so inferior as I did sitting inside that hotel room. Letting fear conduct your emotions has a way of shrinking you down to a fraction of your size. Just when we thought we had Luciphia figured out and her plans dissected, she throws in a wrench and knocks us off our axis.

But what I fear the most is that none of this is her plan, and Torrent has once again gone rogue.

Torrent's never been one to follow the rules, to do as he's told. He's always forging his own path, whether it is right or wrong, and he's shown no regret for his poor decisions. I can't help but worry that this is his newest rebellion, his fight against authority, and it will surely put him in his grave. It was bad enough to go up against his own brother, to plan the deaths of his bandmates, and of me—his bonded—because in the end, I think he knew we would always forgive him. He has an illness of the mind, a paranoia that lives inside of him, constantly telling him he's evil, but I can't help but think this recent rebellion is just a cry for help. Or it's a suicide mission. Either one of those things will tear me apart.

While Raiden looks into everything that's going on, I am going to be scouting that head office, hoping to find evidence Tiny is okay, and if it gives me one more chance to see Torrent, I won't waste it.

I get into my small Honda Civic rental car and pull out of the parking lot. I went with a model not easily detected or overly flashy and I'm glad I did. It'll serve my purposes perfectly.

I'm worried about the Magistrate who's been found murdered, knowing Torrent is the new Vanquisher. Nothing is making sense, and it's even more worrisome that they snatched Tiny, but not the other two girls. Torrent hates Tiny and he's indifferent to the other two. So if given the choice of

whom to kidnap and torture, I know he wouldn't hesitate to grab her.

It's starting to look like all of this was conjured up by Torrent since the agenda works best for him. If this was last year, I would be swallowed by guilt. Just the thought of Torrent doing anything bad would end in a self-deprecating moment. I would consider everything he'd been through and hate myself for thinking the worst of him.

That was until he grabbed Tiny for the first time and tried to sacrifice her on that Nevada altar. Now I know what Torrent is capable of and that his aspirations have no limits. He would kill any of us in the name of advancement.

It doesn't lessen the bond I have with him, or the affection I feel whenever I think of him. I just know what lengths he would go to for himself, even if it meant him watching us all die.

I want to storm into that building and take back my girl, but I know if I show that much attachment, Luciphia would have my weakness in her grasp. Tiny would end up dead for sure. I have to play their game with their rules, but the second I see an opening, I will raze the whole place to the ground to save Tiny.

The skyscraper stands black against the clear evening skyline, the ominous structure a vast contrast to the others around it. I park across the street and watch the entrance like a starved man, waiting for any morsels thrown my way. It doesn't take too long before Torrent is striding through in that

trench of his with the hood up. He's surrounded by guards, but the duffel in his hand gives me pause. He's going somewhere.

He's on another mission.

Torrent drops the hood just before getting in the back of a blacked-out sedan and his eyes find mine, as if he can sense me. He gives me a quick nod before climbing in and I deflate against my seat in relief.

Tiny is okay.

Torrent wouldn't lie to me. In fact, he would celebrate my agony if she were dead. It's just the way he is, the way he's always been. After what happened to Father Robert, Torrent found delight in the darker things. The more gruesome, the better.

### **Loving Beginnings Orphanage -1990**

Victor's cast is being removed today and my stomach has been in knots. He's been waiting until he's fully recovered before following through with his plans to take down the evil Sisters. Even more surprising is Shereen's involvement. She's been an eager participant in the plans and I can see Haynes gradually pulling away from her. I don't blame him. He's been scarred and tortured well beyond the rest of us.

The sound of the saw ripping through the cast jars me out of my worries and I peek inside the small room to see Victor watching the blade intently, an elated look on his face. He's been excited for the last few days, and the Sisters must feel

something brewing. They've separated us during chores, sent us for meals at different times, and most nights, I have been put in the tainted room across the hall.

When I asked Sister Jane why I was being moved, I received a blow to the mouth and a split lip in response. The next day, when Victor saw it, I swear his eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

"They're dead," he kept repeating, making the phrase sound like a mantra.

The saw stops, and the surrounding silence has my heart plummeting into my stomach. I'm so fucking nervous about what Victor has planned tonight and when I find Shereen standing at the end of the corridor, her arms crossed in front of her chest, I begin to feel nauseous.

"Look how fucking skinny my arm is," Victor says, startling me. "Four weeks in a cast and I have a spaghetti arm."

"It'll be weak for a while. You shouldn't do anything that could make it worse—"

"It's happening tonight, Sval," he cuts me off as he brushes by me, walking toward Shereen. "You can hide in your little room if you want."

His words are sneered at me over his shoulder, each one of them like knives to my stomach. He knows I don't have a choice when I'm moved to that room and his cheap jab does nothing but make me feel like shit.

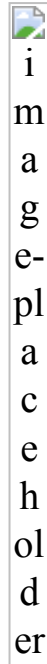
Which is what he wants.

I don't want any part in the nefarious plans he has for the evil Sisters, but I won't stand in his way either. It's not worth it. I want those bitches dead, too. I just don't want to kill anyone.

So I turn in the opposite direction and head toward the yard, knowing I'll find Raiden and Haynes out there doing whatever gardening needs to be done. The whole time, I can feel both Shereen's and Victor's eyes on me, the heat from their glares burning through the thin material of my clothes. I force myself not to look back, to just keep moving forward even though each footstep down the hall is more difficult than the last.

I should tell Raiden everything. He would want to make sure Victor stays out of trouble, especially after Father Robert. We lived in fear of Victor going to jail for months.

With my plan set, I hurry out to the yard without faltering. This is my way of saving Victor and repaying him for saving us all a few years ago. He doesn't see past his anger to the consequences of two more people ending up dead under mysterious circumstances. We would only leave this prison for another.



I will hand it to Victor. This is the perfect night for what he has planned. We're staying up late to help at the church across the street to set up for Easter, and there are so many darkened alcoves a Sister could find herself trapped in.

Raiden has been watching Shereen and Victor closely. The way they sit together and tip their heads to one another is all telling of their new alliance. It makes me tremble with jealousy. Shereen is only making things worse for Victor, and we need to make sure they don't follow through with their plans.

"Shereen has a lot of hate left over from what happened to us," Haynes says quietly as he sets the decorations on the altar. "She wants nothing more than to see that orphanage burn."

"I get it," Raiden murmurs as we all look toward the pews, watching them both sitting together as they dust the bibles. "But it'll only end up badly. I want to get out of here, not be watched even more."



“Victor will have to live with the lives he’s taken, even if they did deserve it. That’s going to be hard on him. He thinks it’s nothing now, but when he’s older...” I trail off, not wanting to think about how damaging this place will be for us.

“Trust me,” Haynes speaks up. “I know all too well.”

There are rumors around Haynes and what he did to his parents. Rumors of a cold-blooded murderer and his damaged soul. I trust him when he says murder follows him like a tainted shadow.

“Do you smell that?” Raiden asks, tipping his nose to the ceiling. “Is that smoke?”

I spin quickly on the dais as I look out to the pews, finding them empty, and my heart slams into my ribs.

“Where’s Victor?” My voice comes out hoarse and frantic. “Where are they?”

We scan the church and when we see smoke billowing from one of the confessionals, we dart toward it in a rush. Only Sister Mary gets there first, and when she opens the curtain to find a Bible on fire, her dark, beady eyes land on us.

“What did you evil boys do?” Her voice wavers with anger, the words punctuated by the grit of her teeth. “What did you do?!”

“We didn’t do anything.” Raiden shakes his head and steps in front of Haynes and me. “We were at the altar.”

“Where is your little brother?” Her eyes widen as it all becomes crystal clear to her. “Where is Victor and his new

friend?”

“Stop!” Haynes cuts in front to scream. “Shereen wouldn’t do that!” He gets a sharp smack to the face, the sound reverberating around the church.

Sister Mary stomps out the fire. Thankfully, it hasn’t spread anywhere beyond the book and then her eyes turn onto Raiden. “If you don’t find your brother, I will punish you all tonight.”

“That doesn’t smell so good,” Shereen drawls as she saunters into the nave. “Did someone light too many candles?”

“You!” Sister Mary snarls as she grabs Shereen’s shoulder. “I know you did this!” Her nails dig into the shirt, but Shereen barely flinches as she looks the nun in the face with a nonchalant expression.

“Did what?” Her bored tone only rubs salt in the wound as Sister Mary shoves her forward toward the exit, promising her a world of pain.

Shereen looks over her shoulder at us, her mouth slipping into a mischievous smile.

“What did she do?” I croak out, my body tense with worry. “Where’s Victor?”



# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *Tiny*

**M**Y EYES OPEN SUDDENLY, hauling me out of my sleep and dropping me back inside my dark prison.

“You have one hour, Squall, and then you get back outside to your car and drive away. Do not come back here.”

I sit up in bed at the sound of his name and come face to face with Squall Andersson. He’s standing in the doorway, watching me with a worried expression as a woman pushes him the rest of the way in.

“One hour. Do not try anything or I will kill you both. Am I understood?”

I recognize the woman as Sky’s aunt, and I know I should be screaming at her to let me go, but I can’t seem to pull my eyes away from the man who’s haunted me since the first night I saw him.

“Yeah, I promise,” he whispers as she quickly shuts the door.

“Please tell me you’re here with Raiden and Hail,” I beg as I move to the end of the bed. “Squall, please tell me you’re here

to get me out.”

“I’m working on it, I swear.” His deep voice hits me in the chest and a low whine escapes me. “I don’t think you’re in danger. I just needed to make sure you were safe and—”

“Alive?” I cut him off. “Did you come to make sure I was alive, but to reassure me I’m not in danger?” I snap and stand. I want to cave, to run into his arms and feel his warmth envelop me, but I know if I do that, he’ll think this is okay. Me being in here in this room because of him and his bandmates will be okay.

“Luciphia has assured me that as soon as Torrent is done with what he has to do, then you will go home.” His eyes scan over me once, searching for injuries, but when he notices what I’m wearing, the second perusal is slow and heated. I’m wearing a t-shirt and boy-cut underwear and they’re hugging me in all the right places.

“I have to share this room with him. Did you know that? They’re holding us here together.” His face drops and his eyes take on a dangerous glint. “Why am I here, Squall? Why am I being used as leverage for Torrent?”

“Because...” His voice breaks and he clears his throat. I know the answer, but I need to hear him say it. “They know what you mean to me, and equally how much he means to me, too.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about that?” I ask, my words ending in a whisper. “Why would you keep something so

important from me? You guys have the same mate symbols as Sky and Tempest.”

“Yeah...” He swallows as his eyes drop to the floor. “We did it a few years after escaping the orphanage. He was seventeen and I was nineteen, and we felt like there was no one else who would love us like we loved each other.”

My heart nearly explodes with his confession and even though each word is like a punch to the stomach, I want to hear it all. “Tell me.”

“The things we had been through and the fact that we made it out alive...” He shakes his head. “He saved me. I saved him.”

I can see his face is wrought in agony the more he forces himself to remember and tell me about his past. “Where does that leave me?” I can hear how small I sound. There’s no way to hide the devastation I’m feeling.

“You are everything to me.” He steps forward, his eyes shining with sincerity. “You have always been everything to me.”

“But Torrent is everything too, right?” I wring my hands in front of me as he grabs them in his.

“I will never disrespect you by lying. Yes, Torrent also means everything to me. I never understood the meaning of my other half until I meant you, but for me it’s different. Torrent has always grasped my heart in both hands, the organ completely belonging to him. But you, you completed my

soul, showed me what it was like to be human.” His eyes swim with tears as his nostrils flare. My hands shake as they’re engulfed by his.

“I don’t understand.” I shake my head.

“Both of you mean the same to me...” Then he shakes his head. “But different.” I can see his internal struggle, but I know he’s being genuine. So, with little thought, I press myself to him, needing his warmth and scent. “Tiny, I can’t lose you, but I can’t lose him either.”

This dynamic between the three of us is muddied and convoluted, and when I envision a future, it’s filled with blood and turmoil. Despite that, I want him. I always have. Clearly, I have no thought of my own future and of living a normal life. Squall is who I long for.

He releases my hands to cradle my face, bringing his mouth within an inch of mine. “I need to taste you, Tiny,” he whispers. “The way we ended, when you left, I thought I would never have you again.”

“You were there the night he took me,” I state, bringing my mouth closer to his. We’re toxic, downright lethal, but what’s life without risks?

“I was too far away. I failed you.” Then his mouth is on mine in a bruising kiss, the pressure like a brutal promise of pain and pleasure. “I can’t make you promises because my life was promised to someone else long before you, but I can show you how I feel.”

I pant against his lips, feeling each word breathed onto the skin of my face, like a stinging breeze in the middle of winter, dangerous but exhilarating. That's always been Squall. He comes in like a raging blizzard, covering everything in a blanket of thick frost, and leaving you numb. He's never pretended to be anything else.

My hand snags up into his white-blond hair, and I haul him back toward the bed, needing to feel him again. He's left an imprint on my heart and I don't think I could ever move on from what we had. I'm just as much an addict as my mother, living with a disease I can't control.

"Show me," I say against his lips. "If you are helpless to free me, then show me how much I mean to you."

"Tiny..." He grabs my face again, his icy-blue eyes piercing into mine. "I will free you."

I no longer care about his promises. I know they are just words. He has no authority to free me because I'm being held captive by a leader who is leaps and bounds more powerful than him. What I do want is to erase what's happened in this room, to replace it with something I can hold close on those nights I find myself alone.

I rip my shirt over my head, making him groan in appreciation before he dips forward to suck a pink, hardened nipple into his mouth. He flicks his tongue over the peak, making me arch my back and press myself closer, but never close enough. I can feel the boundary of where I end and he begins.



His shirt meets mine on the floor and then his mouth presses to my ear, his breath raising the hairs along my arms in anticipation of the words I know will decimate me, only to restore me. “Tell me how wet you are.” His tongue snakes along my lobe. “Even here, as a captive, you’re still a whore.”

My whole body turns to liquid fire as my pussy pulses with every fucking syllable. I never knew how badly I needed to be degraded to feel wanted. I’m not ashamed of it. I crave it.

“If my hand slips down inside these panties...” His hand skims over my stomach, inching closer to my pussy. “Will I find you wet and needy like the slut you are?”

He knows he will, so I don’t bother to confirm as his hand slips down the inside of my panties. “Does that answer your question?” I can’t help but bait the monster, antagonizing a beast to bend to my will.

His teeth sink into his beautiful bottom lip, one I’ve kissed a million times. “This belongs to me, no matter how much you want to spread these legs for men on stage. It will always be mine.”

There it is, the slap in the face about my profession. It’s my passion to dance for an audience while working my body in perfect synchrony with a melody, and I know he doesn’t actually care about that, it’s right now in these moments where he’ll manipulate his slight insecurities to make me feel small. To make me feel *hot*.

“What else?” I ask as I drop my panties to my feet.

He crowds in against me, forcing the back of my legs to meet the mattress as his hand sinks into the hair at the back of my head and his nose lands on the column of my throat. “You smell like you’re needing a good pussy spanking.”

My knees weaken at the thought of him slapping my clit as I sob through tears of orgasmic pleasure. I buckle into him and he steps back, letting me sink to my knees, his intention clear.

## **SQUALL**

She sinks to her knees in front of me, those hazel eyes looking up at me with vulnerability, searching for direction. I can do that. “Take me out of my pants,” I demand as her small hands land at my waistband. “Suck my cock. Girls like you know just how to do it, don’t you?”

She gives me a small nod as her cheeks bloom with a red hue, the color striking against her pale skin. Her full breasts heave as she sucks in a breath, then she’s pulling down my pants, licking her lips with anticipation. I push the thought of her being here out of my mind. There’s nothing I can do, so I won’t let this moment go to waste, but I won’t let her endure this alone. I will be vigilant, watching everything from afar.

The second her hand wraps around my cock, a groan rips from my throat and my hips jut forward, seeking the warmth of her mouth. “Suck it,” I growl down at her, gripping her blonde strands between my fingers. “Open your fucking mouth and fucking choke on it.”

She does as she's told and her effort is admirable as she struggles to take all of me into her mouth. Her eyes glisten, the irises looking like freshly turned leaves in the fall. Whatever her mouth can't take, her hand works with expertise. When she slows down, her jaw getting tired, I grip her head back and spit down onto her face, some of it landing on my cock. "Keep going," I demand. She mewls, and I bet if I were to throw her on the bed right now and push open her legs, her pussy would be fucking weeping for me.

Just when I feel my balls begin to tighten, I rip my dick out of her mouth and pull her up by her hair, twisting her head so she's looking up at me, giving me a clear picture of my spit on her face. "You're going to get on the bed, you're going to spread your legs, and then these pretty fingers of yours are going to pull open those pussy lips so I can see that loose hole."

She nods again, and the second I release her, she's scrambling up onto the mattress, her back bouncing off the cushion. She eagerly does as she's told. Her luscious legs spread open, showing me just what my words have done to her as her pussy drips onto the mattress. This is the part of Tiny I find completely irresistible, the part I crave. I will always appreciate how responsive she is to me, and she has never judged the things I need in the bedroom.

"Spread those lips," I tell her. I kick aside my pants and kneel on the edge of the bed as her long, pink fingernails slip into her pussy, pulling it open. "Keep it spread," I instruct her

as I grab her waist in my hands and pull her down to meet my face.

I swipe my tongue through her juices, slipping past her pussy hole up to her clit, giving it a firm circle before I bite down on the nub. She screams as her ass bucks off the bed and I grin, knowing this is just the beginning. I pay particular attention to her clit, using the tip of my tongue to work tight circles over the surface, and every now and then, nipping onto her lips with my teeth. She moans my name as her legs tighten around my head and her hands abandon the job I've instructed her to do, slipping into my hair to pull me in farther. I suck her into my mouth, moaning around the taste of her as her legs begin to tremble. She's about to come and it feels like the first time all over again.

I slip two fingers deep inside her and her pussy clamps down as she detonates, her juices flowing down to the palm of my hand and her body shaking through the force of her orgasm. The tendons in her neck are tight as her head tips back, her mouth open on a silent scream. My eyes eat up every inch of her like a starved man worried about his next meal.

Dragging my mouth across her mound and up over her stomach, I dip my tongue into her belly button. She continues to shake as I scrape my chest along her sensitive skin, eliciting goosebumps along the surface. When I reach her tits, I suck a nipple into my mouth, flicking my tongue against that hardened peak while my hand grabs the other, giving it a firm pinch between my thumb and forefinger.

“Squall, please,” she begs, and I release her nipple with a pop as I hover my face over hers, looking down into her eyes. They widen the longer she stares at me, knowing what’s about to come. The hand that was wrapped around her tit moves between her legs and I deliver one sharp slap to her drenched pussy, the sound reverberating around the room. “Keep your mouth shut,” I warn her. “Or I’ll find something to stuff in there.”

She slowly nods as she presses her lips together, holding in any sound wanting to come out. I press my pelvis into hers, running my cock through her wet pussy and then I’m sinking deep inside her, stretching her wide as her jaw tightens and her teeth sink into her bottom lip. I take my time pushing into her, watching her as she struggles to stay quiet, and the fact that she’s being so obedient makes my cock ache. I want to let loose and pound into her, moving her from heightened pleasure straight into pain, but I don’t have a lot of time.

I know Luciphia means every word of what she said. She’ll be in here in no time, so I press my forearms to either side of Tiny’s head, slipping my fingers through her silky strands. I look her in her eyes as I brush my nose along hers. I wonder if she can feel the way my heart pounds in my chest, frantically trying to escape the confines of my ribs to nestle itself home between her breasts where it belongs. My cock twitches and I’m on the verge of release, but I’m afraid. I fear this is the last time I’ll be with Tiny and it feels like the end of my life, like I have nothing else to live for.

There was a time when I felt the same about Torrent, that if he were to ever leave me, I would perish. As I thrust for the last time inside of Tiny and spill my seed, my thoughts are on the man who made it his mission to stay away from me these past few years.

My face lands into the crook of her neck as her nails drag up along my back. I can hear the wheels in her mind moving, thoughts forming into questions begging to be voiced.

“What is it?” I ask as I pull out of her and lean up to look into her eyes.

“Why do you need to speak like that when we’re ...” she pauses, her kiss-swollen lips sucking into her mouth, “doing stuff?”

“I thought you liked it.” I push off her, not quite answering her question and hoping honestly to avoid it, but this is Tiny. There’s no avoiding her when she’s looking for answers.

“Is it because of your mother?” My body freezes as if ice water has been thrown over me. I sit on the edge of the bed, my back to her as I try to focus on my breathing. Deep inhale, slow exhale. “Do I look like her?”

I could lie and tell her she’s crazy, but that’s not the last impression I want to leave of myself with her. So I turn and say, “A little.”

She nods in acceptance and moves down to the end of the bed, sitting there and looking at me as a sharp knock comes at the door.

“Yeah!” I call out. “I’m coming.”

I keep eye contact with her as I dress, making sure she sees the agony I’m in, but also that I’m not abandoning her.

“I think Torrent is going to kill me,” she confesses as my heart stalls in my chest.

“Does he threaten you?” I can feel my hands beginning to grow numb as I clench them by my sides.

“No,” she whispers. “But I can see it in his eyes. The way he looks at me tells me he wants nothing more than to see me bleed. It’s not as bad as back in that temple, but it’s there.”

“I don’t think they would force you two together if it went against their plans,” I try to reassure her. “I will make the conditions clear if I can’t get her to release you. I know this sounds insane that I can’t just fight my way out of here with you, but they will use you as an example to teach me obedience. Tell me you understand.”

“Why does this feel like I’ll never see you again?” Her chin dimples as she forces herself not to cry. “Don’t do anything stupid, Squall.”

My hand glides along her cheek as another knock sounds at the door. I want to tell her something I’ve only ever told one other person. The impulse to just lay everything out in the open is overwhelming.

“Squall?” Tears finally escape the confines of her eyelids to slip down over her cheeks in a slow descent of despair. No, she’s better off without me dragging her in deeper.

“I won’t do anything stupid,” I repeat, and lean down to kiss her cheek. “I better go before they bust in here.”

“Okay.” She nods as I turn away, forcing myself to walk to the door and give the handle a tug. When it doesn’t budge, she lets out a sarcastic chuckle. “You can’t open it from the inside.”

Right.

The lock is disengaged and I come face to face with the guards, trying my best not to smash their faces in. I need to think of her.

I follow them out of the building, knowing I just left behind the last remnants of my soul. I have never felt so empty in my entire life.

## **TORRENT**

I did what I was supposed to, but instead of going to the hotel with two guards, I decided to take a red eye back to headquarters. I can’t describe the feeling inside of me, but I refuse to ignore it. My insides feel like they’re on fire and I can’t help but think it has something to do with Squall. I swear if he’s done something stupid to rescue that bitch, I will kill her and him with relish.

The car pulls up in front of the building and I don’t bother to pull my hood up to cover the blood in my locs. This anxious feeling inside me only grows when I see Luciphia waiting for me in the lobby.



“What happened?” I demand as I stride inside, catching the eye of one guard, his face screwing up with disgust. I stick my forked tongue out at him and turn back to my leader. “Tell me.”

“You have no authority to demand anything from me,” she snaps, and I hiss into her face, making the guards gather in close.

“Try again. You and I both know I am the only one who can do the jobs you’re asking.” I turn and growl at a guard whose breath is heating the back of my neck. “What has happened?”

“Squall has been camping outside on the street,” she says with a sweet, saccharine smile.

“Yes, I know,” I admit with a snarl. “What of it? You have the most important person in his life here.”

“Two most important people,” she corrects me with a smirk. I don’t rise to her taunting because I know there’s more to why she’s bringing up Squall. When I don’t bite, she rolls her eyes, reminding me of the girl I was once close to. “I let him in here to see her—”

Before she can continue, I turn on my heel and head for my prison cell. The one I have to share with the woman who has a claim on my man.

“Take it easy on her, Torrent,” Shereen calls to my retreating back. “He sure as hell didn’t.”

“Don’t react,” I tell myself under my breath. “Do not fucking react.”

I hear the hurried footsteps of the guards behind me, struggling to keep up as I stride down the narrow corridor to the room. I swear when I take a deep breath, I can smell the notes of cinnamon and clove. He was here. I almost want to turn around and go right back outside to see if he's still sitting in his car, and if he is, I will rip his fucking heart out of his chest. I am done playing this game with him.

Tiny will not be leaving this fucking place alive, and I wanted him to get the fuck over her. But once again, Luciphia found a way to put a wrench into my fucking plans.

“Unlock it,” I snap as the guards hurry forward. The key slips in the lock and the *click* sounds so loud in the quiet space around me. I shove inside and quickly shut it at my back, finding myself plunged into darkness.

The sole window in the room is offering no light from outside, so I head to where I know a table lamp sits and run my fingers along the cool ceramic base until I find the switch. The golden light sends a wave of illumination, revealing her luscious frame curled up on the bed. She's breathing heavily while in deep sleep, her back moving with the long inhale.

My nostrils flare as I breathe in the scents around me, then my teeth clash together as I piece together just what happened in here mere hours ago. I can smell the scent of Squall's soap, her vanilla body spray, and then their combined scent of release. It makes me vibrate with anger, but it also has me hardening with its potency. How can I ignore the scent of my first lover, the man who gave me light when I was drowning in

darkness? Does it matter that it's completely saturated all over her body? Not right now.

Once again, my nostrils flare as my eyes slowly skim over her form, breathing in vanilla, cloves, and sex. Then they stop on the baby blue pair of boy-cut underwear she's wearing, exposed by the t-shirt raised over her hips. My cock jerks painfully, craving the warmth only a pussy can give, and when I skim over the space between her spread legs, I find her wet through the material.

She's seeping with his release and instead of being disgusted, I want nothing more than to taste it.

I let my trench coat drop to the floor, adding my shirt—still covered in blood—with it as I crawl onto the bed, not caring if I stir her. She doesn't move as her breathing remains even, and I grin, knowing Squall tired her out. I'm no longer raging with anger. It's manifested into something vile and debased, and I can't bring myself to care. She'll be dead soon, anyway.

I hook a finger into the side of her panties, right along the spot saturated with cum. I can fucking smell it and it wipes any remnants of logic. I can't help myself. I want to taste him inside of her.

Pulling the panties aside, I take a deep inhale as I stare at her glistening folds, the pink lips looking like a fucking dewy tulip. My finger drags along her pussy, dipping a little into the pooling cum dripping from her core, then to her clit. I stroke around it in lazy circles, using their combined release to coat it. She stirs a little, mumbling something in her sleep, but then

she's back to blissful oblivion as I lean forward and lick the exposed bits of her pussy. My tongue dips inside her core, scooping out whatever I can, then the flavor I know so well explodes in my mouth. It's different, but familiar. I would even venture to say it's better mixed with her essence.

I continue to eat her as my hand slips into my pants, stroking my cock. I'm so close, knowing I won't last long at all. My balls tighten as I suck the mixture of releases into my mouth, paying special attention to her hard and pulsing nub. She's close too, and still asleep... I think. I don't even care.

Just as my cum spurts into my hand, she begins to pulse around my tongue, calling out for Squall in her sleep. The fog of desire clears and hearing his name from her mouth brings back the anger. With my cum still in my hand, I pull it out and look down at it, knowing what I'm about to do is all kinds of wrong. With the absence of a moral compass, nothing governs my lack of boundaries, so I know I'll sleep well regardless of what I do.

I scoop the cum out of my hand and replace what I ate out of her pussy. She'll never know the difference. Cum is cum to a whore.

Once I'm done, I cover her back up with her soaked panties and head into the bathroom. I need to scrub the scent of her off my face and the taste out of my mouth. Hopefully that helps me to forget whatever it was that just happened.

I'd be worried about procreation if killing her was still up in the air, and if it was indeed up in the air, this would be the

moment I solidified the plan.



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# CHAPTER EIGHT

*Torrent*

LOVING BEGINNINGS  
ORPHANAGE - 1990

I STEP OUT OF the confession chamber, beside the one Shereen and I lit the Bible on fire in, and smile for my brother and his weird band of friends. “That went well.”

“Victor,” Raiden growls as he steps forward. “What are you doing?”

“If I thought for one second you could handle it, I’d tell you. But the truth is, *big brother*, you can’t. If I leave everything up to you, you will tell us to endure the abuse, to eat the gruel, and to be good Christian boys until we’re eighteen and free. Sure, that’s fine for you three, because I’m the one who killed their beloved priest and at the center of their hatred.”

“Are you saying you’re the only one who’s been abused?” Haynes asks, his voice sounding low and dangerous. The voice I can associate with a murderer. He and I have at least that in common.

“I killed your abuser for you. If I hadn’t, you’d probably be in that basement right now, fucking Shereen while the asshole jerked his dick.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth,

the air around us changes. My brother and Sval turn to look at Haynes, horror etched into their features, but he's too busy grinding his jaw and staring at me with murderous intent.

“You're playing a dangerous game, Victor,” he finally says, his voice like concrete, hard and unyielding. “You're on your own. I have been eaten up with guilt for what happened to you in that basement as well, but no more. I'm not helping you kill anyone and I won't hide the truth from the cops this time when they come because another has been killed. Father Robert deserved what came to him, but what these nuns are doing is nothing like that.” He turns on his heel and strides out of the church, tearing the rift between us wider with every step, creating a chasm by the time he's out of the door.

“Victor, he's right. What you are becoming is dangerous. You can't kill everyone who treats you wrong,” Raiden tries to reason, but all he's doing is showing me I truly have lost my brother as an ally. Then he confirms it when he turns away from me too and chases after Haynes. Poor, burned and defiled, Haynes.

Finally, I turn to look into a pair of ice-blue eyes, the same ones that never waver in their loyalty to me, and I search for that now.

“I'm not going anywhere,” Sval murmurs, his shoulders deflating with each word. “I couldn't desert you when you need us most.” I don't understand what it is that sends my own brother away but makes Sval stay. I won't lie to myself and



say it doesn't hurt, because it does, but I've got bigger things to worry about.

"Promise me you won't involve those two." I thumb toward the exit where Haynes and Raiden walked out of.

"You have my word." He sounds dejected, but when his eyes meet mine, I see the sincerity. "What do we do now?"

"Those Sisters will keep her in that basement because they like how much she freaks out down there. Shereen knew they would do that. Even so, she didn't desert the plans." It's a reminder to him to be strong, regardless of what happens. When he gives me a nod, I continue, "They are setting up for dinner right now, so they won't start the punishment until afterward. We go into that room and eat our fucking gruel, then we head out for chores. Only we go to the basement and wait instead."

I grab his arm and lead him out of the church, his skin warm inside my palm. From the first moment I saw Sval, I felt a pull toward him. I had never felt that way before and we became friends. He doesn't treat me like a kid or a burden.

Dinner is just as disgusting as any other meal, but I scarf it down, knowing it'll give me the strength I need to accomplish my plan. My brother and Haynes are sitting at another table, but Sval is right across from me, slowly scooping his spoon into the gray blob on his plate and forcing it into his mouth. I can feel the looks my brother is tossing at us, but I don't care, he's chosen his side.

“Evening chores, then prayers!” Sister Jane calls out. I look over my shoulder to find her grinning at me, the sight sinister. “And prayers tonight will be done on your own. Sister Mary and I have business to attend to.”

I know exactly what *business* that is, and I plan on fucking it all up ... permanently.

“They know,” Sval whispers as he drops his spoon back to his plate. “They know we’re going to try to help her.”

“Good.” I grin. “It’ll be even better when they realize they’re the ones who need the help.”

The bell sounds, letting us know dinner is done, and since Raiden and Haynes’ chores are to clear up the dishes after meals, they can’t try to stop us. I’m still on toilet duty and have been since I killed the asshole priest. That probably won’t change until I’m out of here. Sval has laundry sorting, which puts him perfectly near the basement.

When I walk by Haynes and my brother, I can’t help but jab Haynes with one last thing, knowing it would hurt more than any physical weapon. “After everything she’s done for you, you’re leaving her there to suffer alone. In *that* basement ... that *hell*.”

My brother calls my name as I keep walking by, my eyes never leaving Sister Jane’s as I leave the dining hall. Sval stays close behind me, never wavering when Raiden calls for him to stop. It makes me feel vindicated in the decision I made to separate myself from the weak.

Sister Jane follows us out, standing at the doorway to watch where we are going, and so, just like our plan, we part ways. Me to the toilets and Sval to the laundry.

## TINY

My eyes stay closed as I slowly come out of my sleep, trying desperately to cling to the dream I had of Squall. He was lying on the bed as I rode his face, uncaring if I suffocated him to death. My core pulses with aftershocks of the amazing orgasm I had in my sleep, clouding my senses as I try to sink back into it.

That is until I hear the shower.

My eyes open and I find myself on my side, the blanket thrown off my body and the light from the small window telling me it's dawn. I stretch and wince when I feel how sore I am, and if that wasn't enough proof that Squall being here was real, the feel of his cum slipping from my pussy is.

I don't have much time to reminisce because the shower stops, and I know exactly who it is inside that small bathroom. He's back early and I can't stop the anxiety that begins to form a ball of fear inside my stomach. Does he know Squall was here?

Guilt eats at me suddenly and I can't figure out why. I owe Torrent nothing and his relationship with Squall has nothing to do with me. Even though I know all of that is true, I still feel like the other woman.

He steps out of the bathroom with nothing on, his body moist from the shower and his cock hanging heavy between his legs. I swallow down at the sight of it, my cheeks heating with embarrassment. I'm not attracted to him, I convince myself. I'm just coming off the effects of a sex dream with Squall.

"Shower is free." He shoots me a pointed look over his shoulder with a sniff. "You need it."

Usually I would retort, tell him to shut up, but I seem to have lost the ability to form speech as my cheeks continue to heat.

He clicks his tongue and bends to the duffel bag on the floor, unzipping it to pull out a pair of boxers. I can't take my eyes off him as he slowly rises, his back to me as he pulls them on, the muscles bunching in his ass with the movement. Okay, so his body is sculpted to near perfection. Why wouldn't I look?

"Did you kill someone again?" I finally find my voice. "Were you showering the blood off?"

He turns slowly to pin me with a heated look and instead of seeing the threat of murder, I swear it's lust. "Does it get you off? Me murdering people?"

"God, no," I scoff and push myself off the bed, taking his advice for the shower.

"God has nothing to do with what I do. Quite the opposite, really," he murmurs as he watches me closely. I don't miss

how the front of his boxers tent as my shirt slips back down my thighs. My still *wet* thighs.

“I’m taking a shower,” I declare as I grab my clothes from the day before off the chair and move around him. His scent has me stalling to do a discreet inhale, letting pine and mint wash over me. It’s got to be Stockholm. I’m not crazy.

“Is that an invitation?” he drawls, his voice lowering an octave and sending shivers down my spine.

“No!” I retort and roll my eyes, hoping he doesn’t see the quickening of my breathing and the red I know is coating my cheeks.

I hurry into the bathroom and shut the door, wishing again that there was a lock. Hopefully, he’s too tired from all his murdering to bother with me and he’ll fall asleep before I even get out.

I turn the water to scalding, hoping it burns the lust right out of me. All of this must be stemming from what Squall and I did last night, and I’m still riding the high of the dream as well. The dream was fuzzy in certain places, but I could’ve sworn I was running my fingers along locs instead of straight hair.

With a curse, I step into the spray and gasp at the temperature. The heat of the water hits my skin like cinders from a bonfire, burning away the thoughts of Torrent and his forked tongue. I turn my face into it, letting the water hit my scorching cheeks and I massage my fingers into my scalp. I could try to scrub the thoughts from my mind, but I’m literally

forced to stay inside a small box with the man, making pretending he doesn't exist difficult.

I grab for the soap when a large hand wraps around my wrist and spins me in place. A scream dies on my lips as I look into two inky pools of black, the color boiling with heat.

“Don't do that,” he *tsks*. “Don't wash me away.”

“What?” I whisper hoarsely as I try to yank my arm from his grip.

“My seed, Tiny.” He smiles as his tongue brushes along his bottom lip. “I put it inside you earlier as you slept and called out for my man.”

“You're lying,” I gasp and sharply pull away from him, only to be snapped back into his body and feeling his cock hard and pulsing on my lower stomach. My pussy throbs in answer, making more cum slip out of me.

“Why would I lie?” His statement gives me pause because this is Torrent. Why would he lie?

“Get off me.” I struggle against him as he grins down at me, clearly amused by my torment. “Don't touch me!”

He quickly releases me and steps back, the sudden loss of his body throwing off my balance. I try to right myself but only end up slipping on the tile under my feet. My body crashes into him and his hand grabs the back of my head as he slams his mouth onto mine. I should be fighting this, hating every second, but instead my mouth opens eagerly under his as he backs us into the spray.

I thought kissing Torrent would be like kissing a snake, but it's not at all. It's sensual, all-consuming and thorough. He leaves no part of my mouth untouched, branding himself inside of me. My mind falls blank and I let myself feel as he slips his hard cock between my thighs. I literally purr into his mouth at the feel of him when he wrenches his lips off mine.

“You fucking whore!” He throws himself off me and backs away as I stumble back against the wall, the cold tile pulling me from my need-filled haze. “This is what I mean. You stripping bitches will fuck anything, given the chance.” Then he turns and storms from the small shower stall, grabbing his discarded boxers along the way.

Shame and guilt pool inside of me as I slide down the wall and land on my ass with a sob. I really am a whore.

## **SQUALL**

Torrent's back disappears inside the building as my phone rings. It's been two hours since I got to spend time with Tiny, and I'm craving more. She cracked open a bit of the trauma I packed away at the age of twelve and forced me to see where it began. With my mother.

I pull my phone from my sweater pocket, its relentless ringing setting my teeth to grind. Raiden's name blinks from the screen and I exhale a breath before answering.

“Hey.” I lean back in the seat. “What's up?”

“There's been another one.” He sounds tired but alarmed.

“He’s been gone since late last night and just came back,” I inform him. “It’s Torrent doing Luciphia’s bidding. I told you he is the Vanquisher.”

“The Vanquisher doesn’t hunt Magistrates,” he counters. “Nor do they tie up the spouse to watch the torture.”

“Tell me that doesn’t sound like Torrent’s brand of killing,” I groan. “Why would she kill the members of the Order?”

“It’s been done before,” Raiden tells me. “When a new Luciphia comes into power, she can decide who lives to serve her and who is sacrificed and replaced, but she does it herself, not the Vanquisher. She is meant to use their sacrifices for herself.”

“We can’t begin to tell Shereen’s motives. What would make the former coveted Vanquisher kill the Luciphia? And why is she now killing all her loyal Magistrates?” I run a hand down my face, wishing this would just all be over. I’m tired of running from one organization to another. My entire life’s achievements have been celebrated with a thread of fear woven through them. I’ve reached my max capacity, and this whole situation with Tiny is tipping me over the edge.

“I had heard stories from Kenny about the previous Luciphia. The Magistrates we sacrificed on my birthday were some of her most loyal friends. She killed so they would be in the Order... Her Order. She traveled the world in her private jet and it took two weeks, but by the end, she had the blood of twelve people on her hands.” He takes a deep breath, then continues, “Kenny told me she ate every one of their hearts.”



“Ate them?” That’s not how it’s supposed to be.

“Yeah, every one. I always feared her even though we never met her. Something told me she was more evil than anything we experienced in that home.” I want to tell him he didn’t experience much, that his abuse barely cast a shadow over what Haynes and Victor endured. Even me in some cases, but I can’t say it. We all suffered, and Raiden suffered with us.

“Shereen hasn’t left this building, not while I’ve been here,” I inform him. “She’s not out there eating the hearts of the Magistrates. Torrent is doing her dirty work for her. Did Edward say anything about replacements?”

“Nothing about replacements, but he was shaken about the scene. He said the carnage was over the top from the photos he saw. The wife was forced to watch it all, and it looks like he coated her in the husband’s blood as well.” I can imagine all too well the bloody aftermath of Torrent’s kill. I’ve seen the haze come over him before and he doesn’t stop until he’s been sated. “Maybe Luciphia is planning something to help us.”

“This is Shereen, Raiden. We have to remember that. She has always been one to make her own rules. She’s only ever really been loyal to herself,” I snap as anger courses through me. She has the two people who mean the most to me locked in a room together, toying with Torrent like a mouse to the cat.

“She was until that night,” he whispers, and my heart begins to beat. “Everything changed after that, and even though she was long gone when we left that place, I think she’s been waiting to settle the score.” When my silence stretches on, he

continues, “I know you haven’t told me everything yet, but I think it’s time I heard the rest of what happened that night. I’ve always wondered what part you and my brother had in her agony.”

I haven’t told him everything because the thought of even revisiting my memories sends my heart into overdrive. I buried that night deep in the recesses of my mind, and when Shereen pulled away, I will admit I was relieved. I didn’t want to face her every day and see the pain reflecting in her dark brown eyes. I was a coward, and I still am.

“Squall,” Raiden calls into the phone. “Where are you?”

“I’m outside of the building still,” I say, my mouth forming the words, but my mind is hurdling quickly into the past.

Raiden must sense it because he tells me to stay put and not to drive.



# CHAPTER NINE

## *Squall*

### LOVING BEGINNINGS ORPHANAGE - 1990

**A**BOUT A HALF AN hour later, Victor finds me folding sheets in the laundry room, my skin moist with anxiety. I've been folding and refolding the same sheet, my hands trembling with fear. I don't want to go into that basement and I'm afraid if I tell Victor that, I'll end up killed in my sleep.

"Look what I got," he whispers as something slips down from his sleeve.

I gasp at the sight of the serrated steak knife and drop the sheet to the floor. "How'd you get that?"

"I snuck into the kitchen while the cook was in the garden. We have to go. I saw a Sister coming back for the next round of checks." He yanks on my arm, and I stare at him in shock. I don't give much resistance as he drags me down the corridor leading to the basement. "Sval!" he hisses. "Keep moving."

I want nothing more than to push him down and take back that knife, then force him to the bedroom. The feelings swirling in my stomach are telling me something and I'm nearly sick with fear. I grew up trusting my intuition, but since

I've been in this building, I've thrown it out the window multiple times.

With a longing look over my shoulder, I debate whether or not to run and get Raiden, but we're suddenly in front of the basement door and there wouldn't be any time to stop Victor.

"Did you hear that?" he whispers, pressing his ear to the door.

The hairs along my arms stand straight as a piercing cackle rings from the other side of the wooden slab. Just by the tone alone, I know it's Sister Jane. I choke on the terror climbing up from my chest, invading my throat and cutting off my air.

The laugh is soon followed by a scream, the sound sending my heart into a crescendo as Torrent lunges for the door handle to rip it open. I grab the back of his shirt with a hiss. "Don't! They'll hear us!"

"They're hurting her," he whispers back, his eyes narrowed in anger. "We have to help her."

I want to beg him to turn around and come back with me to the laundry room. The urge to run is bubbling up inside of me as a ringing begins to invade my ears. The room suddenly becomes hazy as I tighten my hold on Victor.

"They could kill us here," I whisper, the sound panicked. "They don't care about us, Victor."

He disregards my pleas and opens the door quietly, the sound of Sister Mary's chuckling filtering up at us. Bile swirls in my stomach combined with the fucking gruel we ate at

dinner, and I swallow it back down in an attempt not to draw attention to us. Victor hauls me toward the pews as my eyes finally do a sweep over the place, and I nearly pass out when I see Shereen being held down on the altar by Sister Mary while Sister Jane paces in front of them.

“You children are out of line,” she snaps, her back to us. “The way you speak to your elders is disrespectful. What you and those boys say Father Robert did is despicable!”

“He did do it! He was hurting us!” Shereen bellows, only to have Sister Jane stop moving, and I watch in horror as her arm drops from her chest with a long whip hanging from her hand.

“Shit!” Victor hisses, the sound echoing around the cavernous room. I quickly duck us behind a pew and wrap my hand around his mouth, praying we haven’t been seen.

“Did you hear that?” Sister Mary asks.

“No,” Sister Jane replies at the same time Shereen screams, “You’re both going to die tonight!” My heart stalls in my chest, and both Victor and I freeze.

“Who is going to kill us, child?” Sister Jane says as we hear the snap of a whip, then Shereen’s cry of pain. “Why would you make such bold threats?”

“Victor!” Shereen yells, the sound bouncing off the walls like a damning echo. “He’s been planning everything. He hates you two and he asked me to help him kill you.” Victor begins to vibrate in my arms as Shereen continues to blurt everything out to the Sisters. “He is going to get a knife from the kitchen

and he's bringing Sval so he can hold you down while Victor carves out your eyes."

"Bitch," Victor hisses as his plans are revealed, and something inside of me snaps with relief. We can leave now and Shereen is surely done being punished. Then the cold realization dawns on me. They will come for Victor if they believe her.

My hand grips back over his mouth as the silence of the room descends on us like a suffocating blanket. "Go get Victor," Sister Jane demands. "And his *big* friend, Sval."

"Yes, Sister," Sister Mary mumbles, and then we hear the shuffle of her feet as she hurries up the aisle. She's coming directly for us and there's nowhere we can go to avoid it. Victor realizes it a second after I do and when Sister Mary's skirts appear beside us, her gasp has Victor slashing that knife outward. I watch as the sharp tip grazes the material and snags in the folds before her foot connects with his head.

She reaches forward and yanks him to his feet, forcing me to get up with him. Sister Jane laughs from the dais, her cackle sounding like a witch's as we're dragged to the front.

"They really had a knife," Sister Mary says, her voice filled with shock. "They were back there waiting for the perfect moment to strike."

We are both forced to our knees in front of a trembling Shereen. She has her arms wrapped around her thin legs, and I can see from here her shirt is shredded on her back. Tears are

running down her cheeks, making her eyes look lighter than the deep brown they usually are.

“You fucking sold us out!” Victor snaps at her.

“I had no choice,” she whimpers. “They wouldn’t stop.”

“I wouldn’t have done that to you!” Victor straightens just as Sister Jane’s whip lashes against his back, making him fall to the ground with a scream.

“Stop!” I bellow as I scramble in front of him, willing to take the next blow.

“Look at that,” Sister Jane sneers to Sister Mary. “These two are budding gays.”

“That is punishable by stoning,” Sister Mary adds, as they both snicker. “We have large stones in the garden.”

“They aren’t gay,” Shereen sniffs.

That gets her another lashing, making her fall forward to the floor in front of us with a scream. Her back is now fully visible and the skin beneath her shredded shirt is angry and swollen, a few spots welling with blood.

I watch with horror as Sister Jane’s arm raises again with every intention of hitting Shereen one more time when I cover her with my own body, taking the lash for myself. The pain is sharp and immediate, like striking flame to gasoline. I clench my teeth to keep from crying out because I’m getting the feeling these twisted Sisters are enjoying the sounds.



“He really is a big protector,” Sister Jane says to Sister Mary with a chuckle. “But he can’t protect both at once, can he?”

I turn in time to see her kick Victor in the face, his nose immediately spouting with blood and then her whip comes down onto the thin material of his shirt over his stomach. I choke on a sob as the tender flesh is easily ripped open and blood quickly colors his shirt red.

“No!” I stand, clenching my fists at my side. “Touch him and I’ll kill you.”

It’s a quick flash, but I saw it. Fear was nestled there in Sister Jane’s cold, gray eyes, and when she blinks it away, it’s replaced by a cunning glance. “You are a big boy, aren’t you?” she purrs, giving me a slow once-over. “Okay, I have an idea. You choose who gets the rest of the deserved punishment for the antics today, and that includes the attempted murder of Sister Mary’s skirt.” This causes Sister Mary to snort as I mull over her words.

“What?” I ask, not quite sure if what I’m hearing is real.

“Pick who gets the discipline.” She juts her chin to Victor, who’s clutching his bleeding stomach and moaning, and then to Shereen, whose heavy pants of pain fill the basement.

“No!” I scream. “Neither of them. I will take the punishment.”

“Sorry.” She shakes her head. “You are not deserving of it, are you? Did you light the Bible on fire at the church? Did you

try to slice into the flesh of Sister Mary's legs?"

"Yes." My voice wobbles as I finally piece together where this is going. "It was all my idea."

"Now, I should punish you for the lie, but I find it an admirable quality to protect those you care about. I know it wasn't your idea, Sval, because I've been watching these two all week. They've been conspiring against me. Who will it be?" Her foot stomps down onto Shereen's back, forcing her to cry out, and I suck in a breath as she moves toward Victor, the leather of her boot gleaming from the candle's flames as she raises it.

"No!" I cry out before I even realize what I'm saying. "Not him."

Shereen lets loose a wail, my name intertwined with the shrill sound. "You've made your choice," Sister Jane dismisses me and Victor as she turns to Shereen. "Get out of here and clean him up before I change my mind."

I grab up a crying Victor, wrapping his arm around my neck as I drag him quickly off the dais. Shereen's cries for help echo behind me as I move toward the door.

"Get her back up on that altar," Sister Jane instructs. "Let's make sure those fingers never play with fire again."

**TORRENT**

This time I took the fucking chair, unable to sleep beside her, knowing I almost did the unthinkable in that shower. She was just with Squall and if I hadn't found my bearings in time, she'd have been with me too. *Whore.*

I didn't want to feel her warmth or smell her scent in such close quarters on the bed. I won't admit to myself just how far I almost took it, or still want to take it, and having her body near mine would wipe the last of my restraint. I don't want her. I only miss Squall and smelling him on her sent me over the edge.

*Yes, that's it.*

My neck cracks as I sit up on the chair as my gaze falls to the woman wrapped in a blanket, the one who cried herself to sleep last night. I won't be her step-in for the man she really wants. If it came down to it, she would always pick him and I don't really care either way. I care about him, not her. He's the only one I would choose if I was forced to do so. I would die for Squall, but not before making sure he understood what I was doing.

I know I'm selfish and I have long stopped trying to change that about myself. I grew up in shit conditions. I was violently abused, and I think while I'm an adult, I deserve to be selfish.

There's a knock at the door and I turn to glare at it, the noise having interrupted my thoughts of vindication. I stand just as it's unlocked and a guard steps into the doorway.

"You've been summoned," he says before stepping back out and locking the door.

“Summoned for what?” Her voice is husky with sleep and the sound does nothing to deflate my morning wood. If anything, it makes me want to crawl into that bed and force her legs apart. I’d fuck her roughly while slowly suffocating her, chasing my pleasure as she succumbs to death. My cock jerks at the thought and I run a hand over my face before disappearing into the bathroom without answering her.

I just finish my piss and shake myself off when the door flies open and bangs off the washroom wall. I look at the mirror on my right and see her standing in the doorway, her breasts heaving with each breath, the nipples hardening under the thin material of her shirt. Her cheeks are red with fury as those hazel eyes spear me with rage.

“If you thought that would startle me into telling you what you want to know, then you’ve never been raped by a priest or whipped by a nun and it shows.” I move to the sink, standing directly in front of the mirror, and continue to watch her.

She stomps her foot in frustration, making her full breasts bounce with the motion, and making me hard as fuck. “Torrent!” she screams. “Is it about Squall?”

“How the fuck would I know?” I lower my eyes to the sink, willing my cock to deflate. “I’ve just been summoned.”

“Fuck you!” she suddenly bellows and I look up in time to see her flying across the small space, her fists in the air and her face a mask of vexation. “I hate you so much!”

I turn just as her small fist collides with my jaw. I know instantly it hurt her more than me, but my anger has always

burned just under the surface and takes very little coaxing to come out to play. My hand ends up wrapped around her jaw, my fingers digging painfully into the skin as she pummels my chest. Tears run down her face in drops of despair, the salty fluid begging me to make this worse for her.

I grab one of her wrists with my other hand and flip us around, forcing her back to connect with the edge of the sink. Her wince of pain has my cock throbbing, begging for release, and it's then I realize, whatever resistance I had last night has long flown out the small, barred window. She's about to understand what pain entails and I'm going to take my time teaching her.

Tiny's breath gets lodged in her throat when I press my hard cock into her lower stomach, and soon all her fighting ceases. "Let me go, Torrent."

"Tell me this isn't what you want. That this isn't what your pussy is weeping for." I bury my face into the crook of her neck and lick her skin, drawing her taste into my mouth. Just when she relaxes against me, I decide her first lesson in trust is needed. My teeth nip at the sensitive skin, making her moan until I clench harder, not stopping until she's screaming under me and her blood floods my mouth.

"Are you fucking crazy?" she yells as she tries to push me off. I release her wrist, my other hand still firm around her jaw, letting her continue to try to push me away as I lick up her blood. She tastes like wanton desperation.

My fingers grip the thin material of her panties and I rip them off, throwing them to the floor. She bucks against me, but all that's doing is showing me just how well those hips will take my cock. Tiny sucks in air, readying to scream, when my fingers find her pussy. She's slick with arousal, just like I knew she would be. Tiny is a whore and with a cock in close proximity, I knew she wouldn't be able to resist.

I find her clit hard and pulsing as I force her head to face me, squeezing my fingers tighter into her cheeks. "How wet am I going to find this pussy hole, Tiny?" I taunt as I slip past her clit and toward her core. "Are you fucking dripping for my fat cock?"

She whimpers and shakes her head, but I can feel her legs trembling with the task to keep her standing. I slam two fingers deep inside her, finding her fucking saturated. Her pussy clenches around the invasion, but she keeps her eyes on me as they fill up with tears. This time it's shame I see glittering back at me, because Tiny here wants me and my cock. I can fucking smell the yearning coming off her in thick waves.

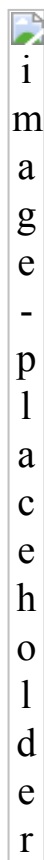
I fuck her roughly with my fingers, forcing her to take them and she does, widening her legs for me as more tears slip down over her cheeks.

"Do you want me to fuck you, Tiny? I could stretch this pussy with my cock and watch you cry through the pain. I want nothing more than to watch you bleed all over me." Her pussy tightens with my words and she's right there near the

finish. Just a few more thrusts and I'll have her milking my fingers.

The outer room's door opens just as she flies over that edge, her eyes like frozen orbs, staring at me in shock while she says my name hoarsely. Her pussy clenches around me as she comes, and I hear a throat clear in the other room. I release her face and step back, slowly dragging my fingers from her dripping pussy. I hold them up between us before dragging my hand down her cheek, then back up to the other, wiping the evidence off me.

“Always proving me right, Tiny,” I sneer and head out of the room.



Her gloved hands drum along the arm of her throne-like chair as I stand in front of her, letting her scrutiny wash over me with nothing more than slight irritation. Maybe Tiny can be useful if she continues to drain my anger.

“You’re fucking your boyfriend’s girlfriend,” Luciphia snickers. “How delightful.”

“Not technically,” I retort. “Or maybe you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference, having only Haynes to compare to.”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” she grits out as she leans forward.

“If you thought for one minute, I would be both fearful *and* obedient to you. You were fucking wrong.” I give her my best smile, showcasing all of my teeth and dimples.

“You have two more targets,” she snarls, her face distorted with anger. “This next one sends you to California and out of my hair for a few days. Try to be a little less messy this time.”

“Your wish is my command, my lady.” I give an exaggerated bow as she huffs out a breath.

“When I agreed to your terms of having Squall’s woman here, I was anticipating the finale and how he would react when you’d ultimately rip the heart from her chest. But now I am wondering what will really happen,” she says with a ripple of amusement in her voice. “Whose heart will you really shatter, Victor?”

**SQUALL**



I wake up in Raiden's hotel room, having no recollection of how I got up here and ended up on the couch. It's early dawn as the sun fights to be seen around the gray haze hanging in the sky. It looks like another snowstorm is coming and I can't help the grin that comes over my face. It reminds me of Tiny and when we first met. She said my name was fitting because I was cold and dangerous.

Thoughts of her immediately have my heart plummeting as I quickly straighten on the couch. I should be there at the building, watching for anything suspicious.

"Chill, I have a car there." Raiden's voice penetrates the anxious bubble around my head as I deflate, my shoulders slumping forward.

"I need to be there," I tell him as my head begins to pound. "Shereen could be up to something and she could hurt Tiny."

"Because of what happened that night at the orphanage?" Raiden asks, as he sits in a chair across from me. "Make me understand what we're dealing with here, Squall."

I look him in the eye and wonder if he can see the shame I'm feeling. I've lived with the guilt of that night for the last thirty-plus years, and sometimes I still wake hearing her screaming my name as I drag Victor out of that basement.

"The scars she has are because of me and the choice I made that night. I was a coward, and the love I had for your brother superseded everything else. I couldn't imagine him being hurt any more than he already had been, and everyone else was

disposable,” I confess as he hands me a tumbler filled with amber liquid. I shouldn’t drink because my tolerance is weak, but I need the courage it provides.

“You’re talking about her hands?” he asks gently as he brings his own glass to his mouth.

“I wasn’t there for that part,” I begin. “But the scars I imagine she has on her back I was there to witness. It would probably match the ones your brother has on his back and stomach, but worse.” I take a sip from the glass and let the liquid burn a trail of fire down my throat and into my stomach.

“I begged you guys to tell me what happened,” he growls and shoves to his feet. “The things Victor endured in there, it’s no wonder his mind is as warped as it is. He trusts no one and least of all me. He thinks I turned a blind eye, but all I really wanted—”

“Was to get out of there in one piece,” I cut him off. “I know, and he knows that, too.”

“Does he? I would disagree with you, Squall. He’s been fighting me for years, and now that we’re older and not on the road, I have no hold over him and it’s harder to clear the fog from his mind.” He takes a drink and leans against the large floor to ceiling window, gazing out at the New York skyline. “When I saw Victor the next day, I knew something happened. He was quiet and almost fearful, so unlike him, and I remember you never leaving his side. Always the most protective friend. Then I noticed Shereen hadn’t come to breakfast or lunch, then again, no sign of her at dinner.”

“Yeah,” I say as I run my thumb along the cool glass, keeping my eyes on the swirling liquid.

“When she did finally reappear a few days later, I was bowled over with relief because I thought she was dead, and do you know who I thought had killed her?” I look up at his confession, knowing exactly who he’s talking about. “Yes, I thought Victor had killed another. The relief was short-lived when I saw the bandages on her hands and the stiff way she walked. I knew something terrible happened, but when she didn’t bother to come near any of us, I assumed you two were involved.”

“She forgave us years later,” I remind him as I drink again, not wanting to remember how empty her forgiveness felt. “She was in love with Haynes.”

“I believe that was the only reason she attempted to move on, but when Haynes carved that pentagram into her skin, she knew we were no better than what we were in that home, becoming as evil as the very people meant to protect us.” He sits back down and levels me with a look. “I think Shereen is using Torrent and Tiny against you. Whatever happened that night, she blames you for it and if you’re telling me you had to make a choice, I believe she’s going to have history repeat itself.”

“I can’t choose between them.” I shake my head. “That would be impossible.”

“She knows that and it can only mean she’s been watching us closely for a long while. You have only known Tiny for

four years and you've only really spent short periods of time together. It means the Vanquisher has stayed close for many years." He's making sense, but I wish he wasn't.

"She's making Torrent kill the Magistrates. Could that be so she can pin all of this on us? Then she'd have the means to execute us by fire." My hand trembles as I bring the last of the whiskey up to my mouth and down it in one gulp.

"She would have the means without that, but it would solidify any case in front of the Order. Shereen is the Luciphia now, she answers to no one. Remember that."

I get up from the couch and look out the window as the first few flurries fall from the sky. I've been living in fear while Shereen has been holding both of the people I care about hostage. But as I stand here and watch the snow float down, I realize I'm stronger than that. If it means I forfeit my life to save them, so be it.

"Don't do anything stupid, Squall," Raiden interrupts my thoughts as if he can hear them. "We will get them out, but I think it's smart to let Torrent finish whatever job she's asking of him. At least we can barter after that."

"There's no negotiating with terrorists," I tell him as I clench my hands at my sides. "She won't listen to our pleas. They will fall on deaf ears. If she does indeed hold a grudge for that night, it would be with me, and therefore, it's up to me to make it right."

"I could call Hail. They were very close at one time—"

“They were forced to be close,” I cut him off. “And remember in Nevada? She helped him once and called them even. No, I need to get over there and speak to her. She’s sending Torrent on dangerous missions, knowing his flare for dramatics could get him caught. I need this to stop now.”

“I’ll come with you.” He rises from the seat, but I stop him with a hand to his shoulder.

“No. You’ve done enough for us over the years, Raiden. You were an amazing leader and someone I look up to. Victor does too. He’s just been clouded with rage. Relax, I promise to make this right.” I hold out my hand for the keys to my car, knowing he must’ve driven us back.

With a heavy exhale, he grabs them from his pocket and places them in my palm. “Be careful and call me.”

I take in the features of his face and take note of all the changes that have happened since Tempest came into his life. His eyes are no longer dull with apathy, they shine with relief and patience. I squeeze his shoulder and turn, etching his face into my mind to hold on to forever. He’s sacrificed so much to keep us alive over the years and I will forever be grateful.



# CHAPTER TEN

## *Torrent*

**H**IS CAR PULLS UP and I hand my bag off to the guard at my side. Only one this time, as if Luciphia feels the scales have tipped and the balance is in her favor. I can't run because she would hurt him and keep me alive to witness it.

"I'll be back," I tell the guard, who looks over our car to Squall's.

"Take your time," he answers as he slips into the driver's seat. This particular guard I've noticed is a bit more slack with me. He doesn't hover and I appreciate it enough not to give him a hard time in return.

I cross the street, knowing Squall is watching me approach, and suddenly my heart pounds inside my rib cage. Something close to guilt washes over me as I think about what I did to the woman he loves this morning and how I can still smell her on my fingers.

He rolls down the window, thinking I will come to speak to him impersonally, maybe shoo him away, but that's not my intention as I head around the vehicle to the passenger side. The guilt I'm feeling washes away as the demon inside of me

laughs at the disheveled appearance of the man I care about. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, and this thing inside of me finds it funny that I was just enjoying myself with the very reason why he's heartbroken.

It's a pity, really.

"What are you doing here? Coming to get round two with the stripper?" I ask as I get in and shut the door.

"Are you able to get her out?" He has a desperation in his voice, one I recognize as his savior complex. "I will drive the three of us far away from them, from Luciphia, and—"

"And what?" I turn to look at him in the seat. "Will the three of us live happily ever after?"

"Do you hate her that much? Why? Because I've slept with her? Torrent, we've slept with many girls together and apart. What is the difference?" If he actually thinks I will buy this explanation, that Tiny is nothing more than a girl he's sleeping with, I will stab him in the fucking eye. The tension drains out of him as I continue to stare at him, the look on my face telling him I'm at the end of my patience. "Fine, she's important to me, but does she deserve this?"

"It's not my fucking call," I lie to him, as if it wasn't me who asked for Tiny in payment for my good behavior. I lie as well as I breathe, and it's become second nature for me.

He leans across the center console and looks me in the eye before saying, "I love you. I hope you know that. I hope you've always known that. For as long as I can remember, you



were the most important person to me. Tiny being in the picture doesn't change how I feel about you." His breath carries the scent of forty-year-old whiskey, telling me he's been spending time with my brother, who is not in Dominica as he was told to be.

"So you've said, Squall." I pull up the collar of my trench as I ready to open the door, but his fingers grip the beard on my chin to pull me into him, his eyes wet with weak tears.

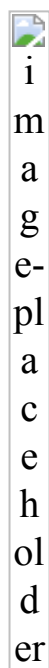
"That night in the home when I chose you over Shereen? I want you to know I would do it again in a heartbeat. I would even choose you over myself. I will always choose you." Then his mouth crashes into mine and I become putty to the only person capable of molding me.

My mouth opens under his, and even though we're in this cheap rental without tinted windows, I don't care who's watching. Our tongues battle as his hand releases my beard to run down my neck and over my chest. I instantly compare the kiss to the one I had with Tiny earlier. He's rough to her soft, demanding to her submissive. And while the thoughts of them both rage through my head, my cock aches as it presses against my zipper. It's been a while since I've had Squall, and with little thought, I rip my mouth from his and say, "Los Angeles. Meet me in Los Angeles."

"Magistrate Christie," he breathes. "You're going after her?"

"Then you know where to find me. Get the stripper off your mind and prove to me you'd always choose me." I leave him

with that as I open the car door and step back out onto the street. My lips are throbbing with the aftershocks of his kiss, and my cock is pressing insistently on my fly, begging for the one thing I could never say no to.



The house is still as the night sky settles and the stars twinkle overhead. The windows are dark; the curtains drawn and shut tight. I look over my shoulder to see the blacked-out sedan idling up the street, waiting to provide me with my quick getaway, but it's the small, red Mazda on the side of the street that gives me pause. Even from here, I can see the illumination of the streetlight reflecting off his near-white beard and I swear I can see the worry in his crystal blue eyes. Squall showed up, proving that he would indeed choose me over all others. I look away with a huff as I walk up the short driveway, not bothering with stealth tonight. Christie knows I'm coming and she knows a fight would do her no good. If

Luciphia wants her dead, there's nowhere she could hide to avoid the death sentence.

If she's smart, she'll take it without much of a fight.

The large, double front doors gleam in the moonlight, the black shellac shining with a high gloss as I reach for the handle and smile when I find it unlocked. Yes, she's aware of what this is. I step in the foyer and drop my hood to gaze around the pure opulence of the place. Its grandeur reminds me of Dominica, and I suddenly feel homesick for Eddy and the island of myths and volcanoes.

My boots echo off the tiled floor as I continue forward toward the kitchen. I can see from here the counters are sparkling clean and the large back patio door is showcasing the clear night sky.

"I knew you would come for me, Vanquisher." As soon as I step into the kitchen, I see her slight form leaning against the island, a glass of wine in her hand and a near-empty bottle beside her. "Let me just finish this bottle and then I will be ready for the sacrifice. Could I make a request?" I incline my head toward her, willing to listen to her last words. "Could you do it in here? The blood will easily clean off the surfaces and my children can keep the home."

I give her a single nod and lean on the counter, watching as she takes a sip from the glass. I could rush her, but what's the point? I am death incarnate, and while I'm wearing this mask, she knows there's no getting out of this situation.

Her red hair looks like burned copper under the dim fluorescent light of her under cabinet fixtures. Her skin is pale, almost translucent, and the dark circles under her eyes show her lack of sleep.

“I have an eleven-year-old and a fifteen-year-old,” she begins, and I huff as I push off the counter. It’s a shame. I thought she had accepted her fate, but here she is trying to tug on my non-existent heartstrings. I grab the glass from her hand and set it on the table with a shake of my head. “I shouldn’t have said that, but do you blame me for trying?”

I shrug my shoulders and nudge her to turn around and drop to her knees. For her cooperation and preparation, I will make this quick. I pull the knife from my pocket and flick the switchblade open, the metal illuminated from the moonlight shining in through the patio door. She begins to tremble but holds her head up high, her bravery giving me pause. She’s stronger than most of the men who’ve pissed themselves in her position.

“Thank you for your sacrifice,” I say out loud, then slash the knife across her throat, sending the blood spraying across the pristine floors.

The demon inside of me crows in victory, urging me to rip open her chest and coat myself in her blood, but as I watch her twitch with death, I realize I don’t want to. No longer am I interested in bathing in another’s blood, especially for an institution I refuse to respect.

I wipe my blade off onto Christie's sweater and give her unruly copper head a pat. One more sacrifice and I'll be free from everything holding me down. The demon inside me preens at the thought of complete freedom and I can't help but grin in return.

The front door shuts behind me and I release the breath I've been holding. I always wait to see if I'll be struck down after a sacrifice. It's the last vestiges of the teachings of the Bible from long ago, clinging to me and making me fearful for a split second afterward.

I whistle as I walk to the sedan and open the door, nodding to the driver in the front. "To the hotel. I need something to eat."

"No red eye home tonight?" he asks, giving me a sharp look.

"No." I shake my head and look into the side-view mirror. The red car follows close behind, the outline of Squall's irritable face visible.

"Will he be staying with you?" he asks as the car turns into the hotel parking lot.

"Yes."

## **SQUALL**

He holds the elevator door open for me, his long, tattooed fingers flexing against the metal and the tips coated in dried

blood. I'm thankful we're the only two in the car as the doors slide close.

"How did Christie take it?" I ask him, my eye on the blinking numbers above the door.

"Surprisingly well," he says as he slips those hands into his pockets. "She knew I was coming. She had accepted her fate."

There was a time, many, many years ago when I first joined this Order, that hearing about a sacrifice would set my blood brimming with excitement. It would rush through every muscle in my body, igniting me with anticipation, but that's changed. This isn't the life I care for anymore ... if it ever was. The only reason I joined the Order was so I could be with my brothers and with Torrent. I could never imagine living a life without him. I'd rather be dead.

"Luciphia put me in the penthouse." I look up to find him side-eyeing me, that dimple on the side of his cheek prominent with his grin. "Maybe she knew you'd be tagging along."

"She seems to be a step ahead of us each time." I nod and chew on the inside of my cheek. "It would seem her plans coincide with our lives a little too well. Don't you think so?"

"She's the Luciphia," Torrent says dismissively with a quick shrug of his shoulders. "Of course she's a step ahead."

It's hard to tell if there was ever a time in which Torrent doubted what we were doing, if anything ever gave him pause. The blood, the sacrifices, the Order itself. Was he ever wary of the things he was doing? It never showed.

The elevator opens and Torrent types in a passcode to open the interior doors. It does indeed seem like Shereen spared no expenses. Maybe this was her way of giving us one last night and it knots up my stomach with fear, because I don't know what that means. Who's surviving, who's not? I can only pray that the two I love get out of this unscathed.

"I need to take a shower." Torrent holds up his bloodied hands and gives me a wink. "There should be a second bathroom in here somewhere." His eyes slowly cast over me with a heated look. I guess we're not sharing a shower. He heads toward what I assume is the master bedroom in the suite and I roam around, passing the small kitchen, then the large sitting room in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows. I find the second bedroom, which thankfully has a connected ensuite. I didn't bring a change of clothes, but coincidentally, the hotel has a robe.

I step into the hot spray, letting it coat over my sore muscles and hoping the warmth will chase away the lingering cold I feel deep in my bones. I'm here to be with the man who's owned me since we were children, but my mind can't stop picturing the blonde-headed woman with sad, hazel eyes. I don't know how I got here, loving two separate people, but feeling loyal to only one. It's always been Torrent and I know if I was forced to choose, my mind would immediately settle on him, but my cold, black heart would ache for Tiny.

Once I feel some of the shame wash away with two days worth of filth, I step out and wrap my body in a robe. I brush my shoulder length, white-blond hair and tie it up into a bun

on top of my head. I look at myself in the mirror, scrutinizing the dark circles under my eyes, the wrinkles around my mouth from constantly frowning, and decide that this life wasn't a great one for me. At nearly fifty years old, I don't see it getting any better. I could blame my mother for deserting me and I could blame the orphanage for their abuse, but ultimately it's me who's to blame. I could have walked away at any point, could have turned my back and forced myself to live a life I would enjoy, but none of that matters now.

I walk out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. The moon shining full and bright through the window makes me pause. I haven't spent nearly enough of my life appreciating the things that are beautiful. I can't remember the last time I looked up to the sky and felt mortal and small.

“Squall!” Torrent calls out. “If your sack isn't clean by now, it's never going to be.”

My mouth curls upward and I immediately feel lighter. I've always felt like he was just beyond my reach, and I never really had the chance to gather him in close, to hold him the way I've always craved. Torrent is hard on himself. He feels unworthy of love and has always closed himself off for fear of what he thinks dwells inside of him.

I find him sitting on the couch holding a glass filled with amber liquid and two cubes of ice. His tastes run as extravagant as his brother's, but where one likes it warm, the other prefers it ice cold. He's also in a robe, the white terry cloth sitting luxurious against his dark sepia skin. He downs



all the liquid in the glass and stands, placing it on the table in front of the couch. I still haven't moved from the spot as he strides toward me, his eyes filled with mischief.

“Why did you follow me here?” he asks as he stops less than a few inches in front of me. Both of us are looking eye-to-eye and I feel my cock stir just from the scent of him alone.

“Because you asked me to.” I reach out and run my finger along the beard on his chin. “When have I ever denied you?”

His fingers wrap around mine, forcing my hand down. “The night you stopped me from killing Tiny.”

“No,” I correct him as I slowly shake my head. “I stopped you from killing me.”

“Is that how you feel?” he asks as he tips his head to the side and releases my hand. “If she dies, you die?”

“Yes,” I answer him honestly, my eyes never wavering from his. “She's innocent and never deserved to be sacrificed.”

“We've sacrificed many innocent women before her,” he reminds me, this time his hand coming up to stroke my cheek. “It goes beyond her innocence. I can see how your heart and hers beat the same rhythm. It makes me want to rip both out of your chests, just to feel them pulse against the palms of my hands at the same time.”

This is why I blame myself for the position Tiny is in, because if I just ignored what I was feeling the moment I laid eyes on her, she would have never been in Torrent's trajectory.

“I can’t let that happen,” I tell him sadly, with a slow shake of my head.

“After tonight,” he says as he leans in close, pressing his mouth to my cheek. “We are through, Squall. I’m no longer yours.”

My heart cracks as I shake my head. “We’re bonded,” I remind him. “There’s no breaking that.”

“After tonight, I will no longer be bonded to you.” He pulls back slightly so he can look me in the eye. “I can’t be Torrent, nor can I be Victor, because my last mission will become impossible.”

“I don’t understand.” I curl my hand into the folds of his robe, pulling his body against mine. “Torrent, I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I need to turn myself over to the demon inside me,” he says as my fist tightens in the robe, anger coursing through me.

“You’re not possessed,” I grind out each word with emphasis, forcing him to hear every syllable.

“Aren’t I?” His tongue slips out between his lips, leaving a trail glistening in its wake.

“You’re just sick,” I admit to him as my forehead drops to his. “You need help.”

“No, Squall,” he growls as he tries to pull away from me, but I don’t let him. “The night he died, the demon left him and entered me.”

“There was no demon.” I give him a shake.

“If I’m sick,”—his fist hits his chest—“then I don’t want to be sick anymore. I don’t want to be here anymore, and the only way I can leave is to finish what I’ve started.”

“You can’t hurt her,” I beg him. “She’s good and pure.”

I feel the tear slip down over my cheek moments before he leans in to lick it off. “I hate her.” His confession is nothing I didn’t already know, and I’m not stupid. The only reason Tiny is still alive is because of me.

“No, you hate me,” I correct him. His forehead falls back against mine, our breaths mingling in the small space between us.

“I can’t be sick anymore,” he says with a quiet sob, causing my heart to shatter. “I don’t want to be here with this sickness inside of me.”

“Take me instead of her,” I plead. “I will go in her place.”

“You’ll come with me?” He runs his nose along mine, the touch lighting my cold skin on fire.

“Always.”

He cradles my face between his hands and kisses me sweetly, the gentle press of his lips like the cool caress of the breeze on a hot summer’s day.

It feels like the kiss of goodbye and I refuse to let that happen, so my hand wraps around his chin, forcing his mouth open under mine and then I take what I want. I kiss him as if

he's the air I need to breathe. My tongue tangles with his as my other hand glides down over his chest and hooks around his waist, dragging his body into mine. His hands cradling my face slip up into my hair and rip it from the bun, forcing it to cascade down to my shoulders.

He releases my lips to run his tongue along my chin and up my cheek, his breath hot on my ear and my cock throbbing in response. He knows every single part of me. Where to touch, where to kiss. No one else knows me like he does.

"How do you want me?" he whispers, his tongue flicking against my lobe.

I rip open my robe and drop it to the floor, pushing him back a few steps. "On your fucking knees."

When we're alone and naked in each other's grasps is when he's the most obedient, and when he falls to his knees without as much as a second thought, I reach out and pat the top of his head as he smirks up at me.

His hand wraps around my cock as he begins to stroke it, and I swear he knows the perfect grip and pace. Just when I'm about to force him to open his mouth, he leans forward, swiping his forked tongue along the tip, collecting the bead of pre-cum sitting there. He moans, rolling his eyes into the back of his head before he closes them, then unhinges his jaw to take me fully into his mouth. I nearly combust at the warmth and the way he envelops me completely, cushioning me as he slowly sucks me into the back of his throat. When he contracts

around my length, I feel my balls tighten, threatening to spill my load prematurely.

He releases me and stands, pulling open his robe and dropping it to the floor. Then his mouth is back on mine as he slowly guides me toward the master bedroom, his hard cock pulsing next to mine. The feel of his velvet length against me is like the sweetest sin. When Torrent and I first started exploring beyond our friendship, we made sure to keep it a secret. It wasn't as accepted back then and we were fearful of what people would think of us. Each time we felt brave enough to come out, something would happen. We got a music deal, then we were going on tour. Our faces were plastered everywhere and eventually we stopped trying to find a way to be together. We've always felt like the other's dirty secret, and maybe that's what's kept it so exciting over the years, but there's no mistake in why we have the symbols carved into our skin. It's for these moments when we're skin to skin and heart to heart.

Once we're in the bedroom, I push his back to the mattress and watch as he lies there, tucking his hands behind his head and flexing his cock, making it bounce against his belly button. Just the sight of him makes my mouth water and I'm overcome with a need so uncontrollable that it always strikes fear into me. When we're on the edge of euphoria, crossing that dangerous line, I never know what I'll be like when I survive it.

I spread his legs with my thighs and lean up, reaching between us to stroke his cock. "Is it going to be you or me

tonight?” I ask him as he stares up at me.

“I’ll let you have it.” He grins. “The pain will be a welcomed relief after what I’ve done.”

I make myself comfortable between his legs, running my hand over his cock and loving how thick it is. He should have chosen the opposite. I’m in the mood to feel some pain tonight, but I give him what he wants because I don’t know when we will be together again. It’s been sporadic over the years and always on Torrent’s terms.

I lick the wide tip of this cock, letting the taste of his salty pre-cum flood my mouth as I continue to work him with my hand. Finally, his arms drop from behind his head as he reaches for me, sinking those long fingers into my hair. I know what’s coming next. Maybe I will have a little pain tonight after all.

“Open.” Just one word coming from his mouth nearly has me coming all over the sheets.

I unhinge my jaw and open my eyes to look up at him, finding him already staring at me. He gives me a soft smile as his hips flex, pushing his cock deep into my mouth, the tip hitting the back of my throat. He pulls back out, but when his fingers tighten, I know what’s about to happen. I relax my jaws and my throat, keeping my eyes on him as he begins to brutally fuck my mouth. His cock pounds into my throat and the sounds of my gagging filters throughout the room. Torrent doesn’t let up when tears course down my cheeks and over his thumbs to splash against his groin. He doesn’t slow down

when I gasp for air, my lungs burning in protest. I do my best to keep up, to try to press my tongue against that rough patch under the head, but I know I've missed the mark with how brutally he's fucking me. He's punishing me and I'm taking it willingly.

His cock jerks against my tongue, and his thrusts become erratic. I know he's almost there, near the euphoria he's chasing. When he looks deep into my eyes, I reach between us and massage his balls, paying close attention to the space between them and his asshole. That's the magic spot. Once I press my fingers into it with quick circles, his hips lift off the bed with a loud moan as cum begins to shoot from his head and coat my mouth.

His cum is thick on my tongue as I release him, leaning up on my knees to look down at his glistening cock saturated with my saliva and his own release. His legs are spread open as he lies on the bed with a sated smile on his face, knowing what comes next. I leaned down, bringing my face close to his balls, and then I spit a long stream of his cum to slip down between his ass cheeks, lubricating the area I'm about to brutally fuck.

I rub his cum and my spit into his asshole, forcing two fingers to spread it open, readying him for my thick girth. He once again becomes a moaning mess on the bed, writhing against the sheets and saying my name. My real name.

"Sval," he says, the sound filled with decades of pain intertwined with a love that's conquered it all.

The rest of the cum is spat into my hand, and then I'm coating my own cock with the taste of him still slick in my mouth. This is what we do. We've never used lube, always opting to use our own fluids. It feels that much more intimate.

I tip his hips upward, spreading his ass cheeks and when the head of my cock touches his asshole, I look him dead in the eye and say, "I love you, Victor." Then I'm pushing into him, the tight hole fighting me at first, but soon enough I'm inside and once I feel the grip he has on my cock and the warmth of his body. My mind shuts down and I turn myself over to what has always been so primal between us.

I'm thrusting into him, the brutal strokes making him cry out as his hands curl into the sheets, his veins popping along his arms, but we never break eye contact. I fuck him through the pain I can see radiating from his eyes, and I don't stop because this is what he wants. My balls slap off his ass, the sound echoing off the walls, combining with our heavy breathing.

I won't last long. It's been ages since I've been inside the man I love and even though I want it to last forever, I know it can't. So I brace myself with a hand on his lower stomach, my fingers sinking into the ridges of his abs. I pick up the pace, tearing into him and finally coming when tears leak from his eyes as he screams. I fill up his asshole and slowly pull out, keeping him spread as my cum mixed with his blood seeps out of him.



With a loud sigh, I fall to the bed beside him, wrapping an arm around his waist and pressing my lips to his temple. “Was I too rough?”

“Never,” he answers quietly. For the first time in a long time, I’m falling into a deep sleep while breathing in the scent of my bonded.

### **Loving Beginnings Orphanage-1991 - Torrent**

It’s been three months since Shereen walked into the dining hall with bandages on her hands and hatred in her eyes. I know she blames me for where she ended up, and I can’t say I care. She deserved it for selling me out. I’ve seen the scars on her hands, sections looking like her skin was melted, and when I asked Haynes what they were, he said burns.

Those fucking Sisters burned her hands because she lit a Bible on fire. I don’t know what lies they told the doctor after that, and I don’t fucking care. Shereen hates us now and every time I pass her in the halls or outside, she gives me a look of promise. She wants me dead. Too bad she doesn’t know what lives inside of me, and as long as I continue to do as he pleases, he won’t ever let me die.

“What’s happening?” Raiden stands from his chair and peers toward the enormous front doors. “I think there are people here.”

“No way.” Haynes stands.

Young children run for the doors, their hopes of finding a family still very much alive, unlike the older kids who just look on with curiosity. We know we're not going anywhere. No family wants to adopt a teenager, they want infants and toddlers.

My eyes skip once again to Shereen as she sits by herself at a corner table, her hands covered in an old pair of gardening gloves to hide the scars. Her curls sway as she looks toward the door too, her hands clenching with the commotion.

"They probably used those candles on her," I murmur to Sval. "I wonder what her back looks like."

"Stop," he snaps, always so fucking sensitive. "Be glad it wasn't you."

"I guess I should thank you, right?" I turn toward him with a sneer. "Would you like a blessing? Just like Father Robert?"

"No," he mumbles, dropping his reddened face to his chest. That was a low blow, and I shouldn't treat my only friend like shit. "Sorry."

"Whatever," I say as I stand. "Let's go see which babies are being taken home today." It's like a lottery of survival. The longer you're trapped inside these walls, the less chance you have of ever making it out.

Before I even make it to the doorway, Sister Mary appears, her eyes narrowing in on me. "Shereen!" she calls out. "Come here."

I stand to the side, making myself seem small and unnoticeable as the others come forward, blocking me from sight. Shereen slowly makes her way to Sister Mary, her eyes downcast and her body curved inward. She's afraid of them now.

"You have someone here to take you home." We all gasp at Sister Mary's words because that can't be right. Shereen is one of the older kids. There's no way she's leaving.

"What?" I scream out as I push my way to the front of the murmuring crowd. "Who would want her? She's damaged!"

Sister Mary crowds in on me, grabbing my arm and giving me a shake. "Shut your mouth," she hisses and turns, dragging me out of the room with her. "Come, Shereen!" she calls out over her shoulder.

"She's really leaving?" I ask, unable to stop the trembling of my voice. "Why?"

"It's probably my sister," Shereen whispers as Sister Mary and I stop to look at her. "She always promised to come get me."

"I'm not letting you leave here without a conversation first." Sister Jane appears in the foyer of the large home just as Sister Mary releases my arm with a shove. "Take those gloves off your hands," she barks at Shereen. I shrink back into the shadows just as Squall appears beside me, providing me with sudden relief. "You're going to tell your sister that you worked the kitchens and these burns are from boiled water."

“What?” I step forward, causing both women to look over at me. “Don’t do that, Shereen.”

“Get out of here!” Sister Mary screams. “Both of you!”

“Shereen, you have to tell your sister what’s happening here. It could save us,” I plead with her and finally she lifts her head to look at me, narrowing her eyes slightly as her lips curve upward into a sneer.

“Not in a million years,” she hisses, as she pulls off the gloves and throws them to the floor. “I hope you stay here and rot.”

Her hands are dark and disfigured, the scars scattered all over the tops and palms. “You’ll let them do that to you and get away with it?” I yell as Sval grabs my arm and pulls me back toward the dining hall. “You’re a fucking coward. You could save everyone here! Even Haynes! Does he deserve to be here?”

Her mouth trembles at the accusation, but her shoulders square and she stands firm. “Yes, if it means you suffer. He chose to be your friend and that’s why he will go down with you.”

She turns her back as the Sisters close in around her, whispering threats, no doubt. Sval shoves me into Raiden, who wraps his arms around me, and that’s when I realize I’m crying. We’re doomed to stay here forever because of me.

“Let’s get our chores done,” Raiden suggests, as he leads me away from everyone and guides me toward our room.

“Why don’t you rest? I will take care of the toilets today.”

“I wish Mom and Dad were still alive,” I sob as I fall onto my bed. “I would rather die than live here another day.”

“Don’t say that, Victor.” Raiden sits beside me and rubs my back. “I’m getting us out of here.”

“You’ve been saying that for years!” I bellow, startling him into standing. “How have you helped us get out? We’re stuck here until I do something about it, just like Father Robert!”

He backs away from me, looking as if he’s afraid, and it makes me wonder what he’s seeing in my eyes. Is it the demon?

“Just rest, Victor,” he repeats. “I’ll take care of the toilets.” And then he’s gone, just like most things in my life. Except for Sval. No matter how mean I am to him, or how many despicable things I do, he sticks around for some reason.

I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling, willing myself to *rest*. Jealousy courses through me at the thought of Shereen getting out of this place and having a family who cares enough to fight for her. Even though it took over three years. I wish I had someone who cared, who would fight for years to save me. I think of Raiden, and I know if he could, he would save me over and over again.

But he can’t.

When it’s clear rest isn’t coming, I get up out of bed and decide to go see Sval. I should go clean the fucking toilets, but if Raiden is giving me a day off, I will take it. Trips to mass in

the basement have been tough, and going there alone is even scarier, but I need to get over the fear of it. I killed Father Robert in there and I was saved from the twisted Sisters' wrath. I shouldn't be afraid of a place I seem to find my courage in.

I hate how I must take the same staircase to the laundry as I would to the basement, and then I give myself a shake. I can do it, and this time, without being a fucking pussy.

I peek out around the doorway of the boys' sleeping room and look down the hall toward the basement door. With hurried steps, I rush down the corridor, only to stop short when I pass by the girls' sleeping room. I take a few steps back and look inside, seeing the bed Shereen usually sleeps in, and another rush of jealousy comes over me. I hope to one day see her again, only to look her in the eye when she's close to death. That would make everything better.

With one last, lingering look, I head toward the basement door, the jealousy quickly turning to anger. I'm angry about being here, about dealing with sadistic adults, and I'm angry with God for not making my life easier. What did I ever do to deserve this place? This Hell?

The door to the basement opens and I flatten myself to the wall beside it, hoping to avoid a Sister. If they see me, I will be forced to clean the toilets and that would make my day even worse.

"Sval!" Sister Mary yells. "These sheets need to be folded better! They're unraveling in my arms!" I step away from the

door to find the Sister standing at the top of the basement stairs, her back to me as she juggles a stack of thin sheets. “Stupid buffoon,” she mumbles, clearly speaking about Sval.

She turns slowly as I fist my hands, her words only igniting my anger and turning it into a boiling rage. I’m tired of hearing her talk shit about us, the abuse she inflicts with her evil partner, and most of all, I really want to hear her scream in fear.

When she sees me standing there in front of her, she gasps and loses her footing on the stair, then quickly righting herself before glaring at me. “Get back to your chores before I get Sister Jane and—”

Her words are cut off as I step forward and give the stack of sheets in her arms a hard shove. The look in her eyes is like a soothing balm over my tortured soul as the blankets are thrown up into the air and her body flies backward toward the steep stairway.

“Tell Father Robert I said hi,” I chuckle as she screams, her body hitting the stairs in dull thuds until she meets the concrete at the bottom with a loud *crack*.

“Sister Mary?!” I hear Sval shriek as I back away from the top of the stairs and slowly make my way back to my room, whistling as the demon inside me rejoices.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN



## *Torrent*

I LEFT HIM THERE while he slept soundly, his fingers only twitching every so often, a sure sign of dreams but not nightmares. My mind was racing and my body wide awake as I laid there beside him, completely sated, but at the same time, longing for something that wasn't mine.

Not yet, anyway.

The sun was just cresting over the horizon when I walked into the lobby of the hotel and found my guard waiting, as if he knew I would appear when I did.

Now I'm back here inside this little room and the sun is about to set, but she sleeps deeply on the bed. There are bags beneath her eyes, as if she was up all night crying, and her mouth is turned down in what appears to be a permanent frown. I'm obsessed with her. Her scent, the way her skin feels, and most importantly, with how much she loves the same man I do. Maybe the very fibers of what stitches them together have somehow entangled themselves inside of me too. I feel her in him, and I feel him in her, but mostly I feel me in each of them.

I drop my trench to the floor, my knife inside of it clanging off the hardwood. Even so, she doesn't move. My shirt is dropped next to it and as I approach the bed, I lose my pants and boxers. My cock stands hard and straining, wanting the one thing I shouldn't covet. I blame the demon inside of me, he's always hungry for more and craving things which are downright sinful.

My knee sinks into the mattress and I wait, seeing if her breathing changes or if a muscle twitches, betraying that she's awake. Still nothing. My mouth curves upward in triumph as I crawl onto the bed on all fours and bend to press my nose to her hair. She smells like the generic shampoo we're given here, but underneath it all, I swear I smell notes of myself on her.

Did I somehow brand her?

Can that happen?

She turns onto her back, making me suck in a breath, waiting for the fight or a fist to the face. Neither happens as she breathes deeply, a soft snore escaping her mouth. I've known no one who could sleep this deeply and without care. To let their eyes close without the fear of being woken up to something horrific. I envy her and I want to ruin it all in one shot.

Tiny likes to sleep in large shirts and small panties, and today, she's wearing a thong. I bet she's down to the wire on the clothes she has and I could demand they be washed, but then I would miss out on moments like this.

I slowly spread her legs as I keep my eye on her face and nearly laugh out loud when she spreads them farther, a moan escaping her. Then my stomach sours as I imagine her thinking of Squall and how hard he fucked her, probably similar to how hard he fucked me. I can still feel him there inside of me.

With a hooked finger, I pull her panties aside and nearly fall into her pussy when I see it wet with whoever she's dreaming about. I nearly combust just watching it and letting the scent of her arousal wash over me. I give myself two seconds to think this through, but I'm barely through the first when I spit on to her cunt, creating enough lube for her to take me. I can't wait any longer and I've never given a shit about how she feels, anyway.

As my spit slips down between her folds, I spit in my hand and quickly glide it over my cock. I don't care about her comfort. This isn't about that. I like my pussy warm and *wet*. I also like them awake and screaming, but I can't deny the appeal this has. I want her to wake up, thinking she's being fucked by Squall, then see that it's me and fight it. A pussy always feels better with a little fight in it.

With her panties still gripped in one hand, I use the other to line myself up with her core, then I'm pushing inside. Tiny tries to close her legs, but my body is in the way, and her brows crease with confusion. She begins to wake up as I thrust about halfway inside, her pussy clenching around me and her throat extending on a moan. Her breathing has changed, and when I draw my cock out a little, her hand slips down over her

mound to circle her clit. I slam in all the way this time, and her breath catches as she continues to play with her clit.

“Torrent,” she mumbles, and my heart stops. I stare down at her as she writhes against my pelvic bone, her hands now traveling to her chest. Her eyes are still closed as she hauls her shirt up over her breasts, then palms them in her hands. I drag in a deep breath, hoping I can hold out long enough for her to wake up and see me. I want to see her reaction.

I roughly thrust into her, making her tits bounce as those eyes open. The first emotion is confusion, but then they widen as her hands abandon her breasts and reach for my face. I expect her nails to rip apart my skin, but when I bend to meet her, anticipating pain, I instead get her gentle caress.

“Finally,” she breathes as she drags me down to her mouth. “I thought I was dreaming.” My thrusts falter as her mouth presses to mine, and I keep my eyes open to make sure this is actually reality. “Harder, Torrent,” she says against my mouth, her words mumbled but clear.

Fuck, am I the one dreaming?

I shake off the surprise and haul her leg up over my hip, opening her up farther as I slam into her, making her tits nearly hit her chin. She gasps and tips her head back on a moan, but that can't happen. I grab her chin tight in my grip and force her to face me.

“Look at me,” I growl with a hard thrust. “Who’s fucking you?”

She locks her hazel eyes on me, the pupils large with her arousal. “You are, Torrent James.”

My next thrust falters as I stare down into her face, her cheeks red with passion. “What about Squall?”

“I don’t know,” she whispers as her hand brushes my cheek. “I want you both. I can’t deny this between us and it’s only growing the longer we’re here.”

My forehead hits hers, our noses brushing as I say, “He just fucked me a few hours ago.”

## **TINY**

Torrent’s confession shocks me more than my reaction to waking up with him inside me. His thrusts soften as he watches my reaction, and I would give anything to see what he’s seeing because I can’t figure out what I’m feeling. Jealousy? Not really. I was with Squall not too long ago too, and I know they’re together in some capacity. Angry? Maybe a little. Did they go off on a rendezvous? Is Torrent really as trapped as I am here?

“You look confused, Marigold,” he husks out, the sound like velvet over my heated skin. “Why?”

“I can’t figure out if I’m jealous or angry. I think it’s more that I wish I was there with you two, instead of being here alone,” I admit as he pulls out of me to sit back on his hunches, his wet cock standing thick and long.

“That would never happen.” He shakes his head. “I would kill you both.”

His words have me leaning up to look at him, my emotions still running high because of what we’re doing and the line we’ve crossed. “Why? How would it be any different from what we’re already doing?”

“I know you fuck him,” he says as he runs a finger along his cock, gathering my juices. “But I couldn’t watch you do it. Out of sight, out of mind.” He sucks his finger into his mouth and moans around it before he falls back over me, slipping my thong back to the side.

“So you wouldn’t care if I fucked someone else as long as you didn’t see it?” I ask as he slams back into me, the intrusion pulling a scream from my throat.

“Did I say that?” He punctuates each word with a hard thrust. “I would kill you if you ever decide to fuck someone else. But not before making you watch me rip the heart from their chest.”

I pull the shirt up over my head, letting it drop to the mattress and giving Torrent a view of what he left on my neck. The wound still hurts, reminding me of the primal exchange we had in the bathroom before he left. His eyes fall to it, and at the same moment, I slip my hand to my clit, knowing I’m right there. He leans forward and swipes his tongue over the wound and groans, the sound catapulting me into a wave of euphoria as I come around his cock. He’s not too far behind as

he comes while paying close attention to the bite he left me with earlier.

He's quick to pull out of me and roll to the bed beside me, his heavy breathing filling the room. Our last encounter in the bathroom left me with more questions than answers, but I figured something out about myself. No matter how hard I try to deny it, I want Torrent. I wasn't sad about wanting him, I was sad because I felt like I betrayed Squall. Until I remembered he feels the same way. He wants us both, too.

"I want you, you clearly want me, and we both want Squall." I turn to look at him. "What would be the difference if we all just had each other?"

His eyes close briefly before he turns to look at me. "Squall is mine. He always has been and he always will be. I know he fucks other women, and yes, I will admit, his feelings for you are beyond just a fuck, but I could never watch you guys be together. I'm not joking when I say I would kill you both."

"So the only option is one where Squall isn't involved. You would only be content if you and I were together?" I'm really confused by the way his mind works, and as I watch him squirm with uncertainty, I think he also struggles with it.

"He wouldn't let that happen either," he admits. "Why does anyone need to be with someone?"

"Oh," I breathe with a quiet chuckle. "We all just fuck each other quietly behind our backs and that's it."

A growl erupts from his throat as he leans over me, his face clenched with anger. “I don’t like that either.”

“Then that means you plan on killing me. Am I right?” My voice shakes with realization, and when he falls back to the bed without another word, I know I hit the mark.

“You were always a means to an end, Tiny,” he says finally as he turns onto his side, his back to me. “Don’t take it personally.”

Soon enough he’s out, his breathing evening as I stare at the darkening ceiling. I always had an inkling that I wouldn’t survive Squall. He’s always been so much bigger than life for me, consuming everything else until there was only him. But that all changed when I stepped foot into this room and Torrent showed up soon after. It was the proximity that brought those hidden feelings to the surface.

*Don’t take it personally.*

How else do I take someone wanting to kill me?

I should be freaking out, but I’m not. I’m over all of this Order, Illuminati, Devil bullshit. I’m tired of a lifetime of being let down and I’m ready to say goodbye to it all. I worry about what my death would mean for Tempest and Sky, and I hope Raiden and Hail will help them get past it. They are my only genuine family.

A whimper comes from Torrent, and I turn to find his face contorted with agony as his legs begin to thrash. “No,” he whines. “Don’t hurt him.”



My heart crumbles for the boys they were and what they must've endured in such an evil place. This is why I can't hate them for what they've become. It was survival, a way to get through each day without having to face what they battled when they were nothing more than children. Squall has these dreams too, and Sky told me about Hail's episodes. It doesn't take much to see why Raiden is the way he is.

I reach out my hand to rest on Torrent's hard chest, his heart beating wildly against my palm. How many times did his heart race out of pure fear when he was younger? What I wouldn't give to see those people strung up like pigs to the slaughter for what they've done.

The warmth of my hand calms him a little as he stills, his breathing evening out again. I'm glad I can bring him some peace. I don't know that he's ever really felt true peace. It makes me feel sorry for them all over again, and given the situation I'm in, it's silly to take pity on my would-be murderer.

I wonder how he'll do it now. The first time we had no connection, there was nothing between us but hatred. He had me on an altar and would've slit my throat had he not been interrupted. When he rips the heart out of my chest, will he savor its warmth, or will he recoil from the organ meant for his lover? Or is it? Do I have room in there for Torrent too? Is this more than a morbid need to fuck my prison mate?

A sharp knock on the door has me scrambling to haul on my shirt as Torrent startles awake, his hand reaching out to grab

my arm and hauling me in close.

“It’s okay,” I reassure him as I disentangle myself from him to fix the shirt. “It’s the door.”

“They seriously couldn’t let me fucking sleep,” he grumbles as he pulls on his boxers and stands. “Yeah!” he calls out.

The door opens just as I grab the blanket to wrap around myself. Two guards stand there with knowing smirks on their faces as they look between us. My cheeks burn with shame as I shrink smaller into the bed.

“What the fuck do you want?” Torrent snaps as he steps forward. “Or are you just here for me to pluck your eyes out for looking at something that doesn’t belong to you?”

I shouldn’t swoon, right? That’s psychotic.

“Luciphia has summoned you,” one guard clears his throat while the other steps back out into the hallway. “You have a minute to get dressed.”

The door shuts as Torrent gives me a sly look over his shoulder. “I was hoping they’d give me a reason to kill them.”

“Then we’d be killed,” I huff as I roll my eyes.

“We’re not meant to live forever.” He shrugs as he finishes getting dressed. “Not too much longer now, Tiny. I have one more sacrifice and then freedom.”

“Two more, right?” I remind him and point to myself.

“Schematics.” He waves me off and bangs on the door. “It’s still freedom from these four walls.”

The door opens as he steps out, taking any semblance of warmth with him, and plunges me into a frigid darkness when the door closes with a loud *snick*. As my teeth chatter with fear, I gather the blanket under my chin. I long to see Squall one more time, to confess what I've done and to apologize for ruining his relationship with Torrent. I didn't know, of course, but I still feel like things changed for the worst when I came along.

I wish I could see Tempest and Sky. I want to tell them what they mean to me and just how much they saved me. I was a lonely girl when I first walked into the Temple, and when they showed up, I knew they were both special. I'm so lucky to have known them.

My mother needs me, but that has always been the case. Despite that, I left her to her own devices because I was a bitter adult. I couldn't help her quit the bottle because I was too hung up on being ashamed of her. Now as I look back, I know as her only child, I could've made her stop at any time. I just didn't care. I hope she finds the peace she's desperately searching for in the many empty alcohol bottles strewn around her apartment, and I hope she stops before it kills her. She deserves to live a life worth seeing without the lens of an alcoholic.

Finally, to Torrent. I hope he knows I will forgive him for his actions because I know it's not his will. This life he's living wasn't one he chose for himself, and yes, I do know as an adult he makes his own choices, but I don't blame him for these. The sentiment echoes something I warned Sky against

months ago, and now I understand how she was feeling at the time.

This organization is the evil rot, not the men who work for them.

## **SQUALL**

I woke up alone in the bed and now I know for certain that everything we did from the moment Torrent invited me to LA was a goodbye. I rushed back to New York on a red eye and let the frigid air slap me in the face for my stupidity. If anything happens to Tiny because of my weakness for Torrent, I will fucking lose it.

After parking the Honda farther up the street, I walk toward the skyscraper that makes me sick to my stomach. The closer I get, the more frenzied I feel. I don't know if it's anxiety for Tiny or my connection with Torrent, but something is off. My teeth begin to chatter with my frantic energy and just as the front of the building appears, a car pulls up.

The blacked-out sedan is a staple for the Order and when they step out with a man whose head is covered by a sack, my feet stumble. I dart into the alley and peek around the corner, trying to get a better look at who it might be. It's hard to focus on the man because about five guards are surrounding him while he puts up a fight. They quickly usher him inside and I can't slow the beating of my heart. Something about this is off and there's only one person who can help me now.

I pull up his number and hit send, pressing the phone to my ear. “Come on, Raiden,” I growl as I release a breath. I pace as his phone rings straight through to voicemail and I let out a heavy exhale before hanging up. I don’t want to leave here, but I have to go see Raiden. He’ll know how to handle this.

With time feeling like it’s against me, I run back to the car and peel away down the street. Raiden’s hotel isn’t too far from here and if I take the side streets, I should be able to avoid New York traffic. I fumble with my phone as I make a sharp turn and press Raiden’s contact again. A car flies out from an alley in front of me and stops in the road, cutting off my route.

“What the fuck?” I mutter as Raiden’s voicemail blares into my phone, asking me to leave him a message. I look into my rearview mirror to see another car come up close behind me, and that’s when I realize they’re here for me. The beep sounds as I pop the car into park and I hold the phone up to my mouth. “Raiden,” I choke out as the driver’s side door opens from the car in front of me and an Order member steps out. “I love you, brother. You’ve done so much for us and I just needed you to know that. Without you, we’d all be dead, but me? I would’ve never known what it was to have a genuine family, one who loves unconditionally and provides protection from the storm. That’s what Deluge was for me, a storm more powerful than any other we ever encountered.” Two members step up to my driver’s side door and tap on the window. “Tell Tiny I love her. Tell Victor he was always my reason for living, and please, please, don’t blame yourself for anything

that happens. You've sacrificed enough. Live your life with Tempest and be happy. Tell Hail I will be waiting in the hottest pits of Hell for him, and when he arrives, we'll rule it all together. I love you all."

I toss the phone to the passenger seat and turn off the car, knowing I'll never see it again. The door opens and one member reaches in to haul me out, his grip telling me he won't hesitate to take me out if need be. There will be no need. I'm ready to face what I always knew would happen eventually. We are not infallible. We were always meant to surrender to the Order, and it doesn't come as a surprise now. I just hope the others stay safe.

I'm gently guided into the backseat of the sedan, the one that stopped in front of me, as if I'm not on my way to face a death sentence.

We pull up to the front of the building, much like the car I saw previously, only I'm not struggling with a hood over my head. I've come peacefully, knowing I don't want the end of my life to resemble the beginning. I've loved, I've lost, and I know what it is to truly have a family. I won't put up a fight.

I'm ushered inside to find the interior deathly silent and dark, and every hair on my body explodes and stands on end. This isn't the same building I walked into a few days ago. It's emanating something dark and ominous, the energy crackling with foreboding. Even though everything inside of me is screaming for me to run, I can't do that because Tiny and Torrent are somewhere in here.

I'm ushered into the elevator and standing in the middle of three guards, none of them I recognize and nor do I expect to. It seems the new Luciphia is slowly cleaning house and replacing everyone to her liking. It scares me because that could include me and my brothers. Then, to make matters worse, I watch as one guard presses his finger into the number seven. I know the significance of that floor and I know what happens there. I've been to the seventh floor plenty of times.

"What's going on?" I finally ask. Two of the three guards remain quiet, but the third one turns and gives me a look. His eyes are filled with something close to pity.

"We all know what happens on the seventh floor," is all he says, and the car falls quiet again as we slowly ascend, the sharp pings filling the silence.

When the doors open, the first thing that hits me is the incense. Frankincense, myrrh, and patchouli swirl around my head, making me feel a little dizzy with the strength of their scents. I'm guided out of the elevator and into a long corridor. Candles are lit along the walls, the flames bending to the will of the breeze. The significance isn't lost on me, reminding me exactly of my disposition the first time I came to this building and how willing I was to bend over backwards for anyone who offered us a life better than the one we had.

Hindsight is both a curse and a blessing. I wish I could go back and shake the younger version of myself. I would tell him to turn and run, that he could make his own life and anything would be better than moving from one institution to

another, but the curse lies in the fact that there's no changing the course of anyone's decisions. The path is paved and once you've hit that dead end, it's too narrow to turn around and try again.

I can't completely hate the life I've lived because while my mind was clouded by murky morals and beliefs, I enjoyed it and I spent most of it with the three men I consider my only family. I also met a woman who cleared away the haze of ritual beliefs and made me question the life I was living. If I hadn't found Tiny, I don't know where I would be, but I do know I'd have been a lesser man.

We enter through two double doors, the color a deep, rich mahogany and the handles large and ornate. The farther we go, the more ancient things begin to look, and even though I've been here many times, this time I know it's different. The room we walk into spans out ten times bigger than the corridor we were in, and it feels like the length is vast, carrying on forever. Candelabras glow with the yellow illumination of candle flames and the incense cloud so strong I nearly choke on the scent. Hooded figures line the walls, all of them humming and the vibration slips through the skin between my ribs, encircling my heart and forcing it to beat to the rhythm. I'm led to a throne, one carved out of the bones and skulls of sacrifices made over hundreds of years. Jagged bone cushioned by tortured souls has created a seat so coveted, many have killed for it. The woman sitting upon it now has her hands covered in black lace, hiding the ugly scars I know exist underneath. Her locs are gathered back into a long ponytail,



their black and gray coloring illuminated under the large candelabra looming over the back of her throne.

“Welcome back, Squall.” She gives me an eerie smile, her eyes traveling from me to the three figures on their knees in front of her. Each has a bag over their head, two of which I know as well as the back of my hand.

A small whimper escapes Tiny as her body trembles, fear emanating off her in thick waves, suffocating me and stealing the air I need to breathe. “She doesn’t belong here.” I fist my hands and look Shereen square in the eye. “You know she has no part in this.”

“I think when we join the Order we are selfish,” Shereen says as she pushes up off the throne and slowly walks toward me, almost as if she’s gliding on air. “We decide our lives are superior and no one else matters. We live for ourselves and everyone else surrounding us be damned.” She speaks quietly, but the closer she gets, the clearer her facial expression becomes. It’s not an arrogant woman I see, but one filled with despair. Her eyes seem to reflect my own and she looks troubled with thoughts of what I can only assume stem from her past all the way to the present.

“I know that.” I nod. “Truly I do, but the Order doesn’t deserve to covet the pure ones, Shereen,” I plead with her, hoping me saying her given name will remind her of where we came from. “Tiny is pure.”

“Maybe so.” She nods. “In some capacity, but would you agree there has to be a part of her that calls to the depraved?”

She found herself within your grasp.”

“No.” I shake my head adamantly. “No, you’re wrong. I forced myself on her. I saw her, and I needed to own her.”

“But...” Shereen’s laced fingers glide along her cheek, her skin a dark ebony and rich under the dim glow of the candles. “Would you feel that way if she somehow found herself in Torrent’s grasp?”

“Yes, it’s because of me that they’re in each other’s presence.” Another whimper escapes Tiny, making my eyes skip over just in time to see Torrent reach out a hand to wrap around her wrist in a comforting touch. My stomach rolls at the sight.

“Ah...” Shereen steps back, her hand moving out in front of her slowly, pointing toward the two people who mean the most to me. “But what happened while they were confined?” she asks.

I can’t help the feelings of jealousy and betrayal that bubble up inside of me, burning up from my stomach into my chest cavity, scorching its way through my esophagus. I swallow back the bile as my eyes slip over to Torrent and Tiny, his hand still resting on her forearm. I may love him and her separately, but seeing them together? I can’t stop the sudden rage tipping over inside of me, obliterating any other emotion. They’re both mine, but not together.



# CHAPTER TWELVE

## *Tiny*

THE WARMTH OF TORRENT'S hand wrapped around my wrist provides some relief against the conversation I'm hearing between Squall and Sky's Aunt Shereen. They call her the Luciphia, and from what I understand, she rules everything. When I was brought here as a prisoner, I thought it was some grand scheme to lure Squall and trap him, but now I'm realizing it was way more elaborate. I was locked in a room with my lover's lover, forced into tight confines and to endure him, but at the same time, I was tested. I can admit I failed. I can admit that because the way Torrent's hand encircles my wrist, giving me his reassurance and his touch, promising me protection, is all the proof I need. I failed whatever test I was set up to take, and now I'm here on my knees, forced to hear as the man I love's heart breaks because I'm falling in love with his boyfriend.

It's all a sick game, and I can't call out to Squall to tell him I love him, to reassure him that this was not what I wanted because I've been gagged, Torrent is gagged, and I know there's a third person with us who I assume is also hooded and gagged. I long to reach out and wrap my hand around

Torrent's, showing him affection reciprocated, to feed the young boy who's starving inside of him for the love he deserved, but I can't do that for fear it would tear apart Squall.

I'm the pinnacle of this love triangle, one forged by the woman who's making it her life's mission to rip apart the men me and my best friends care about. I begin to tremble with anger again, wanting nothing more than to stand and rip this hood off my head. It's my fear of death that's stopping me. I don't know what's stopping Torrent and the other person beside him. Some warped sense of respect?

"Come, Squall, take a seat." Shereen's voice is sickly sweet and my skin pebbles with the sound. Torrent releases my wrist and once again I am thrust into the unknown.

"What's this all about?" Squall asks. "We don't need Tiny here. Let her go."

"Soon," Shereen promises, the declaration empty. I know as well as she does I won't be leaving here with my life. I am the sacrifice today. At least one of them.

There's movement close behind me, and when I feel a hand rest on top of my head over the hood, I stiffen.

"I'm sorry," Squall whispers, the sound tortured. "I will get you out of here."

Another whimper escapes me when his hand is removed, and then Torrent's hand is back around my wrist, squeezing me in reassurance. I promise myself that if I do get out of here,

I will blow this organization out of the water, go on every TV show and radio station. No matter how crazy I fucking sound.

“Remove the hoods,” Shereen demands. “Not that one.”

The sack over my head is slowly lifted, and I immediately gaze around the room at my surroundings. After Torrent left earlier, I was awoken by another knock at the door and was told there was no time for me to change. So here I am on my knees in only a pair of panties and a shirt. Torrent’s shirt. My eyes find Squall and he’s already looking at me, his eyes scanning my attire. Does he recognize this as Torrent’s?

Next, I quickly skim my eyes over Torrent and find he is not gagged like I am, but his head hangs as if in shame. What is going on? I try to see the other person kneeling beside him, but it’s hard to make out anything in this dark room.

“Torrent James, you have one final Magistrate to dispose of. Am I correct?” Shereen slowly sits on the throne made of skulls and bones, the sight making me want to empty the contents of my stomach.

“You’re the boss, Luciphia. You tell me who to kill and I do it.” He shrugs, the apathy in his tone sounding cold and calculated.

“Nearly two years ago, you celebrated your brother’s birthday on the island of Dominica, as you usually do. Did you not feel like that occasion differed from the others?” The smirk on her mouth is filled with contempt, the look making my skin run cold.

“Yes, obviously.” I can hear the eye roll in his voice. “We started sacrificing Magistrates. Raiden wanted out of the Order and we went along with that plan.”

Shereen’s head tips back with a laugh, the cackle bouncing off the walls. “Is that what he said? What if I told you it was to make way for new Magistrates because the last Luciphia was paranoid about the people under her?”

“To what end?” Torrent asks, his tone curious. “He hates this organization. Why would he do it for any other reason?”

“Because he was made Magistrate earlier that week.” Shereen clasps her laced hands together as she leans forward, watching for Torrent’s reaction. “Do you know what that means?”

“You’re saying my brother is the last Magistrate,” Torrent says as he reaches beside him and draws the hood off the last man on his knees. I choke around the gag as I stare at a gagged and bound Raiden. His eye is bruised and his lip split, telling me he put up a fight. “I already knew what his position was long before coming here and agreeing to your terms, and I knew he was here the whole time. I know his scent.”

“Really,” Shereen croons. “Tell me what he smells like.”

I watch as Torrent reaches for his brother and removes the gag gently as Raiden stares daggers at Shereen. “He smells like stripping whores and wrong decisions.”

The harshness of his words surprises me and I don’t know why. He’s never made it any secret how much he despises me,

Tempest, and Sky. Maybe it's because he was just inside of me not too long ago and the way he's sounding disgusted by strippers makes me want to call him out for his contradiction. Until my eyes fall on Squall. He's looking at me earnestly, his cold-blue eyes watching me watching his lover. My cheeks heat at being caught, and he gives me a small smile before redirecting his gaze to Torrent and Raiden.

“Shereen.” Raiden's deep voice almost shakes the walls in this cavernous place. “You know damn well I am not an acting Magistrate. The day I agreed to that role, I had already put into motion to bring down this Order.”

“Didn't work, did it?” She tips her head to the side, her eyes flicking to Torrent. “Was it because your brother loved this Order?”

“Just come out with it,” Raiden demands. “Am I here to be killed like the others? Are you going to force my brother to kill me?”

The room plunges into silence and I swear my heart beats hard enough that everyone must hear it. I want to believe that Torrent would never kill his own brother, but sadly, I don't know if that's the case. I feel like he doesn't form attachments—blood or otherwise—to anybody, and if it suited him he would kill whoever he pleases.

“Torrent.” Shereen looks at him, giving him a wicked smile. “Would you kill the final Magistrate?”

I hold my breath just to prevent the gasp from escaping as I wait for Torrent's answer, dreading the outcome.



“No,” he finally supplies, the sound startling me and causing my body to jerk with surprise. “If you had asked me this time last year, or even a few months ago, I probably would have done it with little thought,” Torrent confesses.

“You are my Vanquisher. I could order you to do it,” Shereen says, intimidation coating her words.

“Will you get on with it?” Torrent snaps, his anger starting to swell. “You wouldn’t have brought us all here if you wanted me to kill Raiden. Squall would never let that happen.”

Squall nods and narrows his eyes on Shereen. No, he wouldn’t let anything happen to his leader. He is loyal, even to a fault. Do I want Raiden dead? Not particularly, but if he’s been a Magistrate all this time and didn’t tell his family, that to me is dishonest.

“I never took that role seriously and you know it,” Raiden interjects. “It was all a ruse to get those Magistrates to the island to slaughter them.”

“Should I tell them about how you agreed to kill them for the previous Luciphia?” Shereen replies coolly.

“Go ahead.” Raiden nods. “But you should know, you’re making yourself out to look like a fool. Of course, I agreed to kill them ... for my own purposes.”

“My brother has always been cunning, his personality nearly mirroring my own with its duality, but he’s no liar,” Torrent growls. “If you are trying to turn us against each other,

there's no need. I long lost respect for any of my Deluge bandmates."

I look around Torrent to see Raiden's face and I'm shocked when I see no reaction. His brother just admitted to having no respect for him and he doesn't seem to care.

"Did you lose it the night you had to kill Father Robert for them?" Shereen inquires, her face dropping its nonchalant mask. "Did you feel alone after that?"

"I was never alone," Torrent says as his eyes move to Squall.

"But you don't respect him?" Shereen's eyes follow his, and they both watch Squall.

"Squall will always own a piece of me. He knows that. Now stop wasting our time. What the fuck do you want?" Torrent snarls and Raiden grunts in agreement.

"I'm impressed with the strong front you guys have, even after all this time," Shereen chuckles as she rises from her morbid throne. Her locs sway against her back as she steps down, the large amulet around her neck swinging with the motion. "I hate that my niece is so firmly in your grasp and convincing her to leave would be futile. Haynes has a sick sense of humor for doing that."

"They were always fated, and maybe you were the path that led them to one another," Squall suggests as he shuffles his feet. "Regardless, they would've ended up together eventually."

Shereen's hand subconsciously moves to her stomach as Squall speaks and when he's finished, she laughs heartily. "None of you care about anyone other than yourselves. Those women will learn the hard way and unfortunately for my niece, she'll probably have the hardest lesson with Haynes."

"*Hail* loves her," Torrent huffs. "I've witnessed it. Much like Raiden and Tempest."

"And you with Tiny?" Shereen asks him as the room suddenly plummets to icy temperatures and I can't seem to take in air. "Or is it you and Squall? Or maybe both? It's so confusing."

Squall comes forward and kneels in front of me, removing my gag and brushing his hand down my tangled hair. "Don't be afraid. I will always love you, no matter what." Then he steps back as I press my lips together. I don't think he'll feel the same once Shereen spills everything that's been happening in that small room.

The scene in front of me distorts as tears pool along my eyes and I drop my lids to stave off the eventual drip. I don't want to look like the weakest fucking link here. Poor, used Tiny, a washed-up stripper fucked by two men who care more about each other than her.

"Squall, you were always so protective of the people around you," Shereen continues as I keep my eyes closed. "From the first moment I met you, you were this powerful force, and I thought you were impenetrable."

“Nothing is impenetrable,” Squall retorts. “Everything has a weakness.”

“Yours was always Victor,” Shereen continues as Torrent growls with the use of his legal name. “And Victor’s was you. But...” Her voice drops and I finally open my eyes to see her staring at me. “Who is yours, Tiny?”

The air whooshes from my lungs with a heavy exhale as I shake my head. My skin is icy-cold and I tremble with the force of her question. “I...”

“Come on,” Shereen coaxes when it’s clear I have no words. “I love a good triangle.”

“Don’t say anything, stupid girl,” Torrent growls at me. “It’s a trick, and you’re not the fucking brightest.”

His words should anger me, but I know what he’s doing. If Torrent didn’t care at all, he would’ve remained quiet. The fact that he’s warning me means there’s something there, and my thoughts are only solidified when Squall gives him a confused look.

Shereen’s clap and gleeful laugh break up the moment as Torrent’s jaw ticks in frustration. “I love it!” she exclaims.

“Can we get this over with?” Raiden tries to sound bored, but I can feel his tension emanating from the other side of Torrent. I wish I knew what the point of all this was.

“In a minute.” Shereen holds up her hand, her eyes on me with glittering mischief. “Grab him.” She nods toward Squall

as two guards come forward and grab his arms, forcing him to the ground.

“Hey!” Torrent jumps to his feet, his fists clenched. “Let him go or I’ll kill everyone in this fucking room.”

I can see Shereen staring at me from my periphery, the heat of her glare burning my face, but I can’t look away from Squall. He doesn’t struggle, but he’s tense as he looks from Torrent to Shereen, his face a mask of surprise. What has he figured out?

“Don’t, Shereen—”

“Kill him,” she nods toward Torrent, and my entire world slows in front of me as a large guard steps forward, a gun in his hand.

Two others step forward to grab Raiden as he screams to Shereen to stop, but nothing is breaking my hold over that gun aimed at Torrent’s chest. “Put me the fuck out of my misery, friend,” Torrent says, the words like ammunition for my fear, making me step toward him as I suck in a breath.

“Him too,” Shereen adds as one guard holding Squall presses a gun to his head.

My heart pumps wildly as I look from Squall to Torrent, from one broken man to another. From lover to lover. Where do I fit in between them? Do I even belong there? Squall struggles against the cold press of the metal, his eyes on Torrent, the worry in their icy depths telling me there is no space between them. There never was.

I'm not doubting how much I meant to Squall. I could feel it whenever we were together, but here, in the same room as Torrent, our love doesn't hold a flame to their history and what they have. Despite that, I don't want anything to happen to either of them.

I open my mouth to say something, to beg this to stop when the sound of a gun cocking puts me into action. I scramble forward, my body moving before my mind can comprehend the action, and I find myself panting and light-headed, standing in front of Torrent with my arms out wide. The room around me sharpens into focus as Torrent's arm comes around my waist, hauling me back into his chest.

"Uh oh, Marigold," Torrent whispers. "Wrong choice."

"Would you look at that?" Shereen calls out as she steps forward. "Squall's brains were about to be sprayed across the room, and yet you ran to Torrent. How interesting?"

"What?" I stiffen as I blink through the anxiety coursing through me.

"This gun was cocked." Shereen pushes on the arm of a guard holding the gun to Squall's head. "How does it feel?" she hisses at Squall, but his eyes never leave mine.

I want to scream out and apologize, to tell him I wasn't thinking. It was subconscious to run in front of the man very few people would protect. I did it for the boy inside of him who grew up believing he was evil and never worth it. Then Squall smiles, his eyes warming as Torrent's hand tightens on my hip. *Thank you*, he mouths.

“Take her back to the room,” Torrent demands as he pushes me to the guard, who’s lowering his gun. “You’ve had your revenge, Shereen.”

## **SQUALL**

I can see how devastated she is by having picked Torrent over me, and I won’t lie. It fucking crushed me when she ran in front of him, but I’m not angry. I know how big Tiny’s heart is and I knew with them being trapped in that room together that she would see all the good parts of him I know exists. So even though I feel like I’m drowning in a pool of icy-cold water as she’s slowly led out of the room and screaming my name, I’m comforted by the fact that she provided him with something I could never. The way he held onto her, his veins popping along his forearm like he was afraid someone was going to take her from him, had me praying the motherfucker holding the gun to my head would just pull the trigger. But that would be too easy, and Raiden is right. All of this was staged by Shereen.

She forced them into a room together, single bed, single washroom, for days, and I knew the moment I stepped into their small prison, just by seeing the room itself, what could potentially happen. Torrent is not everyone’s cup of tea and he makes it really difficult to see the good parts of him. He’s buried them so deep that even his own blood couldn’t recognize them, but Tiny? She can bring out the best in anybody.

As the elevator doors close, silencing her screams, I look away and back to the man who's claimed me, whose fingers are the instrument from which my strings are pulled. I find him looking back at me, his face finally clear and focused, his eyes a little glossy. I'm transported back to that fucking group home and to the boy he once was. It's Victor standing in front of me with his heart still firmly in his chest and his pure, undiluted soul shining through.

I take two steps toward him, finding no resistance from the guards as Shereen takes a few steps back and sits on her throne of death. She got what she wanted anyway, and still, it must feel like defeat because this changes nothing. You can't rewrite the stars, you can't unravel a woven fabric and change its pattern. That's what Victor and I are. Our threads are woven together by fate and there's no amount of unraveling that'll change our destinies.

Raiden watches us closely as I stop to stand in front of his brother, slowly reaching my hand out to press to the center of his chest. Torrent releases a loud exhale, his posture finally falling and his shoulders rolling forward to catch his head as it dips toward his chest. "I don't want to be sick anymore," he whispers as his hand comes up to wrap around my wrist. "I'm tired."

"Where you go, I'll always follow," I promise him, my fingers curling into the fabric of his t-shirt.

"Always?" he asks, his thumb rubbing circles into my wrist. I nod as his eyes penetrate my very soul. I'm unable to form



the words I want to tell him, and I just pray that those fibers which have sewn us together will relay all the emotions I'm feeling.

“Shereen!” Raiden calls out, breaking the moment between Torrent and me. “Let us go. Free us from the contract we made when we were so very young and lost. I'm done with this war and I'll concede it to you and this Order if you'll leave us alone.”

She's still watching me and Torrent. Her brows crinkled in the center and her mouth turned down, but not with disgust. Her look is something akin to nostalgia, and with the four of us in a room together after so very long, I can feel it too.

“I didn't bring you here to win a war,” she says as her voice wavers. “I hated you four when I left that place, and I'll admit, I'd hoped you all suffered,” she grits through her teeth, her anger still very prevalent.

“You got your wish, Luciphia,” Torrent says as he releases my arm and steps around me. “Jane was cruel, and that whip you were so very well acquainted with became our constant companion.” His eyes skip to mine as he says, “The handle was an intimate one.”

“When Haynes found me again after you guys had signed your souls away to fire and brimstone,” she laughs sarcastically, “I was still broken inside. My scars were nothing compared to his, but I felt a kinship there. I was so tired of hating you guys, so when you showed up at that club and pulled me off that stage and I was chosen to go to Dominica, I

thought that was my chance to finally fix whatever was broken inside of me. To be surrounded by the boys who knew just how broken I was. I thought you guys would save me. How very wrong I was.” She falls back in the chair and slowly begins to peel the lace gloves off her hands. “These scars are a constant reminder of that place and I used them as fuel. So when I was nearly carved up like a Christmas ham and killed on that island, I was angry. On that plane ride home, it was Kenny who approached me and said I could do great things. My plan really formed after that. I thought if I could infiltrate this organization, I could exact the perfect revenge. I started by burning down that orphanage with Sister Jane inside of it.”

“You did that? After that, the old Luciphia asked you to be her Vanquisher, knowing what your ties were to us,” Raiden finishes as Shereen slowly nods, the scarred fingers of her hands curling around the bones of the arms on the throne.

“I trained and I soaked up every bit of information I could, then waited. It took years, but I was patient, and when the time came, I sliced that bitch’s throat open. I took this amulet from around her neck and I knew my quest had just begun. Over the years, I learned how easy it was to be swayed. I could see the fame and the wealth. Presidents of the United States, musicians, models, actors, politicians, and world leaders falling to their knees, begging for something only spilled blood would provide,” she spits to the side, her disdain evident. “And I knew my enemy was bigger than just you four. I wanted to take down the Order.” She stands again, her words making my hairs stand on end. “I did that. I’ve wiped out

every Magistrate, save for your brother, and as we speak, every temple is being dismantled. This organization, controlled by me, no longer exists and that feels better than any revenge I could exact on you four. I'm saving many people's lives from worthless sacrifices. I've done my part, and if Haynes wasn't sequestered on an island, I would have him here before us too. Just so he could hear what I have to say. I no longer blame you for what happened in that home. We were children, and I know I played a cruel stunt today, but I just needed to let go of the last vestiges of my anger. We're all free as of right now from the Order."

"Free?!" Torrent bellows. "Who the fuck is free?"

## **TORRENT**

The demon unfurls his anger in my chest as the word 'free' echoes around the room. I haven't been free since I was ten years old.

"Torrent!" Raiden calls out to me, but his voice sounds like it's underwater, distorted and garbled as I stare at the woman who's had a hand in what I've become. I never directly blamed anyone for the responsibilities that fell on my shoulders in that orphanage, but to have had her pull some strings in my adult life is only catapulting me over the edge.

"Who's free?" I reiterate as I walk toward her, her eyes widening as she takes a few steps back. "We all have blood on our hands. People have died for the Order's ambitions,

including yours.” I shoot each word at her like a perfectly aimed blade, sinking them into her chest cavity.

“Torrent.” Squall comes to stand beside me, his hand wrapping around my bicep. “Let’s just leave.”

“Leave?” I shrug his hand off my arm. “I was promised freedom and I’m feeling a bit jilted.” I turn to look back at Shereen as her chin lifts with a smug look. “You told me I would be free.”

“You are free, Torrent,” she says. “Look around you. There are no more Magistrates. We’ve dismantled the Order.”

She knows nothing of being held hostage for most of your life, or committing a selfless act to save your friends and then having that act haunt you for the rest of your life. I often question if it was ever worth it to drive that hatchet into Father Robert’s head because at the end of the day, my scars aren’t just skin deep.

“So you’re our savior now?” I hold out my arms and take another step toward her, making the guard who had his gun aimed at me previously slowly raise it again. “Should we kneel to you, Luciphia?”

“Torrent.” Raiden steps up beside me, his voice filled with authority. “Let’s leave.”

“To go where?” I ask him. “To what life? Back to Dominica? You want to hide there forever? I’m not hiding anymore.” I turn back to Shereen. “You didn’t uphold your promise.”

She gives me a confused look and slowly shakes her head, the pity wafting off her in crushing waves. That look is like gasoline to a torch and I explode outward.

I rush toward her, my hands outstretched, aiming for her throat and needing to feel her pulse weaken under my palms. It's quick, those last few seconds. Raiden screams my name and Squall screams *no*, then a loud *bang!* And the fire that exploded from me gets sucked back inward as my chest blooms with the inferno. Still, I reach her, even though I feel like I'm walking through tar. My heavy arms fall to her shoulders, nowhere near the column of her throat. I look into her wide, watery eyes, watching as her mouth moves, but no sound comes out. I hope she sees the gratitude in my eyes because finally someone has given me my wish and I truly am free.

Before I can even form the words to thank her, she's shoved out of the way, and then there's Squall. Those light blue eyes have never changed. They have held nothing in their depths but love for me, and that's what I find there now as I struggle to take in a breath.

"Victor," he says frantically, as tears spill over his cheeks. "You've been shot, Victor. Lie down. We're going to get you help."

Finally, I get enough air in my lungs as I sink to my knees and he follows me. My brother screams behind me as I slowly look over my shoulder, finding him slamming his fists into the guard's face repeatedly while the others try to pull him off. I

wish I could tell him I'm sorry for being so difficult, but this seems fitting. Even now, as he is fighting for me, I'm still not quite his first priority.

“Squall...” I turn back to the man in front of me and wrap my hand around his cheek, dragging his forehead to mine as he shudders on a sob. “It’s okay, I’m free. But I can’t hold him inside forever.” Squall pulls back and gives me a confused look. “The demon...” The strength to speak is slowly waning from me and I know I don’t have much time. “You promised to come with me.”

Understanding dawns on his features as his hand presses over the wound on my chest. I can feel it throbbing as my blood seeps down onto the floor at our knees. “There’s no demon, Victor.”

“I can’t hold it in forever.” I fall forward, my hand slipping into my pants pocket to pull out my knife. “I have to save you, too.”

He gives me a nod and leans forward to press his mouth to mine. With the last of my energy, I lift my arm and open the blade, sinking it deep into his chest, right where his heart is. The whole time he keeps his mouth on mine until we both fall to the floor, our fingers intertwined like the fabric of our fate.



## *Tiny*

**T**HE FIRST FEW SNOWFLAKES drift down from the sky, slowly skating past my window as I sit on my chair and sip the hot cocoa my mother made. She's been sober for a year now, and I have a good feeling this time. Me though? I've been trying to claw my way out of a hole for the past year and finally feel like I'm gripping level ground.

Soon after what happened in that building, I was rushed out and Raiden went back to Dominica to be with Tempest. I've heard from them a few times over the past year, but I'll admit I haven't always been too eager to talk. They remind me of things I would rather forget. Of the two men who figuratively sacrificed me by ripping my heart out of my chest. Sometimes I wish Torrent had his way and killed me on that altar in Nevada, but then I would have missed out on so much.

Raiden keeps my bank account full so I don't have to work, providing me the excuse to become a recluse inside of my apartment, being chastised by my mother every day. She doesn't know what happened to me, doesn't understand that my insides were pulverized, and when I tried to fit them all



back, I was missing a key organ. Not that I need my heart anymore.

I place the mug on the table in front of me and get up to head toward my room. I need a shower and I need to pull myself back to the land of the living. I step into my room and pull open the closet to grab a shirt and some leggings when my eye catches on the two duffel bags tucked into the corner. They were the last things I grabbed as I was forced out of that building. One of them is mine and the other belongs to Torrent.

I haven't had the strength to touch them, let alone open them, but there's something inside of me today that feels ready. Before I can change my mind, I'm reaching down to grab the leather handle, the feel of it soft and worn against my palm. I pull it out and quickly toss it onto my bed, rubbing my hands together to stave off the energy that's suddenly crackling along my skin. I take a deep breath and stride forward, grabbing the cool metal of the zipper and pulling it open.

I'm assaulted by his scent, still so fresh inside the bag. Like pine and mint as it plumes up around my head, making my eyes water and nearly dragging me back to that room where I writhed beneath his body. My hand creeps up to the scar still visible on my neck though it has faded with time, but I steel my spine and begin to pull out his clothes. Shirts, boxers, pants. I also find some toiletries, but it's the small pocket at the back of the bag that holds a treasure priceless in its value.

Nestled inside that pocket is an old photograph and the sight has my heart lurching up into my throat. It's a young Torrent and Squall, standing in front of the mansion in Dominica. Torrent has a smug look on his face, his dimples deep, while his arm is around Squall. He's so tall and thick, his white-blond hair blowing in the breeze and a smile just as big as Torrent's on his face.

As I gather the picture to my chest, I choke on a sob. I had feared I would forget what they looked like, but this is a gift that I will treasure for the rest of my life and it's one that's pulling on me to do something I didn't think I would ever do again.

I pick up my phone and I press on Tempest's contact to send her a text. I long to be with my family and this apartment has never felt like home.

*I'll see you in a few days. I'm coming home.*

## *About the Author*

### About C.A. Rene

C.A. Rene lives in Toronto, Canada with her family, where most of the year varies from chilly to frigid. Most days you'll find her wrapped in her many blankets in bed while reading or writing her next dark, twisted story.

Her stories boast of inclusivity and refusal to be conformed in any small box. Writing across genres is a hobby and drinking wine is a must... Or coffee ... with a splash of Baileys.

For all book updates and social platforms, check out my website

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