



**D R I T Y**

**W A R S**

*USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

**KENYA WRIGHT**

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I must first give a sincere, heartfelt  
acknowledgement to my **Diamond**  
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---

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I hope you enjoy this story!  
Because my patrons and I had an  
absolutely freaking blast  
working on it.



# Lion & Mouse Playlist

(FAST SIDE)

- \* 95 South- J Cole
- \* Let the Smokers Shine the Coupes- Pusha T
- \* Go Off- Ab-Soul, Russ, Big Sean
- \* Legends Only- JR Writer, Jadakiss
- \* The Heart Part 5- Kendrick Lamar

(SLOW SIDE)

- \* GUD- Zae France
- \* Tiffany- Zae France
- \* Dangerous- Ye Ali
- \* Tell Me Its Over Without Saying Its Over- Jacques, Summer Walker, 6LACK
- \* Blue Train- Alternate Take 8- John Coltrane

(CHARACTER THEME SONGS)

- \* LION: Takeofer- JayZ
- \* MOUSE: Whole Lotta Money- Bia, Nicki Minaj
- \* LUNITA: Rebirth- Clint Mansell
- \* MAXWELL: Shook Ones- Mobb Deep

*“With this book, I’m trying to rip out your soul.”*

—Kenya Wright





# Prologue

EMILY

## Skygasm

The sky held no moon or stars, just darkness thick with fumes from fire and warfare.

Hundreds of feet below us, Italians lay on the ground. Abandoned and dead. Pierced with bullets or trapped between burning cars riddled with bullet holes. Many of the vehicles had burst into flames.

Hovering above the ground, our helicopter's blades violently spun, making a whirring dull roar and rattling the cabin.

Kaz had commanded the pilots to keep us high in the air.

Ours was the only helicopter in the night sky. The other one with Blue, Giorgio, and King David had returned to the hotel long ago.

Instead, our helicopter circled the battlefield below.

The pilots kept their gazes locked on the sky in front of them.

Meanwhile, three feet behind them...Kaz was on his knees in front of my seat, being a very naughty lion. There was barely enough room for his body to be in the row between the passenger seats, but he made it work.

My body hummed. "Oh, baby."

Kaz had my dress yanked to my waist and my legs over his shoulders.

Minutes ago, he'd used a knife to rip through my black inner-holster shorts. They now lay in scraps on the vibrating floor next to my guns. My top had been pulled down at his request. My breasts bounced with the movement of the helicopter.

His wet tongue lapped at my clit as if he were a thirsty dog in heat.

“Oh, Kaz!”

He lifted his head and licked his lips. “You’re going to make the pilots crash moaning *like that*.”

I shivered. “Then, stop licking me *like that*.”

“Interesting.” He blew on my wet pussy.

I shivered again in delight.

*God, he’s so damned sexy.*

“That’s what you want?” He landed soft kisses on my slick folds. “You want me to stop, *mysh*?”

My eyes drooped in lust. “Don’t stop.”

“No?”

“No.” He wrenched me forward by my hips. Blood stained his shoulder. Hours earlier, someone had shot him during the meeting with Fela and the Mancusos. However, Kaz refused to go back to the hotel unless we had sex in the damned helicopter.

He wanted to fuck over the carnage.

Concern filled me. “Are you in pain, Kaz?”

“Yes. Horrific pain.”

“Then, we should—”

“Fuck.”

“At least let me look at your shoulder and make sure the bleeding stopped or—”

“But it’s my cock that hurts.”

I glared. “Listen. You may be a lion, but you’re also human and need medical—”

“Look at my tongue.”

Lusty anticipation throbbed through me. I put my gaze on his mouth. “What?”



Flashing a wicked smile, he dipped the tip of his tongue into my pussy.

“Ooo.”

“Don’t ask about my shoulder again, *mysh*.” Starting at the opening of my sex, he gave me a long swipe.

I trembled in pleasure. “You’re so *nasty*.”

Kaz raised his view to me. “Am I?”

“Yes.”

He tasted his lips and groaned. “You like that I’m *nasty*?”

“I *love* it.”

“Hmmm.” Kaz spread my folds with his fingers, exposing my clit. It was swollen and throbbing for more of his mouth.

“So wet. So tasty.” Kaz stuck his tongue out and gently flicked the tip along my throbbing bud.

*Fuck.*

I gripped the edge of the seat.

*He’s driving me crazy.*

Kaz moved that tongue in swirling circles around and around my clit. Then, his tongue swiped through my pussy and pushed deep into my hole, lathering my folds until I flooded with arousal and wet his chin. His lips dripped with my arousal.

That sight triggered every nerve in my body to spark with heated, erotic greed. The sensation rolled along my inner walls.

Then, he fucked me with his tongue.

“Oh my God!” I went delirious and began bucking against his face.

Gripping me by my hips, he held me in place and wiggled his tongue inside of my pussy.

“Kaz!”

The hungry pressure between my legs grew and burst, rising higher and spreading throughout my body.

At this point, I was soaking wet and staining the leather seat.

“Mmmhmm.” I could not stop watching him.

Kaz devoured my pussy with a slow deliberation, as if he were savoring every second, every lick.

“Oh my God, baby.”

Groaning, he looked up and licked his lips. Those blue eyes sparked with desire. “Are you going to be a dirty whore for the Lion?”

I shuddered. “Anytime. Any place.”

“Then, get on your knees in the seat and turn around.”

“What?”

“Face the door and have your ass up. Now.”

I spread my legs and moved them from his body. “O-kay.”

He lifted up and started unbuckling his pants.

In the seat, I somehow got on my knees and began rearranging myself. “But, how do you want me to—”

Fast, he spun me around like a weightless doll. My knees fumbled and my legs almost twisted together. I tried to fix myself. Suddenly, he had me up against the locked door. My breasts pressed against the cold, vibrating glass. My nipples hardened. My heart pounded in my ears.

I widened my eyes in shock.

*Oh...like that.*

He stayed behind me and got on the seat too, crowding it up with his legs and weight. I planted my palms against the glass to balance myself.

Unzipping sounded behind me.

Seconds later, he had his warm, hard cock pushed against my bare ass. “Are you going to tell me if I’m too much during

sex?”

“Hell no.” My skin prickled with sensual awareness. “I want it hard.”

“You want me to hurt your little tight pussy?”

“Please.”

His groan drummed down to my bones. “Be careful.”

“Why?”

“You’re fucking with the Lion.”

A grin spread across my face. “Don’t I know it.”

He brushed his lips against my ear. “What do you see below us?”

I moved my view down to the Mancuso Family’s dead bodies and burning cars. From so high up, I could barely see all of the corpses, but the wrecks glowed in the darkness. Bright orange flames danced along the melting vehicles and licked at the metal frames like a thousand serpents devouring their prey.

Had we been down on the ground and standing in front of the blaze, I imagined the taste of smoldering copper would be on my tongue, the smell of burning rubber would be flooding my nostrils, and the sounds of sizzling metal, tires popping, and crackling glass would be noisy in my ears.

From behind, Kaz pushed two fingers deep into my pussy. “What do you see, *mysh*?”

A loud moaned ripped from my throat.

He spread me wider and added a third finger. “*Mysh*?”

“I...see...our...dead enemies and...chaos.”

“Hmmm.” He thrust his fingers in and out, torturing me with the slow rhythm. “Like you said, we are fucking unstoppable.”

“We are.” I arched my back, yearning for more than his fingers. I hoped to feel the fullness of his thick, fat cock.

Still owning my pussy with his fingers, he placed the pad of his thumb along my asshole and teased it. “Everyone else will soon be dead. Italians. Nigerians. Maybe, even the French.”

I frowned. “I...heard that...”

He licked the curve of my neck. “What did you hear?”

“We are not killing the French.”

He groaned in annoyance.

“They’re our friends.”

“We will discuss that another day. Now, back to this cock.” Quick, he fisted my hair and turned my head, moving my view from the window and putting it on him.

I gasped.

The sight of Kaz took my breath away.

Hot desire blazed over his face. He watched me with fierce intensity. Those hungry blue eyes pierced my soul.

My core filled with aching warmth.

The air between us throbbed and thickened with longing.

I could see the veins in his neck pulse as he fought to stay in control. “Do you even understand how bad I need you right now?”

“I want you too.”

“You *want* me.” He pulled the fingers out of my pussy and raised them to his mouth. My arousal coated them. The muscles in his face tightened. “I *need* you.”

He sucked on those long fingers. “I *crave* you.”

A dark hunger twisted inside of me.

“Your pussy has become a drug.” He finished licking one finger. “I’m addicted.”

I fell into a daze, fully captured by him. “Perhaps...”

He moved his hand from his mouth and had it behind me, squeezing and kneading my ass. “Perhaps?”

“Perhaps, we’re both addicted.”

“Hmmm.” He rubbed his hard cock against my ass.  
“You’re addicted, *mysh*?”

“Very much.”

“Good.” He yanked my head back an inch more.

It forced me to arch up against the door. My stiff nipples pressed harder into the vibrating glass.

Only God knew what the pilots thought. Kaz had only been speaking in Italian to them the whole time. I doubted they knew English, but they had to know what was going on a few feet behind them.

But I bet the Lion could not care less about anything on this helicopter, but me.

“Are you ready, *mysh*?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

Kaz drove his cock deep into me and kept it there, filling me with him.

“Oh!”

“I want to beat this pussy up with my cock—”

I grinned. “But, what did my pussy do to you?”

“Watching you kill men today and utterly...having my fucking back in every possible way...made me so hard it hurt.”

“That’s what gets you going?”

“Aww. Let me show you what gets me going.” He pulled his cock out and then rammed it back into me.

“Oh, hell yes!”

Groaning, he fucked me harder, dominating my pussy. When he let go of my hair, I fell forward, pressing my face back on the glass. Now my only view was the burning cars below.

With my bending over a little more, Kaz had a better angle. He seized the opportunity and relentlessly pounded into me.

“Oh!” I closed my eyes. “Kaz!”

He groaned, thrusting deeper. “I can’t get enough.”

I whimpered, “Baby!”

“It’s never enough.” He reached one hand around and grabbed my breast. The other hand went to my pussy, playing with my clit.

“Oh, my God.” I wound my hips, rocking with his rhythm. “Baby!”

A dark groan left him.

My mind got lost in the dirty, raw senses of our heated pleasure. The feel of his hard, fat cock pounding in my wet pussy. The sounds of slapping flesh and squelching wetness rose above the helicopter’s constant whirring blades and engine’s purring. The scents of our sweat and sex grew heavy in the air and mingled with the stench of burning fuel and oil.

I felt helpless in the most delicious way.

He slapped my ass, producing a stinging shock that sent shivers tingling up my spine.

My eyes popped open. “Oh!”

The glass had fogged in front of me.

His deep voice reverberated in my ears. “Are you going to cum for the Lion?”

I panted. “Yes.”

Slowing down those deep strokes, he rubbed my throbbing clit. “Come on my cock, *mysh*.”

“God, yes!”

The helicopter jerked to the side as if the pilots lost control and we were close to crashing. I didn’t care. I drowned in the feel of Kaz rubbing my pussy from the front and pumping into me from behind.

Somewhere between my moans and his groans. I realized the helicopter was back on an even level. At least I assumed. I could barely pay attention due to the sensations rolling through my body. Hot pleasure burst through every cell within me, racing and spilling, peaking and crashing.

My orgasm overtook me.

“Baby!” I grasped at the foggy windows unable to get any grip. My fingers slipped around as I came hard, shaking and panting, moaning and whimpering. My whole body pulsed and convulsed. My toes curled.

“Yes, baby!” I bucked fast against him. “Oh!”

A primal groan left Kaz, telling me that he was coming too.

My name vibrated through the cabin. “*Myssh!*”

Soon, cum spurted inside my pussy, filling and making me hot and sticky.

“Mmmhmm.” I bit my lip, loving every second.

His cock left me.

Fast, he wrenched me back to him.

I almost shrieked as my back pressed against his heaving chest.

“Get dirty for me.” He rubbed his cock against my ass, spurting more hot semen on me. It sprayed on my skin, turning me on.

“Oh!”

Groaning, he fisted my hair again and sank his teeth into my shoulder. Pain and pleasure spread across my skin.

*Jesus Christ!*

I whimpered, “B-baby.”

When Kaz let go, he licked the teeth marks on my skin, but didn’t let go of my head. His hands remained fisted in my hair. He moved my view to him. “We marry tonight.”

I panted. “We don’t.”

“We find a church—”

“No, Kaz.”

Pouting, he released my hair and kissed where he bit me. “I want our marriage solidified. Fast.”

“And I want a well-thought out ceremony with our friends. Nice clothes. Amazing food, music, and drinks.” I gave him a sad smile. “Plus, your shoulder is still bleeding.”

He frowned at me. “This makes me angry.”

“Well, be angry, but pull your pants up.” I grinned. “It’s time to head back to the hotel.”

“I am not done fucking you!”

I blinked. “Kaz, I’m about to drop your spoiled ass out of this helicopter.”

A wicked smile hit his face. “I like when you threaten me.”

“You’re not supposed to like that.”

“*Mysh*, that was so good. I want to do it again.”

“I get it, but we have shit to do—”

“And Salvatore to torture.”

I tensed. Nervous energy zipped through me. I thought of my knives. My body buzzed with violence. “Yeah...so, if...”

Kaz raised his eyebrows. “Yes?”

“If...we have more than Salvatore left over...like more Mancuso survivors that aren’t killed...then...”

“You want to cut them too?”

I nodded.

“Then, so be it. Let us dance with your dark side this evening.” Kaz pulled his pants up, stuffed his cock back in them, went over to his seat, and collapsed against it. Next, Italian spilled from those sexy lips as he gave out orders to the pilots.

I quickly pulled my dress up over my breasts and down my legs. Then, I glanced at the pilots. Sweat dripped down their



faces.

Either we had made the space hot as fuck or they were terrified.

Kaz said several things.

One nodded.

The helicopter stopped circling and headed away from the Mancuso's burning wrecks.

Letting out a long breath, Kazimir leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and gripped his cock over his pants. "Don't wipe that pussy up when we get to the hotel. Keep it dirty for the Lion."

"I'm taking a shower."

He turned his head my way and opened his eyes. "I want it filthy with my cum dried inside of it. Sticky and stinking."

I scrunched my face up. "You've clearly lost too much blood."

"I want to be able to smell your pussy across the room."

"I'm not walking around the hotel with stank ass pussy, leaving a trail of odor around me."

He looked at me. "You just think I won't lick your pussy if it's dirty. I definitely will."

Shaking my head, I laughed and looked out the window. "Nasty ass lion."

"And you're stuck with me." Bold laughter left him.





# Chapter 1

## The Dark Side

### Kazimir

It was time to truly understand Emily's dark side. No matter how complicated and painful. It was time to face it. To peer into her mind and unravel the painful, mangled threads of her abusive past.

What was healing, but restoring and relieving, repairing and recovering?

I yearned to heal my mouse. To peel away the bandages. To examine those childhood wounds and figure out what I could soothe.

How powerful was our love? Could it regenerate the parts of her that had been broken and bruised?

I knew our love did damage. So far it had put a hole in Paris and shaken the criminal world. Every gangster with a brain was on alert and watching the Lion and Mouse and the chaos that we would leave behind.

But could our love take Emily's pain away? Could it heal her to the core?

I remembered Maxwell's apartment in Harlem, and when he took me into his father's bedroom. He knew that space was the only place Emily would never go snooping.

There, Maxwell kept a Tinder Killer shrine. Eight photos of men had decorated the back wall. News clippings were thumbtacked under the images. A map covered the other wall with multicolored thumbtacks for spots in Harlem that the men had been discovered. Their criminal records lay in a pile on the desk.

I thought back to the conversation I had with Maxwell.

*I flipped through the criminal records. “They were all suspected of rape. Did she know this before finding and killing them?”*

*“I don’t think so,” Maxwell had said. “She never remembers, and we’ve never talked about this.”*

*That information had boggled my mind.*

*Maxwell continued, “I found her in her bedroom one night covered in blood. She was just sleeping there with a knife in her hand. I called Xavier.”*

*“The man that lives in the abandoned bus?”*

*“Yes.” Maxwell nodded.*

*“He’s like her uncle?”*

*“Yes. Xavier called Darryl. We all decided not to tell her. We washed and dressed her. Cleaned her bedroom—”*

*“But you had no idea what she’d done?”*

*“No. Xavier only found that she’d messaged some guy on Tinder to hook up. We had the meet up address.”*

*“Where was it?”*

*“A hotel. We had his picture from his Tinder account— D.t.f.BeastBoy.”*

*I quirked my eyebrows.*

*Maxwell finished, “I was going to check on Mr. Beast Boy the next day. But that morning, the hotel’s maid found him. His face was all over the news. We matched it to his tinder account from her messaging.”*

*That knowledge had seized my chest.*

*Maxwell touched his neck. “She’d sliced dude deep, right here and then a long side swipe.”*

*Then, Maxwell carved a large cross on his chest with an imaginary knife. “Then she did a holy cross, crucifying him as Xavier would say. He’s religious when it comes to death.”*

*Next, Maxwell stabbed his groin with the invisible knife. “And finally, she cut his dick off over and over.”*

In this world, there hadn't been much that blew me away anymore, but that did.

This precious, impossibly smart woman lathered in curves was also a serial killer.

Her brother Daryl, Maxwell, and even her Uncle Xavier had cleaned up after Emily, not telling her about the horror that she'd committed, nervous that her cracked mind would completely shatter.

But, I knew monsters very well. I had spent my entire life among them, so much that I became one myself.

Meanwhile, a monster was simply a hurt and broken person. One that wore a mask of brutal violence for so long that he forgot it was even a mask.

Since falling in love with Emily, she'd been yanking my damned mask off over and over, forcing me to deal with things I'd chosen not too.

*And now I would help my mouse take off her mask.*

I leaned against the wall and watched Emily.

Twenty feet away, she stood in front of Salvatore, twisting a knife in her hand. She hadn't cut him yet, but I knew the time would come soon.

Tonight, she still wore my favorite color. The dress was a seductive ensemble of red that clung to her body. A zig zag pattern trimmed the top and drew my eyes to her cleavage like an arrow to the bulls eye.

*I'm going to tear that off when she's done cutting.*

Slowly, Emily walked around Salvatore. Her six-inch red heels clicked on the polished tile.

He tried to talk to her, but the gag blocked his words.

*There's no saving you tonight, old friend. You chose the wrong side.*

Pavel's son slept in the presidential suite, in a small bedroom right next ours. Even though we had plenty of rooms to kill in, Emily didn't want this anywhere close to him.

*The boy is another problem that will need to be solved.*

Due to her unwillingness to torture near him, I found us a new suite on the same level. This one was perfect. It had low beams on the ceiling which provided great opportunity to hang rope on.

Currently, Salvatore stood with his hands high over his head. Rope bound his wrists, stretched fifteen feet up to the ceiling, and attached to the ceiling's cross beam.

A guard pushed a cart into the room. The wheels creaked. I spotted tons of knives stacked on top of it. Most had thick, long blades with curved wooden handles. There were also several hand saws, three drills, and two flame torches.

I grinned.

*Maybe, we can torch him together.*

I told myself that I would never settle down. Marriage and relationships sounded dull and tedious. But, no one told me that my soulmate and I would take down enemies and torture them together.

Had I known that, I might have searched for love earlier.

David dragged in a man. His body roughly slid across the floor. This was one of the guards for the Mancuso family. Handcuffed and tied up, he struggled to get free.

David stopped in the center of the room and looked at me. "Where do you want me to put this one?"

I put my gaze back on Emily. "Hang him from the next beam."

On the helicopter ride to the hotel, she had asked if she could torture more than Salvatore. She wanted any other survivors from the Mancuso Family.

The request had shoved me on edge, not because of the men being tortured.

I didn't care about their pain.

I worried about the state of Emily's mind. I was intelligent enough to understand that she was the less psychotic of the

two of us.

*Should I have said yes to her having more men to cut?*

During our time together, Emily had become my moral compass, forcing me to think about the rights and wrongs of my actions. Making me more human than monster.

Granted, I never enjoyed the lessons, but I yearned to become better for her.

She was my soul. My angel. My light in the darkness of this criminal world. The treasure beyond value some men spent their lives searching for, but seldom found.

She was my salvation. My blessing. The part of my heart that had been missing—the part that I hadn't known had been lost to me.

If she went too dark, if she lost herself in my madness... then I would never forgive myself.

*I won't let her take this torturing too far.*

Emily turned to David. "Take his clothes off. Salvatore's too."

I raised my eyebrows.

*Huh?*

Stunned, David looked back at me.

*Let's see where this goes.*

I gave him a slow nod.

Noise sounded.

I looked to the right.

Giorgio entered, wearing blue leather gloves and guiding Ciro Mancuso inside.

Ciro was one of Salvatore's many cousins and a top enforcer for the family. He'd been in the car that we stopped hours earlier.

While dirt and blood smudged Salvatore's face and even David's guy.



Ciro appeared freshly shaved as if he'd just stepped out of the shower and was about to go on a date. He also wore a newly pressed suit.

*That makes no sense.*

Confusion hit me. "Did you clean and dress him?"

Giorgio looked my way. "Of course."

I tried to imagine Giorgio washing Ciro up and then shook the vision out of my head.

I scowled. "Why clean him, if he's going to die?"

"Germs." Giorgio walked Ciro over to a chair in the corner of the room and gestured to it. "There you go. May you rest in peace."

Baffled, Ciro sat down and placed his cuffed wrists on his lap.

I glared at Giorgio. "Do you not see David over there tying his man up?"

Giorgio moved his attention in that direction, watched for a few seconds, and then turned back to me.

I pointed at the third beam. "Put Ciro up on the other side of Salvatore."

Giorgio gave me an odd look and then headed away, leaving his man behind.

*Excuse me?*

Giorgio left and shut the door.

My frown deepened. "I'm going to kill the Butler before we leave Italy."

"The French are our friends." Emily turned around and strolled my way. Her breasts bounced in the red dress.

My cock jerked in my pants.

She twisted and twirled the knife in her hand, taking away all of my anger.

Usually, her stomach was perfectly flat. Now it had a small bump where my child grew.

I couldn't wait for it to grow bigger.

Everyone had been referring to our child as a *he*. Therefore, I assumed we were having a boy. I never asked. I didn't care. I just wanted a healthy, smaller version of us. Hopefully, our child looked like Emily, but had my rage.

She continued forward.

My attention returned to her breasts.

When she stopped in front of me, I captured her waist.

She smirked. "Mr. Solonik?"

"Yes."

"Friends do not kill friends."

"Did I say the French were our friends?"

"I believe so."

"I think I only agreed to not kill them while we are in Italy."

Her smirk faltered. "Kaz."

"I like to be consistent."

The door opened.

Blue brought in Edmundo Mancuso. He handled the money for the family. Salvatore and Bartolo liked to keep Edmundo close to them, which resulted in him being trapped by us.

Blue had her gun pointed at Edmundo's head and gestured for him to keep going.

Due to his ankles being tied, he shuffled his feet. His wrists were bound behind his back.

Like a good soldier, Blue followed David's actions and put him on the other side of Salvatore where Giorgio's man was supposed to go. David helped her with getting the rope on the ceiling beam.

Three more of my men entered with additional rope and helped with setting up the space.

Emily watched them.

I took in her hairstyle. She had the top gathered in a bun. In the back, long, brown curls streamed past her shoulders.

I pointed to her hair. "What's her name?"

She looked at me. "It's not a wig."

"So, I can pull the curls?"

"No, you cannot."

"You didn't mind my pulling your hair on the helicopter?"

She chuckled. "I don't remember you asking."

"I never need to ask when my cock is out."

She blushed.

"How are you, *mysh*?"

She looked down. "I'm...nervous."

I raised my hand to her chin and lifted her gaze to mine. "Why?"

She placed the knife behind her. "Should I be doing this?"

"That is not the correct question."

"Then, what is?"

"Is this what *you* want to do?"

She looked away.

I brought her view back to me. "Tell me."

"I think...I want to. I feel the desire deep within me. It burns...and hums..."

"And you think that cutting these men will get rid of it?"

Instead of speaking, she slowly nodded.

"Then, why are you nervous?"

She let out a long breath. "When I was in New York...I didn't remember anything that I did, but...there were so many

nightmares that kept me up.”

“Dreams of killing men?”

“Slicing them and laughing the whole time. I could smell it and even...taste their blood on my tongue.”

I slipped my hands along her cheek. “When you had those nightmares, you were alone. You had to take care of yourself. Do you remember all the knives you had taped to the head board of your bed?”

“Yes.” She closed her eyes.

“Since being in my bed, you haven’t needed the knives.”

She opened her eyes and gazed at me.

“You have an army protecting you and nuclear weapons at your disposal.”

She gave me a sad smile. “We’re going to nuke my nightmares?”

“Every last one.”

Her smile widened. “I love you so much, Kaz.”

“And I love you too, *mysh*.” I leaned down and captured those soft, sweet lips.

*All mine to protect and love.*

I groaned against her. The minty taste of her tongue spread across my mouth, exciting every part of me. I sucked on it, drawing her taste into me, savoring her like a vintage wine or the most expensive chocolate.

A soft moan left her, carrying an oddly musical note to it. Then, she melted against me.

I tightened my arms around my mouse, physically communicating to her that I would never let her go, no matter what we faced.

When I stopped sucking on her tongue, she slipped her tongue against mine and then nipped at my lip, triggering a groan to leave me. Then she delicately nibbled on my neck, showing me an erogenous zone that I didn’t know was there.

My cock strained against my pants, begging to be released. One would have thought we hadn't just been fucking in the helicopter.

I pulled my mouth away, slid my hands down to her ass, and gripped the softness. "Are you trying to get my cock deep inside of you right now?"

"Did you not get enough?"

I rubbed my hardening length against her, trying to ease some of the sexual pressure at the tip. "You did not give me enough time in the helicopter."

"You are so spoiled."

"After you are done with cutting, I am going to have you on your back, your legs up in the air, and your pussy stuffed with me."

She blinked. "I like the sound of that."

Salvatore loudly grumbled through the gag. It sounded like he was screaming out pleas.

Emily shivered against me and closed her eyes. "Maybe...I shouldn't..."

"We won't deny your desires no matter how dark they can be."

She opened her eyes. "I remember that moment with Rosetta when you told Valentina that torture wasn't only about cutting."

I nodded. "There's an art to torture. The blade is the brush. The body is the canvas."

Her bottom lip quivered.

"*Mysh*, you're quite the artist when it comes to actual paint. What about when it's blood?"

The door slammed shut.

I looked up.

David, Blue, and the rest of our men had left.

Our enemies were now trussed up like Christmas presents for a sociopath. Each was naked, gagged, and bound securely with his hands behind his back. Even Giorgio's man, *Ciro* wildly struggled against his binds that were now tied to a fourth beam.

"It's time."

Emily left my hold and turned around.

I moved my attention to her.

She prowled away, seductively twisting her hips from side to side. With each click of her heel, she twisted the knife in her hand from side to side, then back again.

Meanwhile, the other hand opened and closed over and over. There was something hypnotizing about that motion.

I left the wall and followed her, feeling like I was in a haunting trance.

She stopped in front of *Salvatore*.

I paused a few feet behind Emily, giving her space, but needing to have a close up of her madness.

*What next, mysh?*

Struggling against the rope, *Salvatore* widened his eyes and mumbled through the gag. He probably begged for his life.

Right when I thought Emily was going to raise the knife and cut him, she shook her head and stepped back.

I was about to ask her what was wrong, but she lowered to her knees, hugged herself, and rocked back and forth. The knife's blade pressed against one shoulder.

"*Mysh*, what's wrong?" I walked over to her.

Fast, she whipped the knife up and slashed the air. "No."

I stopped a foot from her.

She remained there for one long, silent minute.

My heart boomed in my ears.

When she rose, I let go of the breath I didn't realize I was holding in.

But...still...something felt different.

Fast, Emily kicked off her heels, sending them tumbling to the side. When her bare feet touched the floor, she flexed her toes.

*Why did she take them off?*

Then, she stretched her neck to the left and then the right. She rolled her shoulders and took a loud, deep breath. Her stance shifted to an odd angle—one hip up at the side, while her upper body tilted in the opposite direction.

*Is she okay? Do I say something?*

Next, she scanned the space as if for the first time. A dark chuckle left her.

I quirked my brows.

This time when she went to Salvatore...the walk was different. No twist in the hips. No seductive prowl. It was more the tip toe of a teenager trying to sneak out of the house for the night.

When she got to Salvatore, she leaned her face to his chest and inhaled him.

He gazed down at her.

Horror covered his face.

Emily laughed like a person unhinged—one who had just escaped from an asylum. The noise rose in the air and echoed off the ceiling beams.

I stiffened.

She raised her free hand to his dick and stroked it.

Rage erupted through me. “What the hell are you doing?!”

“Shh.” Emily squeezed the tip.

“Stop it!” Furious, I rushed over.

Fast, Emily spun around and slashed the air between us.

I jumped back, barely missing the sharp edge of the blade. It had been close to slicing my throat.

I glared at her. “*Mysh?!*”

And what I saw in Emily’s eyes, was not my mouse. In fact, there was no sign of the woman that I loved. Someone else gazed back at me as if Emily had suddenly been possessed by a demon that was now controlling her body.

Fear sliced up my spine.

Watching me, she kept the knife pointed my way.

I swallowed. “*Mysh?*”

“That’s *her* name, not mine.”

*What? Not...yours? What is going on?*







# Chapter 2

## There Will Be Blood

### Kazimir

I remained where I was and studied her.

How odd it was to see Emily's face, but know it wasn't her at all. Her mouth was wide open and slanted in a deranged way, exposing her teeth. Her eyes ran wild in pools of madness drowning the woman whose body she had stolen away in seconds.

I edged back, putting more space between the knife and me. "What is *your* name?"

She tilted her head to the side, but not like a normal person. She had it all the way slanted and leaning against her shoulder. "No one ever asks what my name is."

"I am asking."

She sneered. "Why?"

"Because...we need to have a conversation."

"I don't talk. I cut." She slashed at the air hard.

I stepped back.

A dark, rambunctious laugh left her, setting the hairs on the back of my neck on end.

And just like that she returned to Salvatore as if I would no longer be a problem. She had her back to me, full focus on his dick, and kept tapping the blade against her thigh.

Terrified, Salvatore frantically looked at me and screamed through the rag.

She gazed at Salvatore and placed one finger over her lips. "Shh."

Salvatore went still and gazed wildly at her.

“Be quiet and I’ll give you some candy.” She grabbed his dick and stroked the tip.

“No touching!” I stomped over. “You can cut, but you do not touch him like that.”

Salvatore mumbled through the gag.

Still stroking his dick, she stayed right there and kept her face on Salvatore. But I knew her attention was on me. Her right foot leaned in my direction as if waiting for me to get closer, so she could get a good slice.

I closed the distance.

Shrieking like an injured animal, she spun around like a tornado and charged, slashing the air. Those curls whipped around her neck and then blew back.

I leapt back, dodged the blade, and twisted to the side, grabbing the hand holding the knife and wrapping my arm around her wrist.

“No!” She hit me with her other hand, but it held no strength.

I grabbed that wrist to stop another hit and then slapped the knife out of her other hand.

It fell to the floor with a clatter.

I wound the other hand around her back in a strong grip, twisted her body like we were dancing and then let her go.

She spun away and then stumbled back.

I checked for her next move, noticing her sloppy recovery.

*Not my mysh at all.*

My heart ached.

If I hadn’t believed that she wasn’t Emily, then now it was confirmed. With my mouse, we would still be fighting and the knife would have never left her hand.

In fact, I wasn’t sure if I could actually take any weapon from Emily.

*What do I do...with this...person?*

Lunging for me, she raised her right hand and tried to attack.

I snatched her hand and twisted it to the side. Her whole body spun around. The sudden movement made her fall to her knees.

I lowered to the floor with her.

She reached for the knife.

I slid her closer to me, picked up the knife, and threw it across the room. “What is your name?”

She pushed at my hold, but couldn’t get free.

“What is your name?”

She scowled. “I don’t speak.”

“Why not?”

“No one likes to talk to me.”

“I do.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know you now.”

“Let me go!!” She struggled for several seconds, pushing at me and trying to scratch my neck.

All I could do was gaze at her in utter amazement. She really couldn’t get away from me.

Meanwhile, Emily would have had me on my back in seconds.

*Mysh? Where are you?*

Panting, she gave up and slumped against me.

I kept her in my hold, still trying to wrap this information around my head.

She glared at me. “If you let me go, I will talk to you.”

“Can I trust you?”

“Yes.”

I released her and stood.

She rose. Foreign words left her.

*What language is that?*

Clearly stubborn, she rushed at me again and pushed me hard with both hands.

Shocked, I stumbled back.

She screamed and jumped on me.

I caught her, but it forced me down to the floor. My arms strained as I tried to make sure she wouldn't be harmed.

She seized that moment to attempt to get me in a headlock.

I blocked the move, grabbed her hand, and gently flipped her over me.

She shrieked.

I slowly lowered her onto the floor, not wanting to harm the baby. Once I had her down, I pinned her.

Now flat on her back, she screeched and flailed her feet.

So intrigued, I simply held her down and watched.

More foreign words left her mouth.

*Wait.*

I leaned forward and listened.

*That's Spanish. Emily knows Spanish?*

A good minute of this passed before she gave up.

I had no idea what the bound men around us thought of this sight. This was a hell of a thing to witness before meeting their deaths.

She returned to panting.

I smirked. "What is your name?"

"Emily."

"No. You are not Emily."

She rolled her eyes. "You don't know anything!"

“Then, tell me.”

“I’m Emily.”

“If you were Emily, you would be on top of me and my head would be locked within your arm.”

To my shock, a huge smile spread across her face. “*She’s* really good at fighting.”

“She is.” I raised my eyebrows. “And what are *you* good at?”

“I give her a break when she can’t deal with the bad things.”

“Like right now?”

She pursed her lips together.

“Then...” Fear moved within me. “Then, it is...*two* of you inside of that beautiful head?”

She stared up at me like I was an idiot.

There was so much to process, but I couldn’t waste time unraveling the puzzle.

I cleared my throat. “You know Spanish?”

She spoke in that language. “*Do you?*”

“*Only a little.*”

This was utterly fascinating.

I let out an exasperated breath. “I can’t call you Emily. It would be too confusing.”

She switched back to English. “Then, what?”

“You will need a new name.” I searched her eyes, wondering where my mouse had gone. “What should I call you?”

She shook her head. “No one calls me anything anymore. I come. I go. Everyone leaves me alone.”

“Things will change.”

“I don’t want them to change.”

“Too bad. You’re mine now.”

“I’m not. *She* is.”

I frowned. “We should focus on one problem at a time.”

She turned her attention up to the men. “I want to cut them!”

“What did people call you before?”

She looked back at me and blinked several times as if rummaging around in her mind. “My mom... called me Lunita when she wasn’t mad at me.”

*Little moon in Spanish.*

I leaned my head to the side. “Why Lunita?”

She shrugged.

“Would you like it if I called you that?”

“I want you to let me go, so I can play with that man’s dick and then cut it off.”

Salvatore shrieked through the gag. He began screaming mumbled words.

I scowled at her. “Let us begin with the first rule—”

“I don’t like rules—”

“Too bad.” I clenched my teeth and spoke, “You do not touch another man’s dick.”

“Why...not?”

“I do not like it.”

“Close your eyes.”

“Do not touch another man’s dick.”

“Around you?”

“Period!”

“But...” She looked around as if someone else more sensible was near. Apparently, not seeing that person, she returned her view to me. “But...why not?”



“Because you are mine and I do not like it.”

She laughed.

I leaned forward and touched the tip of my nose against hers.

She ceased with laughing.

“You do not touch another man.”

“I’m not yours. *She* is.”

“This body is mine and you live in it, so—”

“No. I am my own person. And she is her own person. She can do what she wants, and I can do whatever I want—”

“You can’t and you won’t and if you try, you’ll be back on this ground until you leave.” I rose and kept a hold of her.

“Speaking of leaving...”

She frowned. “I won’t leave until I can cut something.”

“You can’t cut anything unless you follow the rules.”

Her voice went to a high-pitched incredulous tone. “There are more rules?!”

“Yes.”

She pouted and returned to Spanish. “*What are they?*”

“*I don’t know yet.*”

She rolled her eyes.

“You...this...it is all new to me.”

“Just let me do what I want and then I will leave.”

I released her and moved away. “*I can’t do that, Lunita.*”

“I won’t answer to that name, if you’re going to be mean.”

“You will or you will be back on that floor.”

She stared down and then frowned. “Where is Max?”

“You don’t know?”

She fisted her hands by her sides. “Where is he?”

“Emily and you share the same body, but not the same memories and knowledge?”

Lunita walked off and looked around the room.

“Lunita, answer me. Please!”

“Just get Max. He understands. He knows me.” Seconds later, Lunita picked up the knife on the other side of the room and headed back to the bound men. “He stays quiet and lets me do what I want.”

My hands shook at my sides.

No longer wrestling with Lunita, my brain began to piece everything together.

*Emily has more than one personality. Of course. Why hadn't I figured that out before?*

She couldn't remember the times she killed the men in New York, but she had actively taken their lives. I thought this was a simple case of her blacking out during these moments. She always said that she drunk a lot. Maxwell talked about alcohol too.

But no one had ever mentioned that Emily was a completely different person when she killed the men.

*Or did they even understand that fact?*

This situation was beyond my knowledge. I knew guns and bombs. I understood how to navigate the criminal underworld—moving gangster chess pieces to win the game. The threat of death and blood never slowed my breath or increased my heart beats, but this...

I ran my shaking fingers through my hair.

*Come back to me, Emily. I don't...know what to do...*

Lunita stopped in front of Salvatore. Then, she glanced over her shoulder and glared at me.

I put my hands in my pockets to hide their shaking from her. “What?”

“I won't touch his dick.”

I sneered. “You’re damn right you will not.”

Lunita hissed at me and turned back around. “Meanie.”

Fast, she slashed Salvatore’s throat.

Shock hit me.

There was power and violence in the way she did it. So much so that I touched my own throat and stepped back.

While Lunita couldn’t handle me in a fight, she was still cold and deadly.

Blood sprayed from Salvatore’s sliced artery. It hit her face like hard rain and she happily stepped into the downpour, taking more of the red liquid on her.

I opened my mouth.

No words left it.

A second later, one of the other men shook and began pissing on himself. A small puddle of his urine lay before him.

Meanwhile, laughter fled from her lips.

More blood sprayed onto her head.

Humming, Lunita twisted in it. Red rain fell on her skin, drenched her hair, and dripped down her cheeks.

Bold, deranged laughter spilled out of her.

The other three bound men freaked out, mumbling and struggling in their binds. It was one thing to die, but another to go like this.

“I’m dancing in the rain!” Lunita giggled and sung more, “I’m dancing in the rain!”

I couldn’t close my mouth and was utterly unable to comprehend the sight before me.

*This really isn’t Emily. She would...never...*

Grinning, Lunita faced Salvatore’s dead body and raised the knife in the air. Her voice lowered to a whisper. “When Jesus is my portion...”

I froze in shock.

“A constant friend is He.” She placed the knife’s point under his neck, drove the knife deep into him. “His eyes...are on...the sparrow.”

I took two steps forward.

Lunita dragged the knife down vertically, making a long bloodied line. “And I know...”

She took the knife out, raised it to the center of the vertical line, and then carved a horizontal line. “He watches...me.”

*The holy cross.*

Blood dripped from her hands.

The red wounds on Salvatore’s chest were shaped in the form of a cross.

Lunita slid her gaze down Salvatore’s body, then stopped it at his penis. Where the other dealings with her knife were somewhat calm, this time she stabbed with pure hate and violence, slamming the knife into the limp length and hacking away at his balls. Bits of flesh mingled with the blood spilling to the floor.

I edged back and covered my groin.

His dick dropped along with his testicles. I had never seen the inside of a penis before and I vowed to never witness that again.

For the first time in a long time, my stomach twisted in disgust.

Lunita formed her lips into a huge smile, showing all her teeth. Blood streamed down her face and soaked her hair. She spoke in Spanish, “*Who’s next?*”

The bound men mumbled and screamed.

One sobbed through the gag.

Lunita giggled and looked at me. “You pick.”

It took me a minute to realize that she was actually talking to me. Perhaps, the horror had shaken me down to my core.

*What have I...unleashed?*

I cleared my throat. “When did you... first start doing this?”

“Pick one.”

Sighing, I pointed to Ciro. “Him.”

“Why?”

“I heard he liked to beat his wife badly in front of their kids. When Valentina approached him on this, the wife stood up for him and said he had not. Meanwhile, the wife was missing teeth. Her thumb was bent in the wrong direction and it looked to be permanent.”

“Good pick.” Lunita headed over there. “Very good one.”

When Lunita stopped in front of Ciro, her face twisted in annoyance. She jerked her shoulders to the right and then left.

*What is she doing now?*

Letting out a long breath, she dropped the knife and yanked at the dress. “Always wearing tight things. So uncomfortable. Too much.”

Lunita proceeded to take off the dress, yanking the red fabric down her arms and wiggling out of it. The garment dropped to the floor.

I might have told her to stop, but I didn't think any of the men would be looking at her in a sexual way this evening, especially with how she hacked at Salvatore's dick.

I headed over to her and picked up the bloody knife.

Lunita took in the red lace bra and panties. Then, she reached her hands behind her and tried to unsnap the bra.

“No.” I handed the knife to her. “That stays on.”

“I want to be naked.”

“Once they are dead, you can be as naked as you want.”

“Is that another rule?”

“It is.”

Groaning, she snatched the knife from me and turned to  
Ciro. “Do you want some candy?”

Screeching, Ciro shook his head over and over.

“The candy is really yummy.”

Tears left Ciro’s eyes as he mumbled.

Lunita placed her finger over her lips. “Shh.”

And then she entered into the same ritual—slicing the  
throat, laughing in the bloody downpour, the religious  
whispered chant, cutting the holy cross into the chest, and then  
hacking off the dick and balls.

Stunned, I studied each movement. More terror should  
have come, but it no longer moved through me. Now I was  
just trying to piece everything together.

*I can’t...believe this. Is this...really happening?*

By the time, she went to Edmundo and begun the ritual  
again. Every time she talked about candy, my heart broke into  
shattered parts that would never be able to be glued back  
together again.

*That man did this to her. He hurt her so badly as a child  
that...she turned into this.*

The offering of candy must have been one of his tactics.

Lunita kept promising it to each man. Of course the  
stabbing of the men’s dick symbolized the hatred she now had  
for it. That was the tool that violated her body and stained her  
innocence.

*I wish he were alive so I could kill him for her.*

Meanwhile, I wasn’t sure about the holy cross.

When she went to the last man, I stepped closer and  
analyzed that moment more. So many questions came to me.

Why did Lunita pick those words about Jesus? Did he say  
them to her when he hurt her? Or were those words a form of  
comfort for her as a little kid when she dealt with so much  
pain?

When she finished, blood covered most of her body and soaked her bra and panties. Pools of blood ran under the four corpses.

She scanned the place. Her chest rose and fell like she'd been running. "Now...we have to organize all of this."

"Organize it?"

She dropped the knife and took off the bra and panties. The garments fell to the bloodied floor. Lunita stood before me naked, covered in blood and gore, stained in death.

My body reacted to the beautiful sight before me. It should have disgusted me, but the primal beast in my core came alive.

It was Emily's body after all—the object of my obsession. And it was covered in blood.

That woke up the beast and lured him out.

My cock grew stiff.

She blinked. "Help me?"

"What do you want?"

"Get naked with me. Then, we organize them, and then..."

I raised my eyebrows. "Then?"

"Then you fuck me in the blood."







## Chapter 3

### A Battle of Desire versus Honor

#### Kazimir

I fisted my hands, holding myself back and trying to decide the right thing to do.

Lunita wanted to fuck, and how could I deny her. She wore my mouse's body. Plus, she was so enchanting and covered in blood.

But would I be fucking Emily or someone else?

While this was my mouse's face, body, and voice, it was not her. It was like my mouse was wasted off alcohol and drugs, beyond sanity and in that state, she's begging me for sex. Although she was mine, even in that situation, I would have been conflicted.

*How would Emily feel about all of this?*

Throughout her childhood, she had been abused and violated.

I wouldn't add my name to that list.

Plus, I promised to love and protect her. While my cock grew with desire at Lunita's request, the promise to my mouse remained.

Dripping in blood, Lunita watched me battling desire versus honor. I stared at her full, slippery breasts, splattered in blood and flesh. Other men would have been disgusted, but this sight called to animalistic cravings within me.

The beast screamed at me to pound into her.

The tip of my cock pulsed with greedy desire. Those curvy hips yearned for me to grip them like I always did. And the space between her thighs yearned to be touched, played with, and fucked. It hypnotized me. I wanted to do whatever she wanted me to do.

*Stop.*

I fought the intense lust rising in my chest.

“I always feel your cock through her.” Lunita turned her head in that odd angle. “Now...I want to feel it for myself.”

My length grew stiff.

*Damn it!*

I looked away and rubbed my face with both hands,

*Fuck.*

This was all new.

There had to be rules in this situation.

Plus, I needed to talk to Emily—the actual personality that I had fallen in love with.

*Should I think of it in this way or...in another way? Was she two or one?*

I let out an exasperated breath.

Would it be cheating if I fucked Lunita? Was it still Emily or not at all? And would my mouse be enraged or understand?

Once my mouse returned, the news of this situation would rock her. The last thing I wanted to add to this traumatic information was that I was balls deep inside of her alternate personality and having a blast.

Lunita strolled over. “No one ever gets to fuck me.”

My thoughts ceased.

“They’re always scared.” She put her hands on my shoulders and pushed my suit jacket away. “Or...”

“Or?”

She pulled the jacket’s sleeves off my arms, exposing my shirt. “I kill them.”

I widened my eyes.

Lunita yanked the jacket down. It fell to the floor. “Are you too scared to fuck me?”

“I’m not.”

With her bloody fingers, she traced a red line up to my chest, outlining each of the buttons that held together my shirt. She did this as if deliberately toying with me, prolonging my anticipation of the moment when she would finally pull the shirt open and reveal my bare chest to her hungry eyes.

“Good.”

“Good?”

“I want you inside of me.”

I cleared my throat. “Well...”

Her fingers moved over the buttons until they were all undone. She slid the front of the shirt off of my shoulders and eased it down, until my naked throat was surrounded by air.

My cock twitched in my pants, eager to be inside her.

She brushed her lips against my collarbone and made her way down to the center of my chest, until she reached the top of my breastbone.

Heat spread across my skin. “Lunita.”

Her fingers worked the remaining buttons, until both sides of the shirt hung loose. “What?”

I watched as she licked her lips. “I must add more rules.”

She yanked my shirt out of my pants and took it completely off. The shirt dropped onto the bloody floor. “What is the new rule?”

I stepped back. “We don’t fuck, until I talk to Emily.”

A dark chuckle left her. “But, you’re talking to Emily.”

I frowned.

She closed the distance and brought her hands to my chest, exploring each layer of muscle.

I grabbed her wrists and stopped her. “Do you understand, Lunita?”

“I don’t.”

“Why not?”

She leaned her head all the way to the side again and had it laying against her shoulder. “You’re not going to tell her about me. We don’t tell her. So then how could you talk about this?”

“I will be telling her everything.”

Gasping, she straightened her head and edged back. “You...can’t do that.”

I unbuckled my belt, undid my pants, and let them fall to my feet. “I can.”

Lunita watched me step out of my pants and hugged herself. “Y-you can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“It would scare her too much.”

“My mouse should know what is going on.” I took off my boxer briefs.

Still hugging herself, Lunita gazed at my cock and then backed up some more. “But...if you scare her too much...or put her through too much pain...”

I prowled over to Lunita and stopped an inch from her. “What will happen?”

“She will leave.” Lunita looked up at me. “And then I will have to be here longer than I want.”

“Is that how *this* works?”

“She’s stronger, so...she can be in charge.” Lunita blinked several times. “But...if she needs a break, then I’ll come.”

“Tell me more.”

She looked down at the floor. “I don’t...like to talk about these things.”

“But I want to understand.”

“I don’t talk.”

I touched her chin and brought her view to me. “But I need to understand how to love her and you.”

She eyed me. “Why?”

“Because you both are mine.”

She shook her head. “I’m not yours. *She* is.”

I smirked. “Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“I already told you that wasn’t true.”

“This is too...serious...” Lunita moved her chin away from my fingers. “I want you to just fuck me.”

“Not today.”

She glared. “Then, why did you get naked?”

“Because you’re naked and I think that would make you feel more comfortable.”

She looked away. “It does.”

“Good.”

“No fun. No fun.” She headed away and went to the large cart covered in torture tools. “Then, let’s organize.”

“O-kay.” I followed. “How will we do that?”

“We can put all the legs in one corner and the arms in another.” A huge smile spread across her face. She showed both rows of teeth.

For some reason it unsettled me.

A wicked giggle left her like she had the biggest secret. “Then...we can just play in the blood, splash it everywhere. Paint ourselves with it.”

I tensed. “Alright.”

“Will you do that with me?”

“I will.”

“Lots of fun.” She picked up a butcher knife and laughed some more.

I grabbed a saw. “And we talk while we do it.”

Lunita raised the knife up to her face and wildly stared at the blade. “But, I don’t talk.”

“With me you *will* talk.”

She headed off. “Is that a rule too?”

“Yes.” I trailed after her. “I need to understand—Emily and you.”

“I explained. I come when she is sad or suffering.” Lunita stopped at Salvatore’s corpse and studied him. “We don’t cut the chest up. That would be bad.”

“Why?”

“We keep the chest together for Max and put them close in one pile, so he can draw smiley faces on them.”

“Why does Maxwell like to do that?”

Suddenly, Lunita turned to me, her eyes wide. Her tears glistened on her lashes, and they swam in a clear liquid pool in her irises. Her mouth dramatically arched, making the most of the exaggerated curve of her lips. She looked both like a child and a woman on the edge of her life. She hit me with a frown that echoed overwhelming fear and unrelenting sadness.

The air in my lungs froze into ice. I could barely breathe.

She lowered her voice. “Max isn’t right in the head. Something is wrong with him.”

Pain filled my chest.

*Mysh...*

She put her back to me and raised her hand to the carved holy cross on Salvatore’s chest. Slowly, she dipped the tip of her finger into the wound and slipped the finger through the fleshy trail. “But, don’t tell him I said that. I don’t like when he is sad.”

“Okay.” I tried to get a grip and remember the details of the Tinder Killer. Now wasn’t a time to be sad or horrified. I needed answers for not just myself, but for Emily.

I pushed the icy chill from my body and gripped the saw's handle hard. "Tell me something."

Lunita took her finger out of the wound and stared at the bloody fingertip. "Yes."

"When did you start coming around?"

"I don't understand." Lunita raised the hand with the butcher knife and placed it on Salvatore's shoulder.

"Was it a year or so ago when the first Tinder Killer victim appeared?"

"Victim?" Chuckling, Lunita began cutting Salvatore's arm. "He tried to rape her."

Rage boiled through my veins. "Did he now?"

"He had her down on the bed, choking her neck. She could have gotten out of it, but she froze...she always freezes whenever that happens."

"And you came?"

"I always come when that happens. No matter what."

"Wait." My head fogged with confusion. "You've come... before?"

Her butcher knife hit bone. She grunted as she sliced at the joint fast. Her breath rushed out in short bursts. Her chest quickly rose and fell. Seconds later, she yanked the arm away with a wet pop and walked off to the corner of the room.

I called after, "Lunita, have you come before?"

"Of course."

"When did you start coming?"

Sighing, she dropped the arm in the corner and headed back. "I don't understand what you are asking me."

"When..." I let a long breath go. "When did you start appearing to help Emily?"

"That doesn't make any sense." Lunita returned to Salvatore. "And you're not helping me organize."



I swallowed down my annoyance. I had to be patient even though I had thousands of questions. I needed to learn as much as I could. More than that, I needed to learn what I could do.

“Oh.” She opened her mouth and touched her stomach.  
“That must be the baby.”

Anxiety crashed through me. My words rushed out.  
“What’s wrong? Is everything okay? How do you feel? Should I get the—”

“It’s just moving.” She let go of her stomach and raised her saw to Salvatore’s other shoulder. “I don’t like to feel it moving.”

“But...don’t do anything to the baby, okay?”

She eyed me like I was crazy. “Why would I do anything?”

*Get back to the questions. We have to solve this.*

While she cut the arm, I worked on Salvatore’s leg. “So, you said that you come and help Emily when she is sad or suffering.”

She sighed in annoyance.

“When did this begin?”

She had the other arm off faster and headed away to the corner.

“Lunita, answer me, please.” I sawed at the leg, taking my anger and frustration out on the corpse. How crazy this would look to David or any of my other men—my being naked and separating body parts with my mouse.

For a few seconds, the sound of the sawing drowned out my thoughts.

Lunita returned, stopped at my side, and watched me. “You keep asking me a bunch of dumb questions.”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “Answer anyway.”

She pouted.

“When did you start coming to give Emily breaks?”

“When I let her take over.”

I paused from sawing off the leg. “What does that mean?”

“She’s smarter so I just let her have us. I wanted to end it all, but she took charge and then I...” Lunita shrugged. “I watch sometimes on the television, but not much. Sometimes it’s boring. Sometimes it’s fun.”

I screwed my face in confusion. “Lunita...”

She went to another body. “No more questions.”

“I don’t understand what you are saying, just explain to me —”

“I don’t talk!” Lunita spun around and slashed the air over and over. “I cut! I cut! I cut! I cut!”

The sound of the door knob wiggling hit my ears.

*Who is that?*

Racing toward the door, I stopped it from opening too far.

David tried to duck his head around my arm, but I blocked him. The muscles in his neck bulged as he tried to get past me. His eyes held confusion. He pushed against the door, but my leg was braced against it and I didn’t budge.

I yelled, “No!”

David backed up fast. “I heard yelling and wanted to make sure—”

“Don’t interrupt us!” I slammed the door, locked it, and walked back to Lunita.

She was now on the other side of the room. Her focus centered on Ciro’s corpse.

Right when I got to her side, she began cutting into Ciro’s arm.

I sighed. “Lunita, when you say television—”

“Where is Max? He doesn’t bother me.”

“What does he do?”

“He stands far away and looks away until I’m done. Where is he?”

“Max is with Jean-Pierre.”

Lunita paused from slicing, looked at the ceiling, and stared at it for several seconds.

I checked it too, but saw nothing.

Then, she put her view on me and squinted. “Jean-Pierre... is the Butcher?”

“Yes.”

“Max is gone with him? That’s probably why she needed me to come this time.”

“But she wasn’t sad.” I frowned. “I have been taking care of her.”

“But sometimes you go too far.” Lunita returned and sliced into the arm. “You’re not right in the head either.”

“How do you think I might have gone too far?” I stiffened. “I don’t want to make Emily sad again.”

“I haven’t been watching the show.”

“Why not?”

She pouted. “I have a life too.”

“Where?”

“In Harlem.”

“Doing what?”

“Painting and talking to Kennedy and Uncle Xavier.”

*But...they’re dead.*

I studied Lunita. “You said that *you* let Emily be in charge \_\_\_”

“Leave me alone!”

I stared back at her in shock. This was all unfamiliar territory. When I asked, people answered. When I needed to understand, everyone did their best to make sure I comprehended or they died.

With Lunita, I would have to figure out another tactic.

*Goddamn it!*

I gave her some space, returned to Salvatore's body, and finished sawing his legs.

*Think. What was she trying to tell me?*

Lunita had been around long before the Tinder Killer murders. Did Maxwell and Xavier know that?

Perhaps, Lunita appeared when she was first being abused. What was the moment that split my mouse's mind in half?

And...were there more personalities?

That very thought triggered chills within me. This was not what I expected today, but I would deal with it.

I would figure this out, and control it.

I carried cut-up legs to the corner and began working on a new corpse.

The whole time more thoughts spun through my head.

What would Emily think when she heard this? And would she be able to deal with this horrific news, plus navigate everything that was going on here?

We were in the center of a war between the Mancuso Family and Fela. That meant Black Axe would be coming for us soon as well as hundreds of 'Ndrangheta soldiers.

More Italian families could join the fight—the Vizzini Family, Sicilians, and others—just on the principal that the Brotherhood was causing chaos on Italian territory.

*What am I going to do?*

Minutes passed filled with cutting body parts and organizing. Every now and then, I attempted to ask Lunita a question. Always she remained quiet, playing with the dead pieces and cutting them off.

Sometimes she hummed.

However, never did she answer me again.

Once everything was *organized*, I went to Lunita, eager to get more answers out of her. "What else do you want to do?"

She looked around. A dark chuckle left her. Then, she turned her view to me. “I should go now.”

“Wait.” I reached my hand out to her.

She blinked and edged back.

“I just...want to understand a little more.”

She held her hands out. “There is nothing to understand.”

“Lunita, there is a whole hell of a lot to understand.”

She leaned that head to the side and had it laying on her shoulder. “Why?”

“Emily doesn’t know about you. Or does she?”

“She doesn’t, and don’t tell her.”

“Why not?”

“Max, Daryl, and Uncle Xavier never said anything, and they’re smart.”

“But, she should know.”

She raised her head back to normal and whispered, “It might make her so sad that she leaves for good.”

“But I can’t keep this from her.”

“Sometimes you will have to keep things from her.” Lunita raised her hands up over her head. “It’s this big. She can’t handle it all.”

“I could help her figure this out—”

“Impossible.”

“Why?”

“To fix her would be to...” Lunita made a circle with her arms. “It would be to make everything disappear.”

“How?”

“Gone.” She clapped her hands hard. “Just like that.”

“Can she see us?”

Lunita frowned. “She doesn’t watch the television.”

“Where is it?”

Lunita touched the side of her head.

My heart ached. “How do I help my mouse, Lunita?”

“You don’t. Leave it alone.” She walked up to me and wrapped her arms around my waist. “You’re so silly.”

I put my arms around Lunita’s waist. “I have to try.”

Lunita leaned her head against my chest. “You’re good for her.”

“I want to be good for *you* too.”

“But I don’t deserve it.”

I frowned. “You do. You both deserve everything and more. I wish...”

A soft whisper left her. “What?”

“I wish I could go back in time and kill the bastard that hurt you.”

“There were more than just one. They never wanted me to grow.”

“Then, I would have killed them all.”

“Silly Lion.” She chuckled. “I killed them myself. Every last one of them that was mean to me, but...don’t tell Max. It would make him so sad.”

I quirked my brows. “Doesn’t he already know?”

“Not about all of them.” She swayed. Then, her body went limp in my arms. She began slipping down.

“Lunita?” I caught her before she fell to the ground. Her eyes closed. Her mouth hung open. Her breathing grew shallow. “Lunita?”

I lifted her body up in my arms and carried her over to the center of the floor. “*Mysh?*”

*Come back to me.*

I lowered us to the bloodied floor and studied the breathtaking enigma that was my mouse.

I was stunned.

I was terrified.

I was out of my element and desperately losing control.

I had no idea what to do or what would come, but there was one thing I understood with every ounce of confidence.

I loved Emily and I would protect her, forever, even if it meant, keeping her safe from herself.







## Chapter 4

### Blue

# Another Day with the Lion and Mouse

*What are they doing? And how long will they take?*

I stood on the left side of the suite's shut door.

King David flanked the right side and had his arms rested behind him.

Giorgio had been out here with us for a few minutes. Tension rose in the air. The space between them was charged with unspoken threats.

In the past days, each had hinted at fighting each other in Paris. Giorgio had even mentioned that he slept with King David's maid. Then, David slept with his.

I didn't know what all of that was about, but they clearly weren't buddies.

A minute later, Giorgio's phone rang and he headed downstairs without saying anything to us.

That left me alone with King David.

Every few seconds, I stole a glance.

King David was devastatingly handsome. There was no way around it. He had captivating blue eyes and a regal nose, accentuated by a strong jaw and full lips.

Sexiness oozed from him.

Usually, his hair neatly went back in waves and teased his ears. Now it was stylishly tousled as if he'd just finished having sex.

However, the most enchanting part of David was the Bible verses decorating the space under his chin and all over his neck.

I glanced at the ink. It was written in French cursive.

I thought back to several days ago when he'd translated one of the verses in English.

*“And when He had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom He testified and said, ‘I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all My will.’”*

*I swallowed. “That’s from...Acts. I think.”*

*“It is. The Apostle Paul was speaking in the synagogue and talking about how King David was found by God.”*

*I looked at him. “Are you religious?”*

*“I don’t know anymore.”*

*“Why?”*

*He turned away. “Because my job tests my faith almost every day.”*

*“I understand.”*

*“But, there’s part of me that thinks that I still do God’s will at times.”*

The memory ended.

In the hallway, King David caught me watching him and flashed me a sexy smile.

*Stop staring at him.*

I moved my view to the front, keeping my focus on the wall across from me.

Unfortunately, the painting on the wall was odd. A man lay on the floor, dressed in a red cloak. His head had been partially severed by a sword. Blood poured from the sliced neck.

The executioner stood behind him, reaching for a dagger so that he could complete his task.

Next to them, a woman held a gold platter like she was waiting for someone to put the head on it.

And near the woman with the platter, an older woman stood, covering her ears with her hands.

*Why would the hotel put this image in the hallway?*

King David's sexy voice sounded. His voice was deep and gruff. "What do you think the Lion and Mouse are doing?"

I cleared my throat. "Slicing the men up."

"Since being with them, it has been a hell of a ride."

"Yes. It has." I glanced back at him. "But, I'm thankful for it."

"You are?"

"I had no money. I would search around old crime scenes and places where there'd been shootings, searching for a discarded gun."

"Did you find any?"

"Most of the time. Then, I would take the guns home, clean and fix the weapons to sell."

"Did you make good money?"

"Not even close to what I make now."

"One thing the Lion enjoys is filling a bank account."

"And mine is full and happy."

"There are benefits to being next to them."

I turned back to the wall and pointed to the painting. "What's up with this image?"

"You do not recognize it?"

I smiled. "Should I?"

"It's a famous Italian painting by Caravaggio."

I shrugged.

A low chuckle left him. "The name may not grab your attention, but the moment he is capturing will."

"What's happening?"

"This is the Beheading of St. John the Baptist."

"Oh." I gazed at the painting with new eyes.

“In the New Testament, Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee under the Roman Empire.”

I nodded, slowly remembering some of the Bible story.

“John the Baptist publicly disapproved of Herod divorcing his first wife and unlawfully taking his brother’s wife as his second wife. Her name was Herodias.”

“Then, Herod imprisoned John the Baptist, but...” I looked at David. “I think he didn’t want to kill John the Baptist.”

“Not at first. Herod’s step-daughter Salome performed for him on his birthday. She was graceful and amazing, Herod applauded and told her that he would give her anything she desired.”

Completely captivated with David’s storytelling, I watched him with excitement.

*He’s so smart.*

“Salome was uncertain of what to ask for, so she whispered with her mother. They went back and forth for a while. Finally, after some time, Salome looked up and declared, ‘Give me now the head of John the Baptizer on a platter!’” David raised his hand to his neck and sliced it with an invisible knife.

I frowned. “That bitch.”

David nodded. “I always imagined the crowd loudly gasping at the gruesome request. I knew Herod must have looked around in shock, knowing that he had to save face in front of everyone.”

“So he did it because of peer pressure?”

“That and Baba believes Herod also killed John the Baptist because he had too much influence over the people. Herod was scared he could ignite a rebellion.”

“That makes sense.”

David pointed at the woman holding the platter. “That’s Salome.”

The image of her now made me want to strangle her. “What ever happened to Salome?”

“I don’t remember her being mentioned anymore. Herod and Herodias stuck together, performing desperate and diabolical deeds until they died. God punished them with constant military defeats and chaos.”

“Why is the older woman next to Salome covering her ears?”

“She doesn’t want to hear the Saint’s final screams.” David gestured to the signature in the pool of John the Baptist’s blood. “This is the only painting Caravaggio ever signed.”

“Why?”

“Not sure.”

I smiled at him. “Why do you know so much about art?”

“Have you not met Baba?” He chuckled. “She demanded I learn as much as possible. I read more than most kids. When she didn’t have me in church, we were in a museum or art gallery.”

“You’re lucky to have her.”

He beamed. “I am.”

Screaming sounded from within the suite.

David widened his eyes. Fast, he went to the door and began to open it. I could tell on his face that he was uncertain if he should, but he did it anyway.

This was why King David was the one to stand next to the Lion. He made the difficult decisions that others were too terrified to even consider.

Once David slowly opened the door.

The Lion roared on the other side, “No!”

Still, David pushed it open another inch. “I heard yelling and wanted to make sure—”

“Don’t interrupt us!”

The door slammed shut.

David stared at it.

Swallowing, I looked away.

David returned to his position on the other side of the door. “I have had three hours of sleep so maybe I am more tense than necessary.”

“We are all on edge.”

“Still, I like serving the Lion. My only worry is...”

I looked at him.

“I do not want to serve a Herod and Herodias.”

I stirred. “You think...the Lion and Mouse will be like that?”

David shook his head. “Not now, but...”

I quirked my brows.

“If moments like this continue, then only God knows what could come.”

“You don’t agree with them torturing the men?”

“Not for fun. It creates blood lust. All of us have it in this field or we wouldn’t be here, but...” David exhaled. “One must be disciplined with their blood lust and need for violence.”

I lowered my voice. “The Mouse wanted to do it. That’s not like her.”

“Baba gave me a reading this morning, after avoiding it for days.”

“What did she say?”

“In these next days, I must be stern with the Lion.” Then, he hit me with a sexy smile. “Also my rituals can return.”

Rolling my eyes, I smirked.

Before King David went into battle, he liked a blow job. According to him, it brought him luck and kept his head clear to make fast-paced strategic decisions. He called these moments his rituals.

*Horny bastard.*

I put my attention back on the painting and that bitch Salome holding the platter. “Who will be the lucky woman to help you with your rituals?”

“One would think that I had a list of women to suck me off, as bad as I need it.” His voice grew huskier. “But, new developments have arose. Ones that make me want to change my ways.”

I looked at him. “What new developments?”

He hit me with an intense gaze so piercing it set my skin on fire. My body flushed with heat. I was like a moth drawn to the light, unable to turn away from the lure of the flame.

But somehow I did and caught my breath.

David spoke, “With this *new development*, I must be careful. It’s a delicate situation. We work together and I respect her entirely too much to quickly hit on her. She must be properly romanced.”

The heat continued to spread and vibrate through to my core.

“Do you have any thoughts on my predicament, Blue?”

My heart skipped at him saying my name.

My view remained on the painting, yet a smile curved my lips. “I think you’re correct. If you properly romance her, then I’m sure she will return your interests.”

His voice lowered to a dark groan. “Very Interesting. I would enjoy that a lot.”

I tried to hide the inferno that flared within me. “Of course...if I were you, I would wait until we returned to Moscow.”

“Of course. The peace in Moscow will provide a great opportunity for lots of romance.”

“It should.”

“In the meantime, I will forgo my ritual and take cold showers.”

“I’ll join you.” Those words escaped my mouth before my mind could stop them. “I mean...I will—”

“Join me.”

I turned his way.



Usually when he stood next to the Lion, David radiated violence and death. A stern expression always covered his face.

But in this moment, lust dotted his expression and those seducing blue eyes glazed with passion. “Last time we talked, I told you not to love. I was wrong.”

I bit my bottom lip.

“A lot has happened since that conversation.” He sighed and turned away.

I thought about his long lost ex-fiancé, Francesca. I’d watched him shoot her. We cut her body up and hid it later. Not one ounce of remorse covered his face. However, I knew it must have hurt him.

“What I’ve learned is that...love is not bad.” David continued, “It’s *who* we love that could be the problem.”

“I agree.” I thought about the one love of my life that I had lost—Adrian.

Even now, I wore the blue pendant cross dangling around my neck—a gift from him on my twenty-first birthday.

The next day, he’d died.

Besides his framed picture, the pendant was the only thing I had of him. Not a day went by that I didn’t wear the blue cross. Those two objects helped me remember daily that someone on this huge Earth actually loved me. I would forever be grateful for our time together.

When Adrian died, and I felt so alone. My heart had been broken in two.

His death had made me fear loving again. I didn’t like the pain, the suffering, the constant emptiness.

David’s words pulled me out of my anxious thoughts. “I want to love again.”

*Me too. I just don’t want to lose the person again in the process.*

“But I want to do it right the next time. That’s what else was in Baba’s reading this morning.”

“Love?”

“Almost. She said that I had to open up my heart to the idea of a new love, and somehow find the time.” He chuckled.

“Time.”

I grinned.

“There’s been no free time since becoming the Lion’s Number One.”

“That I understand.”

With Max gone, I stayed by Emily’s side, trying to prove my worth. After that meeting with Fela, I believe I showed the Lion and the Mouse what I could do.

But I still wasn’t sure where my position was with her.

Additionally, I didn’t know if I should want to be next to her. David was constantly exhausted. He had even admitted to not having much time for love and sleep.

Being next to the Mouse would be a lifelong position.

Was that what I wanted for my life, to only serve Emily? Would I be content with that? Or did I yearn to build an empire on my own?

These possibilities had never been present in my life before. The new bank account and experiences had opened up my eyes, and I was now reassessing my dreams and wants.

Silence ran between us. Comfortable and contemplative.

Minutes passed.

Perhaps, David was considering his life choices too. We were both young with our futures ahead of us.

Another curious thought occurred to me.

*Umm...did King David really just hint at wanting to date me?*

That made me feel giddy. My limbs felt weightless, and my head swam with joy. My cheeks even ached from grinning.

However, I made sure to remain still and quiet.

We were on guard and here to protect the Lion and Mouse. Enemies would soon begin swarming and surrounding us.

Now was not the time to ponder the possibility of romance between us, no matter how much I wondered what David had in mind for pursuing me.

*Is he really going to stop getting his ritual blow jobs?*

That news shocked me. I would know he was serious if he really did.

*We shall see.*

The elevator doors opened down the hall.

David and I both looked that way.

To my shock, Maxwell stepped off with Boris and Jean-Pierre at his side.

*He's back! Thank God.*

Maxwell possessed so much valuable knowledge. Every time we worked together he used it as a teachable moment. Granted, he also picked on me like I was his little sister.

I secretly loved it. That made me feel like we were family, which was something I desperately yearned for in this life.

Maxwell spotted us and increased his pace before the others.

That was when I noticed Giorgio and some of the other French's men in the back.

*Wow, Giorgio. You could have told us that the Butcher was back.*

Maxwell approached us. To my surprise, his voice held an edge. "Why is Em in here and not in the penthouse?"

*Oh. Yeah. I don't know if he'll be happy about what they're doing.*

Maxwell never liked too much bloodshed. People thought that the Mouse was kind-hearted and forgiving. However, I was slowly learning that she was like that due to Maxwell being in her ear. He helped her navigate way more than many gave him credit for.

*Do we tell Maxwell?*

David spoke, “Welcome back.”

I nervously shifted.

With no humor on his face, Maxwell pointed at the door. “What’s going on in there?”

David sighed. “I’m not sure exactly, however, the Lion has requested that no one disturb them.”

Maxwell tilted his head to the side. “Why not?”

“I’m not sure.” David gestured down the hall. “However, I suggest you go to your room, clean up, and order something nice. Your suite has been freshened up each day waiting for your return and there are—”

“Motherfucker, open the door. I want to talk to Em right now.”

*Oh, God. Maxwell is not in the best of moods. What happened while he was gone?*

I cleared my throat. “Maxwell, they told us not to let anyone in.”

“Again.” He looked at me. “Why not?”

I shrugged.

Maxwell screwed his face in annoyance. “You all are supposed to be watching over Kazimir and Emily, but you let them up in a room without knowing what’s up?”

David and I gave no response.

*What the hell were we supposed to do? Not everyone had his ability to yell at Kazimir or Emily.*

Maxwell continued, “And I know they’re not fucking in there because you would have just said that.”

David and I exchanged awkward glances.

Maxwell crossed his arms over his chest. “Plus, we know Em can’t be silent when she fucks to save her life. I would have heard her screaming out ‘Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!’ And the Lion would have been grunting like a fucking animal—”

“You need to go to your suite until they’re done.” David frowned. The lust from earlier left his eyes. Now only that alpha glare filled his gaze. “Welcome back.”

Maxwell sneered. “And if I don’t go to my suite?”

*Can we just take this down a bit?*

I rolled my eyes. “Maxwell, you just got back. There’s been a lot going on these past days. It’s been really rough.”

“*You’ve* had some rough days?” A loud delirious laugh left him.

I inched back.

He yelled, “Did you have to run from a flame thrower, and make sure your foot didn’t get blown up by Vietnam-war era explosives in a front yard?!”

*Flame thrower? Vietnam? What?*

Max raised his hands in the air and wagged them around. “Imagine being stuck in a fucking pit with skeletons floating around in the cold rain and then being baptized in deer blood by a butt-naked priest who prays to an eagle!”

David and I exchanged odd looks again.

*Okay. He’s been smoking something crazy.*

Maxwell continued, “And don’t even get me started on the Voodoo Queen and the incestuous grandparents.”

“Al-right.” David held up his hands. “You’re really high right now. Blue is going to take you downstairs to get some water—”

“I’m not high.” Maxwell pointed at the door. “What are they doing in there?”

Anger spread across David’s face. He spoke through clenched teeth, “I don’t know.”

“But you have an idea.” Maxwell looked at me. “What did they take in there? A map? Popcorn and a movie? A spaceship? Come on, Blue. Help me out.”

*Damn it.*

I let out a long breath. “They took four guys in there. Italians.”

In that moment, Jean-Pierre stepped up. “They took four Italians into that room for questioning?”

“Naw.” Maxwell shook his head. “If they were questioning them or having a meeting, then their number ones would be in there too.”

David gritted his teeth. “Kazimir said that his Mouse needed to blow off some steam, so they took the men in there with some of the Lion’s tools.”

Maxwell frowned. “What tools?”

David pursed his lips.

*We might as well tell him. He’s not going to let this go.*

I muttered, “Knives, saws, flame torch.”

Maxwell widened his eyes. “Say what now?”

David nervously ran his fingers through his hair. “We are not to disturb them.”

Jean-Pierre quirked his brows. “They’re torturing four Italians for fun?”

Now next to the Butcher, Giorgio looked at me. Judgement hit his eyes.

*Really, Butler? You helped bring men into the room too.*

I looked away.

David spoke, “I was told to not let anyone in until they were done...doing whatever they are doing.”

Maxwell opened the button of his jacket.

I tensed, spotting his guns in their holsters.

“What are you doing?” David asked.

“Move so I can go in there.”

David frowned. “Are you serious right now, Maxwell?”

“If it were just the Lion’s sick ass slicing and dicing, I wouldn’t care, but Em in there is a no-go. Do you understand

me?”

I gave him a sad smile. “I know that you want to protect the Mouse but—”

“Protect the Mouse?” Maxwell’s voice shrieked. “I’m trying to protect us all!”

*What?*

I widened my eyes.

Maxwell’s voice rose. “Because if you let Em playfully torture dudes then it’s a guarantee that Dark Em is going to come out and no one wants that shit.”

Jean-Pierre looked at him. “Dark Em?”

“You don’t even want to know, man.”

David stirred. “Listen, Maxwell. I can’t—”

“You will.” Maxwell placed his hand close to the gun in his jacket. “You know that I fuck with you, David. Honestly, I have nothing but respect for you. Don’t make this a thing between us. I would hate for Baba to have to buy flowers for your casket.”

David scowled.

Then all the French pulled out their guns and pointed them at David’s and my head. Even Giorgio had his gun out, but it targeted David.

*What the...?*

No one had instructed them to do so. This made me wonder if they had done it for Maxwell.

*How cool has Maxwell gotten with the Corsican?*

Meanwhile, Maxwell didn’t notice. “Just step aside, man.”

Shockingly, Jean-Pierre placed his hand on Maxwell’s shoulder as if they were very close friends. “That won’t be necessary, Maxwell.”

“It won’t?” Maxwell glanced over his shoulder and finally saw what had occurred behind him. “There we have it.”

*Umm...*

Maxwell shrugged. “Now you two have the excuse of saying that the Butcher and I barged in. You were forced to step aside.”

David sneered. “I wouldn’t be a good number one if I just let you—”

“You think they should be in there torturing motherfuckers?” Maxwell leaned forward. “Seriously? Do you?”

David looked down at the ground. “They’ve had a rough week.”

“Not as rough as mine and I’m not torturing anybody.” Max touched his chest. “Step aside.”

I moved further to the left.

David went all the way to the right.

“Perfect. I’ll tell Kazimir that it was a whole battle to get you all to let me in.” Maxwell touched the knob and tried to turn it. Next, he slammed his body into the door a few times and then kicked it.

The door swung open.

The stench of death and blood rushed out, making me turn to see what was going on.

*Oh God!*

I held my stomach, nervous I might vomit.

*No. Who...did this?*

I stood, horrified and transfixed by the sight. While I knew that they would be hurting the men, I didn’t think they would have gone this far.

It was gruesome on biblical proportions. Blood doused most of the suite.

I felt bad for the maids.

Sawed-off body parts stacked each corner. Arms resided in one place. Legs in another. There was even a pile for what looked like...penises??



I turned away, unable to look at anymore.

*I wish he had never opened the door. I didn't want to know.*

Meanwhile, Max stormed into the room.

Giorgio came to me and touched my arm with his blue gloved hands. "Are you okay?"

Bile burned up my throat. I swallowed hard.

"You should go a few feet to the side." Giorgio took my hand and guided me down the hallway.

So horrified, I followed him.

*Who did what? Was that all...the Lion or the Mouse?*

Giorgio stopped me several doors down. "Now slowly breathe in for four seconds and then breathe out for four seconds."

I did as he said.

Instantly, my stomach relaxed.

I continued with the slow breathing.

Yelling sounded from the suite. Apparently, Maxwell and Kazimir were in the midst of a huge argument. I had to get it together and return.

*Alright. Suck it up and head back over there.*

Giorgio watched me with concern.

I shook my head. "This is embarrassing. I don't faint from the sight of death."

"That was more than death, it was a serial killer's paradise."

I raised my eyebrows. "Still...it shouldn't have made me feel sick."

"Decomposition creates a wide range of chemical gases that are emitted from the dead. That's why the smell is unpleasant." Giorgio reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag. "Gases like putrescine and cadaverine, they all cause the foul smell."

I watched him take a sanitary wipe out of the plastic bag.

“But, the smell is not what makes you sick. It is that our body interprets the smell as a threat.” Giorgio handed me the wipe. “Your body does things to make you want to quickly get away from that area.”

“Oh...”

“How are you?”

“Better.”

“You do not look better.”

“Still, I have to get back. Thank you.” I didn’t take the wipe. “I feel fine now. I don’t need to wipe my hands.”

He kept the wipe in front of me. “One always needs to wipe their hands.”

“But my hands are—”

“Dirty and covered in germs. You were handling a bloodied Mancuso. Plus, your gun is filthy—”

“My gun is not filthy. I clean it—”

“You cleaned it in the middle of the helicopter ride back to the hotel? I didn’t see that.”

“No, but...” I sighed, grabbed the wipe, and cleaned my hands. “Just never mind.”

Giorgio took out another empty bag from his other pocket. “When you are done, put your dirty wipe in here. I empty this bag every hour. Just in case you were worried about how I would get rid of it.”

“I was not worried.” I cleaned my hands some more, took his bag, and stuffed the wipe in there. “Thank you, Giorgio.”

Right when I headed off, he blocked my way. “You should reconsider your employment with the Mouse.”

“What?” I looked at him.

“Once this war with Black Axe and the Italians is done, consider coming back with me to France. I would pay well for your skills.”

I opened my mouth in shock.

“And I am much more civilized.” He stepped to the side like the perfect gentleman and did a dramatic gesture with his hand to proceed.

*Go back with him to France? Was he serious?*

I hurried off.

Giorgio called after me, “And do not forget that you still owe me a clean pair of panties!”

*Did you have to say that so loud?*

I shook my head and caught David glaring our way. At first, I thought that glare was for me. However, Giorgio was the target of David’s angry gaze.





# Chapter 5

## Kazimir

### A Decision of the Soul

Maxwell's voice sounded outside the suite's door.

Part of me was relieved that he'd arrived. I had so many questions that hopefully he could answer. However, I didn't want him to see her this way.

*Keep him out, David.*

I held Emily so close to my chest that I could feel the steady rhythm of her heartbeats.

Banging came at the door.

The knob jiggled.

Then, the splintering sound of a foot hitting the door filled the space and made me look up.

Next, the door flew open, banging against the wall with a crack.

A terror-filled gasp left Maxwell as his eyes landed on me. He stood in the doorway and scanned the space.

I frowned.

*Good job, David.*

Maxwell's fingers shook at his side. He pulled a tiny switchblade from his pocket. It was small with a red handle. Fast, he flicked it up. The blade whipped out.

With determination on his face, he stormed forward.

I scowled. "What are you doing?"

Maxwell continued forward, leaving footprints on the marble's now sticky surface.

Jean-Pierre and his men entered next.

Rage over took me.

“Get the hell out of here, Maxwell!” Rising, I lifted Emily so they couldn’t see her nudity and stood in the center. “Butcher, what the fuck are you doing in here?!”

Jean-Pierre’s face tinted to red as he looked at the piles of body parts.

“Get out!”

Jean-Pierre gestured at his men to leave. They disappeared back into the hallway. Then, he shut the door behind him, and remained inside the suite.

My frown deepened. “Of course you wouldn’t miss an opportunity to be in the room alone with me while I was naked.”

Jean-Pierre placed his hands in his pockets and strolled around the room. “We are not exactly alone, Kazimir.”

Maxwell stopped at the first corpse, kneeled in the blood, and drew a large circle. “You son of a bitch.”

“My mother was many things—killer, mastermind, and smartest woman on the planet—but she was not a bitch.” I turned to the door. “David!”

He rushed in with Blue by his side. Smart, he had his jacket off and in his hands. When he made it to me, he placed the garment over Emily’s body and held out his arms. “I can take her.”

“No.” I stepped back. “I am not going to let her go, until she wakes up.”

Still drawing in the flesh with his knife, Maxwell made holes within the circle and then traced a smile under them. “Give her to David. Em’s going to be out for several hours. I need to make some things clear to you.”

“You do not give out the orders around here—”

“I do in this situation.” Maxwell rose and flicked blood off his knife. It dripped to the floor. “You’ll need five people standing outside of her door, just in case. Also, David, get the

Harlem Crew up here. They need see the different sides of Em. Plus, they have to clean this shit up—”

“My people will clean this up!” I yelled.

“Fuck that,” Maxwell barked back. “Harlem Crew needs to do this shit so they can understand what’s going on.”

Blue hurried to the side, grabbed my pants from the pile, and brought them to me.

I backed up with Emily. “I am taking care of her—”

“Blue, you will stand inside the room while Em is passed out, but have your gun out.” Maxwell headed off to the next chopped up chest. “If Em wakes up, but isn’t acting like her usual, shoot her in the leg and then run to me.”

Blue widened her eyes. “Do what?”

“No one is shooting her!” I roared.

Emily stirred in my arms.

Everyone paused and watched her.

Maxwell left the chest and slowly walked to me, keeping his gaze on her the whole time.

*Mysh?*

Emily sighed, nuzzled against my chest, and remained asleep within my arms.

Watching her, Maxwell whispered, “You do not want Em to wake up in the middle of this. She’ll be fucked up for the rest of the month. Tears and sorrow. Silent and shivering. It would tear you apart.”

A chill ran up my spine. “Then, what do I do?”

Max continued to keep his voice low. “What I said. Give her to David. Put your top men on her. Get Harlem Crew up here. Have only Blue remain inside the room with Em, until you and me are done talking. Then, we will decide who will clean her.”

I eyed him. “Done *talking* about what?”

Maxwell pointed the knife at me. “Motherfucker, you’re asking too many questions and not getting shit done.”

I leaned my head to the side. “You’re talking to me like this?”

“Motherfucker, did I st-st-st-stutter?”

“You did just now.”

“Bet I won’t when I whip your ass.”

We glared at each other.

Tension rose between us.

“You don’t do as I say.” Maxwell pointed his knife at Emily. “Then, I’ll take her from you and we’ll go back to Harlem or where ever else.”

*What did he say?*

Anger boiled through me, releasing murderous thoughts into my bloodstream. My world spun around ready to explode.

I forced my lips into a malicious grin.

“You are correct, Maxwell.” I gently handed Emily to David. “We should talk.”

“Damn right.” Maxwell walked back to the next victim’s chest.

David carried Emily away.

My vision narrowed on Maxwell.

Blue handed me my pants.

Like a lion hunting his prey, I kept my view on Maxwell, snatched the pants from Blue, and put them on.

Blue pulled out her guns and rushed after David.

*Take my mouse?*

Rage continued to ripple through me.

*I would snatch your head off your body before you made your first move.*



I tasted blood and realized I had been biting the inside of my lip until it bled. A bitter, coppery taste filled my mouth.

I spat the blood on the floor and checked for the Butcher.

Jean-Pierre strolled around the room like he was a tourist at the Louvre admiring works by the great masters. When he made it to the corner, he leaned over, examined the severed arms, and nodded. “Astounding. Emily did all of this by herself?”

Silence served as the only response.

I buttoned my pants and turned my view back to Maxwell.

He was back on the other side of the room finishing a smiley face on the second cut-up chest.

I stared at him. “What did you say earlier?”

Maxwell rose from the body. “What?”

“You said you would take Emily from me?”

Maxwell headed to the next chest. “I sure did.”

“I would kill you for simply saying that, but it would shatter her mind.”

“Em’s mind is already shattered.” Maxwell lowered to the new chest and drew a circle. “Therefore, her mind would explode, if I died, so keep your threats to yourself, *partner*.”

“Still, we should have a conversation.”

“We sure should.” Maxwell stabbed two dots in the circle for eyes. “You can’t play these torture games with Em. And... when she wakes up, you don’t tell her what happened. Just pretend like it is another day.”

“I won’t do that.” I shook my head. “I won’t keep secrets from—”

“I said what I said!” Maxwell pointed the knife at me. “Keep your mouth shut!”

“You don’t tell me what I do with my mouse.”

“Yeah, but I’m not talking about your fucking mouse!” Maxwell carved the smile, stood, and scowled at me. “I’m

talking about her dark side and how we are going to handle this.”

“You don’t tell me how to handle—”

“Listen, motherfucker!” Max touched his chest. “You run the Brotherhood, but I run Em. I’m telling you how to take care of her—”

“Yes, but the way you’re talking about it lacks the proper respect—”

“Respect these nuts!” Maxwell spat out the words and stomped off to the fourth chest. “Fucking lunatic! I thought you got rid of the monster. Instead your bitch ass is having a fucking tea party with it!”

“First of all, this is what she wanted—”

“There we go!” Maxwell pointed at Jean-Pierre. “There’s the answer!”

*What answer?*

I looked at Jean-Pierre.

The Butcher now stood by the pile of legs. Sometime during our arguing he had picked up a screwdriver from the cart of tools and was lifting some of the toes as if he was a detective investigating a crime scene.

*What is he doing?*

“Eh, Jean-Pierre. You wanted to know if the Lion was pussy-whipped.” Maxwell bobbed his head. “Well, now you have the answer. Super pussy-whipped.”

I glared at the Butcher.

Jean-Pierre avoided my gaze and began poking at an ankle.

I looked back at Maxwell.

He glared at me. “You do what I say or I will take Em away. Period and exclamation mark.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“I am done attempting to respect you. Enough talking.” I stomped over to Maxwell.

“Enough talking?” Maxwell took me in as I headed for him fast and got what I was about to do.

When I charged, Maxwell dodged me, dropped the knife, and fisted his hands. “Oh, I see, motherfucker. You want to bumble with the bee.”

“You think you can take Emily from me?” I swung at him.

Maxwell blocked it.

I almost slipped in the blood.

Maxwell swiped at me.

He missed.

I aimed for his face and slammed my fist into his cheek. It wasn't a hard punch, but it was enough to turn his head and make him stumble.

“You take her somewhere, Maxwell.” I punched him again. “And I won't kill you, but I will cut your fucking hands off and feed your fingers to you.”

“Fine with me. I'm sweet as hell.” Maxwell came back at me with a jab to my gut. It was fast, hard, and unexpected.

I gritted my teeth from the pain and bent over.

“Bitch!” Maxwell slammed his knee into my face.

*Fuck!*

I fell to the floor. Blood splattered.

While I was down, Maxwell tried to kick my stomach.

I grabbed his foot. He slipped and lost his balance. I yanked him forward and slammed him to the ground with me.

He crashed with a bang. Blood splashed on him.  
“Motherfucker!”

I let go and rolled away, readying myself to grab his neck and choke the shit out of him.

Crawling on the bloody ground, Maxwell hurried my way too.

Out of nowhere, Jean-Pierre appeared and stepped between us. “Did Emily say anything when she cut them?”

I raised my view to him and growled, “What?!”

“This speaks of some sort of ritual. Every slice is exactly the same. The throat, the crosses on the chest, the stabbing to the groin.” Jean-Pierre gestured to all the death in the room. “I wonder...while she was doing all of this, did she sing or recite a poem or maybe a—”

“Naw, man. Dark Em stays silent.” Maxwell rose from the ground and smoothed blood away from his pants. The movement only smeared the liquid further onto him. “She cuts for a while and then passes out.”

“That’s not true.” I got up. “She said a chant about Jesus.”

“Very interesting.” Jean-Pierre headed off to the pile of penises. “Then, the ritual is a sort of religion for her.”

Maxwell stared at me in horror. “She did what now?”

“She said a chant about Jesus and His eye being on the sparrow.”

“No. No.” Maxwell waved his hand. “Dark Em doesn’t talk. She’s silent and—”

“Lunita also told the guys she would give them candy if they were quiet—”

“Lunita?!” Maxwell jumped back like a ghost had popped out. “Who the hell is Lunita? W-why did you say that name?”

“It is what I am calling her.”

Maxwell quickly looked around. “W-who told you that name? D-do you know people in New Orleans?”

*What is he talking about?*

I touched my chest. “I told Lunita that we needed a name for her so that it wouldn’t be confusing—”

“Wait. Wait. You’re talking to it?” Maxwell held his hands to his head. “And naming the monster. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“She’s not a monster.”

Maxwell began pointing at the different piles. “Then, what is this shit. Let me tell you something. It’s not some Martha-Stewart-housewife shit.”

“Martha Stewart?”

“You don’t name the monster—”

“She’s not a monster!” I pointed at Maxwell. “Stop saying that.”

“She’s not a monster?” Maxwell waved his hands in the air. “Eh?! Look the fuck around, man. You don’t think this is some Boogeyman shit.”

“Boogeyman?” I laughed. “The Boogeyman is nothing.”

“Oh really? Because I guess the Lion is scared of nothing. Not even the Boogeyman.”

“Understand this, Maxwell.” I stepped forward. “Before the Boogeyman goes to sleep, he checks under his bed for *me*. So fuck the boogeyman and stop fucking calling her a monster.”

“So, you smoking weed again?”

“A chant about Jesus.” Jean-Pierre kneeled by one of the chests and traced the holy cross with his screwdriver. “Is this when she said the chant? Was it while she cut this?”

I eyed him. “Yes. Why?”

“My guess. She’s angry with God, but has a healthy respect for Him too.” Jean-Pierre pointed to the sliced throat. “Secrets. That’s what that says. You see how deep it is?”

Reluctantly, I nodded and walked over to him. “Yeah.”

“Lots of secrets. The kind that make you bleed. The sort of secrets that made her want to cut her own throat.”

Maxwell paced in the center of the room. “Dark Em is talking now? It’s...evolving.”

I rolled my eyes. “Lunita is not an *it*.”

“Oh really?” Maxwell stopped and looked at me. “So, tell me what she is, since you’re so well educated on this.”

“Lunita is another personality of Emily.”

“We don’t say that.” Maxwell waved his hand. “It’s not that bad. X and I always just said light Em and Dark Em—”

“It’s another personality.”

“I don’t believe in that shit, man.”

“Yet, you’ve cleaned up enough bodies to know that Emily has two separate parts of herself.”

Maxwell returned to pacing.

Jean-Pierre stood and pointed at the piles of dicks with his screwdriver. “Someone raped her?”

I scowled at him.

Jean-Pierre quirked his brows.

“Do you want another scar on your other cheek?”

“It’s a question, Kazimir.”

“Yes. Someone...violated her.”

Jean-Pierre frowned. “Is he dead?”

I nodded. “Has been dead for a long time.”

Jean-Pierre directed his view to Maxwell. “I think I am finally understanding.”

I looked at the smiley faces. “Since you have so much information, then why does he draw these on bodies?”

“I believe it is a coping mechanism that Maxwell is not aware of.”

“But does he get why he does it?”

Jean-Pierre shook his head. “He simply must do it.”

“Stop talking about me.” Maxwell went to the first chest and began drawing another circle on it. “I do it because it is *necessary*. If Em goes down for this shit, then I go with her.”

The door opened.

David and Boris returned with the Harlem Crew. Close to sixty people entered—men and women. They lined up in rows around the room. Their faces wildly went from side to side, scanning the space. Some screwed their faces in disgust. Others held their hands over their mouths. One man threw up. Another guy covered his groin and tried not to look at the pile of dicks on the floor.

*What will they think of my mouse now? Should they know?*

Maxwell finished the smiley face and rose. “Hey, everybody. I’m back.”

David got to my side with three of my men.

I leaned his way. “How is my Mouse?”

“Still asleep, Blue is inside. Valentina is out of the hospital against her doctor’s wishes. She was in your suite waiting for you when I entered. Valentina is now with Blue in the room, watching Emily too.”

I nodded. “Get your guns out, David. Make sure our people have theirs out too.”

David gave me an odd look, but did as I said. Then, he ordered the others. They kept their guns to their sides.

“Alright, people.” Maxwell walked over to the Harlem Crew. “It’s time I reintroduce you to the Mouse and ask you to make a serious decision—a difficult one that deals with your heart and maybe even your soul.”

Watching everything, Jean-Pierre stood on the other side of the room with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Em did everything in this room all by herself.” Maxwell gestured to the bodies. “She sliced them. She diced them. This was all her.”

Low muttering sounded among Harlem Crew. Several people widened their eyes. Others shook their heads in disbelief.

“Em has...episodes every now and then. Especially, when life gets shaky, like now. As you can see...these episodes...are dark ones.” Maxwell walked down the front of the line. “Therefore, you have some new duties. I need everyone to not only have her back, but watch over her.”

I assessed their faces, searching for the ones most bothered by the news.

“There are small signs to tell you when Dark Em is coming. She gets a little dizzy.” Maxwell went to the side of the large group. “She stares off and might not have heard what you were saying. She rubs her hands a lot. You see that, you let me know so I can check on her.”

Several men focused on the pile of dicks.

“If Em is acting strange, proceed with caution.” Maxwell returned to the front. “When the episode happens, she’s not herself. She’s something else. She might even come for you, especially if you’re a man.”

Two guys whispered on the side.

Maxwell walked on. “And you can’t protect yourself from Em. You can’t harm her, because then I’ll be coming for you.”

*And the Brotherhood.*

“So what you have to do is get away, yet protect her. Make it to me, but without harming her.” Maxwell stopped in front of them and backed up several feet. “It’s a tough job within an already deadly position within the Brotherhood. So...I give you all a choice. In fact, this is a decision of the soul.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“None of you signed up for this part of the job. So, I’ll give you a chance to think this over.” Maxwell sighed.

I frowned.



“Everyone get in one straight line.” Maxwell clapped his hands. “Real quick. Time is of the essence.”

Harlem Crew rushed into the new formation, surrounding us in the room and pressing tight against each other.

It took a few minutes before they finished.

“Here’s the decision.” Maxwell scanned their faces. “If you think you can’t watch over Em or handle her dark side, then step forward. No harm. No foul. You get a ticket back and some cash. I’ll pay if the Lion won’t.”

“I will pay.” I smiled. “And those that remain and stay fiercely loyal to the Mouse, not only will you be rich, but generations of your family will be wealthy too.”

“There you have it. If you want to quit, then you get a ticket home.” Maxwell shrugged. “Step to the center of the room, if you can’t hang with it.”

Four men rushed forward, pushing the others out of the way. The one person that had vomited earlier was one of the people that headed over. Two women hurried over next, making it six people.

They all stood in the center of the room.

Everyone else in Harlem Crew remained where they were.

I scanned their faces. “Anyone else?”

They remained still and kept their views forward.

I looked at Boris.

His gaze was on the pile of dicks.

I pointed to him. “What about you?”

Boris gave me a sad smile. “Before Emily came to Kapotnya, most of us were eating cats and digging in the trash can for food.”

Several bobbed their heads.

“Now I eat good.” Boris touched his stomach. “I will ride into any hell she asks me to. Dark or light, I will protect her.”

“Good.” I went over to David, took his gun out of his hand, and shot at the people standing in the center. I got one in the head. Another in the leg.

The rest ran away, screaming.

David shot one man in the chest with his other gun. My men blasted the rest.

Six bodies lay on the floor.

I handed David the gun and faced the rest of Harlem Crew.

Maxwell grimaced and stormed my way. “What the fuck, man?! I promised them a ticket home.”

David jumped in front of Maxwell, making sure he didn’t get to me.

I scowled. “This is the Brotherhood, Maxwell. Not the land of Oz—”

“Man, that’s bullshit! You psycho piece of shit!” Maxwell shoved at David and tried to get around him. David blocked him again. Maxwell gave up. “You know Em is going to be pissed—”

“Only the loyal will surround her!” I turned my gaze and glared at the Harlem Crew. “And now, the only way out is by death. You do not quit, when it comes to my mouse. You remain loyal or die.”

They stared back at me in shock.

“She took care of you all due to the goodness of her heart.” I headed away. “Now, take care of her!”

Maxwell yelled back, “Fucking psycho!”

My heart hammered in my chest.

I left the suite and ran my fingers through my hair, wishing I could shoot someone else.

I stormed down the hallway.

David rushed after me and got to my right. “What do you need?”

“Get eyes on the Mancuso Family. They’re coming for us first.” My bloody bare feet left marks on the carpet. “And due to that wedding, put eyes on the Gallo Family too. They only forced the marriage to create a strong alliance. This is the time to test that alliance.”

“And what do you want me to do about Black Axe?”

“Fela is smart.” Pressure built in my chest. “Which means he’ll let the Mancuso and Gallo Families beat on us. His hopes would be that they tire us out and maybe kill several of my people. Then, Fela will come to us and destroy whatever is left.”

“Have you considered that Black Axe and the Mancuso Family will continue to work together?”

“Definitely. They will share resources and information. Perhaps, they will even meet. Have Misha get his satellites out. I want his team listening to every phone call in this region.”

Maxwell jogged up to my side. My men came for him.

“Relax,” Maxwell growled.

I sighed. “Let him through.”

Maxwell began walking at my pace. “Fuck this war now. We need to get Em out of Italy and back to Russia.”

“If we go to Russia, the problem comes to Russia.”

“We don’t know that.”

“And that is the problem, Maxwell.” I stopped and raised one finger. “War is an uncontrollable animal. One knows where war starts, but one never knows where and how it will end.”

“I get that, but this war is no longer the priority—”

“On that we agree. Due to this...new situation with my mouse, we must end these conflicts fast.” I began walking.

“You need to send Emily back to Russia. Boris, Blue, and I will be by her side.”

My heart ached. I didn't like the idea of us being separated. But I had to think outside of my desires. "Do you really think that would be a good solution?"

"Yeah, but Em won't want to leave, so you will have to push her to go—"

"I am not pushing my mouse away. I don't want her gone either—"

"Stop being pussy whipped and thrive in your big dick energy, man."

I screwed my face up in confusion. "What?"

"Stand up to Em and put her crazy ass on the plane—"

"I will not force Emily to go anywhere. If she wants to stay and help me deal with these problems here—"

"You keep thinking the problem is the Italians and Black Axe." Max jabbed his finger in front of us. "The problem is sleeping in your suite."

I stopped in the hallway and glared at him. The pressure thickened in my chest, making it uncomfortable to breath. "Emily is not a problem."

"You know what I'm saying."

"I talked to Lunita and she's not that—"

"Man, stop giving *it* a name."

I let out a long breath and wanted to rub my chest and somehow ease the tension within my core, but I couldn't show weakness. "Maxwell, you have protected her for many years."

"You damn right I have."

"And I believe you love her with every inch of your heart."

"Right again."

"But she is with me now. While I will need further information from you, overall, I have control of this—"

"Control of what?" Maxwell chuckled. "Dark Em?"

"I talked to her and—"

“Piled the penises and cut-up arms with her too. Yeah.” Maxwell bobbed his head. “I saw your control in the other room. Good job. You’re a fucking miracle worker.”

I scowled. My body tightened into thousands of anxious knots. “First, we end this war fast, so I can get Emily back to Russia and focus all of my attention on healing her.”

“Or we will have a serial killer in Italy killing up your men and maybe *you* too. Have you thought of that, miracle worker?” Maxwell stomped off in the other direction.

“Where are you going?!” I called back. “We are not done talking.”

“Man, I’m getting some weed. What I won’t do...is deal with this shit sober!”

I frowned at him and spotted Jean-Pierre standing at the end of the hallway, watching us and probably taking mental notes.

*Creepy bastard.*

David looked off in Jean-Pierre’s direction. “I have men monitoring the Butcher and his people’s moves here.”

“Good. The Butcher is a pansy, but he is also smart.”

Jean-Pierre dipped an imaginary hat at me and headed away with his people.

I shook my head. “The Butcher will play friends with us as long as he needs too. But, once we show weakness, he will attack and try to take us down. In fact...he may even meet with Fela and play the fence.”

“I will have several men watching him.”

“Good. If something seems wrong with his movements, let me know.” I turned off in the other direction. “And then I’ll finally snap that perfumed neck of his.”

We made it to the suite.

Three men stood outside of the door.

One opened it for us.

I held my hand out and blocked David. “Hold on.”

David eyed me. “Yes?”

“Give me one minute alone.”

Nodding, David stepped back. “Okay. Let me know when you want me by your side.”

“I will.” I entered the massive presidential suite and shut the door behind me.

It was two-stories with three master bedrooms and five bathrooms. Each room boasted impeccable furnishings. There was a living room, parlor, library, piano room, full working gym, and dining area that could be used as a mini-ball room.

King David cleared out the mini-ball room and made it the official area for any meetings. Emily named it the *conference room*.

A butler, chef, and maid came with the place and lavished us with constant attention.

However, in this moment, no one existed in the large foyer.

Silence ran through the place.

I leaned my back against the door and gripped my chest with both hands. My breathing grew into rapid pants. Sweat beaded along my forehead. My vision blurred a little.

I blinked through it.

*You have control. You have control.*

I trembled in fear and wanted to scream, but knew I couldn't. If I did, a whole army would barge into the suite, baring weapons and readying themselves to kill.

And all they would see was the Lion breaking down.

*Mysh...*







# Chapter 6

## An Exchange of Notes

### Kazimir

An hour had passed.

My sleeping mouse lay in the bathtub, submerged in warm water and bubbles. Valentina kneeled on one side of the small clawfoot tub, delicately holding Emily's shoulders and making sure my mouse didn't sink down into the water.

The tub in our master suite was too big. And with the way blood coated Emily and me, I didn't want to get the bathroom too dirty. The maids would have woken her up as they cleaned.

Instead, I decided to wash her in one of the extra bedroom's bathrooms. I had just drained the tub and filled it up for the second time, and still the water was already turning pink.

At least most of the blood was gone.

I had been too nervous to wipe around her face. Red liquid still stained her forehead, cheeks, and the sides of her face. Her hair was a matted mess with clumps of strands and dried blood stuck together on different sides of her head.

*How will I wash that without waking her?*

Emily was so particular about her hair. Valentina offered her stylists. Blue had widened her eyes as if that would be a bad idea.

Still, I considered the possibility.

*If I try to...braid it...Emily would instantly know something was wrong. What do I know about braiding?*

Once again, I was out of my element.

Valentina shrugged. "We can simply fly off and bomb the whole region."

“My mouse would not be pleased with that solution.”

Valentina gazed at one of Emily’s nipples poking out of the bubbles. “I figured she had an amazing body. What else would keep your attention?”

I sneered. “This is your first warning.”

Valentina pouted. “It was a compliment, not me drooling over her body.”

I slipped the sponge’s edge between Emily’s toes. Brain matter and bits of skin had stuck between them from Lunita stomping around the dead bodies.

Valentina let out a long breath. “I didn’t even try to look. The nipple was right there, requesting that I give a suitable comment.”

I pushed bubbles over it. “You will not get a second warning.”

Valentina looked up at Blue. “Do you see how my brother talks to me?”

Silent, Blue stood by the door and kept her view forward.

Valentina turned back to me. “So...will you tell Emily?”

Certain that the foot was now clean, I put it into the water and shifted to the other foot. “Tell her about the other personality?”

“Of course you will tell her that. I’m talking about killing Harlem Crew members.”

Blue stirred on the side. Surely, some of the six had been her friends.

I held no remorse for those cowards. They should have courageously stood by my mouse, not run away at the first sign of a few cut-off dicks.

I rubbed hair off a pinky toe. “I will tell her eventually. First, we must discuss Lunita.”

“I really like that name.” Valentina grinned. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“I do not like the idea of Lunita and you in a room together.”

Valentina’s grin deepened. “Many would die in horrific ways.”

I placed the foot into the water. “Speaking of horrific ways to die, are you going to finally tell me about the ballerina and why you stuffed a children’s book up her ass?”

All humor left my sister’s face. “Emily will be upset about the Harlem Crew deaths. You will need a plan.”

“I have a plan.”

“What is it?”

“I will give her diamonds and dick.”

Valentina laughed. “You will need to do a lot more than that.”

Emily stirred in the water.

Valentina went silent.

I held the sponge in mid-air.

Blue looked down and touched her gun.

All of us remained frozen.

Soft snores left Emily.

I let out the breath I didn’t know I was holding.

Blue moved her hand from her gun.

Valentina lowered her voice. “Emily left you when you bombed *strangers* in Paris.”

“No one died.”

“Exactly, brother. Still, she was upset.”

“Yet, I didn’t let her leave. I simply gave her time to calm down so we could talk.”

“But if she decides to leave—”

“Then, she will find that there is no path away from me.” I soaked the sponge in water and squeezed. “At this point, she

knows that.”

“And if this...Lunita decides to appear because you have upset Emily?”

“Lunita did not appear when I bombed Paris, why would she return now?”

“Those were strangers, Kazimir. Unfortunately, she has treated her people like they were family.”

I gritted my teeth. “They had to die.”

“Of course, I understand that. However, Emily would be sad. Didn’t you say that sadness was one of the possible triggers.”

Pressure built in my chest.

I dove the sponge back into the water and slipped it along Emily’s leg.

“Kazimir?”

“Misha said that he was Natalya’s father. When did that occur?”

Valentina glared. “I know you well, brother.”

“Do you now?”

“Your hands shook when you entered the room. Your breathing seemed hectic. Your face was pale white. Sweat covered your forehead.”

“I doubt that.”

“The last time you looked that way...” Valentina swallowed. “You had to tell me that mom had passed...”

I switched to cleaning Emily’s other leg.

Valentina’s expression softened. “I am your sister.”

“That I know.”

“I am here for you.”

“I know that too.”

“Lean on me for strength.”

“Valentina, you are still healing from bullet wounds.”

“Your wounds are fresher than mine. They are open, raw, and bleeding.” She scowled. “Lean on me or I will make more wounds.”

My lips curved in a smile.

Someone knocked on the door.

Blue spoke, “Should I answer?”

Nodding, I returned to wiping my mouse’s leg. Her body was clean enough. Part of me was just stalling from dealing with her face and hair.

Blue opened the door only a few inches. “Yes?”

Maxwell’s voice sounded. “Let me in.”

Blue gazed over her shoulder for my response.

Before I could answer, Maxwell shoved the door all the way open. “Blue, if you don’t get out my damn way.”

Blue stepped back. “Maxwell—”

“He’s fine.” I frowned at him.

Carrying a small radio into the room and a small beige bag, Maxwell pointed behind him. “Blue, get the towels and box of products on the floor. Bring them inside, along with the stools.”

Blue turned to me.

“I don’t know why you are looking at him.” Maxwell set the radio on the counter and put the bag next to it. “You see he got her hair in a blood afro? You want Emily to wake up and kill all of us?”

Blue left the bathroom.

I frowned. “I was getting to her hair.”

“That was the first thing you should have cleaned. Get the blood out while her hair was wet. Now it’s a hot mess. We’ll have to wash, detangle, and do a whole blow out—”

“You said not to wake her—”

“Man, she’s not waking up. She’ll stir. She’ll snore. But once she’s in warm water, you have control for a little bit.” Maxwell pressed the button on the radio.

Jazz filled the room—hot and passionate. The music penetrated every corner of my head, easing the tension in my shoulders.

I didn’t know who played or what instrument blew, but the notes were smooth and seductive. It sounded like a couple dancing, slow and sweetly, each note served as a rhythmic embrace.

The drums came in leisurely, lingering in the air like the softest caress. It accompanied the melody so well, I imagined two hearts beating together as one.

Maxwell slowly bobbed his head to the music. “Meanwhile, Coltrane will keep Emily at bay. Her mind remains still to him.”

Valentina rolled her eyes. “Coltrane?”

“John Coltrane, if you’re nasty.” Maxwell looked at me. “By the way, she has to go. I can’t work with Valentina around. We’ll be arguing and shit.”

“I am not going anywhere.” Valentina grinned. “My brother will—”

“You should go Valentina.” I let out a long breath. “I need him.”

She widened her eyes. “What?”

“I need to learn how to take care of Emily.”

Valentina shifted to Russian. “*But, we are doing a good job.*”

*“I need help with Emily’s hair. I believe Maxwell. She might wake up and cut us all. I want her relaxed. There will be a lot for her to unpack.”*

*“But, my stylist can do it.”*

*“Do they know how to do her hair?”*

Maxwell smirked. “I don’t know what the fuck you two are saying, but it better be goodbyes and wishes of health as Valentina takes her journey out of here.”

Glaring, I rose and headed over to where Valentina kneeled.

Blue brought in the two stools. She set one by my leg.

I sat down on it and took over, holding my mouse’s shoulders. “Thank you for all of your help.”

Blue put the other stool next to me and headed back out.

Valentina let go of Emily and gave me one of those famous pouts. “I prefer my thank-yous in expensive fur, especially since you are kicking me out due to *him*.”

“You will have your fur.”

Smiling, Valentina rose.

With his arms crossed over his chest, Maxwell leaned against the counter and gazed at my sister. Lust filled his eyes. I didn’t appreciate the way he took in her curves.

Valentina strolled Maxwell’s way and stopped in front of him. “I hate you.”

“When I heard you got shot, my heart ached.”

Valentina blinked.

“I was ready to kill those motherfuckers, but I’m sure you took care of them.”

“I did.”

“Are you in any pain?”

Valentina’s voice softened. “No.”

“But if you are, you know I’ll come through...and take care of it.”

They stared at each other.

Silence rose between them.

And the jazz swirled along the room, pulsing in a steady rhythm.

Clearing her throat, Valentina tucked blonde strands behind her ear and hurried off, almost bumping into Blue as she carried in a big box.

Maxwell watched Valentina walk away.

Blue set the box by the tub and left.

When Maxwell turned and looked at me, he spotted my scowl. “What?”

“Do not flirt with my sister.”

He shrugged. “But we already—”

“Do not remind me. I pretend it never happened, so I do not daydream about killing you.”

“You’re messing with my sister. It’s fair play among gentlemen.”

“You had your chance. Step aside. Whoever ends up with Valentina will be a father to my niece. He must be the best and be able to deal with Valentina’s...moods.”

“Moods? She’s crazy.”

“My sister is a wonderful woman. A Russian Queen.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Step. Aside.”

“Damn, man. I was just...” He grinned and licked his lips.

I raised my eyebrows.

“Never mind.” Maxwell rubbed his hands together and headed over to the empty stool. “We’ve got shit to do.”

Blue brought in several huge cups and a pile of towels.

Maxwell sat down on the stool, reeking of weed. It was like he’d bathed in a thick cloud of the smoke. “Good job, Blue. Take a break.”

“I am fine.” Blue went back to the door and stood there.

Maxwell shook his head. “Go to your room, clear your head, get some food and sleep.”



She remained there. “I plan to be here, when she wakes up  
—”

“Goodnight, Blue.”

Maxwell stared at her. Not one hint of compromise or humor decorated his face.

Blue looked down at the floor. “Are you sure you won’t need me?”

“I’m sure.” Maxwell put his attention on Emily. “And if you see Boris by the door again, tell him that if he doesn’t get back in his room, I’m going to start talking about the Eagle.”

*The Eagle?*

Maxwell continued, “I love that Harlem Crew is trying to have Em’s back, but none of you can do it, if you’re exhausted.”

Sighing, Blue left the room and closed the door.

Gazing at Emily, Maxwell touched her forehead and slowly slipped his fingers along her soft skin. Then, he moved them to her hair and shook his head. “I should have come up earlier, but I wanted to kill you. I figured I should calm down.”

“That was a very smart decision.” I pictured snapping his neck in two. Surely, my thoughts showed in my eyes. “We would not want a repeat of your falling on the floor and splashing blood all over yourself.”

“If I remember correctly, you fell first.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah, man. I could show you if you don’t remember.”

“You would die before you got to show me.”

We glared at each other.

He smirked. “The problem with you, Kazimir, is that you’re not used to having another man with big dick energy around you.”

“I am more concerned with *why* you care about the size of my dick. I think you have been with the Pansies for too long.”

“Eh, man.” Maxwell let go of Emily and picked up a bottle from the box. “After spending time with Jean-Pierre and the rest of the French...I fuck with them. Nothing but respect from now on.”

I twisted my face in confusion. “What the hell happened?”

“Another time and place. That’s a story to tell with a fat blunt and bottle of expensive brandy.”

*What type of trouble did Jean-Pierre get Maxwell in?*

I grinned at the possibilities. If it were too crazy, the details could shake the connection that the Butcher had with my mouse. When it came to Maxwell, Emily transformed into a mother bear fiercely protecting her cubs.

Maxwell tested the water with his other hand. “We need to warm this up, and let some drain.”

“Is that your way of asking me to do it?”

“Motherfucker, you think I’m asking.” He chuckled. “What you need to do is see this as a humbling moment.”

“I am the very essence of humble.”

“Shiiiiit.” Maxwell chuckled again. “Just remember this. Tonight, I’m the boss, and you’re the little soldier.”

*Excuse me?*

Anger rose in my chest.

Then, Emily stirred in the water, reminding me that I needed him.

Clenching my teeth, I pressed the button to lift the stopper. Water began to drain. I turned the hot water faucet. The sound of running water rose as the smooth jazz song ended.

Maxwell moved bubbles away and perused Emily’s naked body.

I gritted my teeth, not appreciating another man’s eyes on my mouse. I gripped the faucet hard. My knuckles went white.

“You didn’t do a bad job.” Maxwell moved his view to me. “You look mad.”

“I would rather you not spend too much time gazing at her  
—”

“Relax, man. I’ve seen it all at different phases of her life.”

“That doesn’t calm me.”

“Thankfully, I don’t care.” Rage filled his eyes.

We glared at each other.

A new jazz song came on. This one wasn’t as melodic as the other. Still, the instrument sang as if it was a beautiful woman serenading her lover. The notes filled the space with musical longing. My soul hummed to the rhythm.

Suddenly, Maxwell bobbed his head as if also lost in the song. He grabbed one of the large cups off the floor and handed it to me. “Lift her head and wet her hair.”

“It won’t wake her?”

“What would you do, if one of your soldiers asked you a question after you ordered them?”

“Probably slap or back hand them.”

“That’s not cool. Another man can’t slap a man.”

“Why not?”

“Too much disrespect. Slapping is designated for woman-to-woman disagreements.” He gestured to the cup. “However, if you ask me another question...I’m going to slap the shit out of you.”

“Are you enjoying this?”

Maxwell grinned. “I am.”

“There will be a moment when you and I are in a room and my mouse is not naked in a tub, needing me to keep her head up so that she won’t drown.”

“I am excited about that moment, but until then...lift her head and soak her head with water.”

I stifled a growl.

Chuckling, he picked up the cup and put it in front of me. “Yeah. I might be enjoying this too much. I’ll chill out.”

I snatched the cup from him.

When he finished chuckling, the humor left his face.

He let out a long breath. “Unfortunately...we’re going to have to work together on this shit.”

He looked down at the water. “I...umm...”

I placed the cup in the water, filled it to the top, and lifted it up. “What, Maxwell?”

“I...can’t lose her, man.” His voice cracked at the end. “Em is my...everything.”

I exhaled some of the tension away. Since Lunita’s appearance, I felt like I was the only person on this planet that was going through this horrific experience.

Now looking at Maxwell’s face, I knew, I wasn’t alone.

Slowly, I lifted her head and poured water onto Emily’s hair. Some of it splattered onto the floor, leaving dark red drops onto the tile. The rest went back into the tub, darkening the water.

“Good job, little soldier.”

“Maxwell, I have never killed a man with a cup before, but there is always a first time.”

He winked at me. “I killed a man with a cup.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Slammed the coffee mug against his temple. He was out in seconds.”

“Why did you kill him?”

“Dude came around the brownstone asking questions. I let him in my apartment. He was a detective hired by some woman looking for her missing husband.”

“You killed her husband?”

“Em did.” Maxwell shook his head. “Catch up, man.”

“Her husband was one of the Tinder Killer victims.”

“There we go, little soldier. Now keep soaking that hair.”  
With his free hand, Maxwell picked up a bottle from the box.  
“If I kill somebody, better believe it was for Em. I never have any other reason to take a person’s life.”

I gathered more water into the cup and poured it over her hair. “We need to exchange notes.”

“We do, but I don’t like *your* notes.”

“You still will have to deal with them.”

“*It’s* talking to you. That shit creeps me out.” He poured purple creamy liquid onto the top of her hair. “Do you know how much weed I had to smoke to come back up here?”

“Why does Lunita’s talking unsettle you?”

“Could we not call her that?”

“Why not?”

“It scares me.”

“Why?”

“I’ve heard the name before.”

I leaned in closer. “Where? Her mother or—”

“Naw, man. This week, from a voodoo woman.”

“What?”

“The woman told me to protect Emily and Lunita.”

“So, then there probably are only two and not more.”

“Man, did you hear what I said? A voodoo woman said the name Lunita.”

“What else did she say?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Maxwell, we must.”

He shook his head. “The water is too low.”

I pressed the button for the stopper. “We need to fill in the empty spaces so everything will make sense.”

“This shit won’t make sense.”

“It could if—”

“Kazimir, you just stepped into this. X, Daryl, and I have been cleaning up her shit for a long fucking time.”

I set the cup down. “Tell me more.”

“After our parents died, the State took us. Barely preteens, we didn’t understand what was going on. She was in one foster home. I was in another. X was working on getting us to him, but the State was taking their sweet ass time. Tons of paperwork. Plus, he had to prove that he was good enough to take care of us.”

“Where was Daryl?”

“Same foster home as Em.” Maxwell’s fingers shook as he rubbed the liquid in her hair. “One night, Em climbed into my bedroom window and didn’t wake me up. She just lay beside me. In the middle of the night, I woke up to her naked and covered in blood.”

I stiffened. “What happened to her?”

“Em said that she went to sleep in her bed with pajamas on. Next thing she knew, she woke up by her foster mother’s husband and he was dead.”

“She didn’t remember what happened?”

“Not one detail.”

“What did you do?”

“We were fucking kids. I helped her wash up. We hid the blankets, climbed out of the window, and went to the sewers to hide.”

“What about your smiley faces?”

“What?”

“Did you go back and carve them on him—”

“Naw, man.”

“But you drew a smiley face that night?”

He returned to massaging the liquid into her hair. Reddish-purple suds appeared.

“Did you, Maxwell?”

“I spray painted smiley faces down in the sewer tunnel.”

“The time she took me down in a sewer tunnel, I saw a smiley face.”

“Fuck the smiley faces. That has nothing to do with anything.” He leaned forward, grabbed the faucet, and shut the water off.

I considered his story. “Maybe, it wasn’t Emily that got into your bed. Perhaps, that was Lunita.”

His bottom lip quivered.

“Lunita sees you as her...caretaker. She kept asking where you were.”

Maxwell went stiff.

“She was pretty annoyed with me for asking her questions and giving her rules. She even mentioned that Emily may have needed her to come because *you* were gone.”

Maxwell’s words grew shaky. “This is fucking my head up.”

“I understand.”

“She never talked. All these years. The few times I caught...*Lunita* in the act...she was always silent.” Maxwell shivered. “All she did was...cut and cut and cut and...”

I studied him.

“Then...she would pass out in the blood. That’s it.”

“When was the first time you caught her in the act?”

“After that shit with the foster home parent, Em and I hid for a long time. No one knew where we were. Not even X or Daryl.”

“Was there an investigation about the dead man?”

“Some shit came up about him dealing drugs out the house. The police chalked it up to a drug deal gone bad.”

“Did they search for Emily?”

“New York? Motherfucker, do you know how many foster kids get lost in the system?”

I frowned.

“Too many.” Maxwell picked up the other cup, dipped it in the water, and poured it over her hair. “We lived on the street. By then, X had Daryl.”

“How did you know?”

“We would sneak and check.”

“Why not go to Xavier?”

“We were scared kids. We thought the cops might have been pretending or something. So...we just hung out in the library. Sometimes we hid in the bathroom, until they closed and slept there. Other times, it was in the sewer or...the alley...”

Maxwell went silent after that. All of his concentration returned to washing her hair. He rinsed and then added more of the liquid.

A new jazz song played, but I couldn't care less about the notes. All I could do was wait for him to tell me more.

However, just like with Lunita, I had to take my time.

*He's just as damaged as my mouse. How did I not see this before?*

On the third time of pouring the liquid into her hair, Maxwell spoke, “Months later...I caught her in the act...right in the alley. Some bum must have strolled up on us while we slept and thought he could get a few feels from her. She was starting to develop but...there was no way this motherfucker thought she was a woman.”

Maxwell just held her head above the water. The blood red matted hair had transformed into long, black silky strands. He gazed at my sleeping mouse. “I didn't even know Em had a



knife. When I woke up, he was screaming. She'd stabbed him in the dick first. I sat up and lost my voice. I couldn't scream. She slashed his throat next. He fell to the ground. I jumped up and called her name. She never turned around. Instead, she yanked his dirty shirt up and drew that damn cross in his chest."

"She did it out of order."

"Is that all you got from what I said?" Maxwell shook his shoulders as if trying to get something disgusting off him.

"What happened next?"

"She turned around. Moonlight hit her. Blood streamed down her face. She smiled at me. It was wild like... a demon had possessed her. I screamed in horror and ran away. I just... it freaked me out... I don't know... it was off... the shit was crazy..."

"That must have been Lunita too."

Maxwell frowned. "Get her head, man."

I did as he said. Her head lay in my hands. I looked down at this lovely creature who had gone through so much pain.

"You see this." Maxwell picked up the bottle that he had earlier. "Don't put shampoo in her hair first. If I'm not around, then find a good conditioner. Use that first. It cleans, detangles, and moisturizes. Then, you can do the shampoo. You got me?"

I nodded.

He grabbed another bottle and poured clear yellow liquid onto the strands.

"Where did you go?"

He looked at me. "What?"

"Where did you go when you left the alley, screaming?"

"I ran to X. After several months of us missing, X was happy to see me. As an adult I can see how that must have fucked with his mind. He lost his daughters and then we go missing."

I watched Maxwell massage more suds into her hair.

Maxwell continued, “I told X everything. His face held no judgement. He just asked me to take him to the alley. When we got there, Em was asleep on the ground and covered in blood. We took her back his place. Daryl slept through it all. X left. I guess he got rid of the body. Nothing ever came up.”

“And no one told her the next morning?”

“We didn’t even talk about it.”

“Not even X and you?”

“No, man. Brothers don’t talk about shit like that. We’re not...vulnerable or...”

I nodded. “Very similar to the Brotherhood.”

“Honestly, X never really wanted to talk to deeply about it. I think the shit scared him more than me.”

“Intriguing.”

“This is not fucking intriguing.”

“Lunita was growing up as Emily was. She was figuring out her style.”

“Her style.” Maxwell rolled his eyes, picked up the cup, and filled it with water.

“How many times did you catch her in the act?”

“Few more. She got smart. Em would go missing for a few days.” Maxwell frowned. “Then, she would return. I would wake up with her bloody ass in my bed.”

“She never knew what she did?”

“We stopped asking. I would go to X and wake him up. Next, we wipe her down.”

“When did Daryl get involved?”

“Once we hit those teen years, we were on some fuck school shit. It was all about getting money.” Maxwell’s frown deepened. “Daryl always had a dumb hustle that got him in trouble. Em always got him out of it. Honestly...I think Daryl would do that shit on purpose.”

“Why do you think so?”

“A large part of him hated her. In his eyes, she was guilty of the fire—the purest evil. And Em...”

“What?”

“I think she agreed with him. Em felt guilty as hell. She did everything for him—gave him everything too. He took and would ask for more. She would help him and he would still glare at her with so much hate. That’s when X involved Daryl in clean up duties.”

Anytime they discussed her brother, I hated him. “Now it makes even more sense why Daryl began working with Fela so easily.”

Maxwell nodded. “And that was why it was easy for me to kill his ass too.”

“I need to know more. How many people came before the Tinder Killer victims?”

“I don’t know. A gangster here or there. Her victims didn’t pop up like that. It was more washing the blood off of her and making sure she didn’t wake, confused and messed up.” Maxwell grabbed a towel. “It was the Tinder Killer shit that really opened our eyes. I hate that dating app was ever invented.”

“Now there was a pattern for the police to follow and victims being shown in the news.”

“Let the water out.” He wrapped the towel around her head. “I’m not going to blow dry her hair. I’ll braid it up and do a nice pattern. She’ll think she did it.”

“You can braid hair?”

“Catch up, Kazimir.”

“Patterns and swirls?”

“Yeah, man.”

I smiled. “When I arrived in New York for Rumi’s death, she had a wig on. Later, her hair was cornrowed in pretty patterns. Was that you?”

“Yeah, man.”

“You’re an artist.”

“Relax.”

The next few minutes, we took our time lifting Emily out of the bathtub. I wrapped her naked body in a towel and then gathered her in my arms.

We left the bathroom.

Boris, Blue, and King David stood in the bedroom.

Several of my men guarded the side.

Maxwell scowled at Boris and Blue.

David opened the door for us. “Baba wants to see you.”

I carried Emily down the hallway. “Good. And I want to see her. I will need a reading immediately.”

“Alright, but she rushed to you about the boy.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “What about him?”

“He woke up from a nightmare and was screaming for Emily. Baba said he kept yelling, ‘*mysh. mysh.*’”

“Did you tell Baba about the...incident.”

“She already knew.”

*Of course she did. She could have told me.*

David continued, “Baba just wanted me to tell you that when Emily wakes up, she must spend time with the boy.”

Walking at my pace, Maxwell remained on my left. “Pavel’s kid?”

David nodded.

“I saw him earlier. He had cornrows in his hair.”

I nodded. “Emily put them in there.”

“Hmmm.” Maxwell stopped us at the master suite and opened the door.

“What?”

Maxwell shook his head. “Just taking notes to catch up. That’s all.”

“We’re still not done talking.” I carried Emily into our suite and slowly lay her onto the bed. “I need to know more.”

“Man, I still have to braid her hair.” Maxwell pulled out a joint from his pocket and headed to the balcony. “I’m taking a smoke break and then—”

“I’m coming too. This conversation isn’t over.”

David remained by the bed. “I will watch Emily.”

Maxwell escaped onto the balcony.

Walking that way, I glanced over my shoulder and spotted Boris peeking in the doorway. When he spotted me, he hid his head.

“Make Harlem Crew go to their rooms.” I raised my voice a little. “And if they don’t...shoot them.”

David smiled. “Yes, sir.”

I headed onto the balcony with Maxwell, right as he lit his joint.

When he saw me, he sighed. “Come on, man. I’ve seen you quite enough today.”

“We need to exchange notes.”

Maxwell blew smoke in my direction. “So far, I’ve been doing the talking.”

“You know more.”

“Apparently, Lunita talks to you though.”

“Maybe, because you screamed and fled from her when she came out—”

“She was fucking killing a guy—”

“Still, she’s misunderstood.”

Maxwell shook his head and took another hit of his joint.

I reached my hand out.

“Oh, hell no. Em said you can’t smoke anymore.”

“I believe enough has happened to warrant a smoke.”

Maxwell shook his head again. “Don’t tell her you got it from me.”

I took the joint. “I won’t keep secrets from her.”

Maxwell let out an exasperated breath. “Dude, you will have to keep these secrets. Haven’t you been fucking listening.”

“How will we fix this if she doesn’t know—”

“You can’t fix it—”

“Says you, and you’re not a professional—”

“But you are?” Maxwell reached for his joint. “Give me my shit back.”

I put it to my lips and inhaled too much smoke. Coughing ensued.

Maxwell eyed me with disdain. “You always like to spit all over my shit. Just keep that one.”

I coughed more.

He pulled another joint out of his pocket. “All this week, I wanted to come back to Em where shit would be normal. She’s my home.”

He lit the joint.

“Now even the home is covered in blood.”

A euphoric feeling washed over me. I blinked my eyes and inhaled some more. “We can fix this. We must.”

“How?”

“Baba might have answers.”

“I don’t trust the magic spiritual shit.”

“Why not?”

“Because it scares me.” He blew out smoke. “You go too deep in it, and you can get lost. Trust me. I saw some shit this

week...”

“What?”

“You know what?” Maxwell took a hit of his joint.

“What?” I followed suit, inhaling some of mine. More coughs left me, but not as many as before. “What were you going to say?”

“That voodoo woman probably could help Em.” Maxwell raised his joint up and stared at it. “Or this probably is the weed talking.”

“A voodoo woman.”

“Forget I said that. I don’t even know if she really helped dude out.”

“Who?”

“Don’t worry, buddy. You’ll find out soon enough.”

I didn’t know if I was super high already or if Maxwell was speaking in riddles.

I remembered something about Lunita and raised my eyebrows. “She could speak Spanish.”

Maxwell backed away. “What?”

“Lunita spoke Spanish to me. Does that make sense?”

“Daryl and Em’s mom was Dominican. She spoke it better than English. I remember when we were really young, they would speak it too.”

“Really?”

Maxwell nodded. “But when they started school...I think it was probably the first grade or so...they were struggling with English back then. Their dad forbid their mother to speak it around them anymore.”

“But Emily still knew some Spanish?”

“Not anymore. Daryl neither. Kennedy would translate shit for us when we had a situation that called for it.”

“Lunita spoke very good Spanish.”

Maxwell shrugged. “Never heard Em speak it since we were little.”

I smoked more of the joint.

Maxwell frowned. “I don’t want to believe...this.”

“This?”

“Two people, man. I don’t like that for Em. She’s been through enough.”

“It makes sense.”

“I don’t like it. I would rather think of it as just...her dark side.” Max looked at me. “Maybe, instead of Lunita. We keep it at Demily.”

“She’s Lunita. A completely different personality.”

“That’s some white people shit.”

I smirked. “It’s *human* shit, Maxwell. A mind splits in order to protect itself.”

“And you know a lot about minds splitting.”

“The Brotherhood is filled with all types of people with split minds, split hearts, and even split souls.”

Sighing, Maxwell stared off at the stars in the sky. “Em deserves a happy ending. Not this shit.”

“She will get her happy ending, if I have to bomb all the bad endings in the process.”

Maxwell shook his head.

Silence filled the balcony.

I drew in one last puff and put the joint out.

Then, we just stared at the stars as if the answer to our problem had been written in the night sky.

Maxwell broke the silence. “She really chanted the song, *His Eye is on the Sparrow*?”

“How does it go?”

He scowled. “You want me to sing to you?”



“Just tell me the lyrics.”

“It goes like this. *Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come?*” Maxwell inhaled and then exhaled. “*Why should my heart feel lonely, and long for heaven and home.*”

I gazed at him.

“*When Jesus is my portion. A constant friend is He.*”

I recognized the words and nodded.

“*His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches over me.*”

I bobbed my head. “Those last lines are what she said when she cut the cross into Salvatore’s chest.”

Maxwell closed his eyes.

Smoke left his nostrils.

“Did Emily sing it as a kid?”

He remained still with his eyes shut.

“Maxwell? Did she sing it?”

He opened his eyes and turned to me. “Naw...my dad used to sing it all the time. It was his favorite song.”

Pressure rose within me.

Maxwell put the joint out. “I’m going back in the room to braid her hair, then I’m passing out by the door. I should be here when she wakes up.”

“No.” I blocked his way. “Braid her hair and then follow the advice you gave to Harlem Crew.”

“You mean the advice Boris and Blue aren’t taking?”

“Everyone is worried for Emily. That is good. But we still need to get our rest.”

“Look, man. I’m going to be here—”

I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. “I need you, Maxwell.”

He looked away.

“I need you to be strong. These days are going to be bloody and full of death, and that’s just the war.”

Maxwell sighed.

“Lunita hinted that you kept Emily calm. She also said that I take things too far.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Lunita explained that she only comes when Emily is either being sexually attacked or dealing with a suffering sadness.”

Maxwell backed up. “That’s what she said?”

I nodded solemnly. “We have to tell Emily everything, but we also have to be her foundation. That will gain control of the situation for now.”

“I don’t know how to tell Em this shit.”

“That’s why you won’t be there.” I touched my chest. “I will, and I’ll be the one to tell her.”





# Chapter 7

## The Beauty in the Madness

### Emily

I woke up encased in a warm cocoon of muscle and satiny smooth skin. Kazimir had those strong arms around me. My head lay on his chest.

*There is no better way to wake up.*

His body was a biological marvel. On one side, it was built to create destruction—rough hands, powerful shoulders, and massive biceps. Kaz had a six-pack that could break a foot if someone kicked him.

Then on the other side, it was a smooth sea of muscles, cradling me in warmth and security.

The scent of Kazimir enveloped me—powerful and seductively masculine, clouding my thoughts. His smell was home. I no longer attached myself to a city or country. It was Kazimir's presence that defined my location.

Yawning, I blinked my eyes and looked down at my body. I wore a white lace gown that comfortably hugged my body. To my surprise, it didn't feel like I had on panties.

*I must have forgotten them when I went to sleep.*

I lay my head back against Kaz's chest.

*When did I go to sleep?*

I tried to figure out yesterday and drew a blank.

The steady rhythm of his heartbeats sounded in my ear. I gave up on trying to remember last night and relished in his heart's melody.

*This is heaven.*

Yawning again, I slowly lifted my head, not wanting to wake Kaz, but needing to watch my gorgeous, dangerous man

sleep.

*How's my lion?*

To my surprise, his eyes were open, and his gaze rested on me.

I curved my lips into a smile. "You're up."

"I am."

"What time is it?"

He lifted his head and checked the clock on the nightstand. "Four in the morning."

"Why are you up?"

He smirked. "Why are *you* up?"

"Have you gotten any sleep?"

"Not yet."

"Not at all?"

He nodded. "Not at all."

My smile left. "Why not? What's wrong?"

"How do *you* feel, *mysh*?"

I assessed my body and noted the soothing relaxing buzz flowing through me. "I feel like...I've just walked out of a day spa. As if...I had the works—facial, body scrub, Swedish massage, everything."

He studied my face. "Did you dream?"

"I did."

He quirked his brows. "Tell me about it."

"I lay in a hammock on the roof of my old building in Harlem. And instead of other buildings surrounding me, it was this breathtakingly crystal blue ocean with these soothing foamy waves that kept crashing against the bricks."

"Interesting."

"Birds soared over me. The sun shined in the sky, and I swung from side to side, feeling this constant cool breeze

brush against my skin.” A silly smile spread on my face. “It was a great dream.”

“Good.” Kaz let out an exasperated breath as if he had been holding it in the entire time. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I lay my head back on his chest and snuggled closer. “But let’s get back to you.”

His pecs flexed. “What about me?”

I had been sleeping with my palm against his stomach. I slid my fingers over his chiseled six-pack. “Why didn’t *you* sleep?”

“Things were on my mind.”

“What things?”

“I am not done asking about you and how you feel—”

“We actually are—”

“And the baby?”

“No butterflies fluttering...so I believe he is sleeping.” I reached down and slid my hand under the waistband of his silk pajama pants, then slipped my fingers down into his silky pubic hairs. Soon, my fingers made contact with the warm, velvety skin of his cock. That thick, length began to harden.

Teasing his cock with my fingertips, I looked at him.

Grunting, he stared back at me with a hunger that took my breath away.

I wrapped my hand around his cock. The long bulging vein pulsed under my fingers. “Now back to you and your lack of sleep.”

“Lions do not need sleep.”

“Actually, I’ve been reading up on lions.”

He smirked. “And why is that?”

“Because I’m in love with a crazy person that thinks he is an actual lion.”

“He sounds like an amazing man.”

I chuckled. "Either way, lions are lazy as hell."

"They are not." His cock hardened to a steel rod and swelled within my grip.

Warmth filled me. My pussy began to get wet. "Lions sleep for like sixteen to twenty hours during the day."

"Because they are active at night."

I slid my fingers to the mushroomed tip and tenderly squeezed.

A dark groan left him.

I let go of his cock and pulled my hand out of his pants. "You need your sleep."

"Put your hands back on my cock."

"I have other plans." I slipped my leg over Kaz, moved my body up, and straddled him. His cock still lay in those pajama pants. Yet, his hardness pressed against my pussy.

He was getting me so wet, I knew I was staining those silk pants.

Licking his lips, he slid his hands down to my ass and gripped it. "And does one of your plans include my pounding into your beautiful body?"

"It does." I rubbed my wet pussy over his length.

Groaning, he moved one of his hands from my ass and tried to push his fingers between us.

I chuckled. "What are you doing?"

"Taking my cock out of my pants."

I swatted his arm. "Not yet."

He frowned. "Not yet?"

"We need to talk about your lack of sleep."

He scowled. "*Mys*h, I am hard."

"And?"



“I expect the proper attention to my cock, not a discussion on my need to slumber.”

“Still, I want to talk about—”

Fast, he rolled us over and had me on my back.

I shrieked. Next laughter left me. “Kaz, I’m just saying—”

“I want to fuck.” He loomed over me. Those blue eyes glowed in the moonlit room. “Now.”

“I do too.” I held my hands up to his chest and smiled. “But I know when something is bothering you.”

“Do you now?”

“Your forehead wrinkles.” I lifted my hand to his forehead and traced them. “The deeper the wrinkles the bigger the problem. And these are super deep. Also—”

“We will talk about it later. Now we—”

“Talk about what?”

“What’s on my mind.”

“Which is?”

He frowned. “*Mysh*, not now.”

*What’s going on? What is he avoiding telling me?*

I stared at him.

Wrinkles appeared at the edge of his tired eyes.

“Kaz...tell me.” I blinked. “What’s wrong with my lion?”

Suddenly, this sweltering sadness radiated off him. Next, heartbreaking pain filled his eyes. That was the only way I could explain his sorrowful gaze. The tears were there, creeping right at the corners of his eyes, but they didn’t fall.

I knew he wouldn’t let them.

My voice went hoarse. “Kaz?”

“We make love, have breakfast, and then...we have a... difficult conversation.” He leaned down to kiss me.

I dodged his mouth and moved my face to the side. “We have the difficult conversation now.”

“That would drastically shift the enjoyment of this morning.”

“I don’t care.”

His voice softened. “Trust me, *mysh*.”

“Trust *me* to deal with whatever you have to say.”

Sighing, he moved away and sat beside me.

I sat up and considered all of the things that could rock my world. “Did someone die?”

“Thankfully, no.”

“There’s no way you...” I fisted my hands. “No.”

“What?”

“You haven’t cheated on me. Right?”

Kaz glared at me. “Is that what you think of me?”

“No, but this sounds bad.”

“That would never be a conversation we would have.”

“You damn right it won’t. However, fucking tell me what’s wrong.”

“I want to be careful with this because it isn’t an easy thing to reveal. I love you and I want you to—”

“Wait.” My heartbeats increased. “Do you want to...”

He raised his eyebrows. “What?”

I touched my chest. “Do you want to change us?”

He tilted his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t want to get married anymore—”

“I would never let you go.” A fierce intensity pushed out the sorrow in his gaze. “We have not done the ceremony, but in my heart, my soul...” He touched the side of his head. “In my mind, you are my wife.”

I swallowed.

“You are the mother to my first born. The woman who has saved me from a bomb and many of my enemies. You have taught me love.” His voice went hoarse. “How could you ever think that I would want anything else, but to make you my wife and live the rest of my life with you?”

“I’m just trying to figure out all the things that could be a difficult conversation.”

He ran his fingers through his hair.

*Stop overthinking. This is going to be bad. We will deal with it.*

I had never witnessed Kazimir being this uncomfortable to talk about something.

I placed my hands in my lap. “Just say it, Kaz.”

“Mysh, this isn’t a just-say-it sort of thing. There will need to be several sentences to slowly get you to understand—”

“If no one died and our relationship is solid, then I can take it.”

A worried expression played on his face.

“If you’re by my side, Kaz...then it doesn’t matter what I must deal with.”

He picked up one of my hands and placed it on his chest right over his heart. “I will always be by your side.”

I gulped down some of my fear. “X used to say...as long as you get someone who will dance with you in a thunderstorm, life will be okay.” I looked at him. “Is this a thunderstorm?”

“I would say this is a hurricane.”

I trembled. “Tell me.”

“*Mysh.*”

I gritted my teeth. “Now.”

He let out a long breath. “Do you remember being in the room with Salvatore and the rest of the Mancuso men?”

I widened my eyes. “The cutting? I don’t...remember...”

I searched through my mind. “What happened? I walked up to Salvatore and...”

“You lowered to the ground.”

My bottom lip quivered. “O-kay.”

“Then.” He looked away and sighed.

“Kaz, what?!”

He turned to me. “You became someone else. Another woman.”

I stared at him and froze.

No other words left his mouth as he watched me.

“Kaz?”

“Yes.”

“What. . .?” I shook my head. “What do you mean I became someone else?”

“You were a different person. You talked in a strange way and held your head oddly. You hated the heels. I got the feeling that this part of you doesn’t like to wear them. You hated the dress too and said it was too tight so you took it off —”

“Wait. Wait.” I moved my hand from his and got off the bed. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“This is a difficult topic.”

Now standing, I shook my head. “I was talking like I was someone else?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe, I was drunk.” I paced a little. “I don’t remember drinking any alcohol or it could have been a drug or something in the air—”

“It wasn’t that. You...well...she said that she has come many times before.”

I stopped pacing and turned to him. “Who said?”

“You. Well...the other you.”

“No. No.” I waved my hands. “There’s no other me. This is...Look. You must be...a little confused.”

“You weren’t you. We fought—”

“What?!”

“This side of you wanted to touch the men’s dicks before you killed them and I wouldn’t allow that, so you attacked me, but you...she was horrible at fighting. Not even close to your skills—”

“Kaz.” I held my hand out to stop him. “Were you. . .?”

“What?”

“Were you drinking?”

“Me?” He frowned. “No. I know this doesn’t make sense, but—”

“Doesn’t make sense?!” I fisted my hands to the side. “This is insane!”

“I know.”

“I’m not...” I touched my chest. My voice scratched at the end. “I’m not *that* fucked up. Do you understand? I’m not... that fucked up.”

“*Mysh.*” He rushed off the bed and captured me in his huge arms. “Nothing about you is fucked up.”

I shivered against him. “A different person? Y-you’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“So, I...She...I...killed them?”

“You did.”

“T-the way I did as the Tinder Killer?”

“Exactly that way. Sliced throat, holy cross to the chest, and hacking off the dick—”

“No. No. That part of me is gone—”

“I believe *she* is the Tinder Killer. This is who you become when you are sad or suffering, she takes over—”

“No. No. No.” I tried to get out of his hold.

He wouldn’t let me go. “I wouldn’t have believed it, if I hadn’t seen it myself.”

“But...”

“I watched her and talked to her for a few hours.”

“I don’t remember.”

“She said you would not.”

“S-she knows me?”

“She does.”

“No.” Terrified, I wrapped my arms around him, needing to be anchored in every sense of the word. “This isn’t...”

“I called her Lunita because she said that your mother would call you that. Do you remember this nickname or anything close to it?”

My nerves frazzled until every part of me shook with fear.

*He’s confused or something. This doesn’t make sense.*

I closed my eyes and tightened my hold around him.

“*Mysh*, do you remember the nickname?”

“I-I don’t remember anything about my mother.” I trembled. “And...I don’t want this...”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to believe you.” I opened my eyes. Tears spilled from them. “I don’t want to be this fucked up, Kaz. Please be lying. P-please.”

“I would never lie to you, *mysh*.” He placed his hand on my chin, and directed my view to him. “And you are not fucked up.”

“I have another personality. Isn’t that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Yes, but—”

“And it kills people?”

“Yes.”

“Then I am the highest level of fucked up!”

“You are not—”

“Don’t do that, Kaz.” I tried to leave his arms. “Just don’t.”

He held me tighter. “Don’t do what?”

“Don’t try to sugar coat this and put rainbows over a field covered in piles of shit and—”

“You are not fucked up.” He stated with conviction and glared at me. “Do not talk about my mouse that way. Do you understand?”

More tears left me.

“My mouse is a brilliant woman who could kick my ass and pretty much most of the men in the Brotherhood.”

My bottom lip quivered.

“My mouse saves people because her heart is too damn big for her own good. And she loves.” Kaz’s voice rose. “She loves with the passion of a million people—”

“But, Kaz—”

“She heals monsters. I know this...” He sighed. “Because she healed me.”

The hot wetness of my tears soaked my cheeks, I buried my face between his bicep and chest and inhaled his scent, needing his strength and love to anchor me.

Kaz’s voice softened. “My mouse was hurt when she was a kid.”

My heart ached.

“She wasn’t protected like she should have been.” Kaz held me closer. “So perhaps, her mind figured out a way to... deal with all the pain that she shouldn’t have experienced.”

My head spun.

“So...sometimes...she’s a great terror to behold.”

I could barely stand. The only reason I was still on my feet was because he held me to him and kept me balanced.

“Still...there’s so much beauty in the madness.”

I sobbed against him.

“But now the Lion is here, and absolutely no one.” His body rocked against me. Death lay in each word. “Not one person will harm my mouse again.”







# Chapter 8

## New Normal

### Kazimir

Emily stepped back from me. Her face was blank, her eyes distant.

“Talk to me, *mysk*.”

“I feel like the walls are coming down around me.” My mouse raised her hands to her neck and held it. “And it’s hard to breathe.”

“Then, we go to where there are no walls.” I gathered our robes. “And where you feel like you can truly breathe.”

Emily wiped her tears. “Where is that?”

“We will just go and keep going until you feel better.” I helped her put on her robe. Next, I put on mine.

From the corner of the room, Harlem looked up from his dog bed, stretched, and then trotted our way. He sniffed the air for a moment and then wagged his tail.

“Fine.” I frowned at Harlem. “You can come too.”

Hand-in-hand, we left the bedroom, headed through the hall, went down the stairs, and then left the presidential suite.

My new guard Wassily silently rose. He pulled out his phone, typed into it, and then followed us.

*I hope he isn't waking anyone up.*

It had taken tons of arguing to get King David, Maxwell, Boris, and Blue to go to their rooms and get some sleep. But once I roared, they scattered away.

I knew Maxwell would have wanted me to call and tell him that she was up. But now that I had her back, I wouldn't share her with anyone for a while.

Slowly, I guided her down the stairs.

Ahead of us, ten other men stood by the door entrances with their guns out, reminding me about the war. David had doubled up security for the day and night shifts.

Mancuso soldiers would soon come, if not by morning, surely by the afternoon. Gun shots would blare. Many would be dead.

But for now, silence filled the hotel, giving me a false sense of peace.

We stepped on the elevator.

Harlem joined us. A whimper left him when the doors closed.

Emily picked him up.

I rolled my eyes.

When would the puppy learn that I was the only spoiled bastard in her life?

Sighing, I put my arm around my mouse and held her close.

She leaned my way and kept Harlem against her bosom.

The elevator lowered. The interior lighting glowed off the smooth walls, lending an ethereal brightness to the descent.

I wanted to lift her in my arms and carry her around, but I knew she wouldn't let me, especially in front of our men. She hoped to appear strong, and I wanted to show her that she didn't have to be.

I could be strong for the both of us.

The elevator stopped on the ground level.

I moved my arm.

Emily put Harlem on the floor of the elevator.

He wagged his tail.

I returned to holding Emily's hand.

The doors opened.

Ten more men waited for us.

When we left the elevator, they separated and made a path.

Harlem rushed out, but never let more than five feet get between us and him.

We continued forward.

The men closed ranks behind us and followed.

Only two weary employees sat at the desk—a man and woman. The man appeared close to dozing off. The woman scribbled something onto the notepad in front of her.

A lamp hovered over them, giving off dim lighting.

Darkness covered the rest of the lobby.

Still, I spotted armed men in the shadows—mine and the Harlem Crew—standing guard.

The space ran silent beside the sound of our footsteps on the polished marble floor and the quiet hum of the lamp.

I guided her forward. “How do you feel?”

“Better. I’m glad that I’m moving. The walking is good.”

“Then, let’s go to the beach.”

She squeezed my hand. “That sounds good.”

The glass doors slid open.

A sweet cologne rode the wind.

*That’s weird. Why does it smell so odd?*

Next, I spotted perfumed pansies standing around with their guns to their sides. I counted twenty of them in the front and assumed more were around the sides and in the back.

Emily scanned them. “Jean-Pierre is back?”

“He is, and apparently he’s brought us more perfumed pansies.”

Her expression brightened. “Then, Max and Boris are here too?”

“They are.” I cleared my throat and took us on the path leading to the beach. “I should tell you that Max walked in on the *situation*—”

“Oh, God.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not. I don’t want Max constantly cleaning up my messes and dealing with my dark shit. He’s been through enough being around me—”

“Maxwell loves you.” I looked at her. “Let him.”

She let out an exasperated breath.

“And I should also tell you that Maxwell and I had a... heated conversation about your dark side?”

“You got into a heated conversation? Meaning... you fought?”

“We both got in a few hits, before coming to our senses.”

“Kaz, I don’t want you two fighting. And I especially don’t want you both hitting each other over me.”

“We are violent men, *mysh*.”

“That’s not an excuse.”

“Violent men deal with stress by hitting each other. No one was truly hurt. Had him or I really wanted to kill each other...”

She stopped walking and glared.

“We would have, but we did not. We kept our fighting to a civil level.”

“No more fighting.”

“No more.” I tugged her forward.

We stepped onto the beach.

Emily stopped and slipped her feet out of her slippers.

I followed her lead and took off mine.

Harlem zipped along ahead of us, barking and jumping around like he owned the beach.

Drawing in a long inhale and then exhaling, she took my hand and we headed off.

*I hope this relaxes her.*

The beach was deserted, yet pulsed with a soothing energy.

Though the salty, night air ran on the colder side, it was a welcome change to our penthouse.

Powder white sand smoothed beneath our feet. It was so soft that we sank down with each step.

We walked in silence, letting the sand make gentle sounds as it slipped through our toes.

The night air was salty on my tongue. The crescent moon sat as a sliver in the dark sky. Its white glow cast a cool light on the ocean.

I studied the shoreline.

Black waves—crested with white froth—rippled out to the rocks, then returned to shore in a slow, rhythmic motion. And it produced the most hypnotic sound and set my nerves at ease.

Some of our men followed several feet behind us. Others ran up ahead and began bordering the beach. All of them had their guns out. A few aimed their guns at bushes and then shook them as if checking for enemies hiding within them.

I turned to Emily.

She watched Harlem jump and bounce around. A smile spread across her face.

Relief spread through me. This pre-dawn stroll appeared to be working its magic, but I knew this wouldn't cure everything.

She looked my way. "Tell me... what else happened."

"The details are gruesome."

The smile left her face. "I still need to know."

And that was what we did as we walked along this beach that seemed endless. I told her about the moment she changed to Lunita, our small tussle, the cutting, the chant about Jesus, and even that we got naked organizing body parts.

When I finished, she shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t remember. Not even one moment of this.”

“It wasn’t you.”

She sighed.

“And...” I cleared my throat. A strange feeling came over me. Perhaps, it was awkwardness. Something I was not used to at all. “Lunita wanted to have sex.”

Emily tensed near me and looked at the sand. “So?”

“I didn’t know the proper...behavior for this situation. And...you have been hurt...violated...”

She directed her view to me. “Did you fuck her or not?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t think it would be right.”

She stopped us, turned my way, and hugged me hard.

“You didn’t want me to have sex with her?”

“I don’t know what I want.” She leaned against my chest. “Besides the fact that I wish she didn’t exist.”

I held her closer.

Emily lifted her view to me. “But...”

“What?”

“Did you *want* to fuck her?”

“*Mysh...*”

She blinked.

“It’s your body. Your breasts. Your thighs and sexy legs. Your pussy. Your soft ass.”

She leaned back against me.

“Of course I wanted to have sex. But...what also stopped me was that...it appears I don’t just want to fuck your body. I



want your mind, your spirit, your personality gripping my cock too. And in the end, Lunita...is not *you*.”

“Still, she feels like another woman in our relationship.”

“Tell me what you want me to do next time she comes.”

Emily let go of me and stepped back. “There won’t be a next time.”

I pursed my lips together.

“I’m just...not letting her come back. I can control this. I can make sure she doesn’t come back.” Emily walked off. “I can...I can just not be triggered or whatever. There’s got to be something. You said that she claimed she only comes when I’m sad and suffering so...I won’t be sad.”

I followed her. “You probably could, but—”

“Not probably, Kaz. I must. We have a baby on the way.”

“We need professionals—”

“Yes.” She bobbed her head. “I want to see somebody. Maybe, tons of people. I don’t want to be like this. I want a cure or a method or something.”

“We have a pussy doctor. We’ll get one for your head.”

Emily slowed her walking and rolled her eyes at me. “Kaz, Dr. Stovall is an obstetrician, not a pussy doctor.”

“Same thing.”

“It is not.”

“How?”

“One is a crass way to describe the field and the other term is the proper way to say it.”

“Regardless, we will get the best doctor for your head.”

“Yes.” She walked off, looking cheered up and even determined. “This can be fixed. Maybe...or...no. It can be solved...I won’t accept anything else. And, until we find somebody, I’ll control it.”

“And if you can’t, then—”

“No. There is no can’t. This must be controlled.”

My stomach tightened, but I chose not to argue. If Emily believed she could control it, then I would follow her down that rabbit hole.

Anything that she needed I would provide.

In silence, we continued on.

Now, the hotel loomed far behind us, and we walked on the more public parts of the beach where there were empty lifeguard stations and piles of chairs chained and stacked haphazardly along the beach.

Our men followed us at a steady pace, staying at least a hundred feet back or in front of us. They were a moving perimeter of security, monitoring the area and ready to protect us if necessary.

Meanwhile, Harlem embarked on a journey of sniffing and urinating in spots to mark his territory.

Emily whispered, “Let’s sit down somewhere. I’m tired of walking, but...I don’t want to go back yet...”

“Do you want to sit on the beach?” I began to take off my robe so we could sit on the sand.

She pointed to an empty lifeguard station near us. “Do you think we could go there? I see two chairs.”

“*Mysh*, you are with the Lion. We can go anywhere we want to.”

She chuckled. “I’m sorry, Mr. Lion. I forgot who I was walking with for a moment.”

“Never forget.” I kissed her cheek and guided us in that direction.

The lifeguard station was white and rose high in the air. A long ramp went up to the station’s high level. There was a small rectangular room with glass walls as well as an elevated platform that wrapped around the tower and provided a 360 degree view.

We walked up the ramp.

Our men circled the station, creating a perimeter that was fifty feet away.

Harlem continued to play in the sand, rolling around and playfully snatching at some of our men's pants.

Emily remained on the platform and leaned against the ramp.

I hugged her from behind and inhaled her lovely scent. "Do you want to sit down?"

"The chairs are inside and it's locked."

"Again. You're with the Lion." I left her, took off my robe, and wrapped it around my arms.

She turned around. "Really, Kaz?"

"Really." I slammed my arms into the glass door. It shattered instantly, breaking into thousands of shards that fell to the floor.

I unfolded the robe, stretched it out, and lay it over the pile of glass.

Smirking, she pulled off her robe, walked over, and also placed the garment over the glass covered path too. "That's breaking and entering."

I smirked. "Is it?"

"It is."

"Am I going to jail?"

"You sure are."

"Will you help break me out?"

"I wouldn't be me, if I said no." She slowly walked over the robes. "Be careful, Kaz. I don't want you to cut your feet."

"A lion's feet don't cut."

She let out a loud groan and went to the tiny desk at the edge of the room.

"They don't, *mysh*."

She hopped onto the desk and sat on it. "I can't with you."

“You can and you will all night long.” I stalked over to her. “How are you feeling now?”

“Much better.”

I stood in front of her. “Are you hungry? I can have some food brought to us.”

“To the lifeguard station we just broke into?”

“Of course.”

She chuckled. “We are paying the city for the damages? Right?”

I sighed. “Yes, *mysh*.”

“I’m just saying.”

*Her heart is too big.*

Smiling, I kissed her.

She closed her eyes and tilted her face up to me, giving me more access to that sweet mouth.

I pulled away, touched her neck, and traced my fingers down to her collarbone. “You didn’t answer me.”

“I’m a little hungry.”

“Okay.” I left her, went over to the glass window, and tapped it.

Two men rushed up the lifeguard station’s ramp and then stood near the doorway. Glass crunched under their shoes.

I turned to them. “Wake up the hotel’s chef. My mouse and baby are hungry.”

One nodded. “Should I bring a menu?”

“Have the chef make everything.”

Emily chuckled. “We are not doing that, Kaz. A simple plate of eggs and toast is fine.”

I hit the men with an intense gaze. “Everything.”

They nodded and rushed away.

“Kaz, seriously? That’s ridiculous. We’re not going to have the chef—”

“We are and we will.” I looked at her.

“Whatever we don’t eat, we give to your men and—”

“I have asked you to stop caring so much about our people.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Your only focus should be on me.”

She grinned. “Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

She licked her lips. “I can do that.”

“Can you?”

The smirk left. Pain filled her eyes. “I love you so much, Kaz.”

My body warmed. “And I love you too.”

“Come here, baby.”

I gave her a devilish grin. “What do you want?”

“You know what I want.”

“You need me to knock the edge off?”

She chuckled.

My cock jerked in my pants. “Do you?”

“Yes, and fair warning, it is a whole lot of edge to knock off. Tons of edge.”

I prowled Emily’s way and stopped right in front of her. “It’s not.”

“Kaz...” She widened her eyes. “I’m fucking crazy.”

“But, we already knew that.”

“Not to this level.”

“What are levels to the Lion and the Mouse?”

Her expression softened.

I leaned in and tenderly nibbled on her ear. “Lucky for you, I am very eager to knock, slam, and pound any worries away.”

She bit her bottom lip.

Desire burned through me.

“Hmmm.” I stepped several feet back. My cock bulged in my pajama pants.

“Come back.”

“Take off the gown.”

“Take it off for me.”

“If I do it, you will not have anything to wear on the walk back.”







# Chapter 9

## Lifeline

### Kazimir

In the darkness of the lifeguard station, moonlight spread in glowing ripples on the walls, blurring into streaks and creating a spider web of dark and light within the room.

Silent, I remained several feet from my mouse, needing to restrain myself, hoping to remain calm.

Instead of sleeping this evening, my thoughts had wandered through her pain, her suffering, her unbearably traumatic childhood.

With it, an unwavering sense of protection pulsed within my body, heart, and soul.

But something else did too—a deep sadness welled up within me and a profound empathy and...compassion. All of it flowed through my body like a warm ocean current sifting through the rocky sand and softening it into something else entirely.

Tonight, I'd turned into a different man.

Always, Emily made me *feel* in new ways, just from looking at the reflection of her soul, her strength, her utter will to survive in this cruel world.

Always, she was constantly changing me, melting away the coldness within the Lion.

Even now—with the space between us—my arms ached to hold her, comfort her, heal her all at once by mending every damned wound, every traumatic cell.

Love her more than any person on this fucking Earth ever could and protect her at all costs.

She was my lifeline.

And with her gone, the day was a hard one, not due to the war, not due to our enemies.

It was because of her suffering.

Her stress.

Her horror.

Her pain.

So, Emily yearned for me to knock the stressful edge off, and my cock hoped to bang, pound, and slam it until it was nothing but past memories.

*Be steady. She's hurt. Be calm. She needs softness this evening.*

Still, every inch of me throbbed and begged to dominate. My body was tight, tense, and coiled like a spring.

There was a storm inside of me, a tornado of lust and desire twisting and spinning, ready for the pending destruction, and it could only be released by the sweetest sin curved within her warm body.

*Stay steady.*

Quiet, she watched, appearing more vulnerable than I'd ever seen her in my life.

*Let my mouse take her time.*

All this time, I had battled with controlling her. And always my mouse fought back against it, needing to be in control, doing exactly what she wanted to, and constantly relying on her own strengths as if I wasn't the Lion—the King of the fucking world.

*Now she thinks she can control Lunita. Can she?*

Emily slipped the thin white gown over her head and let it drop to the floor.

I took in the elegant beauty of my mouse. Her brown skin glistened within the streaks of moonlight. Those soft nipples hardened before my eyes. Her hips curved. Those long beautiful legs spread, revealing that sweet pussy.

Instantly, my brain painted pictures of pleasure through my mind.

Yet, a dark shadow darkened half of her face and embodied the true nature of Emily—the complicated duality of two incredibly dangerous women in one breathtaking body—dark and light, lover and murderer.

*Is Lunita watching on the TV?*

Then, Emily's sultry voice washed over me like a thrilling caress. "You're still over there...*Mr. Lion.*"

I formed my mouth into a wicked smile. My body buzzed with desire.

She spread her legs wider. "After all that's happened...you must be scared of the pussy."

Groaning, I prowled her way and closed the distance between us. I gazed down at my mouse, feeling the heat radiating off her curvy body. "Say that again?"

"You heard me."

I placed my hands on the other side of her legs and planted my palms on the table.

She gave me a sly grin.

I leaned forward and brushed my lips against hers. "*Mysh?*"

She shivered against me.

"With words like that, you must want it rough."

"Maybe."

"I planned to be soft with you tonight. Delicate."

"I need more. I feel so...different...like it's not my body...I need you to pound into me. Make me feel like me again."

A dark groan left me. "Be careful, *mysh.*"

"Maybe, I don't want to be careful."

I gripped the edge of the table. "I want you so desperately I'm ready to fuck you until you're sore."

She widened her eyes. “Maybe...that would be good therapy.”

Fast, I grabbed the braided ends of her hair and yanked her head back.

She gasped for breath and parted those sexy lips. “Oh.”

“Oh is right.” I thrust my tongue between her lips and fucked her mouth.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me back.

Our tongues collided.

I released her head and slipped my hands down her bare back, enjoying the satin feel of her skin.

*Finally.*

My balls tightened, ready for release. My cock throbbed in time with my rapid heartbeat.

I moved my mouth from hers and landed kisses down the curve of her neck.

“Kaz.” She arched her breasts up.

My tongue darted forward to trace the edge of her nipple and flicked the sensitive point.

“*Mysh.*” I caressed her right breast with my other hand, immersing my fingers in her softness.

My cock strained against the pants that bound it. The scent of her arousal perfumed the air around us, luring my beast out of its cave.

“Mmmhmm.” She dropped her hand to her pussy and began to play with her clit.

I left her breasts. The one nipple was wet from my mouth. It glistened in the moonlight. I placed my hands back on the table and glared at her. “Did I say you could touch yourself?”

She hit me with a naughty gaze.

“You are so bad.” I shoved the front of my pajama pants down to my thighs. My cock flipped out and pointed in her direction.

Emily's gaze landed on the stiff length. "I need that."

"Lay down."

She widened her eyes and lowered, until her back pressed against the table.

"You thought I was scared of this pussy?" I reached forward and cupped her sex. Her clit was swollen and slick. "Scared? When this pussy is all mine."

"Mmmm."

I pushed two fingers inside her. "Say sorry."

"Oh!" Her wet pussy clenched around my fingers.

"Not oh, *mysh*." I slowly slipped those fingers in and out of her tight, warm pussy. "I said, say *sorry*."

"S-sorry."

"Hmmm. I am not sure that is good enough." Pumping into her pussy with my fingers, I hooked one of her legs over my arm and leaned down to kiss her.

Our lips connected.

Greedy and hungry, our tongues danced and twirled.

My cock rubbed against her inner thigh.

I pressed myself against her more, moving the head of my cock to her clit.

She shivered beneath me. "Fuck me, Kaz."

Still tilting forward, I took my hands out of her pussy and stopped kissing her.

She tried to capture my mouth.

Grinning, I leaned a little away, yet moved my hips forward and back, making sure my throbbing head slipped along her clit.

She moaned and moved against me. "More."

Beads of pre-cum spurt from the tip. I rubbed it on her clit and she moaned louder.

I was so close to losing control. All I could think about was cumming in her pussy.

*Steady.*

Grunting, I rose.

She pouted.

A dark chuckle left me. I spread her thighs and lifted her other leg up onto my shoulder.

She was so exposed.

I couldn't help but marvel at the sight between those soaking wet folds.

Smirking, she looked up at me. "Are you going to fuck me or give me an examination?"

I gripped my cock and rubbed the mushroomed tip against her pussy.

"Mmmm." She shivered.

With my cock, I slowly traced circles around her clit, letting the head of my cock get her wetter. "What was your question?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Hmmm."

Her pussy began to drip with more arousal, making my cock slick with her juices.

I inhaled the air and breathed in her scent. My need for her grew stronger, in waves that washed over my body. Yet, I held myself back from thrusting into her too quickly. "Do you understand how much I love you?"

Her chest rose and fell fast. "Yes."

I slipped the tip of my cock to her opening. "Are you sure?"

"I think so."

My body hummed, needing to be inside of her. Still, I had to make sure she understood the depth of our love, the mountains I would move for her. "You think or you know?"

She bit her lip. Her body trembled. And part of me knew that it wasn't in desire. Fear radiated from her.

"*Mysh?*"

“You’re...”

I quirked my brows.

“You’re not running away.”

“Lions don’t run.” Fast, I pushed my cock in her pussy and then held it there.

“Ooo.”

I kept my cock rammed deep inside of her. “Do you understand?”

She shivered. This time it was in desire. “Y-yes.”

“I will never leave you.”

She gazed up at me.

I pulled my cock out of her and rubbed the tip along her clit. “And you could never leave me.”

Her voice went weak. “I would never want to leave, Kaz.”

I sneered. “It doesn’t matter if you did. I would shut the city down, the country, the fucking continent.”

She widened her eyes.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Not even the presence of Lunita could free you from me.”

She closed her eyes.

“*Mysh*, look at me.”

She opened those eyes, and tears left them.

“This is forever.” I slammed back into her.

“Oh!”

“Scared?” I pulled my cock back out.

She whined, “Kaz...”

“You are so greedy.”

“I want you inside of me.” She frowned. “Now.”

I played with her clit. “Perhaps, I am too scared of this pussy.”

“I’m about to flip you over and take your cock myself.” She arched her back, her breasts thrusting out towards me.

With my free hand, I reached for a nipple and tweaked the sensitive point. “The only person flipping anyone over is me.”

“Mmm.” She stirred in pleasure. “Keep playing with me, Kaz.”

“That is exactly what I plan to do.”

“But, fuck me too.”

Hunger throbbed down to my core. “In due time, *mysh*.”

“I don’t like to wait for what is mine.”

“Is that correct?” I slowly slid my cock into her. Inch by inch, her pussy opened up around me. Those moist inner walls hugged me tight.

She gasped.

Then, I drove balls deep and stayed there.

*God, this pussy is so good.*

I tried to stifle my groan, but it left me anyway.

“Mmmhmm.” Her pussy wrapped around my cock, squeezing it for all it’s worth. “Please, Kaz.”

I didn’t even want to move. I needed to savor the sensation. Holding back was paradise with a piece of hell woven into the sensation. It was impossible to escape the intense pleasure drumming through me.

Her eyelids drooped. She kept licking those lips like sugar coated them. “W-what are you doing?”

I looked down at my eager mouse. “I am trying to overcome my fear of your pussy.”

“Stop...playing.”

“Go ahead and flip me over.” My cock jerked inside of her.

She jumped a little. “Oh.”



I let my cock bounce against her walls again.

“Goddamn it.” She arched her back and gyrated those hips, showing me who was really in charge.

*Fuck.*

The heat from her pussy set fire to my skin and singed my brain into mush.

Unable to control myself, I started moving at her tempo, pumping in and out of that sexy pussy.

She squirmed.

I thrust inside of her, then, slowly drew myself out only to plunge back inside of her as deeply as I could go.

“Faster, Kaz.”

A devilish insanity ran through me. Sarcasm laced my words. “Are you sure you want me to go faster, *mysh*.”

“Yes.”

Stubborn, I drew myself out so slowly that it felt like torture. I groaned and plunged inside of her at a painfully slow rhythm.

She shivered. “Oh.”

Then, I gave us both what we wanted.

I plunged in fast. Again and again. Hammering into her wet tightness over and over.

She screamed in pleasure.

And it drove me crazy. I went wild, gripping her hips, slamming her onto my cock. Fucking her with abandon. Pounding into that pussy, the whole time making smacking noises.

Harder and harder.

“Oh, God!”

I drew her hips up more to meet my pumping.

She writhed underneath me. “Kaz!”

“*Mysh!*” Grunting, I shoved myself deep inside of her.

We moaned together loudly, almost screaming. Surely, our men heard us out on the beach.

Her legs gave out and fell over the table.

She grabbed at my arms.

I slowed the pace.

She sat up.

Then, I lifted her body up from the table and had her in my grip.

She straddled me, taking my cock at a deeper angle and bouncing on it.

I squeezed that soft ass. My breathing grew heavy. My balls slapped against her ass.

“Oh!”

That motivated me to give her this cock, harder and faster than before.

It was all her and everything else. The sound of her moaning. The wetness of her pussy. My balls slapping against her pussy. The pleasant ache in my shoulders as I gripped her tightly. The faint perfumed scent of sex in the air.

“Oh, baby!” She matched every thrust with a buck of her hips. Her juices dripped down my thighs.

My orgasm built within my core.

I kept going.

I kept pounding into her tight pussy.

I grunted, and my focus narrowed to the point where our bodies met. I wanted to come.

I needed to come so bad I would kill anyone that interrupted us.

Like a drugged-out fiend, I thrust faster and faster, feeling her pussy squeeze me even tighter.

And the pressure began to break in me.

With our bodies joined together in passion, she whispered between breaths, “I...love you...so much, Kaz.”

Through the haze of pleasure, I gazed at that beautiful face. She was my future wife—the mother of my child. And, she looked so damned happy.

That was enough to push me over the edge.

“I love you too, *mysh*.”

“I’m...cumming.”

I groaned deeply.

Moaning, she writhed in my hold. I held her close to me, letting her ride my cock the way she needed to, giving her complete control to rub that clit on my six pack and slide up and down on my length.

“Oh! Oh!”

*There you go, mysh. Use my body any way you want.*

When I felt the waves of her orgasm roll through her body.

“Oh. Oh.” She vibrated against me, triggering my own orgasm.

“Damn it.” Groaning, I gripped her hips and thrust hard into her, my cock buried up to the hilt. She gasped and moaned, grinding back against me, urging me on. My cock throbbed as my orgasm started.

Jolts of electric pleasure raced up my shaft and hit me like a rocket, forcing me to explode, shattering me into a million pieces of hot molten pleasure. My vision flashed to white. I could barely see. “*Mysh!*”

Every cell rode wave after wave of intense, amplified ecstasy.

Slowing, she closed her eyes and collapsed against me. “Baby.”

Groaning, I gripped her hard and shot stream after stream of cum inside her, groaning with each spurt and feeling it fill her up as her pussy milked me.

My cock felt like it would never stop pulsing. She went limp against me.

I carried her back over to the table and slowly pulled out of her.

She pouted and opened those sexy eyes.

My cock twitched.

I lay her down and rammed my cock back into her, just to feel the warmth of her pussy some more.

My legs ached. I was so exhausted I didn't even pull my pants up. Instead, I collapsed on top of her, laying my head on her breasts and floating on a blissful wave of pleasure.

She laughed.

A nipple bobbed in front of me.

I groaned and used my little bit of strength to squeeze it. "God, I love fucking you."

"I feel the same way."

"I have said this before, but I am never letting you go."

"Me either."

"When they bury us, our bones will be on top of each other. My dead cock will be stuffed inside of you."

She laughed again. "Is that legal?"

"I will demand it in my will."

She chuckled some more.

Then, silence blanketed us.

Still, I didn't leave her body, unable to pull out of her warm pussy.

"Kaz..."

"Yes, *mysh*."

"Will we..."

Gathering as much strength as I could, I raised my head a little and looked at her. "Will we what?"

“Will we still win, if I’m...this fucked up?”

“You think you’re a liability?”

She gave me a sad smile. “Maybe.”

A dark chuckle left me. I pulled my cock out of her, but lay my head back down on her breasts.

“Kaz, that’s not funny.”

“You did not see the expression on everyone’s faces. I believe our people now fear you more than me.” I closed my eyes and listened to her heart beat. “That makes you one of the most dangerous people in Italy. I like those odds.”

“Then, what do we do?”

“What do *you* think we do?”

“Take out the Mancuso and Gallo families first. Then, deal with Fela.”

*Exactly, my smart mouse.*

I grinned. “We should marry right now.”

“Kaz, would you focus?”

“Sometimes when you speak about killing people or give me this good pussy, I just want to drag you down an aisle.”

“You still need to focus.”

Noise sounded outside of the lifeguard station. Then, the scent of food wafted in the air.

Groaning in annoyance, I rose from her. “Yes. Yes. I will focus.”

“You should get some sleep too.”

“There’s no time for sleep, *mysh*. We have a war to win—”

“You may have a few hours—”

“They are coming.” I stood and yanked my pants up. “If not now, then soon.”

“And what will we do?”

“Fight.”





# Chapter 10

## Glutton's Wet Dream

### Emily

Our men brought thick pillows, soft blankets, two new robes and slippers. I put the robe and slippers on while Kaz and Wassily piled the items high, making a massive fluffy nest of comfort.

Next the steaming platters of food arrived.

Now, the space smelled of the ocean mingled with the savory and sweet scents.

It must have been thirty additional men carrying food into the lifeguard station. Steam billowed from pots, platters, and bowls.

Most of the time, I gave plates back to our men, urging them to help us eat everything.

Kazimir roared, demanding that they could wait until I was full.

I swatted him away and ordered the Lion to sit on the pillow-blanket nest.

Luckily, he obliged with a sly smile, fell back onto the blankets, and watched Wassily and me serve everyone.

It felt good to be busy, handing out plates and food. The movement kept my mind busy for a little bit, instead of thinking about the horrific things I wasn't ready to deal with.

To any casual onlooker, the lifeguard station must have been a sight. Tons and tons of armed men lined the perimeter of the structure, holding plates and chomping away. The clinking of forks and the scraping of plates filled the air.

Wassily poured pitchers of freshly squeezed orange juice to anyone thirsty.



Even with my giving food to our men, platters upon platters of food still crowded the lifeguard station.

It was a glutton's wet dream.

Breakfast dishes steamed near the left wall. There were tons of golden brown pancakes thick with butter and syrup. There were sizzling slabs of bacon and sausages. Another plate displayed a stack of fluffy waffles wet with honey. Several bowls held ripe peaches, wedges of watermelon, cuts of strawberries, oranges, and mangos, pieces of pineapple, mounds of berries, and cantaloupe.

Lunch sat to the right. Cheesy and zesty aromas wafted towards us from the lunch side. A bottle of olive oil and a loaf of Italian bread, crispy with garlic and dusted with parmesan cheese, were spread out on a red plastic tray. Various steaming hot pastas lay next to the bread along with cups of assorted sauces, cheeses, and spices.

Dinner was laid out on three small tables that made a U shape. The central table held pizza. The table close to the door held Italian favorites like baked ziti, lasagna, and cheese ravioli. The end of it held trays of salad and crusty breads, and dinner rolls.

I took a spoonful of this and that, barely able to truly try everything.

Meanwhile dessert lay on our pillow-blanket nest and surrounded us. Warm baked apples floated in toffee sauce. Whipped cream topped banana nut loaves. Thick coats of icing smeared onto cinnamon buns.

When dawn came, Kaz and I had begun devouring the different slices of cheesecake. My mouth tingled with the delicious sweetness of strawberries mixed with cream cheese.

Sunlight brightened the lifeguard station. The cool morning breeze brushed against me.

In the corner, Harlem lay on his back, tiny belly jutting forward in a bulge. His tongue hung out of his open muzzle. Loud snores left him. Two thick steaks lay by his head. My poor puppy had fought a valiant battle, but had barely been

able to nibble half of one steak before passing out in satiated exhaustion.

Grinning, I turned away from Harlem and looked at Kaz. “You are never to order the whole menu again.”

Kaz fed me a piece of cheesecake. “Why not?”

Sweetness danced on my tongue. I swallowed and chuckled. “You don’t know why?”

He gazed around. “No. What’s wrong? Did the chef miss something?”

“Kaz, this is an exorbitant amount of food.”

“My mouse and child were hungry.”

“Not that damn hungry.”

He dipped the fork in strawberry sauce. “You are just not used to being spoiled.”

“And you damned sure are highly accustomed to the spoiled life.”

“Damned right I am.” He licked sauce off the fork.

I bit my lip and relished in the sight of his tongue lapping at the metal.

He placed the fork on the plate. “You look like you want round two of my cock.”

“I was considering it.”

“Is that correct?” Kaz reached for my robe, opened it a little, and brushed his fingertips along my thigh.

“Yes, *Mr. Lion*. However...”

Kaz frowned.

“We have enemies, so we should—”

“If you say the word *focus*, I am going to stuff my cock down your throat.”

“Wow. It’s like that?”

“Yes.” He moved the plate that was between us, closed the distance, and pressed his lips to mine.

I melted into him, reveling in the rock-solid bulk of him.

What would I have done without Kaz? How could I have lived without his strength and warmth? I would have never survived the devastating news of last night’s events if it had been anybody else but him giving it to me.

Kaz’s replay of his time with my...other personality, had...made me feel like I was crumbling on the inside. My heart broke. My lungs filled with blocks of ice. My ribs ached.

Even on the beach, there were waves of panic, anxiety, sadness, and loss. I swore my soul and heart sank low as if I were being sucked down by quicksand.

All I could do was hold on to Kaz and gaze into those deep blue eyes.

He served as my anchor in the midst of a hurricane.

My refuge and my savior.

His comforting words had kept some of my anxiety at bay. Those large hands stopped me from drowning in grief and despair. Even, his cock had knocked a lot of the tension away.

*I have to fix me, before the baby comes.*

I leaned away from him.

He glared. “Come back.”

I returned. “We really do need to focus.”

“Do we now?”

“Yes, because—”

Kaz swallowed the rest of my sentence.

Desire snaked through me.

When he left my lips, he put his attention on the hollow below my earlobe. “It is true that our enemies are due to come, but our private time is *now*. Let’s respect that.”

“Still—”

“Still nothing.” Kaz lowered his head and breathed me in, exhaling slowly as he savored my scent.

Lusty shivers ran through me.

Nipping lightly with his teeth, he licked down to the base of my neck, sending ripples of pleasure down my spine.

A whistle sounded.

The noise didn't stop Kaz from opening my robe some more and scooping up my breast.

But, Harlem woke up and growled.

“You see that. Harlem is on the job.” Kaz leaned away and brushed my nipple over my thin gown. “With a secret weapon like Harlem how could you ever worry?”

“Mmmm.” I arched up.

The person whistled again.

Harlem rolled onto his feet and charged out of the lifeguard station. Tiny barks left him.

“Your pussy is so good.” Kaz circled the nipple. “I want some more.”

I sighed in pleasure.

Harlem's barking rose and began to echo around us.

Kaz watched my nipple harden under his finger. “I believe Harlem could take out Black Axe all by himself.”

Harlem's barks shifted to excited whining.

Kaz stopped rubbing my nipples and quirked his brows.

Harlem whined some more.

Next, the scent of weed smoke filled the space.

Frowning, Kaz moved his hand from my breast. “It appears our private time is about to get crowded.”

Excitement hit me. “Max.”

His voice rose in the air. “Yo, Em!”

Sighing in annoyance, Kaz sat up and began to rise. “Must he be so eager?”

I closed my robe. “He’s been gone for a while.”

Frowning, Kaz stood and then helped me up.

Now that I was standing, it gave me a new view of outside, that shoved me on edge. Instead of only Kazimir’s men surrounding the lifeguard station, now Harlem Crew and some Perfumed Pansies had joined them.

*O-kay. Did everyone have to get up this early?*

I slid my feet into my slippers and headed away.

Kaz followed.

Outside of the station, the sun blazed in the clear blue sky.

Max stood by the bottom of the ramp, wearing a new designer suit that molded perfectly along his frame. He held Harlem in his arms and rubbed his ears. The puppy happily licked at his fingers and wagged his tail.

Several members of the Harlem Crew maintained three rows behind him, and every hand held a gun. Instead of gazing my way, they kept their views in front of them.

For some reason, my nerves flared on edge.

*It’s a war. Everyone is on edge.*

Still, a large part of me was excited to see Max. There’d been an emptiness inside of me when he went away with Jean-Pierre. Already from simply seeing Max, that space was instantly filling.

*Thank God, he’s back.*

“You’re getting big, Harlem.” Max’s gaze left the puppy and went to me. “Alright, little guy. We’ll talk later. Now I have to speak to your mommy.”

Max stopped rubbing Harlem and slowly lay him back on the sand.

Whining, Harlem jumped around his feet.

Max paid Harlem no more attention. He kept his gaze fixed on me, as if trying to see into my deepest thoughts. A serious expression spread across his handsome face.

I was about to speak, but King David's voice boomed in the air. "I said call! Not in an hour! Not after they have breakfast! Not when they shower! Right when they wake up!"

Kaz stepped to my side.

We both looked to the right where King David held a heated conversation with Wassily.

King David's voice rose higher. "You got that?"

Wassily nodded.

"Next time, there won't be words." David opened his suit jacket and gestured to his gun sitting in his holster. "You understand?"

Wassily pursed his lips, but remained silent.

*Alrighty then.*

I widened my eyes. "Wassily is in serious trouble."

Then, David turned our way and scowled.

"Oh." I blinked. "We're in trouble too."

"I will deal with you more later!" King David stormed away from Wassily and headed our way.

Kaz frowned. "David better take his attitude down a notch, when he speaks to me."

"Be nice, Kaz."

"I am the Lion. I require a certain amount of respect."

"We all know you're the Lion, but it's David's job to protect those paws and your very big tail."

King David almost pushed Max to the side as he stomped up the ramp and stopped a foot in front of Kaz. Usually, a smooth calmness radiated from David. This morning, his anger permeated the air.

*Okay. He's mad-mad.*

Additionally, his suit appeared wrinkled like he'd slept in it. Red tinted the corner of his eyes, and his hands were fisted at his sides.

Kaz stared back at him with a bored expression. "Is there a problem?"

David didn't even try to hold back his sneer. "I would like to be told next time you have a picnic in the middle of the night."

"My mouse was hungry."

"And so you are now a perfect target. Anyone could come and shoot you down—"

"Our men are here—"

"Eating pancakes and drinking juice!" David spoke through clenched teeth. "Should I have someone bring them chairs, so they can sit down? Perhaps, we can get some music out here so the Mancuso Family can have a soundtrack while they kill you?"

Rage entered Kaz's eyes. "Are you questioning my—"

"We are very sorry, David." I loudly cleared my throat. "It was a rough morning. I dragged everyone out to the beach. This is my fault."

Kaz's expression didn't soften. "We will not apologize for —"

"We will, and again we are sorry." I walked around both men, knowing that their discussion would not be over.

Max remained at the end of the ramp with his attention still on me.

It made me uncomfortable that he hadn't said anything yet.

Meanwhile, Harlem leaned against Max's big feet and licked himself.

*What does Max think about...Lunita?*

I had been so shocked with everything Kaz had said, that I never, not once, considered Max's thoughts or what

information he could add to this.

How much had he known? Did X and Daryl know too? Or were they unable to deal with the high magnitude of crazy like I was?

*I have to figure this out and not take Kaz and Max down this crazy path. No more secrets. No more hiding bodies and cleaning up my bloodshed.*

I stopped in front of Max. A few inches lay between us. Nervous, I leaned against the wooden ramp, wishing that I could hug him. But, being this close provided its own sense of satisfaction and comfort.

Max looked down at me.

Silence ran between us.

*Say something.*

His scent surrounded me—cologne mingling with weed. I gave him a sad smile, loving that he'd returned. Then, I forced myself to speak. "Are you okay?"

"Always."

"Did Jean-Pierre get you into anything tricky?"

"A few times."

I frowned. "What the fuck?"

"Doesn't matter. I'm good now."

"But, what happened?"

"Em, my gun's aim is holy. Dare I say...biblical."

"What happened?"

"Your boy is fine."

*I'll ask Jean-Pierre later and he better have some fucking answers.*

Max grinned for the first time. "Leave the Butcher alone."

"I didn't say anything."

"Yeah, but I see it all over you face."



I placed my hands on my hips. “We treated Giorgio and Louis like family so if I find out that you got a scratch or—”

“Leave it alone, Em. I like the Butcher now.”

I quirked my brows.

“We can trust him.”

David barked behind us, “Wassily, get over here!”

Max looked that way. “Let’s walk back to the hotel. Your Russian is busy. Plus, Baba wanted you to be around when the kid woke up.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The little guy had a bunch of nightmares and was calling for you.”

*Poor Paolo.*

My heart twisted.

I glanced over my shoulder.

David talked to Kazimir, but my lion watched me.

I motioned that I was heading off with Max.

Kaz nodded, telling me he understood exactly what I was saying with the gesture.

*My baby.*

I loved how we could communicate with simple body language. The more time I spent with Kaz, the more I knew we were meant to be together. Weeks ago, I had doubts about the pregnancy and even our engagement. Now after all that we had been through, I could never be without him.

*Thank God for Kaz.*

I turned back to Max and walked away, knowing that this conversation would most likely be a tough one.





# Chapter 11

## Possible Solutions

### Emily

Max and I walked away.

Harlem Crew followed along with some of Kaz's men. All had their guns out, ready to shoot.

Harlem trotted after us, wagging his tail.

Far behind us, David's voice rose in the air. Russian spilled from his mouth. It was always unusual to hear David shift into the language, because a French accent always tinted each Russian word.

Still walking away, I checked over my shoulder to make sure Kaz didn't do anything outrageous.

Thankfully, David was nowhere near Kaz. He was back on the sand pointing and ordering the men around. Many of the Brotherhood rushed around, putting their plates away and cleaning up the station.

I turned away and continued forward. "Damn. David is mad. I don't want any of that smoke."

"Shit would give you lung cancer." Max chuckled. "Motherfucker about to beat all their asses like he's their mama."

"For real."

David continued to loudly fire out Russian words as if they were bullets.

*We may need to call an ambulance. David is not playing.*

Max laughed. "You understood what David is saying? Right?"

"Not at all." I shook my head. "He's talking too fast."

“I understood that shit clearly.”

I sucked my teeth. “You barely know Russian.”

“But, I got it though.”

“Then, what did David say?”

Max shrugged. “David told Wassily to find a big stick.”

I rolled my eyes.

“He’s going to whip Wassily’s ass with it.”

I laughed. “I missed you so much.”

Max smiled. “I missed you too, Em.”

We continued down the beach in silence.

The sun sparkled on the surface of the ocean. It created a light that seemed to dance in the waves as they rolled in and out.

A man headed in our direction, wearing red shorts and a windbreaker. A large red bag was slung over his shoulder. He held a confused look on his face as he looked off at the lifeguard station. Keys dangled in his hand.

When he passed us, Max whispered, “I bet that’s the lifeguard.”

“Yikes.” I checked behind me.

Sure enough, the man continued to the station.

“Dude, about to have a very bad day.”

I slowed my pace. “I should go and make sure Kaz and David are nice to him.”

“Naw, Em. Those are grown ass men. Let it do what it do.”

I shook my head and continued toward the hotel. “We shouldn’t have taken over the lifeguard station.”

“Shit. Did more then take it over. Place smelled like ass and pancakes. What were you two doing, fucking in syrup or something?”

Embarrassment washed over me.

“Nasty asses.”

“Whatever, Max.” I grinned. “I bet you slept with all types of females while you were gone with JP.”

“I did, but...” He held up one finger. “Now, I’m a changed man.”

I smirked. “Oh really?”

“I’m looking for the *one*.”

I raised my eyebrows. “*You*.”

“My baby had sparkling stars hanging from her ears.”

“So, you met her?”

“Not yet.”

“Then, how do you know she had stars hanging from her ears?”

“I’ve been dreaming about her.”

My grin widened. “Are you playing with me?”

“I’m serious, Em. As soon as I see a chick with stars in her ears, I’m marrying her immediately.”

“And if she is already married?”

He held up his hand and formed his fingers into a gun.  
“Killing that motherfucking husband instantly.”

“Wow.”

He lowered his hand.

The hotel loomed far up ahead, but we still had some time to get there.

“So...” Max put his hands in his pockets, telling me that he was nervous. “How are *you* doing?”

“I don’t know how to answer that right now.”

“Why not?”

I looked his way. “How would you answer it?”

Max shrugged. “What do you mean?”

“If someone told you that you had another personality—”

“That motherfucker really told you?” Max stopped walking.

“Yes.” I paused.

Max glared back at the lifeguard station. “That bitch ass motherfucker.”

“Of course he told me.”

“I thought he might punk out and—”

“Why would he punk out, Max? It’s a serious thing. Kaz had to tell me.”

“He didn’t.”

I scowled. “You wouldn’t have told me?”

Max shifted his weight to the side. “You know the answer?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Hell no. I wouldn’t have told you.”

The urge to shove him came to me, but I could never harm Max. Instead, I stomped off.

Max called to my back, “Em!”

I increased my pace.

“Em.” Max jogged up to me and met my space. “What else am I supposed to do?”

“Tell me.”

“X never wanted you to know.”

My eyes watered and I couldn’t explain why. “But, I should have known. Maybe, I’m worse off because of the secrets.”

“It’s not like we fucking knew what to do—”

“Another personality, Max?” I stopped and stared at him. “That’s bigger than being a fucking serial killer. You could have added that fact.”

“Okay. Hold up.” Max raised his hands. “In my defense, I didn’t really know it was a whole other person. In fact...”

“What?”

“I mean...I’m still not all the way convinced.”

“What the hell do you mean you’re not convinced?”

Max shrugged. “Sure. You are quiet and shit when you kill people, and you look really weird like something is wrong with you. Like you’re possessed or something, but I wouldn’t say it’s a different personality.”

I held out my hands. “That sounds like a different person.”

“Is it though?”

“Max, I don’t remember any of the shit that happened last night or when you’ve apparently seen me being *different*.”

“True.”

“It’s another person.”

Max frowned. “It’s just you going dark.”

“It sounded like I did more than go dark. This Lunita is—”

“No. No.” Max waved his hands.

“What?”

“Now *you’re* saying the name too?”

“What else am I going to call her?”

“Dark Em. Demily. I would even feel better saying Eminta, but not Lunita.”

“Why not?”

“Long story, Em. I’m just saying—”

“Max, it doesn’t matter. I’ve got to fix this. I can’t be two people and raise a kid. I have to be one person.”

“Listen.” Max held his hands up and blew out a long breath. “We’re...”

“What?”



“We’re going get through this like we always do.”

My heart ached.

I headed away.

Max met my pace again.

I fixed my robe, even though it was just fine.

“Say something, Em.”

“I wish I could smoke a joint.”

“Me too.”

I slowed my pace. My slippers were starting to feel heavy, and I swore the ground had shifted to sinking sand. “Max...”

“Yeah?”

“I have so many questions.”

“Ask them.”

My voice went hoarse. “I’m scared.”

“Shit.” He shrugged. “I’m scared too.”

I let out a long breath.

Harlem trotted on my side.

“Em...”

I looked his way. “Yeah?”

“When X and I were dealing with your...dark side...”

Shivers ran through me.

“Look, Em. Back in the day, we didn’t have a lot of fucking resources. You know?”

“Yeah.” I looked away. “That wasn’t right.”

“I know. I’m sorry we didn’t say anything.”

“No. I’m not talking about that. I’m saying it wasn’t right that X and you held on to such a massive secret and cleaned up all my messes. I feel guilty about that. You both have been through enough—”

“Em, you been through a lot too. Don’t shed tears for us  
—”

“I don’t want you cleaning up my messes anymore. I can  
—”

“Fuck that.” Max got in front of me and blocked my walking forward. “Fuck everything you’re saying.”

“I can handle this stuff now.”

He pointed to me and then touched his chest. “We’re in this together.”

“Max, listen to me.”

Leaning my way, he gritted his teeth. “We’re in this together.”

I looked up at him.

Barely an inch ran between us.

Usually, I would have felt like roaches were crawling over my skin. In this moment, I experienced the opposite—comfort.

Max lowered his voice. “We’re in this together.”

“We’re not.”

“We are, Em.”

“Lunita is in *my* head not yours.”

“Yeah, but...I need to help.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“I don’t.”

“Em...”

“What?”

“My dad put Lunita there.”

Tears threatened to come. Blinking, I walked around him and rushed away. “You’re not your dad, Max.”

He didn't get by my side. Instead, he walked behind me.  
"Doesn't matter."

"It does." Tears left my eyes. I wiped them away. "It does, Max. It really does."

"Don't push me away, Em."

"It's not about pushing you away. I want you to have a life \_\_\_"

"Without you?"

"No." Shiver, I hugged myself. "No."

He got back to my side.

I shook my head. "Max...I can't live without you."

He kept my pace, but stared off in the direction of the ocean.

"I love you." I looked at him. "And I don't like to be away from you for too long. It makes me uneasy and...sad."

His gaze stayed on the ocean. "Yeah?"

"Yes. I mean...I know it's...selfish."

"It isn't selfish."

"It is."

He moved his view forward.

In that moment, I realized his eyes were watering too.

Max frowned. "It's not selfish. You know I feel the same way too."

"Do you?"

"Of course."

"Sometimes I think you like..."

"What?"

"I think you like being away from me."

He shook his head. "Never that."

"You're always smiling when someone mentions Misha."

“Oh. Well, that’s different. That’s my homey.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Misha and you are my family. I love you two.”

“Whatever. Misha is not on my level.”

Max chuckled. “You’re so jealous for no reason.”

We approached the small path leading up to the hotel.

Max continued, “But, Em, you know where you stand with me. You’re my heart.”

I held my hands in front of me and twisted my fingers together.

“I love you more than I love myself.”

“Don’t say that, Max.”

“It’s true. And you know I don’t give a fuck about cleaning up your messes because you clean up mine.”

I sighed. “Because I love you too.”

“Shit.” Max winked at me. “If you or Demily kill someone, I’ll just grab a shovel and dig a hole.”

“Could we not make *Demily* a thing?”

“It’s short for Dark Em.”

“I get that.”

“Then, what do you think about *Dem*?”

“No, Max.”

“Well, I don’t like Lunita.”

“Kaz named her that.”

“Yeah, but...this voodoo woman told me that name days before I even returned to Italy.”

I stopped at the end of the path and looked at him.  
“What?”

“Yeah. I was in New Orleans with the French and—”

“New Orleans? JP was only supposed to take you to France—”

“That’s another story.”

I placed my hands on my hips. “Well, we have the time, so tell me what the fuck happened because I don’t like that he had you everywhere—”

“Actually, we don’t have the time.” Max pointed at the hotel.

Someone stood near the entrance.

I squinted and realized it was Baba.

“Em, I’ll just say this. The voodoo woman was talking about how I had to take care of Lunita and you.”

“She said that name?”

Max nodded. “I didn’t even know who Lunita was at the time.”

“She said Lunita, before you heard Kaz say it?”

“Facts.”

“Then, we need to go see her. Maybe she can help me figure this out or—”

“Hell no!” Max backed up like a ghost had appeared. “I will never see her ass again, and I won’t let her get anywhere near you.”

“But if she knows about Lunita—”

“Em, you don’t want any parts to this voodoo woman. She’ll have snakes and shit crawling all over your body—”

“Snakes?”

Max nodded. “Snakes. Lots of them.”

Trembling, I headed off. “I hate snakes.”

“Exactly.” Max walked on my side.

“But, if she knew about Lunita before—”

“Aww, man. Come on, Em.”

“What?”

“I didn’t tell you about this crazy woman to give you ideas. It was to explain why I don’t like the name Lunita.”

“I want to meet this voodoo woman—”

“Come on, man. If you go to New Orleans, then I have to go, and I don’t fucking want to go.”

“I need help, Max.”

“Fuck that. You got the Russian. Our money bags are different now. We don’t have to go to New Orleans and fuck with some crazy lady walking in people’s heads and shit.”

“Walking in heads?”

“All I’m saying is get a proper professional. Hell! Get thirty professionals, not some witch doctor in the bayou.”

“But if she knew Lunita—”

“Not an option, Em. I’m serious.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

“You damn right it’s fine.”

Still, some of the tension left my shoulders.

*What if she can do something to help? I bet she could. How would this work? Could she combine the two of us or something? Or just get rid of Lunita? Is it possible?*

Max watched me. “Goddamn it.”

“What?”

He pointed at me. “Your fucking face. You’re doing that expression you do right before you drag me down into the sewer.”

“I’m not.”

“We’re not going to New Orleans.”

“Sure.”

*Not now. We’ve got a war, but maybe afterwards.*

“Motherfucker!”

“I didn’t say anything, Max.”

“Yeah, but I know what’s on your mind.” Max gestured to Baba. “If I were you, I would fuck with Baba before the voodoo woman. She’s less scary.”

“I don’t know about that, but...” I focused on Baba. “But, I’ll try anything, Max. I don’t want to be this fucked up. I want to be better.”







# Chapter 12

## Flowers

### Blue

After yesterday, I woke up at dawn with a sense of dread, knowing the rest of the week wouldn't be a vacation.

War had come. Thousands of enemies surrounded us. The Mouse cracked into brutal violence. The Lion killed several of Harlem Crew, sending the message that he expected fierce loyalty.

I would have to remain vigilant.

After I showered and dressed, I spread plastic bags and towels over the table. Then, I opened the balcony doors to make sure the space had good air circulation.

The cleaning solvent's fumes could make me sick, and they had a disgusting smell.

Next, I lay out my tools on the table— solvents to lubricants, rods and brushes, polishing cloths and even a small flashlight.

Then, I put the guns on the table.

*Here we go.*

Properly inspecting and regularly cleaning my guns kept them functioning effectively and firing safely.

Due to the tiny explosion in the chamber every time I pulled the trigger, residue and sediment was always left on the inside of the barrel. That made cleaning the guns essential to avoiding dangerous malfunctions.

The Brotherhood had a team that cleaned their weapons every time they fired them.

Implementing a *Weapons Cleaning* group for Harlem Crew would be one of the many ideas I planned to bring up to

Emily. I just had to wait until she was mentally ready to deal with more stuff.

The image of that suite flashed in my head—the gore, the blood, the piles of body parts.

*Don't think about it.*

Tension gathered in my shoulders. A shiver ran through me. I swallowed and pushed that horrific scene out of my mind.

*She'll be okay this morning.*

But, the biggest question was, how were we supposed to act around Emily? I could barely understand this new reality.

*Will they tell her? And if they do, what will she think? Will she be okay?*

I wanted to be near her when she woke up, but Kazimir and Maxwell wouldn't allow it.

*They think they're the only ones who can take care of her.*

Frowning, I unloaded my guns.

I owed a lot to Emily. Never did I think I would ever be able to repay her. And now there was this moment where Emily was in a vulnerable position, and I could help.

*She'll need more than just Kazimir and Maxwell.*

I gazed at all my weapons. Since being at Emily's side, I had been able to generously add to my collection. Now I possessed items that I'd only dreamt about.

Each one had a name.

My mother's family raised me under a strict Christian household. They'd imprinted biblical teachings in my head so much so that I couldn't escape them. Therefore, I'd named many of my guns after women from the Bible.

*Martha* served as my newest addition. I smiled at the ADS assault rifle. It was designed for underwater use and used by Russian special forces. It could fire seven hundred rounds per minute at a range of up to twenty-five meters. The Lion had

hundreds just laying around in the basement. King David simply asked if I wanted one.

In the Bible's Gospels of Luke and John, Martha lived in a village near Jerusalem. She witnessed Jesus resurrecting her brother Lazarus.

While my Martha would witness plenty, none of its victims would be resurrected.

I had two blue guns that I always kept with me—Mary of Magdalene and Jesus's mother Mary.

I picked one of them up, opened the chamber, looked through the barrel from back to front, and then confirmed that no rounds remained inside.

My ex, Adrian had learned the hard lesson about not checking if a gun was unloaded before cleaning it. If I had been there, maybe I might have saved him.

Adrian had removed the magazine, begun cleaning, and accidentally shot himself in the neck. There'd still been a round in the chamber, ready to fire.

The force of the bullet and bone fragments sliced through his carotid artery. He'd bled out quickly and died.

I found him that afternoon. It took forever to get the image of that day out of my mind.

*Now you're watching me, Adrian. What do you think? Am I doing a decent job of my life now?*

I disassembled Mary Magdalene so that I could access what parts might have become dirty from firing yesterday. I stripped Mary into her major components—barrel, slide, guide rod, frame and magazine. Then I wiped each part with a piece of cloth that already had an oily film on it. This would prevent the cloth from scratching any parts.

When Mary was clean and dry, I put her back together again.

Someone knocked.

*Probably Boris.*

I picked up the other Mary. “Come in.”

The door opened.

To my surprise, Maxwell stepped through with a lit joint in one hand and a huge glass vase stuffed with a dozen blue roses. “You don’t lock your door?”

I gestured to my collection of weapons. “I have enough security in here.”

“Good point.” Smirking, Maxwell set the vase of blue roses on my nightstand. “I came in here for two reasons.”

I dipped a cleaning rod in solvent and began cleaning Mary’s barrel. “What are the reasons?”

“Em and Kazimir have been up for a while—”

“Really?” I paused from my gun. “I woke up early to get a head start before them.”

“Never try to beat Em to the base, as soon as you think about it, she’ll get a tinkling in her spine and just materialize there.” Strolling over to me, Max placed the joint between his lips and took in all of the weapons.

*She’s up. Should I go see her? Or will the Lion keep me away from her again?*

As Maxwell continued to peruse my collection, smoke left his nostrils. “Very nice.”

I beamed with pride. “You like my ladies?”

“I like your ladies, so much that my dick is getting hard.”

I scowled.

“But, it is though.” Winking, Maxwell took another hit from his joint. “The Lion wants to meet in an hour to discuss the strategy for Italy. It will be in the conference room. Only the top hitters are invited. Therefore, congratulations. You made the list.”

“I’m glad to be on the top hitters list.” I blew out a long breath. “However, I won’t get everything cleaned and I’m sure I’ll need to use them this week.”

“Facts. But, that’s part of the job when you fuck with Em.”

“What’s that?”

“Never have enough time to do shit.” Maxwell pointed to the rectangular block on the ground. “What’s that shit? A laptop battery or something.”

“That’s Anna. She’s a Magpul FMG-9.”

“What the fuck is that, Blue?”

“A submachine gun.”

“Oh shit.” Maxwell grinned. “And it folds?”

Nodding, I pulled out the cleaning rod from Mary’s barrel. Gunk coated it. I dropped that on the table and grabbed a new cleaning rod, soaked it in solvent, and wiped the barrel again.

“Yo, Blue. Is it heavy?”

“Anna is mostly made of a lightweight polymer rather than metal.”

“Hells yes. I like her, but why did you name her Anna?”

“Anna is from the Bible. She was an elderly woman of the Tribe of Asher who prophesied about Jesus at the Temple of Jerusalem.”

He frowned. “I would ask you more about that, but it would probably bore me.”

I chuckled.

Still, excitement hit his voice. “Blue, can I pick Anna up and dance with her a little bit?”

“Absolutely not. I cleaned her before everything else. She’s still drying.”

“Your boy is trying to take Anna out on a date. Don’t you cock block me too.”

“She’s drying.”

“Damn.” Maxwell sucked his teeth and headed over to the opened balcony doors. “You’re going to let me borrow that shit one day?”

“Or I’ll get you one for your birthday.”

“Alright, Blue.” He flashed that signature smile that I was sure made most women drop their panties. When I first met him, I almost did. The next day, many of the women in Harlem Crew told me about his reputation. He loved to have sex. Once he did, then he moved on to the next woman.

Still, Maxwell watched me with that gorgeous smile. “You love Papi. Don’t you?”

Rolling my eyes, I pulled out the cleaning rod and placed it in the dirty pile.

“Just admit it, Blue.” Maxwell licked his lips.

“You are a good big *brother*.”

“I see how you did that.” Maxwell smoked more of his joint. “By the way, my birthday is tomorrow.”

I paused from cleaning and looked at him. “Is your birthday really tomorrow?”

“In my mind.”

Shaking my head, I grabbed the bore brush. “You’re not dancing with Anna.”

“I never took you to be a cock blocker too.”

I dipped the bore brush in cleaning solution. “What was the second reason you came?”

“Damn, Blue. Why are you rushing me?” He blew smoke in the direction of the balcony. “Since you brought it up, the second reason I came was that...I’m trying to be a better Max.”

“Alright.” I began scrubbing Mary’s barrel with the bore brush.

“So, I came in here to apologize for bullying David and you.” Maxwell held up his hand. “Granted, my barging in was necessary. However, I don’t want to put you two in a bad place with Kazimir and Em again. So, I plan to talk to them about it. I can’t have you two getting in trouble or anything.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Maxwell.”

“But, next time...” He took a hit from his joint. “Don’t let my ass get by. You need to be on your job.”

“The French were pointing guns at us.”

“No excuses, Blue.”

“As far as I know, I am not supposed to shoot the French.”

“Yeah. Don’t shoot them. They’re cool.”

I quirked my brows. “You think the French are cool now?”

“I fuck with them.”

“What changed?”

“A lot.” Maxwell moved the joint from his lips. “Anyway, do you accept my apology. With all these guns around here, I’m not trying to get on your bad side.”

“I accept your apology.” I scrubbed some more. “Is that why you brought me those beautiful blue roses?”

“Naw, baby.” Chuckling, he took a hit of his joint. “I don’t buy flowers for chicks I don’t fuck.”

I stopped scrubbing. “But you brought the vase of blue roses in here.”

“I sure did.”

“Then, who are those roses from?”

“I’m staying out of that.” Maxwell put the joint out on the bottom of his shoe.

“What do you mean you are staying out of it?”

“It wouldn’t be a good idea if I stuck my nose in this shit. Could be a crime of passion thing.”

“What?”

“Look, Blue. Since you’re kind of a little sis to me.” Maxwell tucked the joint in his back pocket. “All I will say is that the vase of roses were at your door, waiting for you to spot and pick them up this morning.”



“They were at my door?” I put the barrel and brush down, wiped my hands with a towel, and headed to the roses. “But, who sent them? Did the person leave a—”

“No card.”

I quirked my brows. “You checked?”

“Of course.” Max shrugged. “Not that I needed to check. I know who they’re from, but I bet you have no idea who sent this. Do you?”

“Well...maybe...”

“You don’t know.” He smirked.

“I have some guesses.”

“Listen, Blue. The word of the day for you is this...”

I widened my eyes.

He held up one finger. “Management.”

“Management?”

“That’s the word. Learn it. Know it. Live it.”

“What does *management* have to do with who sent the roses?”

“Manage these motherfuckers like you’re getting a check.” Maxwell pointed that finger at me. “Because, trust me when I tell you this, your life will depend on it.”

“Manage who?”

“Keep your hoes in line, Blue.”

“I don’t have hoes.”

“Are you trying to play me?” He leaned his head to the side. “Or you really don’t know?”

“I mean I have some...ideas of who could have sent them, but I don’t have *hoes*.”

“Naw. I’ve been gone for a minute, but I’m already hearing shit. Lots of whispering.” Maxwell headed off.

“Wait.”

Maxwell opened the door, stood in the doorway, and turned around. “What?”

“Help me.”

“Your lists of love interests is building, sweetie. My best advice is *management* with a capital M.”

“Which means?”

“What? You all don’t have *game* in Russia?”

“What game?”

He sighed. “Be as truthful as possible with your hoes, keep a gun under your pillow, and wear protection when you fuck any of them.”

“O-kay, but what have you heard?”

“You’re attracting the attention of dangerous motherfuckers.”

“Hold on. First tell me about the roses.”

“I’m not telling you who sent them.”

“Why not?” I widened my eyes. “Maxwell, please help me. I’m your little—”

“Oh, hell no.” He wagged his finger. “I don’t want any parts of this situation. Shit is about to get crazy enough with Em. I need to focus—”

“But, just tell me who you think sent these—”

“Did you hear the part about my wanting no part in this?”

I frowned. “I just don’t see why you can’t give me a little hint.”

“You’ll see why later.”

“When?”

“Management.”

“Max—”

“Keep your hoes in line, Blue.” Winking, he left and closed the door behind him.

*But, who sent them?*

I went over to the table and stood in front of the large bouquet of blue roses. Each stem held a deep indigo bloom with swirls of baby blue and white. The petals shimmered like spun silk, iridescent and beautiful.

They sat in a crystal clear vase, exuding pure elegance. I ran my fingertips along the soft and silky petals.

*Was it King David?*

My body hummed from the possibility. I imagined his strong arms carrying them to my door and placing them on the floor.

*But...I thought he was going to wait until Moscow to romance me.*

Plus, David had been so busy last night. His eyes had been red from no sleep. Every time I turned his way, he talked on the phone, delivering orders here and there.

*I don't know...*

I leaned forward and inhaled the roses' lovely fragrance. They reminded me of an expensive bottle of perfume.

Giorgio's face flashed in my head—gorgeous and chiseled. It was easy to imagine him strolling to my door with his gloved hands holding the vase. I even imagined him bowing ever so elegantly as he placed the vase in front of my door, his face the picture of calm.

*Could it be...Giorgio?*

Regardless of which man sent them, I couldn't lie. My heart soared at the possibilities. Regardless of which one, it had been a long time since a man had given me flowers.

The last person had been Adrian, although he couldn't afford roses, especially dazzling blue ones.

*O-kay.*

I touched the blue cross hanging from my neck and twisted it between my fingers.

*Why didn't the person leave a card? Why make it a little mystery?*

Maybe, my rose deliverer assumed that I would know it was from him. Perhaps, David or Giorgio would take me to the side and confess it.

*I will just have to wait.*

All thoughts of cleaning the weapons left me. Now I had this mystery on my mind, and I was desperate to solve it.

Even more important, I tried to figure out who I really wanted the roses to be from.

Giorgio had aggravated the shit out of me in these past days. If anything, it would be a nice gesture from him. Perhaps, I would stop giving him such a hard time.

*But...if it were Giorgio...he probably would have knocked on the door and demanded a clean pair of panties.*

I crossed my arms over my chest and studied the roses some more as if they could give me a clue.

King David hinted at wanting to romance me. In my mind, roses served as a romantic gesture. One of those phone calls that I saw him focused on, could have been a floral shop.

*But...*

I reached my hand out to the vase and picked up one of the roses.

*Which one of you gave these to me?*





# Chapter 13

## Root Level

### Emily

Upon meeting up with Baba in front of the hotel, she had simply nodded her head and started walking at my side.

This morning, she had her gray hair pulled back into a small ponytail. She wore a simple dress that was light blue with pink flowers.

“See you at the meeting, Em.” Max headed off. “I’ll wake up the rest of Harlem Crew.”

Both quiet, Baba and I stood in front of the elevators. Several of my people surrounded us.

I didn’t mind her silence. My entire world had been turned upside down. So much had occurred I needed a few minutes to piece everything together. Plus, the conversation with Max had ripped at my soul and left me raw and aching.

The elevator doors opened with a soft hiss.

I stepped on.

Baba followed.

When we turned around, she held her hand up to my men. “Take the next one. We need to talk.”

I quirked my brows.

They looked at me.

I nodded, intrigued with where this would be going.

The doors closed.

The elevator rose.

I put my attention on her.

She gave me a sad smile. “How was your walk on the beach?”

“This question is why you wanted privacy?”

“It’s the first sentence to ease into a difficult conversation.”

“Baba, you’ve known me long enough. You and I don’t ease. We get straight to the point.”

She put her view on the elevator doors. “Still, I would love to know how your walk went.”

Sarcasm laced my next words. “It was so fucking awesome.”

“Physical movement eases stress.”

“And what gets rid of another personality? Running? Yoga? Pilates?”

“Those are possible solutions.”

“I doubt that.”

“Emily, we hold our *issues* in our *tissues*.”

I frowned. “Did you mean to rhyme that?”

“Rhyming helps me remember things.” Baba looked back at me. “We are told that psychological issues reside in our head. That it is all a cognitive process. But I disagree.”

“It’s in our body?”

“It is.” She bobbed her head. “All your trauma is stuck in different parts of your body.”

“Fine.” I gazed down at my legs. “Then, how do I get it all out?”

“There’s no quick fix. Healing is possible but it takes time.”

“I don’t have time. I have a baby on the way.”

“Emily, you have too much pain to put a band aid on. You will need to take time to get to the root of your trauma and heal it once and for all.”



“I already know the root.”

She quirked her brows. “Do you?”

“A sick man touched me when I was a kid, and I guess...I used this...personality to protect me.”

Baba pursed her lips and stared back at the door.

“No way.” I glared at her. “We are not going to do any secret bullshit this time.”

She avoided looking my way. “What do you mean?”

“Say what is on your mind?”

“You must get to the root yourself.”

“Baba, for these past days you’ve kept secrets that could have helped us—”

“So, everyone wouldn’t die—”

“Still, it would have been nice—”

“Everyone is alive.” She turned my way. “We are now in the best *timeline*. I would like it to remain that way.”

“And did you see *Lunita* in this timeline?”

“I did.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “You did?”

“Yes.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it, and faced the doors.  
“And?”

“Now you and I must spend more time together without your men.”

“More time together?”

“I am going to help you as much as I can.”

“Why without my men?”

“They are already extremely afraid of you. We do not need them to be more terrified.”

“You’re not afraid of me?”

“Why would I be?” She gave me another sad smile. “Also, you must be careful of the Butcher.”

“How?”

“Some of your men are now his.”

“He has spies among our people?”

“He does.”

Anger hit me.

“However, his actions are not to ruin relations between you two. The spies are just monitoring your behavior.”

If Kazimir finds out, then the Butcher and these men are dead.

Baba continued, “Jean-Pierre is simply trying to protect his unborn daughter.”

“*My* goddaughter.”

“He is wondering if your being her godmother is still a possibility.”

“He doesn’t have a choice. He promised.”

“That’s not the way the world works, Emily.”

*We’ll see about that.*

“However, we will work together to make sure that the Butcher and no one else will have anything to fear where you are concerned.”

I let out a long breath. “So...you’re going to get rid of the personality for me?”

“I can help you heal a few layers, but my assistance won’t solve your trauma on a root level.”

All hope left me. “What will?”

“Fully getting your body and nervous system into the process.”

I held out my hands. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“That makes sense. Why would you? Still, this is what you will need to do. It will be a journey, Emily.”

The elevator doors opened.

Several men stood on the floor, waiting for us. My people must have called them.

Baba and I stepped off the elevator.

She headed in the opposite direction of the presidential suite.

The men followed.

I eyed her. “Why are you going this way? Did you move Paolo?”

“That little one was up all night screaming your name.”

My heart broke.

“He didn’t go to sleep until three in the morning.” Baba checked her watch. “He will be asleep for a few more hours.”

I slowed my pace. “Then, why are we—”

“I needed to get you away from Kazimir and your men.” She continued forward.

“Why?”

She stopped at her suite’s door. “It’s time for your reading.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I don’t like your readings.”

“In the elevator, you complained that I did not tell you everything. Now you do not want to hear anything.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

She opened the door for me.

I entered.

My men remained in the hallway.

I shut the door behind us and gazed at the small room.

When we arrived at this hotel, Kazimir made sure Baba's suite was near King David. Also, she was the only person to get an extra bedroom to use as an office.

A black desk sat in the office. A deck of playing cards lay in the center.

Tons of lit candles filled the space. Some were on the bookshelf. Others were on the edges of her desk. Most looked like they'd been burning for several hours. In the jars, melted wax pooled around the flames.

I walked over to the desk. "This could be considered a fire hazard."

"I would know when the fire was going to happen." Baba walked around the desk and lowered into her chair.

"Good point." I sat down.

She gestured to the cards. "Shuffle them."

"No, tarot cards this time?"

"The tarot cards never came for you, so we must work with the cards that picked you."

I picked them up and shuffled. Once I finished, I lay them close to her.

Baba didn't touch them. "Pick one."

My nerves flared.

"Go ahead, Emily."

I rubbed my hands together and then reached for the deck. Back in Moscow when Baba did my reading, I picked from the bottom of the deck. During that reading, I had learned a lot. Kaz and I were the King and Queen of hearts. Baba also explained that I was having a boy that would be the King of Hearts while my lost daughter would be the Queen of Diamonds.

*What will she say now?*

This time, I chose the first card and placed it on the side of the deck.

Baba stared at it. “This will represent Kazimir to you. Let’s see if he has changed his card.”

I flipped it over. “The King of Hearts.”

“He is still very much in love with his mouse.” I bit my lip.

Kazimir saw the monster within me and didn’t walk away. Due to that, I would always stand by his side and love him with all my heart.

“Pick the next card.” Baba put her attention on the deck. “Are you still the Queen of Hearts?”

Swallowing, I pulled from the center of the deck and flipped it over. A shiver ran through me when I saw it.

Baba nodded. “Queen of Spades.”

My voice grew hoarse. “We don’t match anymore.”

Baba looked at me. “Do you think that matters?”

“I liked it when we were both King and Queen of Hearts.”

“Now, your dark side has been revealed, but do you think the Lion cares?”

“No.”

“Then, do not worry about matching.” She picked up the cards and shuffled them. “Now we check your present and future.”

Terror filled me.

She lay the deck on the desk and spread them out into a fan. “Pick seven cards.”

“Anywhere I want?”

“Anywhere.”

I grabbed two on the left, three in the center, and two on the right. Then, I put all seven close to her.

Baba pushed the rest of the cards to the side. Then, she moved her attention to the seven cards.

It might have been my imagination, but she looked just as nervous as me to turn the cards over.

As if stalling, she pulled out her drawer and took out a stick that had some sort of odd jewel on the end. “O-kay.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Who or what will keep you safe?”

I widened my eyes. “Because...I’m in danger?”

She held the stick in mid-air. “Are we not still in a war?”

“Fair point.” I gazed back at the cards.

“Who or what will keep Emily safe?” She flipped over the first card.

The Joker stared back at us, wearing a green jester cap that made his head look like an upside-down teakettle. He actually looked to be holding a cigar. Smoke rose around him while a huge grin covered his face.

I leaned back. “Max.”

“Correct.” She tapped the jeweled stick against the card. “Keep him as close to you as possible. Listen to him. Love him. Touch him.”

I fisted my hands in my lap. “Touch him?”

“Our bodies remember what our minds can’t. Through touch our thoughts and memories remain stagnate within our flesh. Through touch they can rise up.”

“Listen.” I shook my head. “We don’t touch.”

“If you do not release the trauma from your body, it will remain locked in your flesh. Pain has no concept of time and space.”

“But...”

“Emily.” She set the jeweled stick down. “I am not telling you to be intimate with Maxwell. However, the gentle squeeze of a hand could do so much.”

I trembled.

“Our bodies can communicate to each other more words and healing than our mouths ever could.” She said as she studied me.

I remained silent.

Sighing, she picked the stick up. “Let’s see what the next card says. Who or what else will keep the baby and you safe?”

The King of Hearts showed up again.

The first time she did a reading, it shocked me to see repeated cards. Now I knew that anything was possible with Baba’s deck.

“While the Lion may be a living nightmare to the world, for you he is your strength and loving foundation.”

I swallowed. “He is.”

“Then, I do not have to tell you to keep him close.”

“Not at all.”

She turned the other card over. “King of Diamonds.”

“Jean-Pierre.”

“It seems that the Butcher may be nervous about your dark side, but will still remain loyal.” She turned the next one over. “Ace of Hearts.”

I thought back to the last reading. “That’s Boris.”

“It is. Your bonds to these men are stronger than ever. They will see you through victory against any enemies.” She put the four cards to the side and touched the final three. “But, what is your future?”

My heart beat fast.

She turned the first card over. “Two of Spades.”

Fear surged through me. “Last time you said that low numbers represent danger.”

She nodded and didn’t look at me. “This means death, blood, and danger.”

“Could it be...a metaphor?”

She slowly shook her head. “This is death.”

“Who’s death?”

“No one in particular.”

“Baba, I need more than that.”

“Honestly, Emily, all I have heard is the word, *war* around these halls. Death comes from war. I am not completely surprised that this card came up.”

“So...this is good?”

“Not at all.”

I let out a long breath.

“Are you ready for the next card?”

I whispered, “Barely.”

She flipped the second one over.

Another Two of Spades stared back at me.

My breath lodged in my throat.

Baba twisted the jeweled stick in her hand. “Apparently, lots of death will come.”

“But, why is it double cards?”

“Death is coming soon.”

“How soon?”

“Very.”

“Baba, I need more.”

“I am not a GPS or clock, Emily.”

“But, you can help me out.”

Baba’s other hand gripped the edge of the desk, telling me that she did have a good idea.

“Come on.” I gritted my teeth.

“Death will come today. Lots of it.”

My voice cracked. “Today?”

Baba nodded. “Are you ready for the final card?”

“I don’t know.”



“We don’t have to flip it over.”

“Oh, I think it’s too late for that. You already fucked up my day even more with the other two.”

“These are your cards, Emily. I have nothing to do with it.”

“Still, you need to start flipping over nicer things.”

That sad smile spread across Baba’s face. “One day all of your cards will be filled with diamonds and hearts.”

I twisted my fingers in my lap. “You believe that?”

“I do.” She nodded. “I see beautiful days ahead of you.”

“But now...you see war and death?”

The sorrowful smile disappeared. “Lots of it.”

I directed my view back to the last card. “Okay. Let’s see.”

She flipped that over.

My heart dropped.

Another Two of Spades looked back at me.

“Oh, come on.” I bit my lip.

“The time to act is this morning.” Baba touched the card with the jeweled stick. “Not this afternoon. Not tonight. Your enemies are coming, and it won’t be to talk.”

“Kaz and I are holding a meeting to get the troops together and figure a strategy out.”

“Do so, and do it fast.” She set the stick down and rose. “I will be packing my things.”

“We are leaving?”

“A vision came to me, while I read your cards.”

I stood. “What was it?”

Worry covered her face. “It appears your lion has big plans, and he’s already putting them in place.”

“Are these good or bad plans?”

“That’s not an easy answer when it comes to the Lion.”  
She pointed her stick at the door. “If I were you, I would hurry  
to that meeting.”

“Fuck.”





# Chapter 14

## Everyone

### Emily

I ran back to my suite with my men, but the conference room was deserted.

Next, I raced upstairs.

Blue stood by Paolo's door like an obedient soldier. She kept her hands to her side. Both of them held a blue gun.

Four other guys guarded the space.

I slowed my pace, unsure of how much she knew. Instantly, I wished I had asked Kaz and Max more questions about last night.

The news of another personality had taken precedence over the smaller details like... how many people fucking knew I was that crazy?

*What if they all know? Will they treat me differently?*

Swallowing down my worry, I continued her way and drank in this woman that I enjoyed keeping at my side.

Today, Blue had dressed for business, wearing a tailored black suit, black tie, and white shirt that fit her slim figure perfectly. Simple, yet elegant.

The sides of her head were freshly shaved. The long blue strands in the center were twisted into a tight bun on the crown.

Her black high heels were expensive, spiked, and deadly.

But her face was what captured my attention. She actually wore make up today. Cherry blossom red painted her lips. She'd brushed up and tweezed those brows, making them smooth and almond shaped.

*Alright, Blue. Looking good.*

When I came close, her rosy perfume hit me.

*I need to get out of this damned robe and gown and match her energy.*

Blue spoke, yet kept her view forward. “Good morning, Emily.”

I stopped in front of her. “You’re looking gorgeous this morning.”

She blushed. “Thank you.”

“How did you dress so quickly after Max woke you up?”

She didn’t look my way. “I was already up, when Max came by.”

*Already up? Did anybody get rest last night?*

“But, did you get any sleep?”

“Not much.”

“Why not?”

She turned her view to me. “I was worried about you.”

*Fuck. She knows. Who else?*

“I…” Blue stirred and moved her view from me. “I wanted to be near, when you woke up, but Kazimir and Maxwell forced everyone to head to their rooms. They pretty much threatened violence.”

“Everyone?”

“Boris, Harlem Crew, some of the French—”

“How many people know I’m fucking crazy?”

Her jaw twitched.

My stomach twisted. “Let me make this clear, Blue. Max is back, but you’re still my number one.”

She blinked. “I wondered about my position, now that he has returned.”

“Max is so high he has no position or rank, so never wonder about where you fit.”

“So...Max is on the level of the Lion?”

“When it comes to me, yes.” I grinned. “Just don’t tell Kaz that.”

Blue nodded.

“After that brawl with the Mancusos and Black Axe, it is clear you have Kaz’s and my back. I want you to stay at my side, as long as you can. You always have the option to leave.”

Doubt covered her face.

“I trust you.” I leaned her way and kept my voice low. “Who else knows that...I have a *dark* side?”

She let out a long breath. “The whole building has been talking about last night. Harlem Crew. The Brotherhood. The French. I even overhead some of the hotel’s cleaning staff walking by my room in the middle of the night.”

“Even, the hotel staff?”

“They had to help Harlem Crew mop up a lot of the blood and get rid of the piles of body parts.”

I shrieked. “Harlem Crew cleaned up?”

“Max made them.”

“Well, I’ll be talking to him about that.” I gritted my teeth and wanted to know more, but had to take my time. It seemed like the more information I received, the harder it was to swallow and take it all in.

*Fuck it. They all know. Nothing I can do about it now.*

I eyed her. “What made you go to Paolo’s room?”

“When I arrived at the conference, I didn’t see anyone. I checked your bedroom. No one is in there either.”

“Not Kaz?”

“I checked with King David. The Lion had an idea and organized several of the Brotherhood to clear the staff and any civilians.”

*What are you planning, Kaz?*

Blue continued, “My understanding was that they all met in the lobby. Clothes were brought to Kazimir. King David says they will be in the conference room in thirty minutes.” She gestured to the door. “So, I figured once you saw no one was in the conference room, your next stop would be Paolo’s room.”

“Good guess.” I gently turned the knob of the door and pushed it open just a crack so that I could peek at Paolo.

Fast asleep, he lay on his back in the center of the huge bed. His hands twitched at his sides.

Most of his braids had loosened on one side of his head. I would have to redo them.

Blankets covered him up to his neck. His long lashes fluttered. Little raspy snores left his open mouth.

*I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you last night, Paolo. But tonight, I will be.*

I took my time shutting the door and perused the men guarding him. They all belonged to Kazimir. “Where’s the two Harlem Crew people I had on Paolo—Angelina and Gleb?”

Blue arched her brows. “I don’t know. I can get new people here fast.”

“You stay by the door, and have Boris get the new people. After the conference meeting, find out where Angelina and Gleb went and why. Paolo must be their top priority.”

Blue pulled out her phone. “Okay.”

“I’m getting dressed. I’ll be back out soon.” I headed off.

My men followed.

Blue turned to the side and spoke fast Russian into the phone.

*Why would Angelina and Gleb leave? I told them Paolo was important, and our enemies were closing in.*

While I didn’t violently rule men like Kaz, I would kill a motherfucker over being irresponsible with Paolo. In fact, I would tear them apart with my bare hands.



Being held hostage by Black Axe for months and losing his parents, the poor little boy had been through so much. No one else could harm him.

I entered the master suite and went straight to the closet.

*They all know about Lunita.*

Embarrassment rose through me, setting off alarms in my nervous system. I felt so damn ashamed and oddly psychotic that I wanted to hide my head in a hole in the ground.

But, I wouldn't.

I opened the massive closet. The dark walnut floors shined like a mirror reflecting lights. The scent of lemon and bleach let me know the cleaning staff had been in here earlier this morning.

I took one step in, and the lights came on.

*X would say, 'Rock up. A Black girl in this world, don't have time to file complaints.'*

Still, I drowned in shame, so much that it almost choked me. I could actually taste the shame in my mouth. And it was cold like metal with a sour aftertaste of guilt.

*What should I do, X?*

I twisted my fingers in front of me and perused the space. My gaze traveled along the cabinets and racks full of the enormous ocean of clothes, shoes, and purses.

*What should I wear?*

It would have been nice to be able to put on a mask and hide in the back of the conference room.

Even something black and simple could perhaps help me blend in. But the problem was, I would be standing by Kazimir, and no one blended in next to him. His terrifyingly powerful presence always made him stand out.

*Maybe...I could put on white...if they're afraid of me? Are they scared of me?*

Jean-Pierre put spies in my crew. If a psycho like the Butcher was nervous, surely everyone else was terrified.

*And...I'll have to tell Kaz about JP's actions.*

I sighed.

*No secrets.*

Walking further into the winding labyrinth of racks, I reached out and ran my hands over some of the clothes. Silk, leather, and more silk ran past my fingertips. Then, my view fell on the shelves of wigs.

*X would say... 'Em, show them who the fuck you are! And you better make it memorable.'*

My eyes watered.

Why did you have to die, X? I still need you.

My heart ached.

I walked over to the wig that I had named Danielle. Short, brunette, and wavy.

*No. Too nice and summery.*

I checked a few others and then stopped at a long black wig. The long silky strands would fall past my shoulders and brush the tops of my chest. There were also perfect bangs.

*Lavinia. Of course it would be you.*

This wig had come in right before we left Moscow. At \$25,000, it was by far the most expensive one I had bought. They called it *Remy* hair.

The strands had been carefully cut from someone's head, collected, and sorted with the root and tip traveling in the same direction to ensure the cuticle did not tangle or matte.

Then, workers dunked the hair in tubs of chemicals to strip the cuticles. After that, it was combed out and coated with silicone for a faux-glossy shine.

Remy hair was more expensive and looked more natural due to the tedious process of not damaging the cuticles.

I picked up Lavinia and thought about the moment I had pulled her out of the box in Moscow.

*Max had tried to touch it.*

*I yanked the wig away. "Keep your dirty hands away from this hair."*

*"That shit looks sexy as hell. You must be trying to get double pregnant."*

*I ran my fingers through the black strands. "I'm already pregnant enough."*

*"What are you going to name her?"*

*"I don't know."*

*"Should be Bridgette."*

*"Why?"*

*"Wear that wig with some red heels and nothing else and you can get anything you want from the Russian."*

*I grinned. "I'm thinking about calling her Lavinia."*

*"Oh, come on. Not that name again."*

*"I've been waiting for the perfect wig. I think it will fit."*

*"I don't even know why you're so into that fucking terrifying horror fact."*

*"It's interesting. Plus, doesn't this wig look like it belongs to a bad ass killer bitch?"*

*"My vote is still for Bridgette and those red heels."*

I returned to the present and picked the wig up.

*Yep. It makes sense to wear you today.*

Lavinia Fisher was the first female serial killer in American history. She owned an inn outside of Charleston, South Carolina, named Six Mile Wayfarer House. It was a mysterious house full of hidden passages and special mechanisms throughout the place. One example was that there was latch that could trigger a room's floorboards to open beneath a guest's bed and drop them in the basement.

Many claimed Lavinia was a breathtaking woman with a captivating personality.

When male guests arrived at the inn and stayed, Lavinia flirted, charmed, and chatted with them about their travels. During dinner, she poisoned them with oleander tea.

The guests then went to their rooms. Later, she triggered the floor to open. The guest fell through. Her husband, John Fisher would beat them to death, and she would steal their valuables.

She murdered hundreds of travelers before her arrest and execution in 1820.

And the only way she had been discovered, was due to a male traveler named David Ross.

David hated tea, but didn't want to be rude. When Lavinia looked away, he poured the tea on the floor.

After dinner, she showed him to his room.

For some reason, David's intuition kicked in.

He wondered why she had asked him so many questions about his money. Plus, he felt uncomfortable with how her husband had been staring at him all evening?

Something told him to sit in the chair by the door, instead of the bed. Then, the floorboards opened. The bed dropped.

David Ross got his ass out of that room fast and ran to the police.

Authorities returned, searched the house, and discovered hundreds of human remains in the basement. Next, they arrested John and Lavinia Fisher.

Max hated the whole story.

I got it.

Surely, Lavinia wasn't a nice woman.

But why not? What had happened to her when she was a little girl?

I spent months and months researching her life. No details about her family or childhood existed.

I figured she must have changed her name and arrived in Charleston with her own story about her life.

I gazed at the wig.

*Someone hurt you bad, Lavinia.*

This was the wig I would wear. I'd killed just like Lavinia, and this *Lunita* did too. While I thought I murdered bad people and charged most of my deaths to the criminal game, I still took lives.

And...*Lunita* was part of me too.

Perhaps, I should get to know her.





# Chapter 15

## The Meeting

### Kazimir

In the conference room, eight men stood around me with their arms full of garments—pants, shirts, ties, coats, and belts. Five more stood behind them holding shoes. They all had been following me around the hotel for the past hour, carrying their designated items.

So far I'd put on black pants and a black shirt. Both fit snug, not hiding an inch of muscle.

I buttoned up my shirt.

*The plan will work.*

My men placed leather chairs around the long conference table, speaking in hushed tones. Fear lined their faces.

Due to being on David's shit list, Wassily wiped the table's surface with a soft cloth, probably making sure that no smudge or speck of dirt would exist.

Others set glasses and pitchers of juice and tumblers of water on a small table across the room.

More carried in pots of steaming hot tea and coffee.

*Where is she? What did Maxwell and her talk about? Is she okay after it?*

Pressure built in my chest.

Two women from Harlem Crew held trays. Different sugars and creams with tons of tiny spoons sat on one tray. Cookies, brownies, and tiny sandwiches cut into triangles rested on the other.

Stress lingered in the air mingling with the aroma of coffee.



Two men carried a massive flat screen into the room. It must have been at least six feet wide and long. They placed it against the wall and plugged it in.

David saw me watching them in confusion. “I thought Misha should attend.”

I nodded and returned to my Garment Bearers.

Dishes clinked all around me. The low hum of whispers bounced off the walls and hit my ears. And my head throbbed in annoyance.

*Where the hell is everybody?!*

My lack of sleep was kicking in, making me grumpy.

I longed for the peace of my warm bed. I imagined my mouse naked and lying next to me. Her brown skin shimmering in the light of a perfect full moon. Her long hair spread across the pillow, begging me to twirl it around my fingers.

Disrupting my thoughts, three men brought in a platter of croissants and various jars of jellies, loudly chuckling about something.

“That’s enough!” I growled. “Are we having a tea party?!”

The men froze in the center of the room, still holding the platters.

David gestured for them to leave and then turned to Wassily. “Get the Lion a large cup of coffee.”

He hurried to the small table across from us.

I finished buttoning my shirt and gazed at the guys holding hangers of jackets. “Get over here.”

They came closer and raised the jackets higher in the air as if that were going to help me pick better.

Ten men rushed in.

Frowning, I put my attention on them. “Are you done evacuating?”

One nodded.

“Put the bombs in place.”

They hurried away.

I glared back at the men holding jackets. “Where are the ties?”

Two men bumped into the others and spread out their arms. All types of ties dangled from their hangers—various patterns and colors.

One of the tie holders interrupted my thought process. “I think...”

Scowling, I looked at him.

David turned his way.

Mr. Tie Holder cleared his throat and gave me an awkward smile. “I think the blue tie would go well with the black shirt and pants.”

I pictured myself taking the blue tie off the hanger, wrapping it tightly around his throat, and strangling the life out of him. In my mind, his eyes bulged. His pale flesh shifted to red as he lost consciousness.

Surely, the emotion registered on my face because he stepped back and widened his eyes.

“Perhaps, there’s no need for a tie this morning.” David motioned for him to leave.

He raced out so fast a few ties fell to the ground. Another rushed to pick them up.

I went back to the jackets.

David watched me. “Are you sure about this?”

I grabbed a black jacket and put it on. “Nothing is certain in war, but it’s a good Plan B.”

Wassily brought over a cup of coffee and handed it to me.

Nodding, I took it. The black liquid swirled with cream. A small line of steam rose carrying a rich vanilla aroma.

Wassily left.

David looked at me. “Many could die from Plan B.”

“That’s the point.” I brought the cup to my mouth and took a sip. The coffee had a strong bite. Heat and bitterness spread across my tongue and ended with a sugary vanilla flavor.

*This will do for now.*

I headed away several feet to the large window behind the table.

The men holding my garments followed and surrounded me. Most kept the hangers in the air, creating a wall of fabric around me.

Groaning, I took another sip. “David.”

He got to my side. “Yes.”

“If you do not get rid of them, I will throw all of them out of the window.”

David smirked. “The Lion is dressed. You can go.”

They rushed away.

David faced the window. “Should I get you a larger cup of coffee?”

“What I need is my mouse.”

“Blue just messaged and said that they are on their way.”

“Why am I just hearing about this now?”

“Because I just heard about it.”

I clenched my jaw and gazed out the window.

The bright sun beat down on the white sands. Birds flew in the clear blue morning sky. The ocean waved and rippled with the wind.

I brought the cup to my mouth and took a large gulp of coffee.

Behind me, I heard two or three leather chairs scrape against the table, followed by the soft sound of distant footsteps moving away.

David spoke, “As your number one, I should remind you that the last time you involved a bomb into a plan, Emily threatened the other men and me in the room with violence, and then left you.”

“This time is different.”

“It is?”

“I evacuated—”

“We evacuated last time.”

Turning, I glared at him. “And now, this is a war.”

Jean-Pierre’s voice sounded behind me. “I would like a chamomile tea with a hint of brown sugar.”

I turned. “Get him a coffee.”

Wassily had been taking Jean-Pierre’s order. Fast, Wassily put the teacup down and grabbed a mug.

*What the hell do they have on?*

On the other side of the table, the Perfumed Pansies stood across from me, decked out in over exaggerated elegance and clearly heading to someone’s ball. They wore tailored pinstriped suits with tailcoats and gold buttons down the front. The extravagance continued with bright blue silk ties, sparkling diamond tie pins, and polished shoes, reflecting the bright lights in the room.

They looked like an antique band about to play for a royal circus.

I was actually shocked they didn’t have on diamond brooches shaped in flowers or peacocks, pinned to their lapels.

Jean-Pierre wore a bored expression. “I prefer tea.”

Unsure of what to do next, Wassily faced us and held the mug in mid-air.

Frowning, I took a sip. “I never trust a man that doesn’t drink coffee.”

Jean-Pierre pulled out a chair. “And I don’t trust anyone that thinks it makes a difference, between whether a man

should drink tea or coffee.”

I shrugged. “Drink what you want, Jean-Pierre.”

Wassily looked at Jean-Pierre.

“Tea.” The Pansy tipped an imaginary hat and lowered in his chair.

Giorgio sat on his left.

Louis on his right.

A couple of the French positioned themselves close to them at the table. The rest of the French backed up and remained against the walls with some of my men.

Apparently still unsure of what to do, Wassily put his view on me.

“Get Jean-Pierre what he wants, just be quick.” I took another large gulp and swallowed. “We don’t want Jean-Pierre to be late for the ball and miss his Prince Charming.”

Some of my men snickered.

“Hmmm.” Jean-Pierre checked his Patek Philippe watch, dotted in diamonds, garnered in rose gold, and finished with a sapphire crystal case. “Take your time, Wassily. It’s nowhere close to midnight.”

Suspicion crept in. “When did Wassily tell you his name?”

Jean-Pierre leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands over his lap. “I never need introductions when it comes to your men.”

“But you do need a reason for why you know their names.”

“Should I not? Besides, I believe you have bigger problems to deal with.” Jean-Pierre scanned the space. “Where *is* Emily?”

I slammed the cup on the table. “Emily is not your concern.”

Jean-Pierre smiled. “Yet, friendships require many things—concern, care, love—”

“Respect.”

“I have always had a healthy respect for Emily.”

Maxwell barged in with a joint tucked behind his ear. “You all didn’t start without the King, right?”

Everyone turned his way.

Ten Harlem Crew soldiers followed him inside.

Maxwell headed over to the small table near Wassily. “Yo, where are the croissants? I specifically requested warm croissants and strawberry jam.”

David spoke, “I will have a plate of croissants brought to you during the meeting—”

“Hell no.” Chuckling, Maxwell sat at the end of the table. “And have the fucking Butler try to shoot me because I didn’t wash my hands. I’m good. I’ll eat my croissants after the meeting.”

The flat screen came on without anyone touching it. Misha’s face greeted us. The view distorted a little and then came into clear focus.

He sat in a dark room. A few people walked around behind him, telling me that he must have been in his techno lair among his team of hackers.

Misha placed a headset with a microphone on and then appeared to be typing onto something in front of him. “Cousin, can you see me?”

“Yes.” I walked to the edge of the table. “How did you turn the television on?”

“Even if I took the time to explain it to you, Kazimir, you wouldn’t understand it.”

I glared.

Misha leaned forward and squinted. “Maxwell, are you wearing our suit?”

“Yeah, man.” Maxwell waved. “I figured this was a good time to bring it out—”

“*Our* suit?” I eyed Maxwell.

“It’s a long story, man.”

“Misha thinks Maxwell is a doll.” Valentina arrived with several of her people. They sat near Emily and my seat.

In unison, the French turned to her.

Giggling, she waved at them as if she were on a dating show. “I forgot the French would be here.”

I doubted that.

Usually, when Valentina and I battled against our enemies, she came to our meeting with black jeans, boots, and a black shirt. Her hair would be pulled up in a ponytail. Not an earring or other form of jewelry would be on her.

This morning, Valentina wore full make up. Her blonde hair was elegantly styled and artfully highlighted. I happened to know that she hated the color blue, yet a bright sapphire blue dress hugged her frame. A diamond necklace dangled from her neck. Diamond hoops decorated her ears. Her bright red nails were freshly painted.

She winked at them. “How are you enjoying Italy?”

Before they could answer, my mouse entered, and I no longer knew if the French spoke to my sister or not.

It was only her.

She captured every part of my attention.

My cock jumped in my pants.

Surely, the rest of the room shifted their focus to her too.

Long black shiny strands outlined Emily’s face. A bang stopped right above her finely arched brows.

*Is this a wig? Whatever it is, I’m pulling it off when I fuck her.*

Her blood red lips matched the red suit formed around her curvy body. While the suit boasted a classic cut, she wore a sheer black bodysuit instead of a shirt, showing off her full cleavage.

The effect exuded a cool, sexy edge. It was the perfect balance of sensually feminine and dangerously strong.

I swallowed hard.

Like a murderous lioness on the hunt, she prowled forward, boldly swaying those hips.

*Is that right, mysh? You want to get fucked on the conference table?*

I slipped my gaze down her lovely body and stopped at those heels. The shoes made her legs look longer. The heels had to be over six inches and so red, they could have been dipped in blood.

I licked my lips.

There was no more need for caffeine. My entire body came alive.

When she got to my side, I captured her waist, pulled her close to me, and brushed my lips against her ear. “I am canceling this meeting.”

She whispered back, “You are not—”

“You knew what you were doing when you wore this—”

“Kazimir, this was to show—”

“That you wanted to bounce on my cock.”

She leaned away and raised her eyebrows. “Focus.”

The line of my jaw twitched.

She kept her voice low. “Are you going to focus?”

“Is this a wig?”

“It is.”

A wicked grin spread across my face.

“You will not touch her.” Emily tried to leave my hold.

I wouldn’t loosen my grip on her. “What’s her name?”

“Lavinia. Now let me go so we can sit down and start.”

“You will be sitting on my lap.”



“I will not.”

“*Mysh*, I promise you that your ass will be directly on my cock for the duration of this meeting.”

“Eh, man!” Maxwell clapped his hands. “Shit is real right now. Are we going to fight or have an orgy?”

Somehow, Emily slipped away. “We are beginning.”

I watched her walk away.

She cleared her throat and sat right across from Jean-Pierre.

It was in that moment when I realized Boris and Blue had been near her the whole time.

*Did Boris walk in with her?*

I didn’t like the idea of him being so close to her when she was looking so goddamn irresistible.

I headed over.

Blue got on Emily’s right, facing Giorgio. Boris sat down near Valentina.

I lowered into my seat.

Louis was positioned in front of me.

Jean-Pierre studied Emily. “How are you this morning?”

My mouse gritted her teeth. “I’m fine.”

“Even with the big news of last night?”

I wanted to jump in, but Emily had worn the outfit and prowled into the space. For me to defend her so early, would be to suggest that she was weak.

Still, I imagined torturing the Butcher in my head.

Under the table, Emily placed her hand on my lap. It shivered against my thigh.

*Oh, mysh.*

I held her hand and squeezed.

Emily stared back Jean-Pierre. “Have you put spies among my people?”

Rage rose within me. “Excuse me?”

Jean-Pierre’s expression never cracked or faltered. “Define spies.”

Emily leaned forward. “Define an ass whipping.”

“I would say that it involves something hitting an ass.”

She let go of my hand. “And I would say that flipping any of my people to your side is a fast way to die.”

I glared. “Point the people out.”

“They are not spies.” Jean-Pierre frowned. “I wanted your men to understand that if you are not yourself, they are to contact me.”

I rose, planted my palms on the table, and leaned forward. “Point them out.”





# Chapter 16

## The Dick Measuring Contest

### Emily

Kazimir towered over everyone. His gaze flashed dangerously at the French. The muscles in his arms flexed and bulged against his black shirt.

J.P.'s face was a mask of blank politeness. He tilted his head slightly to the side.

The air around them grew thick with unspoken tension.

Silence filled the space between them.

But, what I noticed the most was that I could no longer see J.P.'s hands. I couldn't see Giorgio's or Louis's hands either.

If I were them—in a room and surrounded by my enemies—I would definitely have a gun pointed under the table.

*They better not...*

I leaned back, checked under the table, and spotted the guns in all three of the French's hands.

J.P.'s gaze shifted to my way.

Kaz growled. "How many are on me, *mysh*?"

"Six guns." I sneered. "Put them away."

J.P. made no move. "Perhaps, we should start over."

Kaz didn't back down. "Who did you talk to?"

Max cleared his throat. "Can I enter this heated conversation and shed some light?"

"After the French take their guns off Kaz." Fury surged in my veins. "Now."

J.P. adjusted his position. Then, nodded at his cousins. They moved their arms.

I checked under the table and confirmed that the French actually put their guns up.

However, Kaz remained right where he was, curled his lips into an evil smile, and revealed his sharp teeth.

Sitting on Kaz's other side, David gestured at Wassily. "Get their weapons."

J.P. frowned. "That's unnecessary."

David's expression turned stern. "Your pulling them out was unnecessary."

J.P. pointed at Kaz. "Yet, the Lion continues to stand over us like he is seconds from leaping over the table and choking me."

Kaz's showed more of his teeth. "You are really good at reading body language."

"I am even better at defending myself."

Max stood. "So, let's get this over with really quick."

Everyone turned to him, except Kaz. My crazy lion continued to glare at Jean-Pierre.

Max rubbed his hands which told me he was nervous. "So...it sounds like a bitch move on Jean-Pierre's part. I get it."

I raised my eyebrows.

Jean-Pierre's face twisted in annoyance.

Max shrugged. "However, I told Jean-Pierre that he could connect with a few people in Harlem Crew. Then, I gave him the ones that I trusted the most."

*What the hell?*

More rage radiated from Kaz. "Give me their names."

"Hell to the no, man. From now on, all Harlem Crew matters will only be handled by Em and me."

J.P. looked at me. "I wanted your people to let me know if Lunita showed up. My plan is solely to help."

I froze in uncertainty.

Embarrassment washed over me.

However, Baba's cards flashed in my head too—the Joker, King of Diamonds, and Ace of Hearts.

"Help?" Kaz vibrated with rage. "You attempted to flip her people in the midst of war—"

“We are allies.” J.P. moved his view to Kaz. “While this appears disloyal, it is—”

“Treason.” Kaz gripped the edge of the table. “Max, I want the list of names.”

Max sat back down. “I’m not giving your ass shit.”

All of those Two of Spades hit my mind.

Kaz continued, “Next, I expect the pansies to be on the next plane out of here because if I see them, I plan to get my rocket launcher and —”

“Kaz.” I placed my hand over his, rose, and whispered in his ear, “I agree with Max. Him and I will handle this further.”

*“Mysh?”*

“Can we discuss this later?”

He gritted his teeth. “You should clean house immediately.”

“We don’t have time for that.”

“There’s always time for death.”

“But, we have others to kill.” I squeezed his hand. “Please, sit down.”

“We will discuss this later.” Frowning, Kaz lowered back into his seat.

Everyone turned to me, hopefully because I was the only one standing and no other reason. Regardless, I didn’t like their attention.

I sat down.

A deep voice sounded by the wall. “Interesting.”

I looked and realized Misha was on a television screen, watching us.

*What the fuck?*

All types of colored flashing buttons and lights came from the dark walls surrounding him. Plus, he had this odd head set on. I instantly felt like we were all in a science fiction movie and Misha was the ominous captain in the spaceship’s control room.

His gaze remained on Kaz and me as if he were in the middle of typing mental notes in his head.

Wassily gathered weapons from J.P. and then Louis. When he stopped at Giorgio, he shook his head. “I do not let just anybody

touch my guns.”

Now it was time for David to rise. “You will today.”

With blue gloved hands, Giorgio placed two blue guns on the table. They were Colt M1911. G10 grip panels with diamonds fitted to their handles. The brilliant blue titanium shimmered in the room’s lighting.

They were pieces of art.

*Ummm...*

I hadn’t realized they were that color when I checked under the table. I had been so worried for Kaz and needing to make sure the French didn’t pull their triggers.

David frowned. “Nice guns.”

“Blue will hold them.” Giorgio pushed them across the table.

*O-kay...*

Damn near shoving Kaz out of the way, David reached over him and grabbed the guns. “Blue has her own duties.”

Shocked, Kaz backed his seat up to give David more room.

Giorgio grimaced. “I have seen where you put your dirty hands, *King* David, I expect them to be fully cleaned before they are handed back to me or—”

“You can expect all you want.”

Giorgio pointed at him. “If they are not cleaned—”

“Keep your threats to yourself, Butler.” David growled. “You do not want to dance with me. If I remember correctly, you did not appreciate the way I spun you around Paris.”

“I remember differently.”

“Do you?”

“I remember knocking off your crown several times.” Giorgio looked around. “In fact, I see you still have not found it, yet you call yourself king.”

Louis snickered.

“I don’t call myself king, my men do.” David handed the guns to Wassily who had hurried to our side of the room. “It’s a sign of respect. Something you know nothing about.”

Max loudly coughed, “Management.”



*Management? What the fuck is he talking about? Is he telling JP to get Giorgio in check?*

“Enough.” Kaz scooted his chair back up and raised his voice. “Butler, I have had quite enough of you disturbing our meetings with your bullshit.”

David sat back down.

J.P. tilted forward and scowled at his cousin.

Giorgio pursed his lips together.

Meanwhile, I glanced Blue’s way.

Shock hit her face, but she did her best to maintain an all-business composure.

*So...Giorgio likes Blue.*

Misha’s voice sounded from the screen. “Kazimir, I have more pressing matters to attend to at the moment. If this is going to continue to be a match of whose dick is bigger, *I* can leave and *you* can email me the results later.”

“Nothing is more important to you than *this*, cousin.” Kaz placed his big hands on the table. “Since, you are so ready to begin, what information do you have to add to getting rid of the Mancusos and Black Axe?”

“Hold up.” Max raised his hand.

Kaz frowned. “What?”

“I have the biggest dick in this room.”

I let out a long breath. “Come on, Max. Enough time has been wasted.”

He had the nerve to wear an innocent expression. “Em, I’m just saying.”

To my surprise, Misha chuckled. “Good one, homey.”

I rolled my eyes.

Kaz kept his view on his cousin. “Back to any news that you may have.”

“I have several things. My people have been monitoring 24-7.” Typing, Misha disappeared.

The screen shifted to a map of the Calabrian region—the stinky toe of Italy’s boot-shaped peninsula.

Misha's voice sounded from the TV. "The Gallo Family sent their women and children away. Don Fabrizio has not confirmed if you killed Bartolo or Salvatore since their bodies have not turned up, but he is pretty sure they are dead."

Kaz threaded his fingers together. "Hmmm."

An image of a man appeared, looking to be in his eighties. An oxygen mask covered the lower half of his pale, wrinkled face.

The Don sat in a massive bed. Gold and black velvet blankets covered his legs. IV stands and bags of clear liquid hung to his side.

Three red rotary phones rested on his nightstand. Thick cords ran from the receivers to their bases. They had huge black buttons with white numbers on them.

A fourth rotary phone was black and on his lap. The Don held the receiver close to his face as if he were in the middle of a call.

"This was taken at three in the morning."

*How did Misha's people get the picture? Is a camera in his ceiling light or something?*

Kaz smirked. "And what does the Don have planned?"

"Don Fabrizio made a call to Sicily." The map left Calabria and zipped to that city.

I thought back to Kaz's history lesson of the area.

The Calabrian region was Europe's Cocaine Capital. It's Gioia Tauro port was considered a major hub for international drug trafficking.

West African countries served as the waypoints in the cocaine trade to Europe. The Russians provided safe passage, boats, and men from South America to West Africa. From there Black Axe oversaw all the shipments and delivered them to Gioia Tauro port.

Meanwhile, the 'Ndrangheta controlled that port and all other Calabrian ports. That meant that they set the prices and transported drugs throughout Europe.

This made 'Ndrangheta the most powerful out of Italy's traditional mafia organizations.

Kaz had explained that the Sicilians didn't appreciate the Mancuso Family's rise to power.

"Interesting. The Don must be very nervous to make a call to Sicily. He wants help from the Vizzini Family." Kaz tapped his index

finger over and over. “What did they say?”

“I’ll show you, cousin.”

The screen transformed to an image of four tall men standing around a gold rotary phone and staring at it. They must have been in their thirties, and they weren’t bad to look at. The men wore black designer three-piece suits with red ties. White silk handkerchiefs stuffed each of their breast pockets.

However, one man had his handkerchief out of the pocket and was wiping sweat off his forehead when the picture was snapped.

I wondered if he was the leader.

Misha’s face appeared at the corner of the screen. “The Vizzini Family didn’t answer any of the Don’s calls.”

King David nodded. “Their actions make sense. Prior to our arrival in Italy, authorities seized 115 kilograms of cocaine.”

J.P. quirked his brows. “Who’s shipment?”

“The shipment was meant for the ‘Ndrangheta. The Mancuso Family to be exact. Everyone knows that the Sicilians control the police here and throughout the country,” King David said, “Had we not arrived, a war between the Sicilians and ‘Ndrangheta would have happened.”

Kaz curved his lips into a satisfying smile. “Then, Sicily will stay out of the conflict.”

“Well...” Misha’s face disappeared. The screen displayed tons of blocked footage divided in a grid. “Italy has seventy-seven airports. The Sicilians have sent people to the majority of them, especially the international ones.”

Kaz sneered. “They shut the airports down?”

The screen switched to muted news channel footage.

I squinted and read the breaking news tickers scrolling along the bottom. “Italy has locked down the country due to deadly virus—Nord-C.”

Giorgio’s voice went shaky. “Virus?”

J.P. shook his head. “There’s no virus. The Sicilians shut down the country.”

Max crossed his arms over his chest. “Why?”

Kaz answered, “The Sicilians don’t want *us* to have a way out.”

Giorgio looked at us. “So, there is no virus?”

I tensed. “They’re trying to kill us, Kaz?”

He shook his head. “Sicily is more forcing our hands. They want us to wipe out ‘Ndrangheta. Then, they probably plan to take over the region.”

J.P. raised one finger. “About that.”

Kaz sighed. “I am sure *you* have some ideas of who should control the area after this war.”

“I do. Calabrians are suspicious of outsiders. Russian rule will not work here. I remember my father telling me stories about generations of the Brotherhood failing here—”

“Careful, pansy.”

J.P. held out his hands. “The French and Italians are practically cousins. We know the people here. We know the region. We know the process. It would be a *simple* transition.”

“It would.” Kaz nodded. “But, I don’t like you.”

Misha interrupted. “And we have more pressing matters.”

Kaz put his attention on his cousin. “Go ahead.”

“Mancuso and Gallo soldiers have been loading vans with weapons. My people have counted over fifty vans.”

My heart seized in my chest.

Misha continued, “They also have hired the few gypsies in the area that are still alive, after Kazimir burned down their neighborhood.”

Valentina beamed in pride. “Thank you, brother.”

“Anything for you.”

The screen showed an aerial view of a large neighborhood. Huge barricades had been put up in front of the main roads as if to block the Russians from getting in.

The camera swooped over the houses and focused on hundreds of men dressed in black, working fast, loading weapons, and carrying rifles. Many wore various masks and gloves.

I leaned close to Kaz. “Why are they hiding their identities?”

“To cause confusion. If you don’t know what family or gang is shooting at you, then you do not know who to retaliate against.”

“In Harlem,” Max shook his head. “They want you to know it’s them whose blasting you.”

The screen switched to a full view of Misha in his spaceship control room. “This is not Harlem, my friend. Be careful.”

I side eyed Misha.

*He’s with me. He’ll be fine.*

Misha put his view back on Kaz. “The Italians will be heading your way soon, cousin. I see you have several helicopters on the roof with pilots in them.”

*Kaz does?*

“My suggestion is to get everyone in them and fly away to another town further away, until I can somehow get more people to you.”

To my surprise, Kaz grinned. “That will not be necessary.”

Misha loudly exhaled. “They know your location.”

“I am aware of that.” Kaz scanned the table. “How many shooters do we have?”

King David spoke, “With the Brotherhood and Harlem Crew combined, it’s over a hundred.”

J.P. chimed in, “I brought even more of my people.”

Misha sighed. “Still, ‘Ndrangheta outnumbers you, and we haven’t gotten to Black Axe.”

“What are they doing?”

That usual cool confidence left Misha’s face. “We have been having difficulty figuring out Fela and his people’s location. It’s like they have gone underground.”

Louis bobbed his head. “Because they did.”

We all turned to him.

“They have several underground bunkers full of food, water, and anything they would need to survive,” Louis explained.

Misha frowned. “Still, my satellites should have found them.”

Louis wagged his finger. “Fela has made sure they are well-hidden.”

“Satellite remote sensing is infallible for detecting underground structures.”

Louis countered, “Nothing is infallible.”

“Medium and high-resolution satellite sensors, including Landsat can find them. Areas covered by natural soil where underground structures are present or absent can easily be detected, as a result of the change in the spectral signature of the vegetation throughout the phenological stages—”

“Sure, you have vegetation indices.” Louis shrugged. “Such as the normalized difference vegetation index, simple ratio, and enhanced vegetation index may be used for this purpose.”

*What the fuck are they talking about?*

They lost me at medium and high-resolution satellite.

Clearly everyone else was just as confused. We all went back and forth to looking at Louis and then Misha as they continued their nerdy argument.

“Yes. Yes.” Misha frowned. “The SR vegetation index is useful for determining areas where military underground structures are present—”

“Unless, Fela had a genius install technology that could mess with the indexes.” Louis winked. “Then, a satellite couldn’t find them.”

Misha twisted his face in confusion. “I count five people in the world that could trick my satellites. I am one of them. The other four are presently working around me.”

“And then there is a sixth person that is sitting at this table.” Louis beamed with pride.

Doubt filled Misha’s eyes. “I want to see this technology.”

“Not happening, *Mosquito*.” Louis wagged his finger again. “I will simply find Black Axe’s bunkers for you and then give the location to the Lion—”

“I don’t need your help.” Misha’s jaw twitched.

“Yet, you need my technology—?”

“To study it?”

“To copy it.”

“I would never!”

“I don’t know what you would do, *Mosquito*.”

Kaz barged into the conversation. “He is not the *Mosquito*. He is the *Panther*.”

Valentina chuckled. “The what?”

Kaz shrugged. “Panthers have stealth—”

“Panthers don’t exist.” Valentina chuckled. “He is the Mosquito.”

“Hold on.” Misha held up his hand and looked to the side. Someone must have been talking to him. A grim expression spread across his face. He bobbed his head and returned his view to us. “Kazimir, they are heading your way.”

Blood rushed to my head and my heart beat loudly in my ears like a war drum signaling the beginning of chaos.

Everyone stared at Kaz, waiting for his order.

That wicked smile returned to my baby’s face.

*Oh, God. What is he up to?*

Kaz looked at King David. “Then, it is Plan B.”







# Chapter 17

## Big Pussy Energy

### Blue

The Lion looked at King David. “Then, it is Plan B.”

*What does that mean?*

David rose and signaled several men across the room. “Begin!”

They rushed out of the room.

Emily placed her hand on Kazimir’s shoulder and whispered into his ear. The couple shifted into a hushed conversation. I wished with all my heart that I could hear what they were saying. I tilted that way to eavesdrop as much as I could and then gave up.

*What’s going on?*

I scanned the room to see if everyone was just as confused as me.

Jean-Pierre watched Emily and Kazimir, surely trying to spy too.

David headed to Maxwell. Harlem Crew hurried over and surrounded them. They went right into conversation. Once again, I wished I were privy to what was being said. While I desperately wanted to get up and go over there to hear what David was telling Max, my position was at Emily’s side.

The Mouse’s safety was my only focus. This was the hardest part of being so low in the ranks. The bosses ordered. People like me followed, not knowing what sort of danger we were rushing into.

*What is plan B and will this end the war?*

A knot formed in my stomach.

Whatever it was, we needed to put it into place soon. Misha had said that the Mancuso family had gathered Gallo soldiers and gypsies to come kill us. Our enemies outnumbered us by the hundreds.

I breathed in and out, calming myself.

*Whatever the plan is...the Lion will get us out of Italy safely?*

I put my view in front of me.

Giorgio's gaze met mine. He had clearly been watching me the whole time. And, unfortunately, it was hard for me to move my gaze from his.

Giorgio's handsome face possessed the symmetry of one of those classical Roman statues that depicted a mystical god. Plus, those eyes sparkled just like the diamonds on his tie pin and cufflinks.

As usual, he dressed elegantly, outdoing all the men's fashion in the room.

Earlier, I had done my best to pay attention to the information in the meeting, but sometimes I looked at David and Giorgio, wondering which one of them sent the roses. Every now and then, I caught them both glancing my way.

However, when Giorgio tried to give me his guns during the meeting, I took that as a confirmation that it was him who had sent the roses. Now, I didn't know what I would do with that information.

*Should I say something to him?*

I still wasn't sure how I felt about Giorgio delivering the blue roses. A relationship with the Butler could not work for so many reasons.

*I can't worry about that now. I have to think about what this plan B is...*

To my shock, Giorgio leaned forward and kept his voice low. "I really like what you are wearing today, Blue."

Stunned, I swallowed. "Umm...thank you."

More men headed out of the room. This time some were Harlem Crew.

*Where are they going?*

Then, the TV screen showing the Mosquito shut off.

*What is going to happen?*

Clearly unfazed, Giorgio continued to whisper to me, “Do you have my panties?”

Jean-Pierre snapped his view to Giorgio, probably hearing what his cousin just said. Shock covered his face.

Then, Louis chuckled on the Butcher’s other side. Surely, he had heard Giorgio’s question too.

I damn near drowned in embarrassment.

*Is he serious?*

Before I could answer him, Emily’s voice rose next to me. “But, what is plan B?”

Kazimir’s deep voice filled the room. “I already told you, *mysh*, that we have no time for details. It is the plan that we are doing—”

“I’m not leaving without you—”

“You will, and you will do it now.”

“But—”

“Enough, *mysh*! Get to the helicopters.”

“Kaz, don’t make me knock you out in front of your men.”

*Oh no.*

Giorgio tapped his hand on the table, getting my attention.

Annoyed, I turned back to him. “What?”

Giorgio raised his perfectly arched eyebrows. “Well, do you have my panties or not?”

“Are you insane?” I whispered. “A lot is going on and you are asking about panties?”

“Yes, and yes.”

“What?”

“You asked me questions. Those are my answers.”

Unfortunately, Jean-Pierre did not put his attention back on the Lion and Mouse. Instead, he kept his view on Giorgio’s and my exchange. Utter shock decorated his face.

*God, what does the Butcher think of this conversation?*

I gritted my teeth. “Stop asking me about panties.”

“I thought about this last night, and I believe I have a proper compromise.” Giorgio’s face shifted into a serious expression. “You can give me your dirty panties, but I would want to wash them in front of you.”

Jean-Pierre blinked.

No words came to me.

Louis laughed again.

*Dear God.*

Clapping sounded from the door.

Happy to have something else to distract me, I checked who was making the noise.

Baba stomped in and clapped her hands again. “Alright, everyone! Before we begin the Lion’s insane plan, there must be an exact number of people and certain assignments.”

Emily stood. “Kaz, you told Baba the plan and not me?”

Kazimir got up. “I did not tell her anything.”

I rose from my chair and placed myself next to Emily.

Meanwhile, the French remained seated and watching me. Giorgio still wore that quizzical look on his face as if he were seriously waiting for my answer. The Butcher just stared at me in shock. Meanwhile, Louis kept chuckling and watching me.

I stirred, wishing those three would look another way.

“No need to argue, kids.” Baba headed over to Emily and Kazimir. “Sometimes Baba, doesn’t need to be told. Maxwell and David, come over here!”

They ended their conversation and walked over.

“Everyone listen carefully.” Baba pointed at Maxwell.  
“The Joker must be with the Lion and my grandson David.”

Maxwell quirked his brows. “The who?”

Baba gestured to the French. “The King of Diamonds will join along with the Ace of Diamonds.”

Jean-Pierre widened his eyes. “Excuse me?”

Boris rose and went over to Kazimir’s side.

Louis touched his chest. “Am I the Ace or King of Diamonds—?”

“I am the King.” Jean-Pierre shook his head. “You are the Ace.”

“All of the French will go with the Lion.” Baba started counting men. “We will need three pairs of eight when you go, so that we can have a perfect 888. That will give us an unsurmountable amount of success in this endeavor.”

Emily held her hands out. “And do I go with Kaz, before you said that we should stay together and—?”

“You go on the helicopter.” Kazimir scowled.

Baba nodded. “For once, the Lion is correct. Emily, you and I leave in the opposite direction.”

Emily let out a long breath.

Baba glanced my way. “Blue will be with us, along with Valentina and her men.”

The French got up from the table in a graceful transition, almost in unison. So proper, they had apparently undid their jackets before they sat down. Now they buttoned them up while they stood. I was just happy that they had stopped looking my way, and had now put all of their attention on the matter at hand.

Kazimir glanced at Baba. “By doing what you say, all of our enemies will be dead?”

“I am not sure.”

Kazimir grimaced. “Then, what do you know?”

“Many will die today, but I believe most of them are not us.” Baba’s face held worry. “All I can see is that everyone looks pretty roughed up by the end of the day, but we are alive.”

Emily stepped up. “And are you sure we need to separate?”

Baba nodded. “This must happen.”

Someone tapped my arm.

I turned to see who it was.

To my surprise, Giorgio stood next to me. “Have you considered my compromise?”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “Have you considered that we are in the middle of the war?”

“Death and fighting is always around us. Sometimes you have to seize moments of pleasure. If not, then what is the point of the fighting? What does it matter if you never truly live?”

I leaned his way. “Stop asking for my panties. I am not going to give them to you.”

“You smell amazing.” He boldly inhaled and licked his lips. “I wonder how you would taste.”

I shivered and it was not in fear. It was in pure lust. This was not the reaction I wanted him to give me. Additionally, this was not the proper time to be having that response.

*Yeah...he definitely sent the roses.*

“Giorgio.” I did my best to give him a stern gaze. “My sole purpose in Italy is to keep the Mouse safe—”

“And you.”

“What?”

“You are expected to keep yourself safe also.”

“Well, of course—”

“But, you only said the Mouse.”

“Stop interrupting me.”

More chatter came from behind me between Baba, Kazimir, and Emily. I had to quickly finish this talk with Giorgio so that I could pay attention.

I pointed at him. “No more asking about my panties. And don’t do what you did in the meeting again—”

“What did I do?” He smirked.

“Do not try to give me your guns to irritate David—”

“That had nothing to do with him. You are the only person besides my cousins that I trust with my guns.”

I blinked. “Well...um...anyway, I need you to stop, and no more sending me blue roses. Thank you. They were beautiful, but you must stop.”

Giorgio went silent and studied me.

I lowered my hand. “Do you understand?”

Giorgio’s gorgeous face shifted to one of terror. His lips twisted into a cruel sneer. The sound of his heavy breathing thrummed in the air. Rage filled those beautiful eyes.

*Uh...*

I stepped back and placed my hand on my gun.

Giorgio moved forward and leaned my way. His voice was a low rumble. “Roses? *Who* sent you roses?”

*Oh...He didn’t send them.*

I cleared my throat.

King David hit my side. “Any problems over here?”

*Uh...this isn’t the best time to show up.*

Giorgio turned his attention to David. The Butler’s cold, steady gaze bored into David and promised death. And, if one could indeed die from a gaze alone, David would have been on the floor and covered in blood.

Giorgio fisted his hands as if about to knock him out.

David's right hand moved an inch closer to his gun.

*Okay, so...*

Suddenly, in my head, I kept hearing Maxwell yelling, "Management!"

But what the hell did that mean. I needed a manual listing step-by-step instructions. I checked the room.

Watching us, Maxwell stood close with his arms crossed over his chest.

*Help me.*

Slowly, he shook his head from side to side. I didn't know if Maxwell was doing that to say no he wouldn't help or that this was disappointing.

I directed my attention back to Giorgio and David. They stared at each other as if daring the other one to make the first move. Tension and violence thickened between them.

And I was not used to this in any way. I only had one boyfriend in my life. There had been no serious love affair before or after him. A few times, I had jumped in bed with this or that guy for a quick night of fun, only to never speak on the moment again. Boris had been one of those one-night stands from long ago. Never did we talk about it. I doubt anyone in Harlem Crew even knew about it.

Other than those few one-night stands, I had no real experience with men.

David kept his view on Giorgio. "Any problems, Blue?"

I probably spoke too fast. "None at all. Everything is fine. Let's just...um...go."

David's jaw twitched. "He should go."

"Should I?"

Suddenly, Emily stepped between them, forcing both men to edge several feet back. "*We all* must go. What's up, guys?"

*Oh, God.*

I turned back to Maxwell.



He shook his head again.

*What the hell?!*

Emily looked at David, then moved her view to the Butler. “Everybody good?”

Giorgio formed his mouth into a smile that sent chills down my spine. “We will talk later, *King* David. When there is less commotion and people around us.”

“I am excited about that conversation, *Butler*.” David gestured over his shoulders. “Make sure you do not forget your guns. They are in the trash can by the corner.”

*David! Please say you didn't dirty his guns.*

I widened my eyes.

I swore heat radiated off Giorgio.

He cracked his neck. “The trash can?”

David nodded. “I believe they are at the bottom of the trash can, under as much gunk as I could find.”

Fast, Giorgio charged for him, almost knocking Emily out of the way.

Jean-Pierre appeared in a blur. He must have been nearby and watching the whole exchange. Somehow, he had Giorgio in a grip within seconds and began shoving him back several feet which looked to be a difficult feat. The Butler struggled to get out of his cousin's hold as if ready to strangle David with his gloved hands.

“Get your puppy together, *Butcher!*” Kazimir stomped over and glared at the French. “If he comes after my number one, then he will only be a memory on your family tree.”

Emily placed her hand on Kazimir's chest. “That's quite enough. Everything is fine.”

Louis lifted the blue guns in the air and jogged over. “The King is just trying to be funny, Giorgio. They are right here, and clean.”

*Thank God.*

Maxwell whistled from the side.

When I looked his way, he mouthed the word,  
“Management.”

I rolled my eyes.

*How do I manage psychotic men with egos?*

“Hold on. What is this?” Baba waved her hands and came over. “I did not see this in my cards. What are you two doing?”

Jean-Pierre let go of Giorgio.

Louis got to them and handed the guns to his cousin.

Giorgio straightened his jacket and glared at David. “Soon. Very soon.”

“Not at all.” Baba looked at Giorgio and then David. “What are you two doing? I have not seen this.”

“Nothing, Baba.” David shrugged. “I just thought I would check on Blue to—”

“Only stay with the Lion.” She scowled at him. “You are messing with my timeline.”

“I am sorry, Baba, but I did not like the way he was—”

“Go to the Lion. Now!” Baba pointed Kazimir’s way.

Sighing, David quickly walked away and got by Kazimir’s side.

Louis chuckled. “That’s right, *King*, listen to your grandmother before you get disciplined.”

Baba turned her scowl to the French.

Louis went silent.

“Death *will* come today!” Baba scanned the room, getting all of our attention. Then, she pointed at Jean-Pierre. “Is this the day that you will die? Or maybe your cousins will die?”

The Butcher frowned.

Baba pointed at Maxwell. “What about you? Are you going to die today?”

“Eh, Baba.” Maxwell raised his hands in the air. “I didn’t even do anything. Don’t put that on me.”

Baba gestured at Kazimir who walked over to Emily. “Maybe, the Lion or mouse will die.”

“We are listening, Baba. Enough.” Kazimir growled. “You have made your point.”

The fire alarm sounded. The shrill, deafening noise ripped through the air.

Lights flickered in the conference room.

“It is time. That is the first signal.” Kazimir grabbed Emily by her waist, pulled her into him, and pressed his mouth against hers. She closed her eyes as he kissed her.

Even with the blare of the alarm, I could hear the Lion’s groan of lust.

Heat flushed my cheeks. I looked away.

Baba crossed her arms over her chest. “Yes, Lion. I see that you are listening.”

The alarm shut off.

Kazimir dragged himself away from Emily’s lips and then hit her with an intense gaze. “Get to the helicopter, *mysh*. I will call to make sure you are safe.”

Emily frowned. “And you will also tell me that *you* are safe.”

“I will.” He nipped at her bottom lip and then headed off. “Pansies! Harlem Crew! Let’s go!”

David kept his pace with the Lion.

The French headed off with their men.

Baba called after them, “888.”

Passing by us, Maxwell took the joint from the back of his ear. “You ladies take care of Em for me. She’s carrying Max Jr.”

“Lies!” Valentina laughed. “They are naming the baby after me.”

Ignoring the both of them, Emily watched Kazimir head off. Fear filled her eyes.

“Nobody is naming the baby after you.” Maxwell turned around and began slowly walking backwards. “Max Jr. is certified. That shit must hurt you so bad, Valentina.”

The Lion’s sister got to my side. “You do not know what you are talking about. The baby will be named Valentino.”

“Not true, sweetie.” Still walking backwards, Maxwell winked at her. “But, if you need moral support, papi is here for you.”

*Is this management?*

Valentina loudly groaned in annoyance.

*Maybe...not.*

Maxwell held up two fingers and headed for the opened door. “Farewell, ladies. Big dick energy is leaving the building!”

Valentina raised her hands. “And big pussy energy is remaining.”

Maxwell stopped in the doorway and shook his head. “Big pussy energy is not a thing.”

Valentina glared. “It is because we are all big pussy energy over here.”

“No. You are a woman. You are supposed to want a small, tight pussy, not a big—”

“We all have big pussies! You do not tell me what type of pussy I want.” Valentina held her hand on her hips. “Isn’t that correct, Emily?”

“I’m not in this.” Emily smirked. “Be safe, Max.”

“Valentina is fucking crazy.” Maxwell shook his head and left.

Emily began walking away. “Let’s get the helicopters, guys. We just need to grab Paolo and his men.”

The fire alarm wailed again.

*Was that another signal for the Lion's plan?*

Eventually, we hurried out of the conference room and entered the main hallway on the presidential suite's first floor. Tons of the staff hurried away in panic, carrying their bags.

Then, a woman screamed off in the distance. *"They are all dead!"*

Emily looked at me. "Do you know what she said?"

Valentina spoke, "She said that they're all dead."

"What the fuck?" Emily picked up the pace ahead of us and rounded the corner.

The woman screamed more. It sounded like her screams were coming from upstairs.

*Damn it.*

I yanked out my guns.

Emily put her hand out. "Give me one."

I handed her one gun.

"Goodie. We may get to fight too." Valentina chuckled. "Big pussy energy."

A screaming maid ran our way. *"Dead! All of them!"*

We rushed up the huge staircase, taking two stairs at a time. Some of Valentina's men and Emily's guards hurried up before us with their weapons out.

When we hit the top, everyone froze.

Eight men lay dead in the hallway—four of Harlem Crew and four from the Brotherhood.

*Aren't those...*

"No." Emily kicked off her heels and sprinted forward. "Paolo?! Paolo?!"

*Jesus, help us.*

Emily's guards and I tried to keep up with her.

She sped forward and had Paolo's door open fast. "Paolo?! Can you hear me? Baby?!"

*Please, be alright. Please.*

Breathless, I darted in the room.

"No. No." Emily opened the closet door and did a quick check under the bed.

More men came in, crowding the space and looking around for any sign of Paolo.

"Wait." Valentina rushed in, panting. "Did someone take the kid?"

"Motherfuckers!" In seconds, Emily jumped over the bed, ran over it, and leapt down.

My heart boomed in my ears.

Emily was out of the room fast. "Paolo! Paolo!!"

Running after Emily, I yelled at the guards. "Hurry!"







# Chapter 18

## Weak Ass Bitches

### Emily

I ran down the hallway and stopped at the top of the stairs. My gaze darted around the space, searching for any sign of Paolo. Baba stood at the bottom of the stairs. No else walked in the Presidential Suite, probably due to the panic of the fire alarms.

*God, I need you right now.*

Adrenaline surged through me.

*He's been through enough, God. Protect him.*

I raced down the stairs, keeping my hand on the rail to keep from falling. My bare feet almost slipped over the cold marble steps. My eyes burned, but I wouldn't cry.

*Please, God. Get Paolo back to me.*

I checked over my shoulder.

Blue ran three feet behind me, doing her best to keep up and panting heavily.

Several of my men followed her.

I spotted one guard, holding Harlem and jogging after us.

*Oh, baby. I forgot about you, Harlem. Thank God someone remembered.*

Kaz didn't tell me his plan, just that I had to get the hell to the helicopter and fast away from the hotel. Whatever he was up to wouldn't involve flowers and happy singing. It would be tears and blood, death and pain.

I called to the guy, holding my furry baby. "Don't follow us! Take Harlem up to the helicopter!"

The guard didn't seem excited about that order. Still, he nodded.

“You all move too fast for my knees.” Smiling, Baba stood at the bottom of the stairs. “I decided to wait down here for...”

Then, she frowned. “What’s wrong, Emily?”

I hit the bottom and rushed past. “Paolo is gone.”

Baba shrieked, “Paolo! H-how did I not see this?”

I dashed through the lobby, not sure if Baba rushed along with me or not

*God, I won't be okay, if something happens to Paolo.*

Whoever killed Paolo’s guards had been prepared. They’d been watching us and waiting for the perfect opportunity. Somehow, they knew we would be busy in the meeting and seized that time to grab him.

I made it to the door, twisted that knob fast, and swung it open.

In the hallway, only Russians ran off, carrying weapons and boxes in their arms. They escaped through the stairwells.

*Where are you, Paolo?*

Racing, I proceeded to the elevator.

My phone rang.

I slowed to a jog and pulled it out. “Yes?”

Kaz’s deep voice came on the line. “Are you close to the helicopter?”

“Someone took Paolo.” I made it to the elevators and punched the buttons for both, waiting for one of them to come. “They killed his guards and took him—”

*“Mysh, get to the roof. I will send—”*

“I am not going anywhere until I have Paolo in my arms!”

Blue and my men hit my side.

Still running our way, Baba, Valentina, and her people were further behind.

*“Mysh, calm down—”*

“Fuck calming down!” I gripped the phone hard and hit the elevator buttons again. “Whoever took them dies on sight!”

The elevator on the left showed up first.

The doors opened.

I jumped on and kept the phone to my ear. “Whatever Plan B is, you better call it off, because nothing happens until Paolo is safe and with me. Nothing!”

I hung the phone up. My throat was tight and sore. My head pounded. Cold terror sliced up my veins. I kept picturing the worst images in my head—Paolo being tortured or his little body covered in blood and lifeless.

*God, please. Listen. Save him.*

Blue and my men stepped on.

I hit the lobby button before Valentina and everyone else could get on.

Valentina screamed, “Emily—!”

Another elevator would be coming.

Plus, there wasn’t time to wait on anyone. We had to act now. Either motherfuckers caught up or they got out of my way. Nothing was more important than getting Paolo back.

*God, what do you want from me? I will give it to you. Anything.*

The elevator lowered.

Silence ran in the space.

Still, my pulse pounded against my ribcage. With each beat, it felt like a sledgehammer thudding against my eardrums.

My phone rang again.

I turned it on. “What?”

“*Mysh—*”

“Don’t start that shit with me, Kaz.” My voice cracked. My eyes watered. My hand shook. “They...took h-him.”

“I know.”

I wanted to scream. My whole body shook with sadness, but I held on as much as I could. If I looked too much like a mess, my guards might think twice about following me, and I desperately needed their help right now.

*Help me, God.*

“*Mysh*, did you hear me?”

“What?”

My head spun out of control.

I swayed.

Blue grabbed my waist.

That kept me calm and anchored.

When I woke up this morning, I thought the worst part of the day was my finding out about the other personality. Now I didn't care about that. All I needed was Paolo to be safely back with me.

“*Mysh!*”

“Yes?”

Kaz spoke, “I have Misha searching through the building.”

I let out a long breath.

“He will find the boy, *mysh*.”

I shivered in fear.

“Do you hear me?”

“Y-yes. Kaz...”

“Yes?”

My heart ached. “N-nothing can happen...to him—”

“I know.”

“If something did, I couldn't—”

“Nothing will happen.”

“But...” My vision grew dizzy.

I blinked several times to keep it clear.

*“Mysh, did you hear me?”*

“Did you just say something?”

Silence was his only reply.

“What, Kaz?”

“Misha will call you. He has a set of eyes on you and several eyes all over the hotel. Paolo will be found.”

The elevator stopped us on the third floor, instead of putting us on the first.

The doors didn't open.

*What's going on?*

“Kaz, something is wrong?”

He didn't respond.

“Kaz?” I looked at the phone.

The connection went out.

My phone rang.

An unknown number showed on the screen.

*Who the hell is this?*

One of my men went to the elevator's display and began pushing buttons to get it back to working.

My phone rang again.

I answered. “Hello?”

Misha's voice came on the line. “Tell your man to stop pushing things. I am the one that stopped the elevator.”

“Why?”

“Because several Mancuso soldiers are entering the lobby —”

“That doesn't matter. I need to find—”

“Pavel's son. Yes. That's the second reason I stopped you.”

“What?”

“Tell your men to get in front of you and have their guns ready. Paolo is on the third floor with five women dressed as maids. Then, I will open the elevator doors.”

I looked at everyone. “Get ready to shoot. Misha says five women looking like maids have Paolo.”

Misha spoke, “Now get behind them.”

“Thank you.” I remained where I was. “I’ve got it from here, Misha. Please, open the doors.”

No humor laced Misha’s voice. “Perhaps, my English is not as proficient as I think.”

“Misha, open the doors.”

“There is a service exit at the end of the hallway. They are hurrying that way now. This exit is a special set of stairs only used by the staff—”

“Misha, open the doors.” I tapped my foot.

“Once they get down those stairs, there are three vans waiting for them full of several armed men who I believe belong to Black Axe.”

I tensed. “So...the maids are women of color?”

“They are—”

“Open the door.”

“Getting them before they make it downstairs would be optimal—”

“Open the fucking doors!”

Misha stayed calm. “Then, get behind your men.”

“Goddamn it!” I backed up, maneuvering around everyone.

Confused the guards went to the door.

Blue moved back with me, staying at my side.

The phone shut off.

I stuffed it back in my pocket. “The women who have Paolo are heading to the end of the hallway to a set of stairs

for hotel staff.”

I checked the gun that Blue gave me, making sure it was full of bullets. “We kill them before they hit the staircase. If not, then kill them before they get to the first floor, but be mindful that Paolo is with them. He can’t get hurt.”

Everyone nodded.

The doors opened.

My men burst out of the elevator with their guns pointed and feet planted in the center of the hallway. They fired.

The bitches countered fast. Rapid shooting ensued from their side, decorating my guards to nothing but holes. Bullets ripped through their limbs, sending them in all directions. Blood splattered across the walls, up to ceiling and across the floor. Blood soaked into the thick carpet and streamed down into the hallways.

Blue yanked me back. “Automatics.”

I yelled at my men. “Get back!”

But it was too late. Most of them fell dead to the ground.

The last one rushed back to us.

Before he could reach the elevator, a bullet sliced through his eye. He jerked back. His eye exploded. They shot at his face some more. Tissue and blood burst from his face and hit the elevator’s wall.

*Fuck*

I jumped to the side.

He crashed back into the elevator. His upper body lay inside with us. The lower half was in the hallway.

The elevator doors tried to close. Each time they slid forward, they touched his body and slid back.

*Damn it.*

I stepped over the guard’s chest.

*I’m so sorry.*

I crouched down against the elevator's opening and kneeled by the dead guard's waist.

I leaned my head out a few inches and spotted them. The women were different shades of brown. One was as dark as me. The rest were lighter. They wore the hotel's maid uniform—beige with white trimming.

I took in as much as I could and then quickly pulled back. "They are a good twenty feet away from the exit. They are leaning against the wall and pointing our way. But, no cover yet."

Blue's phone vibrated. She pulled it out and checked the screen. "It is Valentina."

"Type in the floor number and tell her that five people are shooting at us in the hallway." I leaned back out the elevator again, did another quick assessment, and pulled back.

*Fuck. How are we going to get him?*

I kept my voice low. "One has a MAG machine gun. I think three are holding AK-47s. The fifth one is holding Paolo, but she's too close up. I don't us want to accidentally shoot him."

Blue placed the gun to the side and typed.

Slamming and shouting sounded from the hallway.

I leaned out to see what they were doing.

One kicked at the room's door next to them. The sound of wood breaking filled the air.

Two others pointed my way.

Paolo struggled in the other woman's arm. He sobbed.

She shook him and yelled at him in some language.

*Leave him alone.*

He shrieked.

She shook him again.

Not thinking, I raised my gun to shoot her.



Bullets crashed into the wall next to my head, leaving holes in the metal next to me.

Fast, I pulled back into the elevator.

*That was stupid. Calm down.*

The slamming ended.

Those bitches must have gotten the door open.

I checked and didn't see them in the hallway which confirmed that they had successfully broke into the room.

Paolo's sobs reached me.

My heart broke.

*I'm coming for you, baby. I'm coming. I swear on everything.*

I just had to figure out how.

Blue's phone buzzed.

I looked her way. "Valentina?"

"Yes." Blue read the message. "They're on the fourth floor and taking both set of stairs down to this floor."

I let out an exasperated breath. "Perfect."

Then, my phone rang.

I used my free hand to pull it out. "Yes?"

Kaz's voice was tense. "Where are you?"

"Third floor. I see Paolo. Black Axe women dressed as maids took him. Valentina and her men are taking the stairs down."

"Listen to me very carefully, *mysh*."

I sighed.

"My sister and you will let *our men* get him. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

The other elevator dinged by us.

Valentina's voice came out. "Emily?!"

"Yes! I'm in the other one and fine!" I hung up the phone. "Don't leave that elevator! Stay there!"

Suddenly, loud laughing came from down the hallway. Dread hit me.

One of the Black Axe women spoke from the room, "Oh my! The Mouse is in the elevator?!"

"Yeah, bitch!" I leaned out a little. "I'm right here."

Shooting blasted my way.

I ducked back into the elevator. "You missed, weak ass bitch!"

More bullets sprayed.

*Good. Get mad and spend all those bullets. Did you bring extras?*

I pressed my back against the elevator wall and kept my gun close. "Missed again!"

"Put your head out, Mouse!" The woman yelled, "I will not miss this time."

"Bet you will, stupid bitch!"

With her gun raised, Blue stood and leaned close to the opening, readying herself to shoot.

"Be careful." I gritted my teeth. "They actually have good aim."

Valentina yelled out, "The Lion's sister is on the other elevator! Have you heard of me?"

The woman laughed. "The Mouse and the Lion's sister? We are very lucky today!"

Another woman chimed in, "Come. Let us see if the rumors are true. They say the Lion's sister is quite a beauty."

"It is true!" Valentina shouted. "I am gorgeous!"

"Or!" I yelled. "We can discuss some sort of an exchange!"

Blue turned my way and quirked her brows.

What else could I do, but try to convince them to hand him over?

One of the women called back, “And what do you want, Mouse?”

“Give Paolo back!” I trembled. “And take me!”

To my shock, silence came.

I leaned out.

No bullets sprayed my way.

I didn’t see them either.

*Okay...*

I leaned back in the elevator. “Come on, ladies! Say something!”

Blue’s phone buzzed. She used her free hand to pull it out and check. When she did, she looked up and whispered, “Valentina said that she will *not* let you go with them.”

“Type back to Valentina and let her know that she doesn’t have a choice in this matter.”

Blue did as I said.

The phone buzzed again.

Blue read it and put the phone up.

I frowned. “What else did she say?”

Blue gave me a sad smile. “She said that you are worth more to Kazimir and her than a traitor’s son.”

I clenched my jaw.

“Do you want me to say anything to her?”

I shook my head. “Valentina has no say in this. If they want me for Paolo, then I’ll go. You take him and bring him up to the helicopter—”

“I cannot do that.”

“Blue.” I scowled at her. “That wasn’t a question, statement, or suggestion. It was a clear order.”





# Chapter 19

## A Lion's Roar

### Emily

Minutes of silence passed. The women must have been going back and forth in the room, contemplating what to do next. Perhaps, they even called Fela to see what he would want.

Heart-pounding, I leaned against the elevator's walls.

*Please, God.*

Finally, one of the women shouted, "Why do you want the boy?!"

"Does it matter?" I yelled back, "Why do *you* want the boy?"

"Fela wants to protect Paolo from the Brotherhood!"

"Bullshit!" My body shook with rage. "Fela wants to use Paolo as a pawn to get me to do what he wants!"

More silence came.

I raised my eyebrows.

*Wait. Right? That is why you're taking him...unless...*

A sudden realization washed over me. What if Fela didn't know that I cared for Paolo. These women damn sure didn't either. If they had, there would have been several quirky replies.

*Was their mission really to save Paolo from the Russians?*

Fela had Paolo for a long time, using him against Pavel. But there was one thing I learned about humanity, most of the time, people weren't *all bad* or *all good*, there were layers to us all.

Maybe, Fela felt guilty. Perhaps, he remembered how he had been treated by the Russians—naked, leashed, and treated

like a dog.

Thoughts and possibilities spun around in my brain. Instantly, I shut them off, and returned to the true focus. In the end, it didn't matter why Black Axe grabbed Paolo. The fact was...they grabbed him, and I didn't like that shit at all.

*Paolo is my little baby. Mine to keep safe. Mine to love.*

The women continued to remain silent as if thoroughly trying to figure out what they should do next.

I inched my face out of the elevator to see what was happening in the hallway.

*Oh.*

My heart stopped.

Five of Valentina's guards prowled forward in the opposite direction.

*This works.*

When the women leaned out, they wouldn't see the men behind them.

*But...what if Black Axe really came to save Paolo? Should they still die if they were trying to protect Paolo?*

My stomach twisted with guilt.

Sadness rose, yet rage drowned it out.

*Fuck it. Whether they came to save Paolo or not, they die.*

I could feel the influence of Kaz moving through me. I could even hear his voice in my head.

*"If you let them get away free, then others will know that they can take Paolo."*

Sighing, I tried to decipher if that was the truth or not, but Kaz's voice entered my head again.

*"Make them an example, mysh!"*

I leaned out of the hallway. "Ladies! What do you think of the exchange?!"



One woman ducked her head out, not noticing Valentina's guards behind her. "How do we know that can we trust you?!"

Fast, a guard grabbed her by the neck and yanked her out into the hallway.

She screamed.

He kept her close and had a gun at her head.

"Don't shoot her!" I leaned out and kept my voice low.

*Not until we get the other ones.*

"Let her go!" Another woman stepped out of the room's doorway, pointing the gun at him. She put her back to me, completely focused on saving her friend.

*You two must be close. Good.*

Leaning further into the hallway, I aimed at the chick's head, hurried out onto the hallway, and crept forward.

Gun in front of her, Blue rushed out with me and stayed at my side.

"Be careful, Bimpe. This could be a trap." A third woman left the room with her Ak-47 and faced our way. "They might \_\_\_"

Blue shot her. The bullet hit the woman's forehead so fast, I shivered. Blood dripped down the woman's face as she crashed to the floor.

*Two down. Three to go.*

Bimpe tried to dart back in the door.

"Naw, bitch." I pulled the trigger.

The back of her head exploded open. Blood burst. Dead, her body slammed into the wall and then slumped to a stop.

*Two more.*

From the room, another woman screamed in horror.

Valentina stepped out of the elevator with her gun in front of her. "This is a much better plan than giving yourself up or was it a ploy?"

“I was going to do and say anything to get him back.”

“Be careful with that in the future,” Valentina spoke through clenched teeth. “There would have been no way I let you go.”

“Valentina—”

“If Blue brought Paolo back to my brother without you, neither would have survived.”

Gritting my teeth, I gripped the gun hard. “Let’s focus on this. Two women are left.” I continued forward. “Be careful. Paolo can’t get hurt.”

“No, Emily.” Valentina frowned. “*You* cannot get hurt.”

Valentina’s guards pointed their guns at the doorway. The other guard holding the woman, pulled her down the hall and kept her there.

The remaining women didn’t come out. Quick conversation sounded from the room. It was in a foreign language.

“Hey, ladies!” I got closer. “Let’s figure out a way for no more people to die today!”

They went silent.

Armed Black Axe men were downstairs in the vans, waiting for the women.

Additionally, Misha said Mancuso soldiers were entering the lobby. Sooner or later, new people would step into this hallway, and we would be outnumbered and shot down.

We had to get out of here.

“Let’s trade your friend for Paolo!” I was ten feet from the door. “Then, you can run down and leave! I just want Paolo!”

“How can we trust you?! You have already killed—”

“You killed my people too.” I closed in more distance. “Focus!”

A woman’s voice that I hadn’t heard yet, sounded. “I-if we...if we send Paolo out to you, then you will let us go?”

“I will.” I got to the door and leaned against the wall.  
“Your odds are pretty fucked right now. You probably have a good aim at me, but you will not leave this hallway alive if you don’t negotiate.”

They spoke in that language again. I wished I could understand them.

*Don't hurt Paolo. He's been through enough. Please.*

I ducked my head in the door opening and spied what was going on.

One woman had her gun down, while listening to the other woman that was holding Paolo. He was the only one looking my way. When he spotted me, he widened his eyes.

I placed my finger over my lips.

*Don't say anything, baby.*

I leaned back and gestured for Blue to rush across the doorway.

The women continued to talk. They sounded like they were arguing about what to do. It didn’t matter. I planned to grab Paolo soon, regardless of what they planned.

Blue got in front of me, did a quick glance in the opening, and rushed over.

Thankfully, Paolo still hadn’t yelled anything out. He was such a young kid, but he was slowly learning the rules of survival.

Valentina stood at my side. “I should be in front of you.”

“Why is that?”

“We have *Valentino* to think of.”

Before I could answer, one of the women yelled, “Alright! We will send Paolo out...then...you leave! All of you!”

“Okay. That’s fine with me!” I pressed my back against the wall. “I will take him and rush away with my people. We just want him.”

“But can we trust you?”

I rolled my eyes. “I am not the one that started this, ladies! I don’t even know you!”

“W-we thought we were saving him—”

“That’s why I will save you!” My chest rose and fell. We were so close to getting him back. “You didn’t mean him any harm so no harm will come to you!”

Valentina scowled at me.

“A-alright.” Noise came from the room. “He is coming to you.”

I looked at Blue and whispered. “Grab Paolo and get behind the guards.”

Blue widened her eyes.

“Got it?”

She nodded.

I leaned forward and peeked in.

Like she said, the woman let Paolo go and shoved him forward. “Run out.”

Paolo rushed away with his little legs. “*Mysh! Mysh!*”

I wanted to get him so bad, but I spotted the other woman putting her gun to her side. I raised my gun and readied myself.

*Come on, baby. Get on out here.*

Paolo rushed out of the room and into the hallway.

Fast, Blue gathered him up and headed off.

“*No. No.*” Paolo spotted me and cried, “*Mysh! Mysh!*”

“*Just a minute, baby.*” I stepped into the room and fired at the women.

They screamed.

I got one in the head. Her body dropped like a sack of wet cement.

The other ran off, shrieking. “No, please!”

I aimed her way and pulled the trigger over and over. Her chest exploded into a horrid mess of blood.

Valentina clapped behind me. “Oh goodie. I thought you were going to let them go.”

“Fuck that.” Heading into the room, I went to the first dead chick, lowered, and checked her pockets. I found a phone and wallet.

“*Mysh!*” Paolo sobbed in the hallway. “*I want mysh!*”

I spoke in my broken Russian. “*I am coming, baby! One minute.*”

Valentina strolled into the room and headed to the other woman. “This is so much fun. I love spending quality time with my sister.”

Rising, I turned on the woman’s phone. “Is that what we are doing?”

“When I was little, I always dreamed about having a sister.” Valentina searched the other woman’s body. “Growing up around so many men and boys can be depressing. They think you are automatically weak because you have a pussy. They talk down to you like they are smart when they are idiots.”

“I understand that more than you know.” I scrolled through the phone’s contacts.

Valentina rummaged through the other woman’s pockets. “Meanwhile, pussy is what brought them into the world.”

“True.”

“Women are gods.”

“All facts.” I found Fela’s number.

*There we go.*

I left the contacts, went to camera mode, and took a picture of the dead women on the floor. Then, I pocketed the phone.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Rising, Valentina waved a paper in the air. “This is the hotel’s blueprint. She also has a phone.”

“Bring it.” I headed out of the room. “We have to get to the helicopters before Kaz loses his mind. Plus, Italians are in the hotel.”

Out in the hallway, Blue struggled with Paolo. He was not letting her properly hold him. As soon as she spotted me, she let him down.

Paolo ran over to me. His tiny body slammed into my legs. I bent my knees and lifted him. “*Hey, baby. I’m so sorry.*”

Paolo wrapped those little arms around my neck and squeezed me so hard, I thought I might choke.

“*Take!*” Paolo shivered against me. “*Take.*”

“*I know, baby.*” I carried him off to the elevators. “*They took you.*”

Still shivering, he lay his head on my shoulder. “*Take, mysh.*”

“*Yes. I know.*” I felt his heart beating madly against his ribcage. “*No more bad people. All gone now.*”

“*Mysh.*”

“*I will never let you go.*” Continuing forward, I rubbed circles on his back.

One of Valentina’s men spoke, “What do we do with this last woman?”

Valentina responded, “No one survives when they come for us.”

The woman screamed, “Please! Please, don’t—”

Several shots rang out behind me.

I continued walking.

And no guilt came from her death, only numbness.

That fact scared me more than anything else.

Everyone got on the one elevator without my dead guard. Blue pushed the top floor's button.

The doors closed.

The elevator rose.

Silent, I rubbed Paolo's back, knowing that everything would be okay now that I had him with me.

A minute later, we arrived on the top floor and left the elevator.

Valentina's guards jumped ahead of us.

One spoke, "There are already tons of Mancuso in the hotel. We must be careful when we enter the stairwell."

I nodded.

We rushed to the door.

He opened it and gestured for us to enter.

Below us, tons of footsteps sounded inside the stairwell. Men barked Italian to each other.

We crept up to the final flight of stairs leading to the roof.

I shouldn't have, but I checked over the railing.

*Shit!*

It wasn't tons of men. It was *hundreds* of them, barreling up the stairs. Groups rushed into each level. They must have been searching for us and any Russians in the building. Only God knew what they planned to do when they caught us.

*Holy shit.*

We crept up the stairs and hit the roof.

Three helicopters waited for us with pilots sitting in them.

Baba hurried forward. Her eyes were red like she had been crying for a while. She rang her fists in the air. "Dear God! I planned to jump off this roof if you said something happened to him."

I shook my head. "Baba, we don't need all of that—"

“Give me my little *pumpkin*.” Baba snatched Paolo out of my arms without asking me or giving me time to let him go.

I held my hands out. “Excuse me?”

She hugged him. Tears spilled out from her eyes. “*There’s my little pumpkin. right here.*”

Paolo made no protest. He even curved his tiny mouth into a smile. “*Baba.*”

“*My heart cannot take all of this, little pumpkin.*” She carried Paolo away and kissed his cheeks. “*Getting into all types of trouble and worrying Baba.*”

We all climbed into the helicopters.

The guard that held Harlem earlier, sat in back with my puppy. The poor man’s face was bright red with worry. As soon as he spotted me, he sighed in relief. Surely, things would not have been good for him if he had returned to Kaz without me, yet holding my puppy.

Valentina and her men got in the other helicopter.

The third one remained empty. It would have been for all our men that died in the hallway. Grief hit me.

*I’m ready to get out of Italy.*

The pilot started our helicopter. The engine rumbled.

When I buckled in my seat, I took out the Black Axe women’s phone and pulled up the picture that I had taken earlier.

The helicopter blades spun. Everyone else hurried to put on their seatbelts.

Paolo whispered in the back, “*Take, Baba.*”

“*Yes. Those naughty people took my little pumpkin because he’s so sweet.*”

I texted the picture of the two dead women to Fela and typed a message.

**Me:** Paolo is mine. Never come for what is mine!

**Me:** Sincerely,



**Me:** the Mouse.

The message read delivered.

“Son of a bitch.” I slung the phone out of the helicopter’s small open window and then slid the glass closed. I had considered keeping the phone on me so that Misha could find him, but Fela could have put a tracker in it.

The helicopters rose in the air and took us away.

In the back, Baba sang in Russian to Paolo. Watching her, he raised his tiny fingers to her chin and tapped in the rhythm of her singing.

Blue watched.

I leaned close to Blue. “What is Baba saying? I can barely translate.”

Blue smiled. “She’s singing, ‘Little red berry, Little red berry of mine! In the garden is a little raspberry, My little raspberry—’”

My phone rang.

*Oh shit. I forgot to call Kaz back.*

I answered, “I’m sorry, baby. We are in the helicopters and leaving the hotel—”

“You hung up on me.” Anger rode those words.

“I know. I am so sorry.”

“Twice.”

I smirked. “I will make that up in a way that will help you forget.”

“And you will do so *two times* in one night.”

I chuckled. “Yes, Kaz. Twice.”

He grunted. “Perhaps, three times.”

“I don’t even know what you *think* I will do, but I can bet it will *only* be twice.”

“Hmmm.” His tone brightened. “If not for Misha, I would have gone crazy.”

“He kept you up-to-date?”

“He sent footage to my phone. I saw everything.”

“Oh.”

“It was terrifying to be so far from you and watching—”

“I’m fine.”

“I am proud of you for not letting anyone go.”

I swallowed.

“How far are you from the hotel now, *mysh*?”

The helicopter sped us away.

I looked out the window.

The hotel was now far off in the distance.

Paradiso Hotel had been our residence for a while. Kaz had rented out the entire building. The beautiful structure stood on a cliff above a white sandy beach. An enchanting garden surrounded the place and it was full of jasmine, citrus trees, and heaps of magenta bougainvillea.

Now hundreds of Mancuso, Gallo, and Romani people crowded the place.

I frowned. “They were coming for us, Kaz. And it’s so many. Misha may be right. We should head out of Italy—”

“Are you scared, *mysh*?”

Dread hit me. “Yes.”

The hotel became smaller and smaller as we flew away.

“Did you know that a lion’s roar is a territorial display that can be heard from at least three miles away?”

“Kaz, don’t you think this is a time to do more than talk about *lion facts*?”

“But, did you know that?”

“No, I had no idea that a lion’s roar could be heard three miles away.”

“The roar is so loud because the lion must let all enemies know what they will face, if they continue to fuck with his pride.”

“Okay.”

“How loud do you think *my* roar is?”

I smirked. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t?”

“No.” I sighed. “How loud, baby?”

“This loud.”

Suddenly, the hotel exploded. In seconds, fire spread out and split the structure in half, telling me that the bombs must have been placed on the center floors.

*Oh my God.*

Clouds of black smoke fought their way up the sides of Paridiso Hotel and painted the sky. Bright orange flames bulged out and decorated the hotel in scattered spots, blanketing the space in destruction. Then, the building began to crumble into itself. Windows burst from the foundation and rained down a waterfall of shattering glass and jagged shards. Thousands of bricks fell away and twisted in the air.

Soon the beautiful hotel would be reduced to a mountainous pile of burning rubble and ashes.

Everyone on the helicopter gazed out of the window, even Paolo.

In Baba’s lap, Paolo pointed at the hotel and whispered, “Boom.”

“*Yes, pumpkin.*” Baba turned away from the window and watched me with a neutral expression. “*The building went boom.*”

Those two of spades flashed in my head.

*Death, but death of our enemies. Is this it? Are we out of the clear?*

Kaz spoke on the line, “When it is a question of who will die, *us* or *them*...”

My bottom lip quivered.

“The answer will always be them, *mysh*. Never doubt the power of *us*. You walk with lions.”

I trembled. “I never will again.”

“However, I hope you like our new suite. I had something special put there.”

“What?”

“You will see.”

“And you will be there?”

“Soon, *mysh*. I still have a few more Italians to kill.”

“The Don?”

“And the guards surrounding him.”

I turned away from the explosion. “Be safe. Please. Stay close to Max, Jean-Pierre—”

He groaned in annoyance.

“Please, Baba said so.”

“I promise.”

“I need you, Kaz.” I placed my hand over my stomach. “And the baby needs you too.”

“Killing the Don will be a simple task. Do not worry. I am a lion after all.”

Now it was my turn to groan in annoyance.

“I will see you tonight, *mysh*. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He hung up.

I put the phone away and gazed back at the destruction.

More fire and smoke rose.

Baba spoke, "When we get to our next location, I will do a reading for you."

"Good." I twisted my fingers in my lap. "Blue, do you know where the rest of Harlem Crew is? Do you think they left the building before the bomb?"

"My understanding was that David gave them the location after the meeting and they quickly headed that way."

"Okay." I leaned back in the chair. "What about Paolo's two guards? Did we ever figure out why they just skirted their duties? We needed them today?"

"Umm..." Blue looked out of the window. "I will talk to Boris about it?"

I watched her. "Blue."

She turned to me.

"But, do you have an idea of what happened to them?"

She bit her lip.

I twisted my face in confusion. "What?"

Baba watched us.

Blue leaned forward. "I...I don't know if you already know about...ummm...last night, but I think that they were a part of the others..."

"What are you talking about?"

"So...Boris told me that when everything happened last night, Maxwell called Harlem Crew into the room with the Mancuso's...dead bodies...he wanted them to see everything and then he gave them a choice."

"What choice?"

"Maxwell told them that if they didn't want to deal with... your personality, then they would get a ticket home."

"Oh, God." I shivered. "Was Kaz there?"

Blue nodded. "Boris told me that a few people decided that they didn't want to stay."

I closed my eyes, scared of what she would say next.

“So...the Lion killed them.”

My body rocked with sadness.

*They had families. They were sons and daughters.*

Baba’s voice filled the air. “No matter how sad or upset this makes you, do not call Kazimir about this now, Emily.”

*Of course not.*

I opened my eyes and swallowed down my rising rage.

Baba pointed to me. “The Lion must focus.”

I fisted my hands in my lap. “I know.”

“This is a conversation for when you know he is safe and back with you.”

“Definitely.” I looked out the window.

*Be safe, Kaz. Come back to me fast...so I can kick your ass.*







# Chapter 20

## Sea Monsters

### Kazimir

Ruffo Castle loomed in front of my men and me.

I stood there, enjoying the sight.

The breathtaking fortification stood on the highest point of land right at the mouth of the Strait of Messina. The place was a formidable structure of massive spires and towers, each one crafted with care. Overlooking the sea, it possessed a vaulted entrance and massive courtyard. A grand, external staircase led to the Ruffo residence.

For those who embarked on a sea voyage in the Straits of Messina, the castle served as a welcome sight. The black and white lighthouse of Scilla rose just behind the castle walls and had been built to provide a reference to ships. It was still active today and managed by the Italian Navy.

Paolo Ruffo had purchased the castle in 1533. He was a member of one of the longest-standing noble families in Italy. The castle functioned as his residence until the early 18th century.

Whistling, Maxwell got to my side. “Yo. When are David and Harlem Crew returning?”

“Soon.” I pulled out my phone and checked it. There had still been no return calls from Emily.

Max looked at me. “What did you have David and them do?”

I put my phone up. “All will be revealed, when necessary.”

“Not when it comes to *my* people. I always need to know.”

I gestured to the French watching us several feet away. Thankfully, Jean-Pierre and his cousins kept a wide berth from us since we had been waiting in front of the castle.

I let out a long breath.

It was bad enough that I had to work with them. I damn sure would not be forced to smell their perfumes.

I leaned Maxwell's way. "I do not trust the ears around here."

"Man, you act like the French have supernatural hearing powers."

"Be patient."

"Whatever." Maxwell gazed at the castle. "Either way, this place is dope. What's it called?"

"Castello Ruffo di Calabria. It's a legacy of rare beauty, dating back to the Etruscan era."

He squinted his eyes. "Etruscan?"

"Related to an ancient people of Italy."

"More ancient than the Romans?"

"The Etruscan civilization was the highest in Italy and came before Rome was risen. Therefore, Romans were highly influenced by the Etruscans."

"So, the Etruscans were black?"

I raised my eyebrows. "What?"

"Ancient people with style that white people took from?" Maxwell pulled a joint out from his pocket. "Sounds like they were black to me."

I considered what I knew about them. "Actually... Etruscans were supposed descendants from refugees who fled the city of Troy when it fell to the Greeks."

Maxwell took out a lighter.

"Yet...they were led to Italy by the prince, Aeneas. He is a common figure in Greek mythology who is often described as dark-skinned."

"Boom." Maxwell winked at me. "You see what I mean?"

“However, dark skin could represent more of a tan complexion or—”

“That motherfucker was Black.”

“Well, the Etruscans were theorized to worship Ra, a sun deity, which suggests that they may have had ties to the ancient Egyptians.”

“So, they’re African?”

“Hmmm.” I rubbed my chin. “This is quite interesting.”

Maxwell lit his joint. “Why?”

“Now that I think of it. There are a lot of ancient works of art from the time of the Etruscans. Uncle Igor had several in his castle.”

“I bet you those motherfuckers looked black in the pictures and shit.”

“The art did depict dark-skinned people. However, the Romans, who later took over the Etruscan cities, claimed that the mosaics, statues, and paintings of Black people were actually depictions of Black slaves.”

Maxwell sucked his teeth. “Come on, man. Motherfuckers aren’t doing a bunch of mosaics and statues of slaves.”

I nodded. “Many of these images did show the dark-skinned people in positions of power.”

“Think about it.” Maxwell tapped the side of his head. “The Romans were hating.”

Grinning, I shrugged. “Regardless, this castle has been standing here for a long time.”

“Sometimes you are a smart dude.”

I frowned. “Sometimes?”

Maxwell looked back at the castle. “Please tell me you’re not going to blow this up too?”

“Why would I bomb this castle?”

“Man, I don’t know why you do things.” Maxwell took a hit of the joint. Smoke left his nostrils. “I just know one

thing.”

I stared at him.

“Don’t bomb this place.” Maxwell pointed at the castle.  
“My people built this.”

“You are *now* related to the Etruscans?”

“They’re distant-distant cousins.”

“As you would say...whatever.” I pulled out my phone and dialed Emily again.

She didn’t answer.

I stared at the phone.

Smoking his joint, Maxwell watched me. “She already texted you that she got to the place safely. Why do you keep calling over and over?”

“The more important question is...why doesn’t she answer?”

“Because she’s probably tired of talking to you, man. You can’t be all up in her ass all the time.”

“I can and I will.” I put the phone up.

Maxwell blew smoke out of his mouth.

“I want confirmation that she is safe.”

“She texted that they arrived.”

“Why a text and not a phone call?”

“Because you are supposed to be busy killing Don Fabrizio.” Maxwell gestured at the castle. “By the way, is the Don in there?”

“No.” I tapped the side of my pocket where the phone lay.

“Is he at least close by? We’ve been here for a good thirty minutes, man.”

“Do you have somewhere to be?”

“Motherfucker, I didn’t get all my sleep last night due to your crazy ass woman.”

“She’s not crazy.”

Maxwell blew smoke in my direction.

“And yes, the Don is close.” I turned around and pointed to the small fishing village with houses stacked right on the rocky shore. “Don Fabrizio lives in the city of Scilla, named after the legendary monster.”

The Strait of Messina outlined the village. Three kilometers wide, it was a narrow strait between the eastern tip of Sicily and the western tip of Calabria. The strait connected the Tyrrhenian Sea to the north with the Ionian Sea to the south, within the central Mediterranean.

Currently, tons of fishing boats floated in the strait. It was known for having strong currents and a bountiful amount of enormous swordfish. Apparently, swordfish couples liked to pass through the straits during certain seasons.

And these boats didn’t resemble typical ones. They were six meters long and equipped with five oars. Plus, each boat had a mainmast tree trunk that stood in the center and rose twenty-five meters high in the air. There, a man climbed up to the top and served as look out for the swordfish.

Maxwell frowned. “You said the village was named after a monster.”

“Yes.”

“What monster?”

“Scylla, from Greek mythology.”

“Never heard of him. And I like Greek mythology.”

“Scylla was a *female* monster who lived on one side of the strait. Her counterpart monster, Charybdis lives on the other side.”

“Two sea monsters?”

I nodded. “Legendary heroes like Odysseus, Jason, and Aeneas had to deal with them.”

“But was she a pretty monster?”

“You decide? She had tons of octopus looking arms with heads for hands that had sharp teeth—”

“Then, hell no.”

“She had been a beautiful nymph who was turned into a monster.”

“Why?”

“That’s not our concern. What is important is that we are looking at the capital of the ‘Ndrangheta.” I gestured to the other side of it. “The Don’s huge house is in that direction. We can’t see it from here.”

I had chosen Ruffo Castle as a great place to wait since the castle overlooked Scilla, giving us a great view.

I took in the breathtaking landscape of the village. It was going to be a shame how much we destroyed it today.

Scilla stretched out in front of us like a painting. The coastline was a series of steep drops and rocky cliffs that fell into the sea. Every angle represented a work of art.

The quaint village had houses built right up to the sea. Boats and dinghies were perched up between the houses. Other boats were docked in the many narrow alleyways lining the steep slopes.

The few times I visited the Don, I enjoyed feasting on the dishes of fresh fish.

I spoke, “In anticipation of us coming for him, the Don locked the village up, placing barriers at the few road openings.”

“Then, how are we getting in?”

“That is King David’s job to figure out.” I checked my watch. “And he will not disappoint.”

One of my men hurried over.

Along with the tons of gunners, we had brought five technicians with us. The men’s job was to hack into any security system that we had to deal with. This man was one of the five technicians.

However, I had him looking into our new hotel's security system. I wanted a view of my mouse and to get a hint of why she wasn't answering the phone or calling back.

Maxwell eyed him.

"Excuse me, sir." Fidgeting his fingers, the man stepped in front of me.

"Is my mouse in the suite?"

"She is not."

"Is she in the hotel?"

"We are not sure, sir."

I clenched my teeth. "Be sure."

He pursed his lips.

Rage rose within me. "Where is she?!"

"We are not sure, sir."

"Did you contact Misha?"

"We did."

"Well?!"

"He said that she is safe and fine. When we asked if *he* could send us footage, he said that he was staying out of this."

*What the hell did that mean? Staying out of what?*

The man cleared his throat. "Then, we looked into the hotel's security system and could not find her location."

"Then, find her."

"Sir, I do not think that is possible. It is a lot of rooms—"

"Find her." I closed the space between us. "I asked you to get a view of her minutes ago."

"Sir, the problem is that there are so many rooms—"

I slapped him so hard my hand ached. So hard he fell to the ground and grabbed the side of his face.

“Yo!” Maxwell opened his mouth. The joint fell from his lips.

I leaned over and glared at the man. “Find her!”

The man stared up at me in shock. Seconds later, he rushed to standing and then raced away.

Maxwell picked up his joint from the ground. “Dude, you can’t just be slapping grown men like that.”

“I can and I will. Be careful you don’t get slapped today.”

“I wish your ass would think about raising your motherfucking hand at me.” Maxwell pointed at my way with the joint. “It would be the last thing you did before you died.”

“I doubt that.”

Maxwell brushed dirt off the joint. “This is why you have so many enemies plotting behind your back.”

“No.” I turned around and stared at Scilla. “It is because everyone wants the throne that I sit on—”

“Naw, man. It is because you be slapping people and talking to motherfuckers in the most disrespectful ways.”

“Perhaps, you should smoke your joint and concern yourself with other things.”

“This motherfucker!” He placed the joint between his lips. “Em is fine. You’re being extra right now.”

“She should call back.”

“I bet she wants you to focus.”

My frown deepened.

*I hate being away from you, mysh. At least let me hear your voice.*

King David appeared. Wassily walked on his right. Harlem Crew was on the left, carrying large bags stuffed with something.

They stopped in front of us.

The French chose that moment to come over.



Maxwell quirked his brows at David. “Where’s the rest of my people, man?”

David frowned at Giorgio and then looked at Maxwell. “They are waiting by the boats, making sure no one takes them.”

“Boats? So, that’s how we will get to the Don.” I nodded. “Not a bad idea.”

David gestured to Harlem Crew. “We have tons of clothes for you all. This is to make sure we fit in.”

Jean-Pierre frowned. “Clothes?”

“Find something in the bag and put it on.” David smiled. “Today, we are all fishermen .”

One of Harlem Crew carried a bag over to the French. Jean-Pierre never moved his view from David as if waiting for him to elaborate.

Meanwhile, Giorgio’s face twisted in disgust. “Where did these clothes come from? A store or—”

“We grabbed the clothes off some fishermen who appreciated the stacks of euros we gave them.” David flashed Giorgio a wide smile. “If I were you, I would ignore the smell.”

“They are dirty?!”

“Are you suggesting that these hard-working men do not wash their clothes.”

“I am not wearing any of this.”

“Then, you can stay on the shore and babysit the vans.”

Jean-Pierre scowled at Giorgio. “Put the clothes on. You will not be wearing them for long.”

Giorgio sneered.

“Make sure those diamonds are put up too.” David turned back to me. “Like I said, we need to look the part.”

I crossed my arms across my chest. “What’s the plan, David?”

“We dress, get in the boats waiting for us on the side, journey through the strait, and sail to the cliffs. There’s several fishing poles in the boats to help us look the part.”

“Are you sure about this plan? Don Fabrizio would have men on the cliffs, watching out for Russians.” Jean-Pierre stepped forward. “With the number of us and amount of boats, it would look suspicious.”

“Apparently, it is swordfishing season. We have six boats.” David gestured to all the fisherman already out there. “We will have no problem fitting in. Of course, some courageous men will have to climb to the top of each boat.”

“Look. I don’t mind the clothes or climbing to the top.” Maxwell took a hit of his joint and then paused to exhale a cloud of smoke. “I’m just worried about the sea monsters.”

Everyone turned to him with confused expressions.

“Do not worry about them, Maxwell.” I smiled. “Only monsters on the sea will be us today.”





# Chapter 21

## Gone Fishing

### Kazimir

We went to a dark, narrow alley on the side of the castle that was blocked by our vans. There, we searched through the fishermen's items.

Wassily grabbed our jackets and the French's fragranced diamonds.

I loosened my tie and took it off.

"This is a lot of clothes, man." Shirtless, Maxwell rummaged through the bags. "Tell me something, David."

"Yes?"

I unbuttoned my shirt and slung it off.

Maxwell went to another bag. "Are there a bunch of naked Italian men running around the shore or something?"

David's face held a wicked smirk. "Let us not worry about that."

"Sounds like a bunch of naked men to me."

I gave my shirt to Wassily and went through my own bag.

Finding anything to fit me proved to be a challenge. Still, several lightweight, breathable t-shirts stuffed the bag, but most were too small. Many were made from polyester and nylon. A few were wool.

Then, there were tons of long-sleeved nylon shirts. The fishermen must have layered their clothing. One shirt was probably to keep them warm. The other possibly protected them from the sun.

Trusting the fishermen's choices, I found two shirts and put them on.

Louis walked around the alley completely naked. His cock swung from side to side like a pendulum. “Are there shoes too?”

“Eh, man!” Maxwell turned away from Louis. “No one told you to take your drawers off too.”

David gestured to another bag. “We have shoes over there, but I was not certain of everyone’s size.”

“Lots of blue in here.” Maxwell dumped one bag onto the ground. “But, no black though?”

“A smart fisherman chooses the color based on the surroundings of the fishing spot. The sea is crystal blue so these are the shades we have to choose from.”

I undid my pants and checked to see what the French were doing.

Somehow Jean-Pierre had already changed and was now sharpening his famous violin bow.

I squinted my eyes to get a better look.

The bow’s stick was dark brown and polished to a high sheen. I imagined the psycho sat over dead bodies every night, wiping the blood from the wood with a cloth. Surely, he had an erection when he did it.

A long, sharp blade made from tempered steel was where the bow’s hair should have been. I’d heard many stories about how Jean-Pierre loved to play a song on his enemies’ skin with the deadly bow.

With complete concentration, Jean-Pierre slid the blade back and forth across a rectangular block.

A second later, he caught me watching and raised the bow in the air. “Do you like it?”

“It makes more sense to bring a gun.”

“Oh, I will have guns.” Jean-Pierre twisted the bow to the side, showing me the blade’s deadly edge. “But, this is a special occasion that calls for music.”

“Just make sure you kill many people.”

“I plan to.” He stared at the blade. “And they will all dance to my tune.”

*Fucking psycho.*

I looked to the side.

Giorgio stood by the wall, glowering and not making any move to get clothes.

I frowned. “Is there a problem, Butler?”

“Is the Brotherhood’s budget not intact enough to get new clothes?”

“If you have a customer complaint be sure to write it down on a piece of paper and then stick it up your ass.”

Jean-Pierre eyed his cousin. “Giorgio, it will be fast.”

“Last time you made me wear smelly fabrics, I had a rash.”

“And you were well compensated.”

Mumbling, Giorgio walked over to a bag. “I better be *doubly* compensated this time. I do not have my decontaminating spray.”

*Fucking idiot.*

I put my attention back on the shirts and dressed.

David came over and handed me light blue nylon pants. “These should fit. They’re the biggest in the bag.”

From the back of the alley, Maxwell raised his voice. “I may need those pants, David. We already confirmed I have the biggest dick in the alley.”

“Are we sure about that?” Louis bent over, peering into one bag and exposing his bare ass to everyone. “We can get a ruler—”

“Man, if you don’t put some clothes on.” Maxwell yanked out turquoise pants that had tons of pockets on them.

Then, the alley went silent as everyone finished dressing.

“These are the most important items—hats, gloves, and sunglasses.” Soon David came over to us with another bag.

“They are worn for protection from the sun. However, we will be wearing them to further our disguises.”

I expected him to hand out *coppolas*. They were the traditional flat caps typically worn in Sicily and Calabria. Instead, David gave us light-weight hats with wide brims.

Next, he passed out different shaped black glasses and lots of blue fingerless gloves.

Giorgio waved David away. “I will wear my own gloves.”

“Suit yourself.” David walked. “Just make sure you look the part.”

Twenty minutes later, we loaded into the boats and journeyed out into the Tyrrhenian Sea.

In one boat, I sat with David, Maxwell, Giorgio, Jean-Pierre, and two of my main guards. Wassily climbed up to the top of the mast and served as lookout.

In the boat to our right, Harlem Crew rowed forward. Several played the part, holding their fishing poles. And after five minutes of rowing, one of them had actually caught a swordfish. Appearing like real fishermen, they celebrated and dragged it on board.

On my left was a boat filled with Boris, Louis, and several of my men.

Behind us, five more boats followed, packed with men from the Brotherhood, French, and Harlem Crew.

Our boats were all scattered and far apart. The last thing I wanted to do was give onlookers the impression of a huge naval fleet heading to battle.

I smiled at David. “This will work.”

He beamed. “I do feel good about this plan.”

A flock of seagulls squawked as they flew by us, flapping their white wings. Their yellow beaks were pointed at the crystal blue water, probably searching for fish to eat.

*The Italians will be out of the war soon.*



I remained at the head of the boat, needing the best view. A salty cool breeze brushed by carrying the scent of fish and seaweed with it.

On my left, David placed several rigs on the end of lines, telling me he probably liked to fish on his off time. Once done, he handed poles to Jean-Pierre who then passed them down to the French.

Whistling, Maxwell sat on the other side of David. He readied his fishing pole and put his line in the water. "I hope I catch something too. Wouldn't that be wild?"

Next to him, Jean-Pierre placed his violin case by his feet and grabbed a fishing pole. "Fresh fish is a good treat at the end of a nice battle. Scilla has some of the best swordfish sandwiches I have ever tasted."

A low grumbling noise sounded from Giorgio as he pouted on Jean-Pierre's side. Clearly, the Butler was still not pleased to be wearing another man's clothing.

Yet, the Butler's displeasure brought me joy.

Perhaps, that was also why David kept glancing his way and chuckling.

*We finish this with the Don.*

Relaxing, I took in the sights.

It was a beautiful day. The sea served as a perfect mirror and reflected the cerulean blue of the sky.

I leaned a little over the edge and looked deeper into the water. There was an extraordinary transparency to the Tyrrhenian Sea. Tremendous natural treasures scattered along the bottom and speckled the seabed with a myriad of colors. There was another world down there. Purple, green, and red sponges, starfish, sea lilies, and anemones. Bright colored fish darted around in the water. I even spied some stingrays and small sharks swimming amongst them.

I returned my view to Scilla.

*We will be there soon.*

My guards barely needed to row. The boat rocked with the rhythm of the shimmering sea and drew us forward as if the universe adorned the mission.

Every few minutes, water splashed against the hull, catching the sunlight and sending a rainbow into the air. I also took that as a positive sign.

I checked my watch.

We were twenty minutes to the Don's house.

*Maybe...I should see if she is okay.*

I pulled out my phone and dialed my mouse.

No response came.

I confirmed that I had cellular service and dialed again.

*Nothing.*

David leaned my way. "Still no answer from the Mouse?"

Maxwell loudly sighed. "Are you for real, man? Like... you're taking pussy whipped to the next level."

I tried to call Emily again. "No answer."

David held his fishing pole. "I checked in with Baba earlier. She told me that she planned on giving the Mouse a new reading. Perhaps, that's why she hasn't been answering."

My nerves stilled. "When do you think it will be done?"

"I am not sure."

"Hmm." I considered the new information. "Maybe, I should call Baba."

"Naw, man. I have an idea." Maxwell placed his fishing pole to the side, reached over David, and held out his hand. "Give me the phone. I forgot to tell you that Em has a different number with a new code, just in case Fela tracked her."

"What?" I handed him the phone. "When did this happen?"

Max took the phone and slung it off the boat.

Stunned, I watched my phone soar into the air and then instantly drop into the water with a splash.

Max leaned back in his seat and picked up his pole.  
“Focus.”

Rage bubbled inside of me. Slowly, I turned his way.  
“Focus?”

“Focus, man.”

Fast, I rushed up and tried to jump over David to grab Maxwell. My hands yearned to squeeze and break his neck. David quickly grabbed me and kept me back as much as he could.

Maxwell saw me coming and rolled his eyes. “You need to chill the fuck out.”

“Chill out?!”

“It’s not like *you* can’t afford another phone.”

I almost got out of David’s hold.

Jean-Pierre jumped up and got behind David, further blocking my path.

I pushed against my number one. “Let me go, David!”

“You know I cannot do that.”

The boat violently rocked splashing water inside and knocking some of the poles into the sea.

I roared. “Get over here, Maxwell!”

Ignoring me, Maxwell rushed to get his pole from the sea and grabbed it before it sunk. “Come over for what, man? You don’t want these hands.”

I strained against David’s hold. The King would not let me go.

“But, Maxwell,” I growled, “I want to *focus* on you.”

“Focus on these nuts!”

Jean-Pierre remained standing as the second barrier.  
“Gentlemen, we have an audience.”

I scanned the sea.

Tons of fishermen looked our way.

Further ahead, the first boat with Harlem Crew rowed away fast as if they were too embarrassed to be seen with us.

David winked at the onlooking fishermen and spoke in Italian, “We are so excited about the swordfish today. So excited...we’re fighting over the *poles*.”

Several of the fishermen turned back to what they were doing. Some shook their heads.

I sat down.

David and Jean-Pierre lowered too, yet remained between Maxwell and me.

Meanwhile, Maxwell wore a smirk.

*I will get you back later.*

Everyone went silent.

My guards sped up their rowing.

*Now how will I check on Emily and my child?*

Needing to be calmed, I took in the breathtaking view—the blue of the sea, the contrast of white houses stacked on rugged brown cliffs.

I spotted Scilla Beach off in the distance with its coarse white sand and was ready for violence.

*Soon. Very soon.*

Jean-Pierre cleared his throat. “Have you decided who will take over the region, after the Italians and Black Axe are killed?”

I didn’t turn around. “Not you.”

“Why not?”

“You are too ambitious.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, *Butcher*.”

“I am just a simple business man, hoping to expand.”

“You made friends with my mouse to trigger a historic alliance between the Brotherhood and Corsican.” I turned his way. “Genius, yet completely suicidal.”

Jean-Pierre held out his hands. “How was it suicidal?”

“I do not like any man too close to my mouse.”

“How could I not be friends with such a lovely woman?”

“Careful.”

“I would never do anything to shake the strong foundation of love that you two hold.”

I sneered.

“However, you need to maintain a stronger alliance with the Corsican.”

“Do I now?”

“Love inspires war.” Jean-Pierre picked up a fishing pole. “You love Emily more than an average man would care for a woman.” He placed his line into the water. “Thus... making Emily a powerful weapon to use against you. Fela understood that.”

“And Fela will die soon. Should you hope to join Fela, let me know.”

Jean-Pierre frowned. “I do not.”

“Are you scared to die?”

“In life, death silently dances in everyone’s shadow, twirling and twisting about.”

“Not exactly an answer, Butcher.”

“Basically, all humans are afraid. However, our success in surviving against death, depends on our working together. My intention is for you and me to become close friends.”

“Aww. So the spies you put in Harlem Crew were to find out what type of presents I would want for Christmas. It was all about friendly surprises.”

“The spies were to protect the Mouse.”

My jaw twitched. “Only *I* do that.”

Maxwell sighed. “This boat ride is long as fuck. I almost wish a sea monster would burst out of the waters. I don’t even know if we all are going to make it to the Don without killing each other first.”

Jean-Pierre spoke. “Kazimir, we will be friends one day.”

“And how will you manage that, pansy?”

“I plan to give you all your enemies’ heads on silver platters.”

“I prefer the finest porcelain rimmed in gold.”

“Noted.”

“Yo. Let’s lighten the conversation up.” Maxwell looked at King David. “So, you got your tradition back right? A little oral sex before fighting?”

David nodded. “Baba said it could return.”

“So, what chick did you get to suck your dick before this?” Chuckling, Maxwell nudged Jean-Pierre. “David has a tradition where he has to cum before battling. I’m thinking about stealing that from him.”

“Well...” David cleared his throat. “I actually cut the tradition off. No more blow jobs before battle.”

“What? Why the fuck would you do that, man?”

“I did it for a special woman. I wanted her to know how serious I was about courting her.”

Suddenly, Giorgio leaned forward in his seat and targeted David with a furious gaze.

“Oh, yeah.” Maxwell looked at David, then Giorgio, and released an exasperated breath. “Fuck it. Enough with the chit chat. Maybe, we should just go over the plan again.”

David pointed ahead of us. “We hit the cliffs. There are two of the Don’s security guards at the bottom with guns.

There are six more men spread along the cliffs. They are not used to anyone bothering them, so I expect them to be lazy.”

“Makes sense.” Maxwell bobbed his head. “Most wouldn’t come by boat to get it popping on the Don.”

“Exactly.” David lowered his hand. “When we arrive, we need to peacefully get on the shore, get to the men, and then kill them without shooting.”

“I get it.” Maxwell turned his view back on the pole. “If there’s no noise, then there isn’t a signal for the Don’s people inside.”

“Correct. We don’t want them to rush the Don away and we need to catch his security crew by surprise.”

I spoke, “How many men are guarding him?”

“It’s war mode. Misha told me around forty guards are throughout the house.”

*You’re scared that I’m coming. Aren’t you?*

David continued, “Make sure you carry your fishing poles onto the shore.”

I put my gaze on the cliffs. “And do not forget your guns.”

The Don’s seaside mansion appeared.

White, with turquoise trim, it was a sight to behold. It had three-levels, panoramic windows, and several long terraces.

It had a long flight of steps that led to a long, low dock.

On either side of the mansion were marble fountains with statues carved out of stone.

I’d been to the Don’s mansion a few times.

The fountain’s rippling waters fed into a large pool, which was reserved for the Don’s many swans to enjoy.

Even this far from shore, I spotted the several guards, looking fierce and dangerous on the sides. There were even three large sentry guns on the roof with men behind them.

I lowered my cap and picked up a pole. “We won’t be going to the Don’s dock?”

“Of course not. I thought the cliffs on the side would work better due to the guns on the roof.”

The more time I spent fighting next to David, the more I confirmed that he was the correct person to be with me.

Maxwell spoke behind me. “Too bad we don’t have any fish to bring on shore.”

“We do,” David replied. “Harlem Crew’s boat has piles of fish. We bought a good bit from the men who gave us their clothes—”

“The butt naked men.” Maxwell chuckled. “Eh, you think the Italian dudes will trip with all the brothers showing up on shore?”

David raised his eyebrows. “Brothers?”

“Black guys.”

“Oh. No. Black Axe has been allowed to fish in the village since the pact many years ago. It would be nothing out of the ordinary to see many *brothers* showing up with fish.”

“Then, we are going to have some fun.”

The cliffs came in sight.

*We sure will.*







# Chapter 22

## When Life Gives You Lemons

### Kazimir

*Here we go.*

Our boat approached, cutting through the water.

A few of our boats still floated far out behind us. They wouldn't make shore until several minutes later.

I looked forward.

Seagulls squawked from the top of the cliffs, diving and wheeling in the air, cawing and fighting over scraps of fish.

Harlem Crew's boats already crowded the shore. Several of them unloaded fishing poles. They'd secured their vessels with rope. Others threw down loads of deep silver-blue swordfish.

Our boat continued forward, heading to an open spot by the cliffs.

*Nice and steady.*

I made sure my guns remained in their holsters.

We just needed to quietly get all of the men on the outside of the mansion and not alert the security inside. It would take patience, silence, and stealth.

I put my back to the cliffs and perused my unruly crew.

Jean-Pierre placed his violin case on his lap.

*Where are his guns?*

I sighed.

Already we were starting off badly.

*Is he really going to battle with just the bow?*

What would the Don's men think when they saw us? Were we supposed to be a group of fishermen who enjoyed classical music? Or were we the sort of fishermen that apparently hired a personal violinist to journey with us on sea trips? And how was he supposed to defend himself with just the bow?

*Perhaps, the psycho will die today?*

I curved my lips into a huge smile.

Before the boat could make it to shore, Giorgio stood and placed white plastic gloves over his blue ones. "Let's get this over with quickly."

"Relax," King David spoke through clenched teeth. "Until we get inside of the house, we must be patient, and take this slow, and kill them without using our guns—"

"I have been in these dirty clothes long enough!"

David scowled. "Sit down and shut up!"

The boat hit the side of the rock.

Giorgio stomped by Jean-Pierre and climbed out.

David sneered. "The damn idiot will get us caught."

I checked the Don's security on the cliffs. Like David had explained earlier, two of the Don's security stood at the bottom with machine guns.

Thankfully, they didn't pay any mind to Giorgio now on the rocky shore or us in the boat.

Due to Scilla being a fishing village, it would not be odd for tons of fishermen to load up on these cliffs.

Before joining the 'Ndrangheta, Don Fabrizio's grandfather had been a fisherman. No doubt the Don had joyful memories of going fishing with his grandfather. Maybe, that was why he chose to build his luxury mansion here. Perhaps, he wanted to enjoy watching fishermen from his balcony and reminiscing on the nostalgia of his childhood days.

Currently, the Fabrizio's two guys watched Harlem Crew chattering about their swordfish and bragging to each other

about who had the biggest fish. Three of Harlem Crew even held huge fish high in the air.

*Good job.*

I had to admit that my mouse's people were on point.

Still keeping my hat's brim low, I glanced further up.

Six more men spread along the cliffs, carrying semi-automatic rifles. Most of them gazed out on the water and didn't even glance our way.

I raised my view higher.

The three gunners on the roof had those huge sentry weapons pointed in the other direction. They probably anticipated me coming from the front of the house, not the back.

*Never try to guess the Lion's moves. You will be killed every time.*

I assessed the roof's sentry guns. They were so big and long, they could have easily been mounted on a Navy vessel and used in war. Each gun had two-foot-long barrels with long belts of bullets to feed them. Huge scopes were attached to the tops.

I went back to Giorgio. The Butler stood on the rocks and dug into his pockets.

*What is he getting? More gloves?*

I checked on my crew.

Everyone rose in their boats slyly checking their weapons and grabbing fishing poles.

Maxwell sucked his teeth and yanked his pole into the boat. "I never got that damn fish."

I smirked. "Maybe, if you had not tossed a phone at the fish, they would have come by."

"Yeah. Yeah." Maxwell lifted his pants.

I spotted Glock 27s in both ankle holsters.

“At least, I’ll get to kill some Italians today.” Maxwell patted himself down, telling me he also had guns in his shoulder holster.

Looking like an idiot, Jean-Pierre left the boat with his violin case.

*He is really serious.*

Maxwell and David followed.

Wassily climbed down from the mainmast, went to the corner of the boat, and grabbed a long item covered in tarp. It must have been heavy. He took his time hauling it over to me.

I stared at it. “What’s that?”

“I thought you would want to bring your rocket launcher.”

I grinned. “I really like you, Wassily.”

He nodded. “I will hold it for you until we get in—”

Shots fired.

*What the fuck?!*

I dove face down on the wooden slats of the boat.

Wassily hit my side.

More shots rang out.

“What happened?” I wrenched my gun out of my holster, lifted my head, and checked for the two initial security men.

Their bodies lay dead at the bottom of the cliffs. Shock decorated their faces. Blood spilled from their foreheads.

*Who killed them?*

I raised my view.

Giorgio darted up the boulders like a maniac—intent, quick, agile—twisting and turning in the air. So goddamn fast, it was hard for my eyes to keep focus on him.

He vaulted from one jutting rocky ledge to the next. Never still. Never at rest. Firing his gun in long, wide bursts of five or six bullets that sent sparks flying. His targets fell back—one

man with his eye blown out and another with a bloody hole in his jawbone.

*So much for patient and silent.*

Due to Giorgio, everyone else broke character and had been forced to follow.

Fast, Harlem Crew dropped those fish, grabbed their guns, and raced up the cliffs.

“Damn it.” I returned my view to the idiot.

Four Italian soldiers were left, all bearing semi-automatic rifles and sprinting towards us.

They fired.

Dodging bullets, Giorgio leapt up the cliffs with cat-like agility and accuracy, shooting at one man’s neck and then another’s leg.

Blood sprayed. Both fell back, yet one still aimed at Giorgio.

Maxwell got him in the head.

David blasted the other in the chest.

Giorgio sped after the last two.

David and Maxwell followed, firing at the enemy.

Meanwhile, Jean-Pierre strolled up the cliffs with his violin case as if on holiday and enjoying the scenery.

*Fucking French!*

I yelled at Wassily. “Hand me the rocket launcher!”

Up above, more bullets whistled through the air.

*I hope they killed the last two.*

Wassily snatched the tarp off. My baby shimmered in the sunlight.

Fast, I grabbed it from him, placed the launcher’s back on my shoulder, and aimed for the roof.

Thoroughly alarmed, the men had already begun twisting those massive sentry guns our way.

*Stupid Butler!*

I targeted the middle sentry gun since he had faced us first.

Next, I pulled the trigger. My baby rattled and popped, launching a rocket in the direction of the building.

The boat rocked from the impact.

I staggered back to keep my balance.

The rocket zoomed at an alarming rate of speed and then soared upward on a cloud of sulfur and smoke.

Screams rose from the roof as the men took cover.

The rocket hit the middle gun, knocking it into the air where it exploded into a massive cloud of black smoke and orange flames. Then, the burning mass of twisted metal rained down on the roof, knocking a second gun into the air.

I aimed at the third gun and shot a rocket. This one landed on the last sentry gun in a flash of light and fire, destroying it in seconds.

Noise sounded from behind me.

I checked over my shoulder.

The other boats had finally reached us. Tons of Russians, French, and Harlem Crew piled onto the shore and rushed out with their guns in front of them.

Already there were people on the roofs, putting out the fires with extinguishers.

*You can save the roof for now, but the whole house will be ashes soon.*

“Let’s have some fun.” I handed the rocket launcher to Wassily, climbed out of the boat, and raced up the cliff with everyone else. After two minutes, my knees ached. I didn’t know how Giorgio had sprinted and leapt up the cliff so fast.

Up ahead, the sounds of war rang out. Men screamed. Guns blasted. Glass shattered. Metal crashed and boomed.



I made it to the top of the cliff.

Wassily rushed to my side.

We approached the house and then hurried into the back of the mansion.

Tons of men—mine and the Don's—crowded a huge living room, shooting and fighting, spraying blood all over the plush white carpet and velvet gold couches. Bullets riddled the paintings on the walls.

With both guns in front of me, I stayed low and headed forward.

A dead man lay stuck between the top lid of a grand piano. His head was burst open, exposing a smashed brain.

The stench of smoke and death filled the air.

It was hard to pay attention to who was shooting at who. All I could do was remain alive.

The first Italian that headed for me, I blasted—two in the chest and one in the head.

A man screamed on my right in Russian.

I turned that way.

A bullet had struck him in the neck. Blood gushed out, and he fell to the ground.

Men bumped into me, either running past or trying to take cover.

Heading my way, a man screamed in Italian, "*The Lion!*"

I fired.

He crashed to the ground.

David hit my side. "Fucking Butler ruined the plan."

"Where are the French now?"

"Up ahead with Maxwell." David took the lead. "This way."

We left the living room.

The hallway was a slaughterhouse. Bodies piled up on either side. Some were Brotherhood. The rest were the Don's.

At the end of the hallway, a few Harlem Crew fought viciously against the Italians, grappling and stabbing.

David looked at Wassily. "Help them."

Wassily headed their way, while we sprinted up the circular staircase.

Dead men littered the steps.

On the second level, we turned the corner and entered a large hallway.

An almost dead Italian soldier lay on his side beside a smashed vase. His breathing was shallow, and a thin line of blood trickled from his mouth. His glassy eyes stared at me, and I could see the horror of death in them.

We rushed forward.

Maxwell stood at the end of the hallway, peering into a doorway.

*What is he doing?*

We got to Maxwell.

I looked into the room that he had been staring at.

With a smile on his face, Jean-Pierre battled six men by himself, slicing and dicing. Dancing around one and slashing another's throat. Sidestepping a punch and thrusting the bow's point into a groin. Ducking under one blow and carving a razor-sharp line into a forehead. Slipping under one man's lunge to chop his hand off. Weaving to the side, to take out the last one's kneecaps.

"I would jump in." Maxwell showed us his right arm. His sleeve was cut and a little blood trickled from his flesh. "But last time the motherfucker accidentally got me."

I turned back to Jean-Pierre.

All six men now lay dead on the floor.

The Butcher wiped the blade on one of the corpse's pants and then took a dramatic sweeping bow.

I scowled. "You could have simply shot them."

"Where is the finesse in that?" Jean-Pierre placed the bow by his side.

One man that I thought was dead, stirred and tried to get up. Jean-Pierre looked his way and thrust the point of his bow into the man's throat with such force that it hacked him open to his spine.

Maxwell chuckled. "I guess that's why they call you the Butcher."

Rolling my eyes, I headed away. "The Don is probably on the third level."

Maxwell called back, "Must be. He wasn't in his master bedroom. We already checked."

I stormed back toward the circular staircase.

They followed.

King David loaded his gun. "And where pray tell is the idiot Butler who ruined my plan?"

Maxwell got to David's right. "You sure you want to know the answer?"

David twisted his face in annoyance. "What is the idiot doing now?"

Jean-Pierre strolled behind us. "Being that we are all friends, I believe the name calling is unjust."

David scowled at Maxwell. "Where is the Butler?"

"Motherfucker is still in the Don's master suite." Maxwell smirked. "Taking a shower."

"Excuse me?" I turned and glared at Jean-Pierre. "Explain why the hell your cousin decided to wash during our fucking mission?"

"Apparently, he is dirty."

“You have to admit.” Maxwell laughed. “Dude *does* have class.”

David growled, “I hope someone shoots his ass in the bathroom.”

We rounded the corner, hit the staircase, and raced up the steps.

The noise of war echoed off the walls and rocked the foundation—screams of agony and gunfire, booming and banging.

We hit the third floor.

“The Don likes his greenhouse.” I took the lead. “He always holds meetings in there.”

David rushed with me. “Due to the Butler alarming everyone, he might have escaped.”

“Hopefully not.” I increased my speed. “The Italians took out the fire on the roof, telling me that they might be trying to land a helicopter. He could think I have people outside of the village.”

“Well,” David smiled. “We do have men out there, waiting with guns.”

“Good job as always, David. You need a promotion.”

“I agree.”

Maxwell called back, “I need one too. And a vacation.”

“You’ve been traveling with the French. Surely, that was a fucking cruise compared to us.”

Maxwell mumbled, “One would think, but they would be wrong.”

We reached the greenhouse.

David opened the door.

Maxwell and Jean-Pierre barreled in first with their weapons out.

Potted plants packed the room. Sunlight poured through the glass ceiling.

Positioned among the many plants, five of the Don's enforcers stood with assault rifles and machine guns at the ready. They instantly opened fire.

Bullets whizzed and ricocheted off the glass and potted plants. Chunks of wood and dirt flew. Shattered glass rained down.

Maxwell and David returned fire, hitting one in a thigh and another in the shoulder.

Jean-Pierre disappeared behind tall vines.

I dove on the floor, pressed myself against a pot of bamboo, and shot one in the foot. He crashed to the floor.

Then, I got him in the head.

Some of the gunfire decreased.

"Two left!" Maxwell shot a guy in the chest. The man fell to the ground and then tried to raise his gun.

"Eh!" Maxwell shot him in the neck. "Stay dead!"

Jean-Pierre slung a cut off head our way. "Last one gone!"

*Psycho.*

The head landed next to Maxwell's feet. He jumped back. "Motherfucker, you could have just said that."

Jean-Pierre appeared by several rose bushes. "I prefer evidence."

"And I prefer decapitated heads not rolling by my feet." Maxwell walked away.

"The Don is definitely in here." I rose from the ground and scanned the room. "Those were his main enforcers."

We searched through the greenhouse, moving plants and flowers to the side.

Maxwell stomped through rows of plants. "Man, this place smells amazing. You would think it would be a rosy fragrance, but it's something else."

I sniffed the air and shrugged. "Citrusy."

“Yeah, man. Like we are swimming in a cool, sweet glass of lemonade.”

I stopped at the bookcase lining the wall. “Hmmm.”

*Bookshelf in a greenhouse? I don't think so.*

Maxwell's voice sounded behind me. “Maybe, it's because of all these fruit trees over here. Smells so good, I'm getting hungry.”

“Since the Butler has taken this time to shower,” David said. “You might as well sit down and have a lovely lunch, Maxwell. You can go in the Don's kitchen and make a sandwich.”

I went up to the bookcase, pulled away a few books, and slung them on the floor.

Annoyance laced Jean-Pierre's voice. “My cousin is the reason why we are safely in this house.”

“Is that what you think?” David chuckled. “He ruined my plan.”

“In my cousin's defense, we believed *your plan* was a suggestion not some concrete—”

“I say the plan. You follow.” David's voice rose. “Next time, do not *think!* Just *do!*”

Maxwell spoke, “I think these are oranges over here.”

I yanked off another row of books and spotted a gold button in the back. “Interesting.”

“And these are lemons for sure. Shit.” Maxwell loudly inhaled. “This is why the room smells good. It could be the lemons.”

I hit a button and stepped back.

A beep sounded.

Then, the whole bookcase slid to the right, revealing a small room.

*Perfect.*

There, Don Fabrizio sat in a chair with his breathing machine next to him. A clear mask was strapped onto his face. The machine produced a low, rumbling hum. A cellphone lay in his lap.

His hand shook as he held a gun and pointed my way.

I sneered. "Put it down."

Reluctantly, he dropped the gun to the ground.

I studied him.

Today, the Don wore a yellow suit, vest, and jacket with a pale yellow shirt. However, his dark red tie made him look like a lemon that was bleeding at the top.

I raised my gun.

"Wait." The Don held his hand in front of him. "Wait. I have information on Fela."

Jean-Pierre got to my side.

I aimed at his face. "What information?"

"Fela is coming here to meet with me."

I lowered the gun. "When?"

"Now."

Jean-Pierre and I exchanged glances.

"I-I swear to you." The Don pointed to his lap. "Check my phone. You will see our messages."

Jean-Pierre stepped forward, picked up the phone, and walked off. "What's your code to get in?"

"0556." The Don watched me. "I can help you get Fela. *He* is your true enemy."

"Yet, you planned to meet with him."

"You killed my sons."

"Because they tried to kill me."

"Kazimir, you are young, but one day you will grow old, look past power, and see the importance of family."

“I see it now.”

“Yet, you continue to make enemies of everyone—”

“They come for me.”

“And you welcome them.” The Don pulled off his mask and wheezed. “I heard the Mouse is pregnant. You must make friends in Italy if you plan to keep your child safe.”

“You should remain silent. I could simply shoot you...” I grinned. “Or I could take my time.”

The Don pursed his lips and placed the mask back over his face.

Maxwell walked over. “Can I ask him something?”

I shrugged. “Go ahead.”

Maxwell looked at him. “Why does it smell so good in here? I keep sniffing the orange trees, but don’t get that fragrance I’m looking for.”

The Don pointed to a small tree in the corner. It was three feet tall and about a foot wide. It had four lemons hanging from thick branches. And these lemons looked different. They were bright yellow with deep green stripes. “You are smelling the Variegated Pink lemon tree.”

“What?” Maxwell grinned and headed to it. “This little baby is making the whole room smell?”

“It is.” The Don adjusted his mask. “It is also an eye-catching variety because, as the name implies, it’s not yellow on the inside, but pink.”

“Damn!”

“Variegated Pink lemons are prized for their sweet, juicy fruit.”

“That’s probably why they smell so good too.” Maxwell bent over and inhaled one. “Yep! This is the smell.”

“When my wife was alive, she would make an amazing pink lemon cake with these.” The Don leaned back in his chair



and sighed. “Salvatore would slice a few and put it in a glass of soda to give it an added taste.”

“You know what?” Maxwell bobbed his head. “For some reason, I’m now remembering that my mother used to use lemons to condition her hair. On Sunday mornings, I remember squeezing a bunch of them for her. Her hair shined after it.”

“My daughters used the juice for their nails.”

“That’s smart.”

“The plant you are currently in front of took four years to produce fruit.”

“Damn, man. that’s a long time.”

“Gardening requires patience.”

I glared at Maxwell. “Are you done asking questions about the lemon tree or would you like the Don to give you a tour of the garden?”

Maxwell rolled his eyes. “This motherfucker.”

I turned to Jean-Pierre. “Is Fela coming or not?”

Jean-Pierre nodded. “He planned to not only bring the Italians men, but they discussed a ploy to take Pavel’s son and lure out the Mouse.”

I put my attention back on the Don. “Is that right?”

“It was simply a discussion, not a clear plan put into place.”

“Hmmm.” I aimed my gun at him.

The Don raised his hands. “I can be useful to you.”

Jean-Pierre walked over with the phone. “He probably could.”

I frowned. “I have enough frenemies.”

“Let me live so that I can—”

I shot him in the head and lowered the gun. “Let’s wait to see if Fela will arrive.”

“Too bad we couldn’t just wait for the Don to finish his fucking sentence.” Maxwell flipped his middle finger at me.

I sneered. “Do you want that broken off?”

“You are too quick with the gun, man. You got all that knowledge about fucking ancient Italians and shit, but your street smarts be off sometimes.” Maxwell picked up the lemon tree and headed to the balcony.

“Where are you going?”

“To smoke!”

I frowned. “But, why are you taking the tree?”

“Motherfucker, it is a Variegated Pink lemon tree. I’m keeping it!”

King David came over. “So we wait for Fela’s arrival?”

I nodded. “Two birds. One blood bath.”

“No need.” Jean-Pierre scrolled through the phone and shook his head. “Fela saw the smoke from the roof.”

The Butcher handed me the phone.

I read the text.

**Fela:** I see smoke. It looked like an explosion. Are you in trouble?

**Don Fabrizio:** The Russians are here! Help!

Fela never responded.

I put the Don’s phone in my pocket. “Then, we head to the new hotel.”

“I’ll grab Maxwell.” David glared at Jean-Pierre. “Perhaps, you can tell your idiot cousin to dry off and dress.”

I shut the bookshelf, closing the dead don inside. I was eager to get to Emily.

*Why didn’t you answer, mysh?*

I smirked.

*Do you need to be disciplined with my cock this evening?*

I headed away.

Talking on his phone, David walked off the balcony.

Maxwell followed, holding the lemon tree in one arm and taking a hit of his joint with the other hand.

“Alright.” David hung up and looked at me. “The other problem could be fixed this week.”

I stopped in front of him. “What problem?”

“Pavel’s son.”

Maxwell looked at us.

I nodded. “You found suitable guardians?”

David smiled. “I had someone doing a search on possible guardians for Paolo. They already have possibilities for Italy and they are in this region.”

“Good.”

David nodded. “And even *Baba* would like these people.”

“Have them sent to the new hotel tonight. Emily and I will meet them.”

Max blew out smoke. “Meet who?”

“The guardians. Paolo’s new parents.”

“Dude, Em put braids in his hair. It’s a wrap.” Maxwell took another hit of his joint.

“What do you mean it is a wrap?”

“That’s your son now.”

I glared at him. “My mouse understands that we will not be keeping Paolo.”

“She put cornrows in his hair.”

“Maxwell, I do not know what hair braiding means in America, but in Russia, it is simply styling.”

“Naw, man. It’s not an American thing. It’s an *Em thing*. She is putting her little print on him when she does that.”

“Fine. If that is true then even more, we will meet the guardians tonight, so she doesn’t imprint anymore.”

Maxwell shook his head. “You might as well give Paolo your last name and keep it moving, man.”

“A traitor’s son?” I leaned my head to the side. “Never. Even if I wanted to, it would be difficult to keep him safe back in Moscow.”

“I see the Brotherhood is on some Draconian shit.” Maxwell headed away. “You just better hope Eminita doesn’t have anything to say about it!”

David quirked his brows. “Who’s Eminita?”

I frowned. “Ignore him.”





# Chapter 23

## The Phone Call

### Emily

We arrived in front of our new location. The hotel had its own helicopter landing pad.

As we lowered, I scanned the space.

It was on a high cliff and provided an amazing view of the sea.

Once we landed, the helicopter's engine shut off.

The hotel staff rushed over, dressed in impeccable white uniforms with gold buttons.

"No. No." Sitting on Baba's lap, Paolo opened and closed his little hands. "*Mysh. Mysh.*"

"Aww, Paolo." Baba frowned. "Is our time already over?"

"*Mysh, Baba.*"

"Okay. But, you are hurting Baba's feelings." She brought him over to me. "Baba wanted to hold her little Paolo all day."

I grabbed him. "Hey, buddy."

Paolo wrapped those little arms around my neck. "*Mysh.*"

Valentina looked out the window. "Interesting, brother. I see what you did."

"What did Kaz do?"

"We are in Sicily. Right on the edge of the Strait of Messina." Valentina pointed to the shimmering water. "The Strait is between the eastern tip of Sicily and the western tip of Calabria in Southern Italy. It connects the Tyrrhenian Sea to the north with the Ionian Sea to the south."

"But, should we be in Sicily?"

“The Sicilians have made no move to help the Mancuso Family. Some would see it as a sign of respect to the Russians.” She shrugged. “Although we know that the Sicilians want us to take out the Mancusos for them.”

“Yet still...” I frowned. “Is it a good idea to be over here? I don’t want any new enemies.”

Valentina grinned. “If the Sicilians didn’t want us over here, Kazimir would have never been able to rent out this hotel. The Sicilians know all.”

That didn’t make me feel any better.

Still holding Harlem, my guard rose, went to the door, and opened it. The hotel staff helped us climb out of the helicopters.

One man had a big white teddy bear for Paolo. Another tried to hand him a glass of pineapple juice. Surprisingly, Paolo turned away and tightened his hold on me.

I waved them away. “Maybe, he will want it later.”

Another woman hurried over with tons of champagne glasses on a silver platter.

“It is a shame Emily cannot drink with us.” Valentina grabbed two glasses and handed one to Blue. “But, you and I can still have fun.”

“I cannot.” Blue shook her head.

“Emily is safe now, Blue.” Valentina still held the glass in Blue’s direction. “Enjoy yourself for a few minutes.”

Blue got to my side. “I am fine.”

“Then, I will drink for all of us.” Valentina sipped from one glass. “My father used to say that ‘Peace lasts until the army comes, and the army lasts until peace comes.’”

I eyed her. “Meaning?”

“I took it to say that we must enjoy life while we can.”

“Not a bad assessment of an old Russian saying.” Baba took a glass. “Therefore, I will join you in drinking,



Valentina.”

One man hurried to us and gestured to the building.  
“Welcome to Villa Lusso. I am Angelo.”

I smiled. “Nice to meet you, Angelo.”

“I will be your butler during your stay.” He guided us forward. “Villa Lusso is a stunning 16th century Italian Palazzo. We are tucked away in the center of Fiumefreddo village.”

“Interesting.”

“This is the first time we have had someone rent out the whole village.” Angelo grinned. “However, we are excited to show you—”

“Excuse me?” I kept my pace with him. “Did you just say that the whole village is rented out?”

Angelo nodded. “Yes. Your men came in earlier and found other places for everyone to live until your stay is complete.”

I blinked. “Oh.”

“However, the compensation to the villagers was a hefty enough amount for everyone to even sing as they packed their bags.”

“Taking over the village was probably my brother’s order.” Valentina chuckled. “However, I am sure the compensation idea came from King David.”

Angelo raised his eyebrows. “Well...Fiumefreddo is an ancient medieval village, that still preserves the characteristics of a fortified space with medieval walls.”

*Kazimir probably picked the place due to the walls.*

“Let us know when you want someone to take you out into the village,” Angelo continued. “We have small alleys, ruins, and towers.”

Valentina finished one glass and handed it to him. “Enough about old things in the village. What are the new things in the villa.”

Angelo cleared his throat. “Our villa features eighty-five bedrooms, a private boat dock, access to a beach beyond the walls, spa services, gourmet dining, and vast gardens.”

“Sign us up for all the spa services.” Valentina glanced at her hand. “I am in need of a serious manicure.”

Angelo nodded. “Many of your people have been checked-in to their rooms.”

That had to be the members of Harlem Crew that didn’t go with Maxwell.

My heart ached for the ones that Kaz had killed.

*I can’t believe you would do that, baby. It wasn’t their fault that my darkness scared them.*

I swallowed down my anger.

We entered the lobby.

Luxury lathered every inch of the space. The walls glistened with polish. The rich scent of vanilla soaked the cool air. The marble of the lobby reflected a blinding light. Crystal chandeliers hung everywhere, dazzling and sparkling.

Soft classical music played on the right. I glanced in that direction. A woman in a red ball gown sat on an oversized, regal bench with a highly polished black finish. A piano stood in front of her. She delicately moved her fingers over the ivory keys playing the piano.

We continued forward.

Valentina snapped her fingers and raised her empty glasses. “More of this.”

Baba burped. “I must agree with Valentina.”

To my surprise, the woman with the silver platter had been following us. She rushed to them, took their empty glasses, and replaced them with new ones.

We made it to the elevator.

The silver doors opened.

The inside walls were white and smooth, shiny enough to see my reflection in. Plush gold carpet covered the floor. Meanwhile, a small crystal chandelier actually hung from the elevator's ceiling.

*Well damn. This might be next level luxury for me.*

Before I could enter, my phone rang. Everyone else stepped on, except Blue. She stayed at my side. I checked the screen. The number was unknown.

I answered. "Hello?"

Fela's voice rode the line. "That was an interesting picture you sent me."

My heart pounded. "But did you understand the message?"

"I assumed you would have some affection for Paolo. He is a kind boy. However, I also believed the Lion would hurt him. My intentions were pure. I only wanted to keep the young boy safe."

"I don't believe you."

A dark chuckle left him. "Because you are smart."

"Don't ever come for Paolo again."

"I learned that lesson. Many of my people are gone because of it."

"Then, we have nothing else to discuss. Unless you are ready to head back to Nigeria?"

"Are you ready to return to Moscow?"

"No." I hung up.

Angelo kept his foot in front of the elevator door, making sure it didn't close. "Should we go up without you, miss?"

"Stay with her." A voice boomed from the chandeliers.

*What the hell? Where did that come from?*

Everyone looked up to the elevator's ceiling, except Valentina. She continued to drink her third glass of champagne.

Blue took out her gun. “Who was that?”

Valentina rolled her eyes. “Apparently, that is the *panther*.”

The voice sounded again. “I prefer the Mosquito.”

“Misha?” I stepped inside of the elevator and peered up at the ceiling. “Is that you?”

“Yes.”

Valentina frowned. “How is my darling baby. I did not receive pictures of her this morning.”

“I sent them. You were busy at the time and now your phone has exploded.” Misha’s voice rose in the elevator. “I have someone bringing a new phone to your suite with several pictures of her.”

“Your *ballerina* better not be around her.” Valentina smiled and sipped her champagne.

*O-kay.*

“Emily,” Misha said. “If Fela calls you again, remain on the phone longer. I want to track him.”

“Oh. I hung up because I thought he was tracking me.”

“He was. However, once he sees the location, it will make his stomach drop. Since the war, Black Axe is no longer allowed in Sicilian territory.”

“And are *we* allowed here?”

Valentina laughed.

Misha’s voice held a hint of humor. “Emily, if you know of a place on this planet where Kazimir cannot go, then I would keep it quiet because that place will soon be visited by several bombs.”

My phone rang again.

Stunned, Angelo still looked up at the ceiling. “Do I...let the doors close or. . .?”

Misha’s voice filled the air. “Keep your foot where it is. I can watch you all better and monitor the phone conversation, if you remain in one place.”

Sighing, Valentina mumbled, “You are so weird.”

“I heard that, Valentina.”

My phone rang again.

I picked it up. “Yes?”

Fela spoke, “I only want to talk.”

I frowned. “With words or bullets?”

“Words are more powerful than bullets.”

My phone beeped. I checked the screen. Kazimir was calling, but I couldn’t just tell Fela to hold on.

Fela spoke, “Can you answer a question for me, Emily?”

“Go ahead.”

“What are your plans for Paolo?”

“Does it matter?”

“Pavel believed that his son would not be safe with the Brotherhood, if they discovered Pavel was a traitor. Yet, his son is safe.”

“We don’t harm little boys.”

Fela’s laugh scratched at my ears. “What Brotherhood are we talking about?”

“Is that your only question?”

“My people tell me that Pavel begged you to keep him.”

“You mean, your prostitutes that you had in my hotel to spy on me.”

“Yes. The ones you still sent home with money. You could have killed them.”

“I’m not led by revenge—”

“No. Your heart guides you. That is something I had never bet on. Daryl never told me about the deep love that lived inside of you.”

I trembled at the mention of my brother’s name.

As if feeling my sadness, Paolo leaned away and stared at me. His face was barely three inches from mine.

Fela continued, “I was surprised Kazimir killed Pavel.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“I was. Pavel was the Lion’s cousin. Plus, their blood ran deeper than the family connection. Still, the Lion killed his own blood over a woman that is as dark as me. Could you make sense of this?”

I rolled my eyes. “You are smart enough to piece everything together.”

“Are you going to raise Paolo, Emily?”

“You don’t care about him, so stop asking.”

“You are going to honor Pavel’s request. I believe that.”

“Believe what you want.”

“I have been listening to many phone conversations lately.”

“Good for you.”

“Did you know that several maids called their families in shock. They were so traumatized from the piles of cut-up bodies in a particular suite.”

My bottom lip quivered.

“One of your people did something horrific. I know Kazimir didn’t put those piles there. He has no time for the artistic side of death. He is a spoiled child, needing everything to be quick...but not the Mouse.”

Closing my eyes, I trembled again.

“Daryl talked to me about your dark side. He believed that it was your *true* nature and the nice part of you was simply an act. He called you a demon—one that should be killed immediately.”

Guilt and pain spread through my heart like Fela stood right in front of me and shot me in the organ.

*Words really are more powerful than bullets.*

My phone buzzed. I was sure Kazimir was calling again.

Paolo's small palm pressed on the side of my face.

*Thanks, baby.*

Fela's voice rode the line. "There is a darkness within you, Emily. That was what I had bet on to kill Kazimir. The wickedness pulsing inside of you. Your brother guaranteed that you could not be good for too long. He said soon the bad would come out and destroy everything."

Shivering, I opened my eyes. "My brother is dead, Fela. Just like your Popobawa. All gone, and I had a hand in both of their deaths, so maybe he is right. Perhaps, you should watch how you speak to me."

Fela went silent.

My eyes watered. "Anything else?"

"How can we solve this, Emily?"

I gritted my teeth. "With blood and death."

Fela let out a dark chuckle. "Aww. There you go. Now I see you."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Fiumefreddo village," Fela said. "What a lovely area?"

*Good job. You tracked me, but we're tracking you too.*

I cleared my throat. "I think it is a lovely place."

Paolo leaned his head back on my shoulder and patted my back.

Fela chuckled. "Did you know that the Godfather was filmed in that area?"

"I didn't."

"Oh yes. There is an 18th-century country house called Castello degli Schiavi in Fiumefreddo. Several scenes were filmed there."

"Thanks for the fun fact."

“I like that movie, the Godfather. My biggest lesson was that the Italians are not to be trusted.”

“Very intriguing lesson.”

“It is.” Fela hung up.

My hand shook as I put the phone away.

Misha’s voice sounded from the chandelier. “Got him.”

I let out an exasperated breath.

“Shut the phone off,” Misha said.

I did as he ordered.

“Give it to someone to destroy,” Misha continued. “A bug was installed during the conversation. Not only could Fela track your physical location, he would also be able to record your phone’s activities and listen to the surroundings of the cell phone user.”

“We can’t have that.” I gave my phone to Blue.

She took it and stepped off the elevator. “I will destroy it.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “Misha, do you have eyes on Kazimir?”

“I do, especially Maxwell.”

Valentina giggled.

I widened my eyes. “How are they doing?”

“As one would expect.”

*What the hell does that mean?*

I shifted Paolo to my side. “Are they safe?”

“Very.” Misha’s voice lowered. “You may let the doors go, Angelo.”

Frowning, the man stared at the ceiling. “He knows my name.”

“I know everything, Angelo.”

Valentina sighed. “Shut up, Misha.”



Clearly bothered Angelo moved his foot from the doors. They closed. The elevator rose. Still, Angelo gazed up at the ceiling.

Silence filled the space.

Daryl's face flashed in my head.

*Fuck you, Fela, for bringing him up.*

Paolo continued to pat my back, and I let myself fall into the warmth of his innocence and love.

Baba looked at me. "Remember. You must not argue with Kazimir until he kills the Don."

Valentina frowned. "Why would she argue with my brother?"

I frowned. "He killed some of my people."

Angelo snapped his view to us and widened his eyes.

Valentina leaned her head to the side. "But did your people deserve to die?"

"No, Valentina. They just wanted to go home because they were scared of my dark side."

Angelo edged to the corner of the elevator.

"Aww. They wanted to go home?" Valentina laughed. "There is no going home."

"There is for my people—"

"Never." She shook her head. "And especially not in war."

"Still, Kaz shouldn't have done it." I quirked my brows. "Can he kill *your* people?"

Valentina went quiet as if thinking about it. "Hmm."

"See. What if he just shot down half of your men because he thought he should?"

Angelo put both of his hands on his chest.

*We are going to give this man a heart attack.*

Valentina ran her fingers through her long hair. “Well...my brother usually knows best, so if he killed some of my men, then it will be fine.”

“Bullshit, Valentina. You would be mad.”

“But, I love him. I cannot be mad for too long.”

“Me too. Which is why I am waiting to curse him out. I want him safe and back to me.”

“And then you will curse him out?”

“Exactly.”

Valentina grinned. “I would like to be in the room when this happens.”

“No. I can’t curse him out in front of people.”

She pouted. “But I would very much like to see this.”

“Absolutely not. It will be a private argument.”

Valentina looked up at the ceiling. “Mosquito, record it and send the footage to me.”

*Is he still listening? No way.*

To my shock, the elevator filled with Misha’s voice. “I am staying out of it, Valentina.”





# Chapter 24

## The Essence of Trauma

### Emily

Several minutes later, we made it to our suites with no problem. Paolo remained in my arms the entire time, refusing to let go.

I called Kazimir back on his sister's new phone.

He didn't answer.

It was probably good that he didn't. I was so pissed about him killing my people. I wasn't sure if I could play nice on the line.

Next, Baba entered my room and announced that she would be giving Paolo a bath.

I rushed to take out Paolo's braids. Blue helped.

Paolo's hair had been in a simple no-nonsense design, long lines that went from the front to the back with the ends swinging free. Since his hair was so silky, already strands stood up from the braids and some were unwoven.

After Blue and I undid Paolo's hair, Baba bathed him. Harlem jumped into the tub and swam around in the bubbles. I was pretty sure my puppy thought the bath was truly for him.

Several minutes later, Valentina lounged at the edge of my king-sized bed and watched me brushing Paolo's hair. "So, my mother waited for my father to arrive. He showed up just as drunk as I am now."

Blue stood by the door and smirked.

"That must be pretty drunk." I laughed. "By the way, how many glasses of champagne have you had?"

"Six." Valentina raised her hand in the air and shook her finger. "No. Seven. Wait...maybe eight."

“You need food.”

“I need sex, Emily, and lots of it.”

I paused from brushing. “Valentina.”

“Sorry. We have tiny ears in the room.” She looked at Paolo. “I meant to say that I need *love*.”

Ignoring us, Paolo sat on my lap. One hand held a half-bitten cookie. The other one gripped a green crayon.

Between munching on the cookie, he colored in his notepad.

I put the brush down. “So, what did your mother do when your father came home?”

“When he stepped inside the house, his head met the end of a shovel.”

I opened my mouth. “What?”

“She beat him.”

I stared at Valentina.

“What else would my mother do?” She laughed. “He missed her birthday and was out all night, drinking and doing whatever. She had to harm him.”

I blinked.

“Is that not funny to you?”

“Uh...” I picked up a comb. “Hey...whatever they like.”

“And they liked it. They had loud sex after that. Oh, sorry, Paolo. Loud *loving*. Very loud. He must have been dripping blood all over my mother.”

“O-kay.” I parted Paolo’s hair with a comb.

This new braid design would be different and have a mix of patterns embedded into it—short, zig-zagged braids crossing with longer, thicker braids between the sections. The style would be no easy feat, but the end result would be totally worth it.

For some reason, Valentina raised her legs and swayed her feet in the air. “Do you know why I told you that, Emily?”

*Her ass is about to fall off the bed.*

I gestured at Blue. “Order some food for us please.”

“Caprese Salad with Pesto Sauce! I need it so bad.”  
Valentina tried to get up and fell over the bed.

I shook my head. “And lots of water too, Blue.”

“And so much bruschetta!” Valentina yelled from the floor.  
“I need all of the hotel’s bruschetta! All of it!”

Heading to my suite’s living room, Blue chuckled.

Paolo stopped drawing. “Fall.”

“Yes, Paolo.” I combed through his strands.

*She busted her ass.*

“No one can have bruschetta but me!” Laughing some more, Valentina climbed back on the bed. “Oh, I think I am scaring him.”

Paolo went back to drawing.

“He looks so much like his father.” Valentina sat up and studied Paolo. “Listen, Emily. You must not keep him. It cannot happen.”

I put the comb down.

“Do you understand?”

Silent, I began braiding the side of his head.

“And I told you the story to help you with my brother.”

“How will *that* story help me, Valentina?”

“Because sometimes you must hit my brother with a shovel.”

“I am not doing that.”

Valentina turned her view to me. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want a violent relationship. We already have a violent life.”

“The shovel will be the only thing that gets through my brother’s head.” She pointed at me. “Do you know how hard his skull is?”

“I have some idea.”

“Then, you must use something even harder to get through it.”

“I’m not hitting him.”

“Well...” Valentina lay back down on the bed. “Perhaps, you should not listen to me. I have my fair share of relationship problems.”

*That’s putting it mildly.*

Continuing to braid, I looked over Paolo’s shoulder and checked out his drawing.

So far, Paolo had a huge building in the center. A monster made of flames hovered over the structure with his mouth open and fangs dripping liquid.

*He’s really good for his age. He’s going to be an artist.*

I returned to braiding.

Baba entered the room. “Look at my little one. Is he getting his hair done?”

Paolo pointed the end of his crayon at me. “*Mysh.*”

“Yes.” Baba grinned. “Our mouse is so talented.”

I finished a small braid.

Baba turned to me and frowned. “However, we must hurry with the reading.”

I shook my head. “Let’s do it later—”

“Do we still need to listen to Baba?” Valentina waved her way. “She did not know Paolo was getting taken.”

“Valentina, when I love the person, it is hard to guide them.” Baba scowled at her. “For example, my grandson’s readings are always erratic. There’s always surprises when he’s involved.”



Valentina rolled her eyes. “I do not see the point of the readings, if you are not going to see—”

“Leave Baba alone, Valentina.” I pointed the comb at her and then looked at Baba. “However, I want to finish Paolo’s hair and do the reading later.”

“There won’t be a later, Emily.”

I froze. “What do you mean by that?”

“The Lion is heading back soon.”

My nerves calmed. “Is he okay?”

“They all are.”

“Then, perfect.”

“Still, we should hurry. When Kazimir comes back...he will be keeping you busy.”

I didn’t like the way she said it.

“Alright. Fine.” I grabbed a rubber band and brushed Paolo’s hair into one long pony tail.

Valentina watched. “Pavel would love what you are doing.”

Paolo paused from his drawing. “Papa?”

“Damn it. I shouldn’t have said that.” Valentina looked away and rose from the bed. “I need more champagne.”

Blue returned with a menu. “I ordered several items along with all of the hotel’s bruschetta.”

“Blue, Valentina was just playing. I hope you got a reasonable amount of bruschetta.”

“I was not joking. There better be platters and platters of bruschetta.” Valentina walked off. “Where’s the champagne, Blue?”

She pointed to living room. “There’s a few bottles on the bar.”

I hugged Paolo for a few seconds. “I have to go for a minute.”

“And what did my pumpkin draw for me?” Baba went over to the bed. “Look at that green monster eating the building.”

Paolo pointed. “Boom!”

“Yes.” Baba clapped hard. “Boom! Just like that.”

I lifted Paolo and put him on the bed. “Blue watch him for me, please.”

“No problem.” Blue strolled over to the bed and sat down.

Baba and I walked away.

Together we left my suite and entered the hallway. She guided me to her suite.

Nervousness twisted knots into my stomach.

I matched her pace. “The readings are fine, but what I really need is your help with getting rid of Lunita.”

She didn’t look at me. “Do you really think you can get rid of her?”

“It is not a question of *if*, but *when*.”

She sighed. “Emily, I have had long conversations about this with the ancestors.”

“And?”

“Your trauma reshaped your brain. That means so much trauma was trapped inside of your body that—”

“But, can I get the trauma out of my body?”

She pursed her lips.

“Can I?”

“You can. Trauma is a mental injury not a mental illness.”

“So, I can heal it?”

“Yes, but when it becomes continuous, the trauma takes root in your body.”

“But, how is this shit still in my body? Most of it happened when I was a kid.”

“My thinking is that the essence of your trauma merged with your nervous system.”

I gritted my teeth.

“When your brain sees or feels the threat, it triggers your system to go to a fright, freeze, or flight response. It pumps your body with cortisol and other things.”

We rounded a corner.

She continued, “The body goes from safe to activated and trying to fight off an attack or run away, but in your case...”

I looked at her.

“Perhaps, in your case you could not fight or run away.”

I fisted my hands.

“It begins to sit in your body, and if this is continuous...”

“I don’t know, if it was.”

She gave me a sad smile. “You do not remember?”

“I don’t.”

“Why do you think you cannot remember?”

“Because I don’t ever want to think about shit like that. Would you?”

She looked away. “I understand more than you know, Emily.”

*Did something happen to her too?*

Baba spoke, “Regardless, we have a natural way to resolve trauma in our bodies.”

“Then, why didn’t my body resolve it?”

“I do not know, Emily.” She shook her head. “Think of it this way. A big dog chases a boy. He thinks the dog is going to hurt him. His mother rushes out. Maybe, the dog goes the other way or is restrained.”

“Okay.”

“But, there is still trauma of that incident for the boy. So... what does his mother do?”

“She hugs him.”

“Yes.” Baba smiled. “Like you do with Paolo. You hug and comfort him. And now his body triggers healing and calm. Did you...”

“What?”

Baba took out her keys. “Did you receive a lot of comfort from your parents?”

I shrugged. “I barely remember them.”

Sadness filled Baba’s eyes. “No comforting memories of your mother or father?”

“I don’t like to think of them or anything from that time.”

“Why not?”

“My mom died. Dad didn’t properly mourn her. Plus, he had no patience with us. And I was a difficult kid. Then... there was the fire. He died in that along with...Max’s dad and others.” My hands were already fisted, but I squeezed my fingers even harder until they began to ache. “Then...shit gets foggy.”

“But what else do—?”

“How do I get rid of Lunita?”

“Emily, you should be able to heal the trauma and release a lot of it from your body, but...”

I frowned. “But what?”

“I am not sure we can completely get rid of Lunita.”

My eyes watered. “She has to go.”

“And what if it is impossible?”

“I’m not rolling with that.”

“We are going too far down the road. Let us first begin with healing your trauma.” She stopped at a door and took out her keys. “Have you made progress with Maxwell?”

“In what way?”

“Have you held his hand or—”

“No.”

Baba placed the key in the knob. “When will you?”

“Soon.”

“Touching him will help a lot.”

“I don’t like the way you’re wording that.” It felt like bugs crawling over my skin. I unfisted my hands and rubbed the sensation away from my arms.

“You must understand that Maxwell can help heal you.”

“I want to leave him out of this.” I rubbed my arms some more. “Max needs healing too.”

“His healing you will heal him.” She unlocked the door, but didn’t walk in. “Do you understand, Emily?”

“I have already taken so much from Max. I can’t take more —”

“You can, and you must.” Baba gave me a sad smile. “If you do it, then you will help Maxwell *and* you.”

I shivered.

“Now, do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Baba turned around. “Now...let’s look into your future.”





# Chapter 25

## The Black Mouse

### Emily

*Please, God. Let this reading hold hope and positivity.*

Baba opened the door.

A cozy office greeted my eyes. A large wooden desk sat in the center of the room with two soft chairs on either side. Tons of paintings of dragons and knights as well as women in candlelit castle halls, decorated the walls.

I glanced at the painting with two dragons facing each other and looking like they were about to battle. One had bright white scales that shimmered in the sun. The other was midnight black and shooting out fire. Its tail coiled, ready to strike.

I went over to the chair and sat down.

Tons of boxes were stacked in the back of the room. Kaz's men must have rushed to pack all of her things when he evacuated.

Baba lowered into her chair. "How do you feel, Emily?"

"Like shit."

"Why?"

"Baba, I just shot women over Paolo after being frightened that he was gone forever. Not to mention the fact that I'm..."

"What?"

"I'm really sad about..." Suddenly, tears left my eyes, and I lost all control of my emotions.

*What the fuck is going on with me?*

Baba reached her hand over the desk.

"I'm fine. It's all good." I wiped the tears.



“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just sad about Kaz killing my men. But maybe...you know...maybe I’m just sad overall about everything—”

“Being sad about your men and about everything else is perfectly fine.”

“It’s just that I don’t usually cry about these things.” I rubbed my eyes.

“Don’t forget that you are pregnant.”

My nerves flared. “I’m not ready to have a baby.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not...”

“Why aren’t you, Emily?”

“I’m not suitable enough to be a mother.”

“You will find that many women aren’t suitable or even ready, yet they become mothers. Some do a decent job. Others...well...we won’t talk about the others.”

“I don’t want to ruin my kid’s life.”

“I see you with Paolo.” She smiled. “You will be a wonderful mother.”

“That’s only because Paolo keeps me calm. That makes me feel guilty too. Is that bad?”

“Is what bad?”

“Being around Paolo soothes me. It makes me...relaxed and I just...I feel guilty about it sometimes.”

“Tell me more.”

“When I care for him, I can forget about my own shit.”

“It always feels good to take care of someone else.”

“But, I don’t know if it is...proper.”

“For a long time, I had a consistent vision.” Baba opened her desk drawer and pulled out the stack of playing cards. “Always I saw a mouse riding a lion’s back with pride. The

little creature held strands of the lion's mane like it was a horse's leather harness. It has been some time since I have seen that. Now it is a new vision that comes to me, over and over."

I leaned forward. "What do you see?"

"Three little mice playing and crawling in the mane of a sleeping lion. Near his paw, the mouse that was riding him in the other vision, now relaxes and nibbles cheese."

"Three mice? Like kids?"

"Could be."

"And the lion is sleeping? Not dead or anything?"

Grinning, Baba put the cards on the desk and pushed them over to me. "Not dead."

"What made the vision change?"

"Paolo's appearance. I never saw him coming, but when he did...the vision changed."

I stared at the deck of cards. "Why do you think that happened?"

"Your compassion. Your love. It all triggered something inside of you when you took control of him. Because of that, your love for Paolo completely shifted your future."

I picked up the cards. "So...is Paolo...one of the mice or...?"

"I do not know." Baba frowned. "I love that little boy too much to see his readings."

"But, you can read King David's future?"

"To a point. It is always foggy and hard. I can more see what happens to him through the Lion's visions." Baba touched a rosary bracelet on her wrists. "Days ago, I saw you all dressed in black and crying over a grave. Then, I saw the name and cried."

"It was David's name?"

"Yes."

“Do you see that anymore?”

She twisted one of the rosary beads. “Since your meeting with Fela, I have not received that vision again.”

“Good.” I shuffled the cards one more time and placed them on the desk. “Tell me good things, Baba.”

“I will try.”

“I think we should also be using actual tarot cards.”

“Why?”

“Because these are playing cards. “

“It doesn’t matter. Reading fortunes with a deck of playing cards is fine.”

“Why is that?”

“The cards have their own personalities and ways in which they interact with one another to develop a story or overall picture of what’s going on.”

“But do people use playing cards for reading?”

“Many do. It’s actually called *cartomancy*.” She pushed the deck back in front of me. “This time we will have you pick more cards to get a bigger picture.”

“I don’t want any more spades.”

“Do not worry. We will deal with what comes together, Emily.” She went into her drawer and pulled out that signature gemmed stick. “Pick six cards and place them in one line.”

I inhaled and then let out a long exhale. “Alright.”

I took my time choosing six cards. I picked one on the top and one on the bottom. I grabbed two from the center. Then, I moved the deck to the side and got two more.

Next, I spread them out into a line and hoped for the best.

“Here we go.” Baba flipped the first one over. “Jack of hearts. Very interesting.”

“If *I’m* the queen of hearts and Kazimir is the King, then who is the Jack?”

“The Jacks can represent children and young people. A Jack can also denote something small or the start of something new.”

“So?”

She tapped the desk. “Let’s see the other one, before I say anything.”

I frowned.

She turned the next card over. “Another Jack of Hearts.”

“Two kids or...two things that are beginning?”

“I want to say this is two kids, but the meaning is a bit foggy.”

I tensed. “If it is foggy, then it could be about Paolo, since your mind is never clear with him.”

She nodded. “I was thinking that, but it is two cards.”

I touched my stomach. “What if this deals with my baby too?”

“I agree, yet that is also foggy. But that would make sense. I do know that I will fall madly in love with your son. Already I have seen visions of little Emilio and I strolling through a garden—”

“Emilio?”

“I believe you both settle on that name.”

I blinked. “Oh.”

Baba scratched her head. “Therefore, we say that the two Jack of Hearts belong to the children.”

“Baba, I need more confidence coming from you.”

“It has been a long day, Emily. I am not a fortune telling machine. I require rest and emotional down time.”

I smirked. “And you had some champagne.”

“Yes. I am a little tipsy.” She flipped the next card over. “Queen of Spades.”

*Fuck.*

I blew out a long breath. “That card always gives me Lunita vibes. Maybe, my mind is playing tricks on me or—”

“You are correct. I would say this is Lunita, and a clear sign that your darkness may be coming back soon.”

“May be coming or actually coming?”

“We shall see.” Baba turned over the next card. “King of Hearts.”

“That’s Kazimir?”

She closed her eyes and then twisted the stick between her fingers.

*What about Kazimir and Lunita? And my babies? What’s going on?*

I tapped my foot.

My insides twisted and turned in anxiety.

“Yes. That must be it.” Still with her eyes shut, Baba nodded. “The Lion will bring Lunita out.”

“What? Jesus Christ! How does Kaz bring Lunita out?”

She kept her eyes closed. “I see...a mouse, but this one...”

I touched the edge of the desk and gripped. “What about this mouse?”

“This mouse is different. Thick black fur covers its little body, and it floats...no...the creature is swimming...”

“Swimming?”

Baba opened her eyes. “The black mouse is swimming in a pool of blood.”

“No.” I stood up. “I don’t like that. Close your eyes and see something else.”

“If only life worked that way, I might be on a private jet being fed caviar by a stunning man.”

I scowled at her. “Why is the mouse swimming in blood?”

“Visions come with no meaning. It is up to us to find it.”

I began to pace in front of my chair. “Then, find the fucking meaning, Baba.”

“Relax, Emily. That is why we have the cards.” Baba flipped the next card over. “Five of Hearts.”

I stopped pacing and went to the desk. “Okay. That can’t be too bad. Right? Five is a nice number.”

“I believe this represents loss and despair.”

“Come on, Baba.” I held my hands out. My voice grew weak. “I’m having a fucked up week. Could you pull something happy for once?!”

“These are your cards.”

“Then, we reshuffle them and—”

“Sit down, Emily.”

I gritted my teeth and lowered into my seat.

Baba turned over the next card. “Eight of Hearts.”

“What is it now? A black mouse eating hearts or something?”

“Must we be so sarcastic?”

I pointed at her. “You are lucky I am not flipping this desk over.”

Baba widened her eyes. “Emily, please calm down.”

“It’s hard.”

“You have to—”

“I want my happy ending!” I trembled. “I’m tired of this... shit...”

Tense silence moved between us.

Baba twisted that damned stick between her fingers. “You will get it, Emily. Remember. The mouse nibbled cheese while her mice played in the lion’s mane.”

“Yeah, but the damned black mouse is swimming in blood. What the fuck is that about? Get the mouse out of the blood, Baba!”

She scowled. “Emily.”

I hugged myself. “Fine. I’m calming down.”

“You are becoming worse than Kazimir when it comes readings.”

I pursed my lips.

Baba pointed the gem at the Eight of Hearts. “This deals with you battling emotional detachment because you have to make a hard choice.”

“What hard choice?”

She tapped the gem against the card. “All I can see is that you are unable to deal with a hard choice, so you are trying to detach your emotions from it, but...”

“Okay?”

Baba flipped the last card over.

*Queen of Spades. Here we fucking go.*

Baba sighed. “However, Lunita is more than happy to deal with this hard choice for you.”

I held myself tighter. “Okay. Let me understand this. Kids are involved, but we are not sure what kids. My baby or Paolo or both.”

Baba nodded.

“And it is a hard choice that I am trying to emotionally detach from, and it deals with Kazimir.”

“I agree with this assessment too.” Baba looked back at the cards. “However, I do not think you are trying to avoid dealing with the choice. I believe you simply *cannot* deal with it. You do not have it inside of you.”

“So, Lunita deals with it?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t like that.”

“Me either.” Baba picked the cards up and shuffled them some more. “Let’s see if we can truly get to the root of the

problem.”

“Alright. The root.” I unfolded my arms and rubbed my hands together. “This is going to be better.”

She finished shuffling and then placed the cards in front of me. “Pick.”

“How many cards?”

“One.”

This time, I separated the cards into four piles, took one card from the third pile, and placed it in front of her. “Here.”

“Flip it over.”

I did and cursed.

*King of Hearts.*

Baba quirked her brows. “Kazimir is the root of this problem.”

“I don’t want Lunita coming out anymore.”

“I agree.”

“Maybe, I need to be away from Kazimir tonight. I’m really mad at him, and full of anxiety and...this wouldn’t be a good time for us to discuss anything. Plus, he hasn’t slept... this is just...and I’m scared she will come out and...”

She leaned back in her chair and turned the stick. “Space sounds good, but...”

“What?”

“I don’t know if you can run from your destiny.”

“I changed my destiny by loving Paolo.”

“Yes, but even more, I truly do not think you can run away from Kazimir.”

“I wouldn’t be running away. I would just be giving us space, until I can figure this out, and maybe...change my destiny. You said before that Paolo coming into the picture made things different.”

“Yes.”



“Then, I take an emotional break this evening and you read my cards again in the morning.”

“But, would Kazimir allow that space for this evening?”

“You tell him that we are trying to prevent Lunita from coming out.”

Baba frowned. “Me?”

“Yes. You.”

Baba sighed. “Then, I will need several guards when I do it.”





# Chapter 26

## Hard-Headed Lion

### Emily

The opened balcony doors showed a breathtaking view.

*Beautiful.*

The setting sun burned through the sky's canvas with brushstrokes of reds, oranges, purples, and a palette of darkening golds.

After giving the baby and me a quick check-up, Dr. Stovall insisted that I do less fighting and more resting. I promised I would listen. When he finished the examination, he gave me a disappointed scowl and left without saying goodbye.

*Emilio, I think we are in trouble.*

A tiny movement fluttered.

*Oh. Is that you, baby?*

The movements shifted into gentle swirling like he was swimming around and checking the womb out.

*Have fun, Emilio.*

Smiling, I lay down on my bed and picked up my cup of tea. The cup's sides warmed my palms. Steam rose from the top, carrying a symphony of floral fragrances.

I looked down at the liquid. The color was a deep, rich green.

*I hope this tastes good.*

Baba had given me a new jar of herbs to calm any stress and anxiety—Ashwagandha and Chamomile, Valerian root and Lavender, Passionflower and something called Kava Kava. I knew what was in the tea because Dr. Stovall had called Baba into my room to list every herb.

Once Baba did, Dr. Stovall nodded and approved of the tranquilizing tea.

Usually I wouldn't drink something when I could barely understand the names, but I was on a mission to keep my mood steady.

*Emilio, we are done with fighting. It can harm you and the violence brings out Lunita.*

I tried the tea.

*It's all...peace from now on.*

The first sip was bitter, but after a few mouthfuls, my tongue captured the flavor of the herbs. Calm washed over my body, unthreading the knots in my stomach and smoothing out all tension.

*There we go. I am going to be like this the rest of Italy. Chill. Relax. I will have my men fight for me.*

Someone knocked.

I swallowed more tea. "Come in."

Blue peeked her head inside. "Did you want your items now or should we wait?"

"Now is fine. I'm about to go to sleep soon, so I don't want the distraction later."

Blue smile and opened the door wider.

Five men carried in suitcases and placed them on the floor. Then, a sixth man brought in a large shovel which he leaned against my nightstand.

I quirked my brows.

Blue smirked. "Valentina delivered the shovel. She thought you would need it for this evening."

The men left.

I chuckled. "Valentina better have her butt in bed."

"I made sure she went to bed after the third plate of bruschetta and tenth glass of champagne."

“How was getting her to sleep?”

Blue stirred. “She flirted a little and then proposed. At least I think so, her Russian was a bit slurred.”

“Girl, Valentina is a straight mess.” I shook my head and took another sip. “Well...since we are on people flirting with you.”

Blue raised her eyebrows. “Yes?”

“What was up with Giorgio trying to give you his *blue* guns in the conference room this morning.”

“Giorgio thinks he likes me.”

“Hmmm.” I grinned. “And King David blocking Giorgio from giving you the guns?”

A silly smile spread on her face. She got rid of it quickly. “He thinks he likes me too.”

“But who do *you* like?”

She sighed. “I actually haven’t allowed myself to think of that too much.”

“Why not?”

“The days have been busy.”

So nosy, I took another sip and asked, “True, but who are *you* attracted to?”

“Honestly?”

“Hells yes, honestly.”

“I think they both are sexy.”

“They are, but don’t tell Kaz I said that. He would shoot them in the head.”

“He would.” Blue chuckled.

“Speaking of Kaz.”

“The helicopters just landed with all the men. That’s why I decided to rush your remaining items down here.”

“Good call, Blue.” I held my cup in my lap.

“No one, but me and the men down here, know where you are at. I have even talked with Misha and he said that he is completely staying out of this.”

“Good. This isn’t permanent. I just need space to figure this out.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “Is Paolo still asleep?”

She nodded. “I also put cameras inside his room and have two of Harlem Crew monitoring his new guards.”

I let out a long breath. “Thank you. I know I’m probably tripping, but I don’t know Paolo’s new guards yet. It makes me uneasy to have new people watching him.”

“I understand.”

“He’s so tiny and...” I gripped the cup hard. “Anyone could do...bad things to him.”

“We will make sure that *these* people keep him safe and do not harm him.”

“Good. Because if they do, let me know.” Instantly, my fingers itched to hold my knives. The image of a room covered in blood hit my mind. My pulse quickened. The blood was a deep maroon, and there was lots of it in the room, splashing over furniture, dripping down the walls and soaking the floors. So much that, the coppery taste coated my tongue.

*Stay calm.*

Swallowing, I turned away and pushed through that thought.

*Stop it. We don’t need to cut anyone today.*

I looked at Blue.

She watched me with widened eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. W-why do you ask?”

“You...swayed a little like you were about to pass out.”

“I did?” I looked at my lap. A little tea had spilled. I brushed the drops of liquid off my pants and put the cup on the nightstand next to me. “I’m fine.”

“I should stay in here with you tonight.” She pointed to the love seat on the other side of the room. “I can sleep over there.”

I shook my head.

“Or outside the room.”

“No. Your new room is down here between mine and Paolo’s. That’s good enough.” I gripped my hand and twisted my fingers. “You said the helicopter landed with the guys. Did you get a glimpse of them?”

“Oh, yes. Kazimir walked out with not even a limp. He stormed toward the hotel with King David by his side. Harlem Crew along with Boris, Jean-Pierre, and Louis were all fine too. I doubt there were many that died. However, there was something odd that I noticed.”

“What?”

“Everyone had drops of blood, bruises, and ripped clothing, except Giorgio. He was the only one that looked like he had just left an elegant dining event—newly pressed tuxedo, polished shoes, hair perfectly styled, and even a flowing cape on his shoulder.”

“What the hell?” I tapped my finger. “I wonder if he fought at all.”

“Me too.”

“What about Max?”

“That was the other odd thing. Maxwell was fine, but carrying a lemon tree.”

I shook my head. “That’s so Max. You never try to understand him. You just love and rock with him.”

“I immediately notified Baba like you asked. She has twenty men with her and is waiting for Kazimir by the suite.”

“Being that King David is with him, Kaz will remember to have nothing but respect for Baba.”

A worried expression covered Blue’s face.



“You don’t think so?”

“I do not think the Lion will ever harm Baba, but I am worried for Harlem Crew.”

I pinched my thumb over and over.

Blue cleared her throat. “I would like to go up there and make sure—”

“*Mysh?!?*” Kaz’s voice boomed in the hallway. Doors creaked opened and then slammed shut. “*Mysh?!?*”

I rolled my eyes.

*How the hell did he know I was here? Was it the hotel’s staff? No one told them.*

“*Mysh?!?*” Another door slammed.

“Please get him, before he wakes Paolo.”

She hurried to the door and opened it. “Emily is in here.”

Seconds later, Kaz stormed into the room with his face drawn back into a snarl. His brows were furrowed. Drops of blood decorated his torn blue pants. His shirt was off. Those huge muscles on his arms bulged as he fisted his hands.

He towered over all of us, radiating fury and violence.

Blue reached for her guns.

As if hearing the movement, Kaz snapped his view to her. “Why are you still here?”

“Don’t talk to her like that.” I rose from the bed and walked over.

Kaz looked at Blue’s hand on her gun. “Why are you reaching for that? Do you need me to show you how to use it? I can if you want—”

“Thanks, Blue. We’re done.” I got between them.

Blue and Kaz continued to stare at each other.

For the first time ever, Blue glared at him and did not move. “Are you sure, Emily?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“Then, I will be outside.” Blue headed away.

Kaz called back. “Do not waste your time! You and no one else could save Emily from me!”

“I don’t need anyone protecting me from you.” I turned around. “I will whip your ass myself!”

The line of his jaw twitched. That big chest and those huge shoulders rose and fell. Three feet of space ran between us.

If he came close, I would knock him out.

*Maybe, I do need that shovel.*

To my shock, he closed his eyes and exhaled.

I tensed.

A minute of silence passed.

Then, he opened his eyes. “*Mysh?*”

“Yes.”

“There is a 3,000 square foot suite upstairs that is considered the jewel of the entire hotel. *Cassina* and *Poltrona Frau*, two high-end Italian design houses, decorated the space.” He placed his hands in his pockets, yet kept both thumbs out. “It has a stunning view, elegant furnishings, and comes with dedicated butler service—”

“That sounds amazing. Maybe *you* should go up there.”

“We are currently on the *second floor*,” he said it as if the very words tasted nasty on his tongue. “Full size bed. Simple furniture. Ugly view. This room is not even 400 square feet—”

“Which is barely enough room for your ego.”

He bared his teeth at me.

I sighed. “Did Baba explain to you why I am down here?”

He spoke through clenched teeth, “I did not give her a chance to speak.”

I stepped back. “Did you hurt Baba?”

“Absolutely not. I just stormed through your men and went into the suite to look for you. Baba followed saying words that

I did not comprehend. Then, I tore off my shirt—”

“Like a mad man—”

“And searched for you—”

“How did you know I was on this floor?”

“I asked where *the boy* was moved. You would not be too far from him.”

*Smart.*

Those big shoulders rose and fell like he was beginning to lose his temper again. “That suite upstairs...”

I rolled my eyes.

“That suite is fit for *my* Cinderella.”

“Perhaps, your Cinderella lost her glass shoe and needs some time to look for it.”

He took his hands out of his pockets. “What?”

“Kaz, I need an evening away from you, space to—”

“Space?”

“Yes. Space to—”

“You will not get it.”

“I will.”

“Trust me, *mysh*.” He closed the distance between us. There was only an inch of space from his chest and my face. “There will be no space. No evening off. No time apart. No moment to think or understand. There will only be us. Together.”

I looked up at him. “If you don’t get your ass out of here, then—”

“Do it.”

“Do what?”

“Hit me. Kick me. Slap me. Whatever you are mad about, get it out now.” Kaz leaned forward and sneered. “I have not slept. It has been a long day. And I want some pussy!”

I stepped back. “Your sister delivered a shovel because your head is hard. Should I hit you with that?”

“If that will get this moment over.”

I frowned. “Baba’s reading said that Lunita could come back soon, and that the root of the problem was you. And our kids may be involved.”

“Kids?” He twisted his face in confusion. “More than one?”

“Well...our baby and Paolo.”

He scowled. “The boy is not our child.”

I walked off.

He called back, “And I don’t care about Baba’s reading. If Lunita wants to appear, then let her come!”

I headed over to the balcony, needing some space. I was close to strangling his big neck. I stepped out there and went to the railing.

The sun glowed on the edge of the horizon, almost disappearing. Darkness rose. A blanket of stars appeared. And then, I spotted a quarter moon suspended within the night sky.

Kaz’s voice sounded behind me. “This is not only about Baba’s reading. You are mad about something. I can feel your anger thickening the air.”

I turned around and faced him.

Kaz stood in the balcony’s doorway. “Talk to me, *mysh*.”

“You killed my men.”

“I did.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“When I had enough diamonds to make up for it. I had no time to go to the store—”

“Diamonds can’t replace their lives!” My voice grew weak. I steadied myself. “Why would you kill them?”

“*Mysh*, you did not fall in love with the milkman.” He stepped onto the balcony. “You fell for the leader of the Brotherhood.”

I pointed at him. “You had no fucking reason to kill them. None!”

“They turned their backs on you—”

“They were afraid of Lunita—”

“And disloyal!”

“But, they—”

“Refused to protect my mouse at all costs and in every situation.” He stomped forward. “I have killed men for less!”

“But you don’t get to kill *my* men—”

“I did and I will do it again!” He stopped right in front of me. “If they were here right now, I would fill those disloyal heads with bullets.”

I trembled. Pain hit my heart. My eyes watered. My bottom lip quivered. “But...they were sons and daughters. They had families that depended on them. They were human beings who had come to Italy with me.”

“And when it was time to truly test their faith, they turned away.”

Tears spilled my eyes.

He tried to wipe one.

I shoved his hand away. “That’s not how I see it.”

“*Mysh*, it does not matter how *you* see it. I made the decision and that’s final.”

“Excuse me? Those are *my* men. I am more than capable of handling them myself.”

“I know you’re capable. I watched you carve four men with a knife, but *you* weren’t there at the time. Max was there. Maxwell’s heart is bigger than yours. He could not be trusted to make the hard decision.”

“Your head is hard.” I tried to walk around him.

He grabbed my waist and pulled me back, pressing my body against his.

Shivering, I closed my eyes.

He leaned forward and brushed his lips against my ear. His voice went low. “Sometimes I’m going to be a caveman and lock you away, keep you safe, and do things that you may not like, and in those moments, you will deal with it.”

I opened my eyes. “This is not how *our* relationship will work. We have compromised. We have come to the middle point before. Can we do it now?”

It was his turn to tremble.

Shocked, I widened my eyes.

*What is he afraid of?*

Kaz shook his head. “You want me to compromise on having disloyal people around you, I will not.”

“Kaz—”

“You are my future wife and the mother of my child.” He trembled again. “The things that I would do to keep you safe...” He sneered. “If you knew...you would run away, screaming...you would have nightmares.”

“That’s not how this will work.” I left his hold and walked to the other side of the railing. “We need a clear line of what you will and will not do to my men.”

“Enough. I already told you the line—”

“You know what? Just go upstairs, before I flip you off this balcony.”

Frowning, he crossed his arms over his chest and glared at me. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Since we are arguing,” Kaz stepped back and leaned against the railing. “I might as well bring up something that pissed me off today.”

“Pissed *you* off?”

“Yes.”

I held my hands out. “Oh do share. I’m so fucking eager to hear *your* complaints.”

“You offered yourself up for Paolo and told Blue to take him back to me.”

“I did.”

“Do you know what would have happened to Blue if she followed your orders?”

“You would not have touched her.”

“The very opposite, *mysh*. If Blue told me that you traded yourself for Paolo that’s an automatic bullet to Blue’s head—”

“You don’t threaten my people!”

His voice rose, shaking the foundation. “You don’t threaten yourself and my unborn child!

I blinked. “It was a ploy, Kaz.”

He uncrossed his arms and fisted his hands at his sides. “Ploy or not, you never offer yourself up—”

“Let’s get back to you killing my people.”

“Let’s!” He headed over to me. “If they step out of line, I will kill them. If they don’t keep you safe and near me, I will kill them. If they ever come back without you, I will torture them for hours and murder them and their family and their friends, and I will not back down on that—”

“Then, we can’t continue—”

“You have no choice on that front!”

“You’re not even letting me finish the end of the sentence.”

“There is no need! I don’t like the beginning!”

“Kaz—”

“*We can’t* is not a thing and it will never be a thing for the beginning of *any* sentence!”

“Kaz—”

“We will! And we always will!”

*I won't... be able to get him to understand.*

Helpless, I dropped my hands and turned away, shaking with rage. Hot tears streamed down my cheeks. My breathing went erratic. So much panic hit me, I wanted to claw at my throat with my nails and tear through to my lungs.

“*Mysh?*”

I panted. “Don't mysh me.”

“Are you okay?”

My heartbeats drummed through my chest. “Y-you won't give m-me some chance for a compromise. Y-you just k-kill my people.”

Pain twisted my stomach. I held both of my hands to it and felt like doubling over. “Y-you expect me to just t-take it.” My voice cracked. “I love you so much.” My vision blurred with tears. “B-but you are going to...push me away.”

His big arms wrapped around me as he hugged me from behind. I violently shook within his hold. “*Mysh*, I am sorry.”

“Y-you're not.”

His voice lowered. He tightened his hold, anchoring me, giving me warmth, and taking some of the cold panic away. “Breathe, *mysh*.”

I leaned the back of my head against him and closed my eyes. I focused on slowly inhaling and exhaling.

He tenderly rubbed my arms. “Lunita says I go too far.”

“You do.”

“Am I going too far now?”

“Yes! Are you serious right now?” I trembled. “Of course you just went too far.”

He went silent, but wouldn't let me go.

Tears spilled from my eyes.



He brushed his lips against my cheek. “I don’t want to back down on this, *mysh*. This is about your protection and my child’s safety. Tell me how I fix this.”

“The only way to fix this is backing down.”

“But, your people must always keep you safe. That means Lunita too.”

“Kaz, Max and I run Harlem Crew, not you. Don’t make Harlem Crew be what causes a divide between us.”

“Saying things like that makes me want to kill them.”

I tried to leave his arms.

He wouldn’t let me. “What did I do now?”

“You threatened Harlem Crew.”

“But...” He cleared his throat. “Okay. I chose to threaten them because I do not want anyone causing a divide between us.”

I turned around in his arms and faced him. “*You* are the only one that could cause a divide.”

He blinked. “By killing them?”

“Yes!” I shook my head. “Why is this so hard to understand?”

He groaned in utter annoyance. “Because I am not built any other way, *mysh*. All my life, I have been taught that it is *us* or *them*. Violence and blood. Not giving people another chance to disappoint. Not compromises. Not accepting disloyal soldiers.”

Sighing, I leaned my head against his chest. “Then, it is time to reshape and change. I had to by letting you take control of my life when it terrified me. I...like to depend on myself because at least I know I won’t hurt myself and things will get done, but I’ve had to give control.”

“You depended on Maxwell and X.”

“I took control when I could.”

“And now you give control to me?”

I looked up at him. “As much as I can.”

“All of it.”

“Kaz...”

He frowned. “And...I will give my control to you.”

“That means leaving my people alone.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Does it?”

“Yes. What the fuck is wrong with you? You are highly intelligent. Just stop killing my men.”

He groaned in annoyance.

“Let me go.”

“*Mysh?*”

“What?”

“Can I offer a simple example to rationalize my point?”

“Fine, but I won’t change my mind on this.”

“Good. And, I want a true answer from you.”

“Yeah. I’ll be honest.”

“I have men that swore their lives to protect me.”

“Alright.”

“And one day, these same men are around me, in a moment where I am unconscious, helpless, and on the ground. So, you ask my men to help you. Many stand strong and remain loyal. They nod. It is just another day on the job for them. They will not leave my side. They will wait until I wake. They will keep me safe, until I can walk again.”

I swallowed down fear.

“But then, there are six men who decide that they no longer want to protect me. They are scared. And the other men who stood strong are watching your reaction to these disloyal men.”

I sighed.

“What would you do, *mysh?*”

“That’s different.”

“It’s not.”

“Kaz, I have two fucking personalities. One likes to cut people into parts and play with them. That’s completely different than you being—”

“What would you do?”

“You know what I would do?”

“What?”

“Kill them.”

Kaz curved his lips into a wicked grin. “This is why I chose *you* to be my wife. Intelligent. Strong. Beautiful. Loyal. Loving.”

“That example is different.”

“It’s different because it is me and you would do more to protect me than yourself.”

I opened my mouth in shock.

Kaz continued, “Somewhere in your life, you learned that you weren’t important enough to fiercely protect, so you do it yourself and don’t expect much from others. In fact, I think too much love and protection makes you uncomfortable.”

“T-that’s not true—”

“You would rather give than take.”

“Because...”

“You would rather protect men and women who turned their backs on you, than to make sure good people are around you, keeping our child safe.”

I placed my head back against his chest.

“Sometimes I think you love your people more than you love yourself.”

I pursed my lips.

“So, I will properly love you enough for both of us.” He kissed the top of my forehead. “Also...”

I rolled my eyes. “Is there really an also, Kaz?”

“*Also*, you are focused on the wrong part of Harlem Crew.”

“What?”

“Focus on the ones in Harlem Crew that didn’t flinch when they saw what Lunita did. The ones that were given a choice to walk away, yet boldly remained to serve you.”

I didn’t know why, but that made me cry more and my heart ache.

Kaz continued, “Boris stood strong and said that he was eating cats before you, and that he would never leave your side.”

I sobbed.

“Kapotnya was nothing until you, Emily. You cleaned it up in a matter of weeks. There are murals of you on the buildings.”

I didn’t want to hear anymore. It made me uncomfortable. Uneasy. It made me want to hide and cover my face.

“The ones that stood strong...they saw the horror in your small frame and stayed for one simple reason.” Kaz ran his fingers through my hair. “They stayed because you are as close to a superhero as they will ever get in this cruel world.”

I gritted my teeth.

“But do you know that? Or should I buy you a cape?”

“Fine.”

“I love you, *mysh*.”

“I love you too, but...”

“But?”

“Do not kill any more of my people.”

He sighed. “Fine, but this is *my* compromise.”

“What?”

“Do not add any more people who need to learn that lesson. I believe your current people have gotten the message.”

“Okay. I won’t add anymore.”

“Good.” He pulled away and grinned at me. “Now. I want some pussy.”





# Chapter 27

## Feast

### Kazimir

*Space? Naughty, mouse. Never!*

Clothes off. Cock out. Hungry and ready to fuck, I towered over Emily.

*I will teach you about space this evening.*

I had returned my mouse and her items to the proper suite.

Blue even carried a sleeping Paolo to his bedroom next to us. Emily had monitored the move as if she expected someone to try and grab him again. Once she confirmed that he was fine, she returned to our suite.

*I must get rid of the boy soon.*

But, that was a problem for tomorrow.

*Time to teach a lesson.*

Naked, Emily lay motionless on the mahogany dining table, covered in warm oil. Two pillows rested under her head. Her hands were bound above her head, stretched taut by red silk ribbon. Her legs were spread apart. Red ribbons tied each ankle to a table leg.

Tons of lit red candles sat on the shelf across from her, filling the room with the scent of roses, jasmine, and ginger. The flames danced and licked at the air, creating shadows on the walls.

*Never will you think of space again.*

Anticipation pumped cool blood through my body, so much that precum beaded at the tip of my cock.

Her seductive voice filled the air. “Kaz...fuck me.”

“Patience, *mysh*.”



“I have no patience, when it comes to you.”

“So naughty.” I wrapped my fingers around my cock and slowly worked them up and down until my length was hard as a rock and throbbing with need.

*Soon.*

I let go and walked over to my mouse.

A warm breeze blew through the open balcony doors. The long sheer curtains rippled. Then, thunder rumbled, announcing an approaching storm that would break over the ocean.

My cock throbbed as I went over to Emily’s wrists and made sure she couldn’t escape her bindings.

*Yes. Very good.*

I walked around the table to further inspect my handiwork. “Very interesting.”

Her breasts rose and fell. “What’s so interesting, Kaz?”

“I’ve seen many naked women, but *your* beauty...it always dazzles me, always captivates and triggers further addiction to rise.”

She licked her lips. “I have that same reaction when I see you without any clothes.”

My cock jerked. “Is that right, *mysh*?”

“Yes.”

I walked over to her side and studied the lovely curves of her body. Hunger pulsed through my body. I planned to make her scream all night, then rest, and make her scream again.

Emily disrupted my thoughts of sexual madness. “In fact...”

I moved my view to her face. “Yes?”

“You should take this blindfold off my eyes so I can see you now.”

“Should I?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you love turning me on.”

A wicked grin spread across my face. “But, you have been a very bad mouse.”

She pouted. “How?”

I frowned. “Your audacity to put space between us—”

“That’s a healthier choice than hitting you with a shovel.”

“Next time, pick the shovel.”

“Either way you forgave me for that, so you can take the blindfold off—”

“You also hung up twice—”

“Which I’m making up for now.”

“We will see.”

“We will see? *This* is making up for it, Kaz.”

“Still...we will see. I may require more to get over it.” I pictured her bent over and my cock slapping into her ass.

“You’re so fucking spoiled.”

“The fact that you know that is why I love you even more.” I placed my hand on her hip and then slid my fingertips up.

She bit her bottom lip.

I stopped my hand and kept it over her soft stomach, loving the feel of the small round bump against my palm.

“How is the baby?”

“Dr. Stovall said we are healthy, but he also stressed that I should not be fighting anymore.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “And what do *you* say?”

“I agree.”

Relief washed over me. “We will be out of Italy soon.”

“I agree with that too.”

I felt a small movement under my hand.

Excitement hit me.

*Is that the baby?*

I had read tons of pregnancy books. It was too early for me to feel the baby at this time, but I still hoped for that day to hurry. I wasn't the most patient man, and was too eager to meet my child.

In fact, in the few quiet moments we had in Italy, my mind had filled with images of our baby. I imagined how our child would look—a powerful mix of Emily and me.

“Oh.” Emily frowned.

I quirked my brows. “Oh?”

“Fela called me.”

I sneered. “What? That should have been the first thing we discussed today, not those Harlem Crew deaths—”

“Be careful, Kaz. I am barely over that—”

“What did Fela say?” Too pissed off, I moved my hand away from her stomach, not wanting to transfer any of my angry energy to our child.

My erection began to go down.

*You dared to call her, Fela, after running away scared from my fight with the Don!*

Emily spoke, “His call was clearly to track me, but Misha was around to track him.”

“And did Misha track him?”

“Yes. Misha said he had him. I assumed you talked to your cousin about it.”

“When I arrived at the hotel, Misha called, but I did not want to talk to him. I wanted to talk to you.”

She smirked. “Very spoiled.”

The sneer didn't leave my face. “And what did Fela say?”

She let out a long breath. “Fela asked about my wanting to keep Paolo. He mentioned that he was trying to save Paolo, which is all bullshit.”

“I confirmed this when I saw the Don’s cellphone. They planned to take Paolo and use him as bait to get to you.”

Her mouth opened.

“What else, *mysh*?”

“When were you going to tell me *that*?”

“We were busy talking about other things.”

She shook her head. “I’m going to kill Fela.”

“No.” I shook my head. “That job is *mine*. Remember what Dr. Stovall said.”

“Kaz, can I at least stand next to you when you do it? I want to watch you cut him open. I want blood spilling from his neck and chest.”

Usually a question like that and those statements would give me pride, but this time they made me nervous. Was this my mouse’s desires or the inner needs of Lunita? And if Emily watched me kill Fela, would Lunita return to join the fun too?

“Kaz?”

I blinked. “Did Fela mention anything else?”

She frowned. “He brought up Daryl and how they planned for me to kill you. He was trying to fuck with my head and taunt my...darkness as well as keep me on the phone.”

*Little do you know, Fela? You do not want to taunt Lunita.*

Someone knocked on the door.

I sighed. “I will be right back, *mysh*.”

“What?” She tugged at the binds. “Don’t leave me here.”

“I am getting our order.” I grabbed my robe and put it on. “You will still be in my sight.”

“You better hurry your ass back here.”

“Yes, *mysh*.”

“I mean it, Kaz.”

“I would never abandon you.”

“You do and I am going to get free and come for you.”

My cock jerked.

“I’m serious!”

“Hmmm. You always turn me on with your threats.” Tying the robe’s belt, I walked away, went to the door, and opened it five inches.

David’s face greeted me.

I raised my eyebrows. “Where is my order?”

David gestured to the long silver cart, covered with items. Tons of fruit filled crystal bowls—sliced plums and peaches, strawberries and cherries. In the center, there were cups of warm honey, caramel, and chocolate.

A large knife lay on the side of the cart.

David smirked. “Baba saw me pushing this up and advised that the baby will need all four food groups.”

“Tell, Baba, that I will definitely consider that.” I winked at him. “You can leave the table. I will push it in.”

“You?”

“Yes. I know how to do things for myself.”

David’s smirk widened, telling me he knew exactly what was going on. “Well...I do not want to interrupt your...feast, but the couple is here.”

I gazed at the cup of melted chocolate syrup. Steam rose from the top. “What couple?”

“The couple that is supposed to take care of Paolo.”

Fast, I waved my hand. “No.”

David stepped back. “No?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Do you want me to tell them to go”

“No.” I lowered my voice. “Have them stay the night. Check them into a nice suite. Also, tell them to order everything, even a masseuse if they desire it.”

“O-kay.”

“Emily and I already argued tonight, David. I need sex and sleep. We can deal with this hard topic tomorrow.”

David nodded. “Enjoy your evening, Kazimir.”

I watched him walk off.

*Damn you, Pavel. Even from the grave you cause problems.*

My stomach twisted with the reality of what could come tomorrow. Maxwell claimed that Emily had imprinted onto the boy. I had already told her several times that he couldn't stay with us. It was time to end this situation soon.

After David disappeared, I stepped out into the suite's hallway.

My men turned the other way.

I grabbed the end of the cart, pushed it into the dining area, and then shut the door.

Emily sighed. “It's about time. Who was that?”

“David brought my order.”

“And what is your order?”

“You will find out soon, *mysh*.”

“I want some dick.”

I chuckled.

“Right now.”

*Stop saying that. You make me want to stuff you.*

I placed the cart next to the end of the table where her head rested.

“Let us begin.” I dipped my finger into the warm chocolate. When I lifted my hand, chocolate dripped from the tip. The alluring sweet scent rose in the air.

“Mmmm.” Emily smiled. “What did you order? It smells good.”

“Open your mouth.”

She parted those full lips.

“Stick out your tongue.”

She did as I said.

I brought the finger over to her mouth. Chocolate dripped along her breasts. Then, I dove my finger into her mouth.

Groaning, she sucked on my finger, making my cock deliriously jealous. The warm, wet pressure of her mouth triggered a bolt of heat to surge through me.

I slid my finger away and then licked up the drops of chocolate from her breasts.

“Oh.” She writhed under my tongue. Her stiff nipples jiggled.

I moved away.

She pouted. “I want more.”

I smiled. “More chocolate?”

“More of your tongue.”

A dark chuckle left me. I grabbed one of the peaches, dipped it in caramel, and fed it to her.

She groaned with pleasure.

“Which did you like better, *mysh*? The chocolate or the caramel covered peach?”

She smirked. “I liked *your tongue* the best.”

“That was not an option.”

“Still, I want your tongue.”

“Is that all you want?”

“Your cock too.”

“Hmmm.”

“And I want to see you.”

“Do you now?”

“I want to see that damn six pack and those biceps bulging as you fuck me.”

I took off the robe. It fell to the floor.

“But most of all...”

Quirking my brows, I grabbed a sliced strawberry and dipped it in the warm honey. “Most of all?”

“I want to see your cock going in and out of me.”

I gritted my teeth, trying to restrain myself.

“Now, Kaz.”

Another dark chuckle left me. “But, I am spoiled?”

“I’m only cock-spoiled. You are spoiled in every other category.”

I brushed the honey-dripping strawberry against her lips.

She opened them.

I placed it on her tongue.

She took it.

Then, I kissed her. The sweet tartness of the berry mixed with the honey coating our tongues. I twisted mine around hers, and she moaned with pleasure.

Right as she moaned, I left her mouth.

“Damn it, Kaz. Bring your lips back.”

“But, you want space.”

She sucked her teeth. “I know you better be over that.”

“Surprisingly, I am not.”

“Then, get over it.”

“Yet...we have both established that I am spoiled.” I dipped my finger in the cup of chocolate. “How could you think I would let you be far away from me?”



“It was going to be for *one* evening.”

“One evening is too fucking much.” I painted a nipple with the warm chocolate, covering the stiff little point.

She stirred and twisted those hips.

“You could have gotten more people killed.”

She looked like she was about to answer.

I dove toward that nipple and lapped at it, loving the taste of her and the chocolate.

“Oh.”

I licked a circle around her nipple, making sure I gathered up all the sweetness.

She arched her back.

Grunting, I moved away and grabbed sliced plums. Their sweet liquid dripped down my fingers. This time, I smeared the juices and cool plum against her lips. She lathered up some of the fruit. The liquid dripped down her chin. I dove for that, licking and lapping on her chin and throat.

“Oh fuck, Kaz. Please just...”

I leaned back and licked my lips. “What do you want, *mysh?*”

Her voice held a fierce pleading. “I want you to touch me all over my fucking body right now.”

I chuckled.

“That’s not funny, Kaz.”

I rose. “I love when you beg.”

“I’m not begging. I’m *demanding.*”

“Is that right?”

“Yes.”

Laughing, I picked up the warm cup of chocolate and held it over her breasts. “Do you really think a mouse can command a lion?”

*“This mouse can.”*

“Hmmm.” I poured the entire cup of chocolate onto her.

“Oh.” She arched up in shock and opened her mouth.

“What is that? It’s so warm.”

“I do not have time for your questions.”

“What?”

“I am hungry.” I descended on those chocolate covered breasts. It was heaven. Sweet, warm, and luscious. I had been chasing true power all my life, only to find real power right here before me.

What was more powerful than my mouse’s body? It could put holes in a country. It could start a fucking war among the deadliest crime organizations. It could make a lion kneel, obey, and beg for more.

*All mine. Every inch of you.*

I nibbled and swiped my tongue along the fullness of her breasts.

“Oh!”

*Understand that now or deal with the consequences.*

I licked and sipped up all the sweetness.

She shuddered under my tongue, writhing and twisting.

My cock ached to feel the warmth of her pussy, but I was not done with teaching her a lesson. Somehow, I dragged myself away and loudly groaned.

Emily trembled. “Come back.”

“What was that, *mysh?*”

“Get your ass back over here.” She tried to sit up. Her bound wrists stopped her. She lay back down in frustration. “Kaz.”

“Yes, *mysh?*”

“Fuck me, Kaz.”

“I am sorry.” I picked up a cup of caramel. “What did you say? My English is not so good—”

“Fuck me!” She tugged against the bindings. “Now, Kaz!”

A maddening grin spread across my face. “But, are you wet for me?”

Her voice became weak. “Yes.”

“How wet?”

“So damned wet.”

“Hmmm. That does not sound very wet to me.”

Her bottom lip quivered. “Put your finger down there.”

I raised the cup of caramel over one of her thighs. “Put my finger on your pussy?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, man.” She yanked hard at the ribbon. “When you let me out of these bindings, I am going to show you something.”

I chuckled. “What will you do?”

“You better stop playing with me.”

“Hmmm.” I poured the warm caramel over her thighs.

“Oh.” She lifted her head and inhaled. “What did you put there?”

“Does it matter?” I set the empty cup down. “We both know all you want me to do is lick it up.”

“I do.” She shivered and wildly nodded. “Please lick it.”

I lowered.

“And lick my pussy too.”

I switched to Russian. “*Such a demanding mouse.*”

She responded in Russian. “*Fuck me, lion.*”

I swayed a little from the sexy order. “You are improving more and more with your pronunciation.”

“I can improve even better if you fuck me.”

My body rocked with laughter.

She writhed. “This isn’t funny, baby.”

I licked her caramel covered thigh, taking slow, long swipes from her knee up to the area close to her pussy. Each time I lapped upwards, she twisted her hips and tried to shove that pretty pussy in my face. Somehow I didn’t take the bait.

Every time I moved back down, she sighed in frustration.

*So fucking sexy.*

Wetness dripped from her folds. Even the table under her ass was wet. The lush scent of her musk and heat filled the air and I deeply breathed it in.

Thankfully, she couldn’t see me. If she could, she would have saw the madness radiating from me. She would have known the power she possessed. She would have witnessed the primal need painted over my features and truly understood how much I struggled.

For several minutes, I continued this slow up and down motion, licking the caramel off her thigh and driving her crazy. I wanted to bury my face in her pussy, but remained strong. The whole time she trembled and moaned.

When I licked all the caramel away from her thigh, the tip of my cock swelled in pain, needing release.

*Soon.*

I rose and picked up a cup of honey.

Emily shivered like an addict, desperate for a fix. “J-just touch me...please.”

I dipped my finger in the cup. “But, I touched your thigh.”

“My pussy, Kaz,” she whined. “Now.”

My body vibrated with overwhelming lust. I was unable to hold on any longer because I wanted to play with her pussy just as much as she wanted me to.

“K-Kaz...I will do anything.”

I spoke through clenched teeth. "You sure will."

"Please."

Slowly, I brought my honey coated middle finger to the front of her pussy.

"Kaz...I'm going to explode, if you don't touch me."

My head clouded with desire.

"Beg me."

"Please."

I gritted my teeth. "Louder."

"Please, Kaz! Please, touch me!"

"Hmmm." I touched those warm, soft folds.

She parted her lips. Her chest rose and fell like she had been running.

I gently slid honey over her folds.

She threw her head back. "Oh. Thank you, Jesus."

Smiling, I slipped my finger between her folds.

She rocked her hips.

"No. No." I gritted. "Stay still."

She stopped. "Please..."

"No, *mysh*."

She whispered, "Why not?"

*Because it looks too sexy. It's making me crazy.*

I parted her folds with two fingers.

"Ooo."

I moved my finger.

"Damn it, Kaz!"

I turned the cup over and dripped some honey on her clit.

"O-okay. W-what's that?"

I smirked.

“S-so...you’re going to lick it?”

*“You are such a dirty little mouse.”*

*“I am. Make me more dirty.”*

I grunted and painted honey on her clit.

She twisted. Then, her movements shifted to erratic and wild as I rubbed small circles along the sensitive bud.

“Oh, G-god!” She writhed against me, turning her hips in tight circles, pumping as if trying to come.

I moved my hand away. *“Mysh?”*

“Y-yes.”

“I am very hungry.”

“Y-you know you can eat this pussy.” She raised her hips in different directions, not sure where my head was, just trying to put that beautiful wetness on me. “H-here you go, baby. Come here.”

*“Mysh?”*

“Yes, Kaz. Goddamn it! What do you want?” She ground her hips against the air. “Just eat me.”

“I want to make something clear.”

She let out an exasperated breath.

“When I call you, I want you to answer.”

“W-what?”

“When I call, you answer.”

“Yes, Kaz.” Her thighs shivered. “I will answer anytime you call.”

“First ring.”

“First motherfucking ring, Kaz!”

“And about hanging up on me—”

“I will never hang up.” She tried to move one leg as if testing its strength.

I leaned over, placing my mouth a few inches above her pussy. “Now let us talk about the space that you wanted this evening.”

“There will never be space, Kaz. When you tell me to go to a suite, that’s where I’ll be.”

“Hmmm.” Finally, I gave her what she wanted and what I so desperately needed. I ran my tongue around her honey-coated clit, and then started flicking it over the bundle of nerves.

“Oh, baby!”

I thrust my tongue into her wet, sweetness, lapping up every bit of honey and fucking her with my tongue.

Her voice rose to a fevered pitch, torn between a scream and a wail. “Yes! Yes!”

The warm, wet, silkiness of her pussy was so good. I could have given up my life with the Brotherhood and simply licked her pussy for days. The taste of her juices mixed with the honey was a forbidden fruit. It was the flavor of ecstasy. Pure, hot, and intoxicating.

My cock dripped with more pre-cum.

I wanted to slide the head of my cock along her pussy and stroke her clit, but I had to get control of myself. That would only set her off and make her orgasm faster.

That wasn’t what I wanted.

I wanted to play with my mouse a little more.

Was that not the instinct of a wild cat?

I yearned to hear her scream even more.

“Oh!”

I pulled her clit into my mouth and sucked on it.

“Oh, Kaz! Yesssss!”

I sucked harder, hard enough to make my jaw ache. Her pussy gushed. Her body violently shivered under me. My mouth was full of her juices.

I pulled my face away from her pussy and licked my lips.  
“How do you feel?”

“O-oh, my L-lord.”

I went to the cart and grabbed the knife. “What do you want?”

“Your cock.”

I went to her right ankle and sliced the ribbon.

“Oh, hell yes.”

I chuckled.

She wriggled the free ankle. “I’m going to fuck you so hard, Kaz.”

“Is that right?”

“I know one thing. When you let me free, it is on!”

I grunted and cut the other ribbon from her ankle.

“Get my hands.”

Smirking, I walked over to her wrists. “Patience, *mysh*.”

She tugged at the wrists. “Come on, baby.”

I held her hands still and freed her from the remaining ribbons.

“Thank God.” She sat up fast, kicked her legs over the side, and remained on the edge of the table.

I tried to touch her blindfold, but she had it off before I could grab it.

She blinked her eyes. “Never again.”

I gazed at those pretty brown eyes. “Never what?”

She wrapped her arms around my neck. “Never again will I let you tease me like that.”

“But, you will.”

She frowned.



“You will as much as I want and you will love every minute of it.” I yanked her up, carrying her away from the table and onto the balcony.

She held on. “Fuck me, baby.”

“Oh. I plan to, *mysh*.”

Out on the balcony, I kept a tight grip on her body and then let her down.

A cool breeze blew against my skin.

I spun her around. “I loved hearing you beg.”

She placed her hands on the railing and leaned back against me. “And I love when you lick my pussy.”

“Hmmm. So dirty.”

Her hair fluttered in the breeze.

The storm had not broken yet, but rain would arrive very soon. I could smell it in the air.

“No one on this entire planet has the power that you have over me.” I pressed my cock against her soft ass. “Did you know that?”

Lightning cracked a jagged line across the dark sky.

She whispered, “Yes, baby.”

Thunder roared.

“Do not take that power lightly, *mysh*.”

The wind whistled and howled.

“Never think you can be away from me.” I thrust into her from behind, rocking my hips and loving the silky smoothness of her skin sliding against mine.

“Oh!” Her voice was a high-pitched gasp in the dark night. “Oh, Kaz! I love you!”

My biceps bulged. My cock throbbed. The raindrops tickled my skin and made it slick with moisture.

I slipped one hand to her clit and the other to her breasts.

She met my pumping, knowing how I loved it.

Then the rain fell in sheets, drenching our skin and turning it soaking wet and slippery. But we didn't care.

We fucked in the storm, hidden from the world. Wet and wild with lust. Each stroke was violent with passion and deranged hunger. Giving and taking pleasure. Riding the waves of ecstasy.

The rain pounded. The thunder rumbled, and the lightning flashed, illuminating the night sky for a brief instant.

“Oh!” She screamed, “I'm cumming!”

“Fuck, yes. Me too, *mys*h!”

And then, we orgasmed together and for that moment, the world was perfect.





# Chapter 28

## The Challenge

### Kazimir

We slept through the morning, curled up against each other, our arms and legs tangled.

When sunlight filtered through the window, I woke from the comforting veil of sleep and noticed my lovely mouse laying against my chest. An all-encompassing happiness encased me. I felt wealthier than any time in my life, and it had nothing to do with money.

It was all Emily and my love for her.

I wrapped my arms around my mouse's curvy body and kissed her forehead. Her hair smelled like honey and rain. Her warm skin smoothed against mine.

I spent an hour, watching Emily and simply considering the beauty of love.

*She has truly changed me.*

When she woke, I became a kid at Christmas, excited for her attention.

Due to how late it was, we didn't order breakfast. Instead, we had a nice brunch—bruschetta topped with tomatoes, fresh garlic, basil, and drizzled with extra virgin olive oil along with Bacon and Potato frittata cut into simple triangles. Several bowls of peaches and strawberries were on the table too, and Emily told me that she would never be able to look at fruit the same way again.

We discussed the possibilities of our child's full name. Emily thought it would be important to go with the Russian tradition of structuring—first name, middle patronymic name, and then surname. She felt that our child would be the safest in

Russia. Therefore, he or she should truly feel rooted within the country and its traditions.

To my surprise, she also wanted his first name to be Russian. It made my heart ache a little that she would be so welcoming of my life. Maxwell and she held so much American pride, especially when it came to New York. Yet, she wholeheartedly opened herself to my life, and it made my insides so warm...so comforted...so full of love.

Over nibbling food, we played around with boy names going back and forth with Emilio and Alexander. Naming our son after my mouse gave me pride, especially since our child would be having a mixture of my name regardless of the gender.

However, Alexander the Great was one of my favorite kings. He had succeeded his father Philip II to the throne and spent most of his ruling years conducting lengthy military campaigns that expanded their empire throughout Western Asia and Egypt.

Surely, this was a worthy name to the Lion's child.

Then, we switched to discussing girl names. For some reason, I was drawn to the name Kira. I loved that it meant *throne* or *leader of the people*. The name made sense because my daughter would be sitting on the throne one day and ruling our empire.

Emily loved the name Sofia because it meant *wisdom*. She wanted our daughter to be highly intelligent and truly independent, traveling all over the world and having a fun luxurious life.

Meanwhile, I found that concept funny. Independence? My daughter would be a daddy's girl and always remain by my side, killing and conquering, bullying and terrorizing. Her aunt would be Valentina after all.

Once full of food, we made love. Soft, slow, and sensual. No teasing. No taunting. Just whispers of passion and moans of pleasure.

After intense orgasms, Emily dragged us out of bed late in the afternoon, reminding me that we should get everyone together to discuss Fela.

I was going to argue that we had more time, but I could see the sun lowering to the center of the sky. There would only be a few more hours of afternoon left before we shifted into evening.

We showered together. So happy, I sang her a few of my favorite songs, while she laughed and soaped me up.

Once we dried off, I came up with a fun challenge.

“Hmm.” With only a towel on, I stood in the center of the suite’s massive closet, examining the scores of Emily’s wigs displayed on shelves. “This is a rather difficult choice, *mysh*.”

She perused my suits. “Not as hard as mine.”

“Your challenge is simple.”

“It isn’t. My decision for what you will wear is much harder. You have hundreds and hundreds of designer suits.”

“Of course.”

“Kaz, you have a shopping problem.”

“I have a problem?” I pointed at all the wigs. “I think you have clearly beat me in this category.”

“Just pick a wig.”

“Do not rush me.” I lifted one red wig off the shelf. It was a lush mane of long, wavy strands.

*Very nice.*

I stroked it. The wig’s silkiness was soft and thick, caressing my fingers, tickling my palms, and making me want to never stop running my fingers through it.

*This may be the one.*

Emily eyed me. “Are you going to pick the wig or fuck it?”

“I must take my time with this.” I frowned. “It is important.”

“But, no one even said you were choosing my wig today. The challenge was that we would pick each other’s outfits for this afternoon’s meeting.”

I shook the wig, assessing the way it swayed with the movement. “But the wig is just as much a part of the outfit as your shoes. Or am I wrong?”

“Just pick a damned wig, and stop shaking her like that.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.” Emily took out another suit and placed it by four other ones that had been hanging across from her. “I have more progress than you.”

“What progress?” I turned the mannequin head around to get a better look of the waves. “You have done nothing over there.”

“Kaz, I already have the tie, socks, boxer briefs, shirt, and shoes.” She went to a different rack of suits and ran her fingers over a dark blue one. “Meanwhile, it took you thirty minutes to pick out my panties.”

“That was important. I wanted to know what pair of panties I would be tearing away.”

She shook her head and checked out a black suit. “Just pick the wig, and then give me some clothes. I’m over here naked and waiting.”

“You have on a robe.”

“I’m naked under it.”

“Take off the robe. I like you naked.” I stroked the wig.

She sighed. “Put the wig down. You look like an evil villain stroking his wicked cat.”

“How can I pick your clothes, if I do not know the wig?”

“You are being so extra right now.”

I smirked. “What is this wig’s name?”

“Raquel.”



I lifted the top of the wig off the mannequin head and peered under it. “And you said this is the...lace part of the wig? The part that keeps it all together—”

“Kaz.” She turned my way and put her hand on her hips. “We are not doing a symposium on wigs.”

“It was a simple question.”

“Okay.” She gave me a skeptical look. “Yes. That is the lace.”

“The base?”

“Yes.”

“But, you said that there were different types of bases.”

“I did.”

“Which one is this?”

“This one is French Drawn.”

“But you said there is a Glass Silk one. That sounded more expensive. Glass. It must cost more.”

She sighed. “Glass Silk is a very soft and fine material that creates a realistic scalp color and effect.”

“Then, why get the French Drawn instead of the—”

“Because in my opinion French Drawn gives the most natural look.”

I leaned my head to the side. “How?”

“It creates the appearance of growth at the scalp and allows for parting anywhere.” She pointed at me. “And this is why I didn’t want to start with the questions because you will keep on going, and we will be in here for five hours talking about wigs.”

I raised the wig up to my face and sniffed. A floral scent hit my nostrils. “Do you spray your wigs with perfume? They all smell so good.”

She mumbled, “I’m about to spray your ass with something—”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” She grabbed a navy blue suit and showed it to me. “I’m picking this. You always wear a lot of black as if you are the villain of everyone’s story—”

“I *am* the villain in most stories.” I grinned.

“Either way, for this meeting I would like you to present a sense of confident power, yet more relaxed.”

I ran my fingers through the red wig. “Tell me more.”

“I read once that the British Royal Navy and even United States Air Force chose this deep color of blue to convey confidence and power, but most of all stability and unity.”

“And you think this meeting will be more stable and united, if I am wearing navy blue?”

“It’s setting the stage.” She carefully placed the suit over one chair.

“*Mysk*?”

“Yep.”

“Is this human hair?”

She groaned in annoyance. “Yes, Kaz.”

“Then, do you have wigs in here that are synthetic hair?”

“Maybe one or two due to their styles.”

“Is animal hair used for wigs?”

“I read that animal hair is very rarely used.”

“What animals?”

“Yaks, horses, sheep, and even goats. Now stop asking me questions about wigs.”

“But, who else could I ask?”

“Valentina.”

I quirked my brows. “She wears wigs too?”

“Yes, Kaz. Lots of them. She just sticks with long blonde ones.”

“Very interesting.”

Emily picked up the tie and placed it against the suit. “I don’t know. I may change the tie and shoes. I have to get the right combination.”

She proceeded to walk around the closet and gazed at a pair of brown shoes. “I can’t have my baby looking crazy in front of everyone.”

She went over to the black shoes. “But...which ones? No. I will choose a new tie and then place everything together to get the right look. Then, I can truly make the decision.”

“Sounds boring.”

“At least I am getting somewhere.” She chuckled. “Meanwhile, you are over there trying to date my wig.”

“No. We are past the dating stage. Also, I believe this is the wig you will wear today.”

“Okay. Finally, some progress.” Clapping, she walked over to my shelf of ties. “And why are you picking Raquel?”

“Because I can’t wait to yank it off your head when I’m fucking you in the ass.”

“And see...that right there.” She wagged her finger at me. “That is why I didn’t want to do this challenge, because you’re not taking it seriously.”

“I take *fucking* you very seriously.”

“You’re picking what I will wear to the *meeting*, Kaz. Not to fuck. The *meeting*.” She snapped her fingers twice. “Focus.”

“But I will be fucking you after the meeting.” I set the wig next to the red lace panties. “In fact, I will possibly bend you over the table once everyone leaves—”

“We are not doing this clothing challenge again.”

“I plan to pick your wig and clothes every morning.” I returned to the shelf of wigs to confirm I had truly made the correct choice.

“Kaz, what are you doing back over there?”

“I am making sure—”

“Get away from my wigs.”

“You are too territorial of them.” Frowning, I went over to her dresses. “Hmmm. We will need something where I can see your ass, but no one else can.”

Emily sighed.

“And the dress will need a very long split so under the table, I can slip my hands—”

“We have to discuss the strategy to end Black Axe.”

“Correct.”

“That means you won’t be fingering me.”

“Is that what it means?”

“Yes.” She held two ties in her hand. One was dark blue with red markings. The other was a solid black. “Focus.”

Someone knocked on the closet door.

I headed over and opened it.

King David wore a worried expression. He gestured for me to come outside of the closet.

“I will be right back, *mysh*.” I stepped out and shut the door behind me. “Yes?”

He kept his voice low. “Baba found out about the couple. She’s been searching the hotel for them.”

“Why? Does she want to make sure they are good people?”

“I think she is going to convince them to leave. Baba is adamant that Paolo must remain with Emily.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Did she provide an explanation for that reasoning?”

“She did, but...” David sighed.

“What?”

“I can also tell when Baba is bullshiting me and emotionally attached. The way she talked and...she looked close to crying.”

I frowned. “Now Baba has imprinted on the boy too?”

David nodded. “I believe so. I knew Baba would want to make sure the boy would be safe and protected, but I never thought she would fall in love with him.”

“Women.” I sighed. “This is why it is called the Brotherhood. We make the hard decisions.”

David widened his eyes and then cleared his throat. “Alright. We can discuss this later—”

“No.”

A worried expression spread over David’s face. He backed up. “Later, Kazimir—”

“It can’t be later, I want the couple for Paolo hidden from Baba. They can’t meet her—”

“What couple?” Emily walked around me, holding ties. “For Paolo? What about Paolo?”

I stiffened.

*When the hell did she open the door? She is starting to move too silently.*

Emily looked at David. “Why are we hiding this couple from Baba and what does it have to do with Paolo?”

David pursed his lips.

Emily turned her view to me. “Somebody better say something, before I pull my guns out.”

I sighed. “I thought it would be better to discuss this after our meeting over Black Axe.”

“Why?” Her face went to a neutral expression. “Because I would be mad?”

“I do believe you would be upset.”

David edged away. “I will give you two privacy.”

I shook my head. “Stay here.”

“Yeah, David. Stay.” Still holding the ties, she crossed her arms across her chest. “You may need to protect the Lion.”

I frowned. “We found a couple in Italy that takes care of children. They have been thoroughly researched—”

“What does this have to do with Paolo?”

“You know what this has to do with him.”

She spoke through clenched teeth, “Paolo is supposed to be in Russia. That’s what Pavel wanted—”

“Pavel is dead. He has no voice. I know that because I took it from him.” I touched my chest. “Meanwhile, I am the fucking Lion, and I say that the boy remains in Italy not—”

“And you think this couple is taking Paolo?”

“*Mysh*, I want you to meet them and see if you feel comfortable with—”

“I do not even know these people.” Her bottom lip quivered. “How could I know them?”

David cleared his throat. “They were thoroughly researched.”

“Researched? Foster parents are researched and go through all types of assessments. Still, that doesn’t mean many of them don’t touch...” She shivered and inched back. “S-sometimes...they can...be bad too.”

She swayed, but didn’t fall.

“*Mysh*?”

The ties fell from her hands.

“Are you okay?” I reached out to touch her.

She moved away. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Fine, guys.” She raised her hands in the air. “You found some couple. Then, I will meet them.”

I studied her. “Right now?”

“Now.”

“We can do that after the meeting. Perhaps, sit down with them for dinner so that you can question them as much as possible.”

“Now.” She glared at me and then turned to David.  
“Where are they?”

“First floor.”

“What room?”

David looked at me as if asking for permission.

I nodded.

“Room 111.”

She rolled her eyes. “Where’s Blue?”

David spoke, “Blue is standing outside of this suite. She wanted to have an eye on your door and the boy’s room.”

“Cool.” Emily headed back into the closet and slammed the door shut.

*Fuck.*

The ties remained on the floor.

David picked them up. “I am sorry. I tried to warn you—”

“That was a very shitty job of warning me.” I snatched the ties from him.

“We need a clear symbol.”

“How about you jump up and down and yell Emily is behind you.”

David widened his eyes. “Are you serious?”

Pain throbbed at the front of my head. “This is going to be a long evening, and the sun has not even set yet.”

“I have people keeping Baba busy. What should I do for Emily?”

“Remain out here. I have to get dressed.” I opened the door and headed back inside the closet. Once in, I threw the ties to

the side.

Emily already had jeans on and a black bra. Quickly, she grabbed a buttoned up white blouse from a hanger.

I spotted my black jogging pants on a shelf and picked them up. “*Mysh?*”

She yanked the shirt off the hanger. “What, Kaz?”

“You knew this day would come?”

“But, not today.” She slung the hanger on the floor. “You know that...I...just...fuck it. I give up.”

I stepped into the jogging pants. “What? We should talk about this.”

She buttoned up the shirt. “Should we?”

“Yes.”

“We didn’t talk about David finding people. Did you order him to do that?”

I pulled the pants up. “I saw that this problem was becoming bigger with each day—”

“Paolo is not a problem!” She scowled at me.

“You know what I am saying.”

She lowered her voice and went over to her heels. “I know.”

“I have already explained why we could never keep him.”

“I know.”

“Then...”

“I just...” Her fingers shook at her sides. She quickly picked up a pair of black heels.

I grabbed the first black shirt I could find and put it on. “*Mysh*, let us figure out a way where this can go smoothly.”

Quietly, she put the heels on. “There’s no smoothly, Kaz.”

“We could find ways.”

With the heels on, she turned to me. “Kaz...”



“Yes.”

“I...” Her eyes watered.

I tried to walk over to her.

She held her hands out in front of her. “Don’t.”

“Talk to me.”

“Kaz...” Her voice cracked. “I love Paolo.”

I let out a long breath.

She whispered, “I tried not to. I...really did. I swear.”

I gritted my teeth. “We cannot keep him.”

“I know.”

“All of the Brotherhood sees Pavel as a traitor because he is. Therefore, the boy will carry that stain.”

“He’s been safe here—”

“No one here has bothered him because these are our most loyal men. Once we return to Russia.” I held out my hands. “There are over a million and a half brothers just in Russia. Some are violently traditional. Plus, Pavel had enemies. He was only protected because of how close he was to me. Now those enemies will take it out on his son. The boy would always have a target on his back.”

Her bottom lip quivered.

“And...”

Her voice cracked. “And?”

“He looks too much like Paolo. I could never...” I rubbed my face with both hands. “Killing Pavel was already hard but to see...the boy every day...”

“I know.” She headed away and opened the door. “I understand, Kaz.”

“Hold on, *mysh*. We will go together.”

“No we won’t. I’m pissed with you, but I understand.” She stomped past David and continued walking away. “Still, I’ll meet this couple on my own.”

“Not by yourself.”

“Then, Blue will go with me.”

I rushed after her. “David can go with you—”

“I’m mad at David too!” She opened the front door of the suite and slung it open.

I gritted my teeth. “Wait!”

Out in the hallway, she turned around. “What?”

Several members of Harlem Crew gathered around her.

David followed me into the hallway.

Blue already stood next to Emily, looking utterly confused.

I did my best to calm myself. “I want to go with you.”

“And *I* don’t want you to come.” She sneered. “You are already making me give Paolo up, at least let me properly check them out.”

I frowned. “I want you to be...okay.”

She rolled her eyes and walked off. “Come on, Blue.”

I watched her stomp away in those heels, twisting that lush ass from side to side. Blue kept her pace. They looked to be talking. Emily was probably catching her up on what was happening now.

Then, Harlem Crew followed.

David stepped to my side. “What do you want me to do?”

I rubbed my head. “Have Misha record the exchange between the couple and Emily.”

“You want the footage sent to your phone?”

“Correct and make sure it is live streaming. I need to know what is happening in the moment.”

“While Emily does not want you there, we can still be on the same level.”

I nodded. “I will need to put on my shoes, but we can take the elevator after her.”

We were on the tenth floor. By the time we got to the first and stood near the room, Emily may have calmed down and decided that she *did* want my presence.

Sighing, I looked down the hallway.

Emily and Blue stood in front of the elevator.

Harlem Crew kept a few feet behind them.

David spoke, “This may not be important now, but Misha has a location for Fela.”

*I really fucked this up. We were having such a nice day.*

I continued to watch Emily. “Did you put eyes on the location?”

“I did. Several men are in the area.”

“Good. I want all of Black Axe gone.”

“And who will supervise the area afterwards?”

“I’m not sure.”

The elevator dinged.

Blue handed Emily a knife.

*What?*

Fast, Emily leaned forward, looked at me, and showed me her middle finger. Then, they stepped on the elevator, leaving Harlem Crew.

*Why did she do that?*

My heartbeats sped up.

David spoke about the news of some drug shipment, but I stood there confused. Emily wasn’t the type to flip me off.

One of Harlem Crew picked up the heels that Emily had left by the elevator.

*She left her shoes? Emily would never...*

“No!” Barefoot, I rushed down the hallway. “David, do you have men guarding the couple on the first floor.”

“No, but I have people around the hotel perimeter and—”

“Send men to the couple. Now!”

He rushed after me and pulled out his phone. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t think Emily stepped into the elevator. It might be...”

“Her dark side.”

“Yes. Lunita.”

“Blue!” David sped up.

I rushed to the elevator. “Shit. There is only one.”

*Fuck! The steps will take longer!*

I frantically searched the hallway. “Where are the steps?!”

David pointed in the further direction. “That way.”

“Come on!” I yelled at Harlem Crew and hurried away.  
“And someone call Maxwell!!”





# Chapter 29

## Meet the Fuckers

### Blue

The Lion and Mouse had slept in most of the day, giving me some time to relax.

But, I knew I would be busy soon.

King David walked my way.

I straightened my position near the door. Surely, he was going to deal with Kazimir, but the girlish side of me wanted to show him that I was on point in my position.

When King David made it to the other men, he looked at them. "Give us space."

They stepped several feet away. One of them furrowed his brows and headed away.

Then, David stepped to the door. His designer cologne swirled around me and taunted my senses. Instead of opening the door and entering, he turned that handsome face my way. "How is your day going, Blue?"

I tried not to get lost in those stunning blue eyes. "It has been peaceful."

"As it should be." David moved his gaze over my body. "I am close to outlawing these new suits that you are wearing."

I grinned. "I do not believe you have *that* authority."

"There is nothing sexier than a beautiful woman in a perfectly tailored suit." David gave me a wicked smile.

"Thank you for the compliment."

"You have been in my thoughts lately."

I smirked. "And what were you thinking?"

“Very inappropriate things.” He licked his lips. “I have plans for you. Lots of them.”

I blushed.

“But...I will not forget the romance.”

“I like romance.”

He touched the knob with one finger. “You should.”

The silly smile returned.

“Because it is what you deserve.” David traced the knob with his finger, following the curve around its round metal surface. “On another note, have the French been bothering you?”

“No.” I quirked my brows. “Why do you ask?”

“Security told me that Louis hacked into the hotel’s system. Apparently, he was searching for your room several times.”

“My room? Several times?”

“Yes. Your room was moved three times. You had the one room that was reserved by me. Then, Emily moved you to a lower level, due to being angry with the Lion. Once Kazimir and Emily made up, the Lion put you in a new room up here.” David tapped the side of the knob. “Each time your room changed, Louis went back into the system to figure out where you were.”

*What the fuck?*

I tensed.

*Did Giorgio have him look for me? Or did Louis want to find my room for himself? No way. It must have been due to Giorgio. Right?*

David studied me. “Do you have any idea why Louis would want your room number?”

*Management, Blue.*

I cleared my throat. “No idea.”



“That is fine. It does not matter anyway.” David gripped the knob. “I had a conversation with Louis. He will not be looking for your room anymore.”

“Oh.” I raised my eyebrows. “What did you say?”

“Perhaps, we can discuss it later tonight. Over dinner.”

I widened my eyes.

He hit me with a sexy smile. “That is of course...if our favorite couple is back in their suite, enjoying the fire of their passion.”

Excitement filled me. “Let us hope.”

“Then, that is a date?”

Warmth spread across my skin. “Yes.”

“Excellent.” David opened the door. “I will give you more details soon.”

Excitement filled me.

The door shut behind him.

I spent the rest of the time, imagining what would happen during our dinner. David talked about romance, but how romantic would he be? He was part of the Brotherhood after all. Romance to most of them was a cold bottle of vodka and a new box of condoms.

But, David had spent time in Paris—the City of Love. Would there be flowers? Lit candles? Soft music? Would everyone know about our date? Or would he be able to keep it a secret?

And most important, what would I wear?

My phone vibrated, pulling me out of my daydreaming.

I pulled the phone out and checked the screen.

A text had been delivered.

I read it.

**Unknown:** I want to see you.

I twisted my face into confusion.

*Who is this?*

The phone vibrated in my hand. A new message came through.

**Unknown:** Can you get away?

**Unknown:** Perhaps, you can tell everyone that you are sick.

I typed into the phone.

**Me:** Who is this?

**Unknown:** How many admirers do you have?

*This has to be Giorgio.*

The next text arrived.

**Unknown:** Meet me on the roof.

**Unknown:** Then, you will see who it is.

Suddenly, the Mouse's voice sounded from inside the suite. "I'm mad at David too!"

*What is going on?*

Forgetting about the texts, I stuffed my phone in my pocket.

The door jolted open.

Emily stormed out into the hallway.

Kazimir yelled at her, "Wait!"

*What did the Lion do now?*

I got to her side and kept my hands close to my guns.

Emily spun around and glared at him. "What?"

Barefoot, Kazimir came over. It was odd seeing him without shoes on. Even crazier, he looked sad and desperate.

David got to his side.

I quirked my brows at David.

He let out a long sigh.

*I guess we will not be having dinner tonight.*

Kazimir spoke, “I want to go with you.”

“And I don’t want you to come.” Emily sneered. “You are already making me give Paolo up, at least let me properly check them out.”

*Oh no. Not Paolo. This will not be good.*

Kazimir frowned. “I want you to be...okay.”

Emily rolled her eyes and stomped away. “Come on, Blue.”

*Yeah. No date tonight.*

Hurrying away with Emily, I kept her pace. “What happened?”

“Fucking David and Kaz thought it would be a good idea to find people to take care of Paolo.”

*Oh no.*

“I could just fucking kill the both of them.” Her bottom lip quivered. “Slice their fucking necks, stick my hand through the holes, and yank out their tiny black hearts.”

*Oh...*

I shook my head. “What do you want me to do?”

“Kill them.” Her eyes watered. “Kill everybody and then let me watch them bleed onto the floor.”

Speechless, I almost tripped over my own feet.

“Fucking assholes.” She spoke through clenched teeth, “Paolo is a little boy. Small. Defenseless...he’s all by himself in this fucking world.”

“Maybe, I can take Paolo away and...hide him or—”

“Kaz would know.” Tears left her eyes. “He won’t fucking stand down on this. He...he’s going to m-make me get r-rid of him.”

My heart ached. This shoved me on edge. Never had I seen her cry or look so helpless. I searched my head for some answer, something to help her out. I had to save the day. Nothing else mattered.

I gritted my teeth. “Emily, I will do whatever you want me to.”

“I can’t think of anything. Nothing.” More tears spilled down her cheeks. “I...”

*Damn you, Lion. I would kill you if you didn’t terrify me.*

I wanted to stop Emily in the hallway and hug her. She was already going through so much. This had to be the most stressful pregnancy any woman could ever experience.

She spoke, “All I know is that...”

I fisted my hands.

“I can’t let Paolo go, Blue.” She wiped the tears with a shivering hand. “I-I can’t...”

“Maybe.” I swallowed down my fear. “Maybe, we can get rid of the couple. I can take them far away and have some of Harlem Crew hide them so that Kazimir or David never find them. That could buy us some time.”

She went quiet.

*No. That’s a stupid idea. Think of something else.*

I let out a long breath. “Or we could get Maxwell. Perhaps, he has a good idea. Oh. Could Baba or Maxwell adopt Paolo? Would Kazimir be okay if Baba took care of him?”

Emily blinked several times and looked around as if seeing the hallway for the first time. I scanned the hallway too, wondering what she was checking out.

*Stop talking. Let her think. She’s so smart. She’ll think of something and I will do whatever she wants.*

Suddenly, Emily glanced over her shoulder and stared oddly at Harlem Crew. “No.”

*No?*

She quickly turned back around and whispered to me, “They can’t come. They stay. Tell them.”

*But, why?*

We stopped at the elevators.

I turned to Harlem Crew. “You all must remain here.”

They nodded, but held confused expressions.

*Why can't they come?*

A soft giggle left Emily.

I snapped my face the Mouse's way, not used to such a girlish sound coming from her.

*So...she feels better now? That...quickly?*

She let out a low giggle again. Then, she cleared her throat. “Do you...have...a knife?”

I nodded.

“Give it to me.”

*Anything to make you feel better.*

I slipped my hand in my jacket and yanked out my favorite knife. It was a simple tactile knife that one would use in combat or for hunting. Military design. Serrated blade. Indestructible handle. I called it, Pastor.

“Ooo.” Emily whistled and snatched it from me. “Rambo.”

I blinked.

*Rambo?*

Emily lowered her hand, placing the knife by her side.

*But...why did she say...Rambo?*

Then, to my shock, Emily slipped off her heels and kicked them to the side. I raised my eyebrows.

She wiggled her toes on the carpet. “Hurts.”

Stunned, I stared at her.

*She is really out of it. What should I do?*

The elevator dinged.

The doors began to open.

Shocking me again, Emily leaned forward, looked down at the Lion, and flipped up her middle finger.

*Uh...*

Giggling, Emily stepped onto the elevator. "Hurry."

I got on and turned around.

Our men stared back at us with confused expressions.

*Do not judge Emily. She is stressed.*

I swallowed and pointed at them. "Get her shoes."

The doors closed.

"Yeah." Emily bobbed her head up and down over and over. She stretched her neck and wiggled her shoulders. Then, her voice changed to a lighter, scratchier pitch. "She likes those shoes. Don't lose them."

*Who likes the shoes? And why is she talking like that?*

Emily continued talking in that weird tone. "Mean old lion."

My stomach twisted. Something was terribly off. And the answer was at the edge of my brain, but I could feel myself running from it, not wanting to face it.

"Let's meet them." Emily slashed at the air with the knife. "Fucking Rambo those fuckers!"

I edged away.

*Hold on.*

My heart boomed in my ears.

A dark, rambunctious laugh left her, setting the hairs on the back of my neck on end.

*Please, no.*

She stabbed the air over and over. "I'll show that mean old lion."

*This can't be happening.*

Fast, she spun my way and pointed the knife at me. Her mouth was wide open and slanted in a deranged way, exposing her teeth. Her eyes were wild. It was hard to explain. It was like madness was trapped within the lids.

*This is...the dark side.*

I edged back, putting more space between the knife and me.

*Lunita.*

That scratchy voice left her. “She can’t show him, but I will.”

Suddenly, the elevator felt much smaller, more confined. My breathing grew constricted.

*I have to call David or Maxwell.*

Slowly, I slid my hand to the pocket that held my phone.

With that knife pointed my way, Lunita watched me.

I dug my hand in the pocket.

Slowly, Lunita leaned forward.

I froze.

She whispered, “Don’t you do it.”

I trembled.

“It would hurt her, if I killed you.” Then, she loudly inhaled and scowled as if smelling something wrong.

*What is she doing?*

“No. No.” Blinking her eyes, she stood back and leaned her head to the side, until her head oddly lay against her shoulder. “I thought you would smell like blue berries.”

I stood there speechless.

“But you don’t smell like them.” She straightened her head and sniffed again. “You smell like...”

*What?*

Fast, she stabbed the knife my way.

I jumped back into the wall and screeched.

Giggling, she faced the doors. “Fear. That’s what you smell like.”

*Emily...really has another personality.*

I had heard. Maxwell had warned us all. But it was different from hearing and then actually seeing.

Cold terror sliced up my spine.

“Don’t be scared, Blueberry.” Lunita began drawing swirls in the air with the blade’s point. “You’re our friend.”

I gulped down fear. “Y-yes. I...am your friend.”

She snapped my way and watched me with those wild eyes. “You better be our friend.”

The way she said that, made me want to reach for my guns and shoot. But I couldn’t harm her. It was the Mouse, but...not the Mouse either. It was completely another person moving and controlling her body, and I didn’t feel safe, but I also knew I couldn’t harm her and the baby.

My skin crawled from the reality.

Lunita didn’t stop looking my way. “Do what I say. Got it?”

I nodded.

“Get your phone and put it on the ground.”

I did it. “We should go back—”

She loudly laughed.

I got chills.

She tapped the center of her forehead with the knife’s point over and over. “We have to meet the fuckers.”

She kept tapping the knife against her forehead.

It shoved me over the edge. “Then, we should get Maxwell so—”

“Too much talking, Blueberry. Listen.”

I pursed my lips.

“We go in the room.” She smelled the blade. “Them fuckers in one, one, one.”



The elevator stopped.

In a blur, she jabbed the knife my way. “Then, you lock the door behind you.”

“I-I do not think we should—”

“No, Blueberry. Listen.”

The elevator doors opened.

“Be nice!” Lunita raced out. Not running. Not jogging. But doing some odd hop-leaping movement and waving her arms. “Fuckers!”

*Maybe, I can grab her and... Wait. Could I grab Emily and she not slice me?*

I had seen the Mouse take dangerous, huge men to the ground in seconds like they weighed nothing.

I rushed after her.

*Please, let the door be far away.*

I checked around me, wishing any of the Brotherhood or Harlem Crew was around. If they were, I could somehow signal them.

*Shit. Shit.*

“Yay!” Lunita went to the first door. “One. One. One.”

*No. Why did it have to be so close?*

She knocked really hard and then kicked the door. “Open up! Open up! Please!”

*When we get in, I won't lock it behind me.*

I rushed to her. “Lunita, I have an idea.”

“That’s what he calls me.” She tossed me a wide smile, showing all of her teeth and some of her gums.

“Loooneeeetaaa.”

“Yes. Lunita, we shouldn’t go in now because Maxwell—”

“He can’t know about this.” Lunita kicked the door. “It would make him sad.”

“We cannot hurt them, Lunita. Do you understand?” I reached my hand out to touch her arm.

She jerked back and pointed the knife at me. Horror decorated her face. “What are you doing, Blueberry?”

“S-sorry.” I put my hand down. “Maxwell would want us to...”

The door opened.

*Damn it.*

A pleasant-looking man greeted us with a warm, inviting smile. His hair was pepper-gray. His blue eyes sparkled and matched his blue shirt.

He spoke with a thick Italian accent, “Hello. Nice to meet you—”

Lunita slashed his neck. So fast, I stumbled back with my hands raised. Blood gushed from the wound and flowed down his neck, staining the shirt. His face froze in shock as his body began to fall back.

“Fucker!” She slammed the knife hard into his chest again and again. “Fucker! Fucker!”

Then, she jumped on top of him, riding his body to the ground.

*She just...*

Straddling the dead man, she began humping him. “That’s what you want? Huh?”

Bile rose in my throat as my stomach twisted in disgust. I was so close to vomiting.

“Not from me. Not from Paolo.” The body shook as she rocked her hips, pushing her groin into him. Blood pooled around his body. “And no candy!!”

My nerves frazzled. My head grew dizzy.

The Lion roared down the hall, “Lunita!”

*T-thank God.*

She stopped humping the corpse and screamed like the boogeyman was coming.

Kazimir yelled again, “Lunita!”

“Hurry, Blueberry!” She jumped up and ran into the room.

Frozen, I still had my hands in the air, unable to move them or me. Shock cemented me in place. In fact, I could barely think or breathe. And I couldn’t get that image of her humping the dead man out of my mind. It was worse than seeing her slash his throat.

*But...why?*

A woman screamed from inside, yelling something in Italian.

I shivered.

*Come on. Move...*

Glass shattered.

Drenched in sweat, Kazimir rushed past me. “Get Blue out of here!”

I had no idea who he was talking to, until David wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close to him.

“Blue?”

*Why did she hump him?*

David snapped his fingers in front of me. “Did Lunita hurt you, Blue?”

I shivered against him. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

*Candy?*

“Blue? Can you hear me?”

I nodded. “S-she killed that man and...”

“Yes.” He tightened his hold on me. “I know.”

“I...messed up, David.” I shivered against him. “I froze.”

“You did not mess up.”

“She killed him.”

From the room, Lunita screamed, “No! No!”

Kazimir yelled back, “Put the knife down and get away from her!”

Lunita giggled. “Never! Never! Ever!”

“Do not kill her, Lunita. It would hurt Emily. Think about that.”

“*You* hurt Emily!”

“Listen to me.” Kazimir lowered his voice. “Lunita, please do not—”

A large thump sounded like something fell to the ground.

I shook my head.

*She killed her.*

Then, her delirious laugh rose in the air. “Ah ha! Joke’s on you! Paolo stays!”

More noise came next like maybe she was running through the room and he was racing after her and knocking things away.

*I messed up.*

“Get away!” Lunita rushed out of the room. Blood dripped down her face. She held long bloody blonde strands of hair in her hand and hurried past us.

David moved us to the side.

I tried to leave his arms to go after her. When I turned, I stopped.

Lunita saw what I did and stopped too.

Maxwell stood in the center of the hallway with his arms crossed over his chest, and disappointment covering his face.

Instantly, she shifted to slowly walking backward.

That was when Kazimir left the room. His black shirt was slashed open. Lunita had definitely swiped the knife at him. But, I didn’t see any blood.

“Get over here.” Kazimir rushed for her.

She tried to dodge him.

He grabbed her.

Lunita wrestle against Kazimir, but she couldn't get free of him.

Still further back, Maxwell lowered his arms. “Did she kill the couple?”

David nodded.

“Fuck, man.” Maxwell walked forward. “I told you. I fucking told you.”

As Maxwell came closer, Lunita froze against Kazimir and then crouched down a little as if trying to hide.

*Is she afraid of Maxwell?*

Right when I thought Maxwell was going to help Kazimir out with Lunita, he continued past them.

Kazimir glared. “Where are you going?”

Maxwell pulled out a small pocketknife. “You know what I have to do.”

Kazimir scowled. “Draw your smiley faces later.”

“Motherfucker, you hold her and keep silent.”

Kazimir glared. “What did you say to me?!”

“I said, ‘Shut. The. Fuck. Up!’” Maxwell headed past David and me. “I have shit to do, and we need to wait anyway.”

Kazimir called after him, “Wait for what?”

“The Butcher is coming, motherfucker!” Maxwell disappeared into the room.

“Jean-Pierre?” Kazimir groaned. “Why did you call him?!”

I turned back to see Lunita pouting and looking down at the floor. I almost felt bad for her. She looked like a naughty kid that was about to get a whipping.

*What will happen now?*

Emily didn't want Paolo to leave, but I knew she wouldn't have wanted innocent people to die either. That was why I followed the Mouse to Italy. She had brought compassion to the Brotherhood. She loved to protect the people that couldn't defend themselves. She cared about all of us, more than my family ever did.

The Mouse would have never killed the couple.

Sighing, David released me. "Let me take you to your room."

"I should stay and help."

"This is *their* show." David gave me a worried look. "And you need time to calm down."

"I am...calm."

"You are not." He took my hand and squeezed it. "Let us go. They have her now."

*But what will happen to Lunita/Emily? When will she come back...and...what will they tell her?*







# Chapter 30

## Work-husband

### Kazimir

*I pushed too hard.*

I was a man who thought guilt had not been built in my DNA and that I had been born without a soul.

In the past, I had taken pride in these two facts.

Was that not how I rose so quickly to power?

I had the ability to do things that others wouldn't—kill and bomb, terrorize and take. I had no conscience nor compassion. Just violence and might.

But today...guilt shackled my ankles and made it hard for me to walk.

Maxwell ordered me to come into the dead couple's room and sit down.

Helpless, I obeyed, my legs felt like they were shackled with boulders. Lost and full of terror. Sad and drowning in despair. I dragged Lunita with me, needing something to anchor my soul.

Never had I felt so vulnerable and utterly alone.

We entered the room and went to a black leather couch. I lowered to it. Lunita sat down next to me, tucking her left foot under her butt and placing her right foot on the couch, so that her right knee rose up to her shoulder. The leather squeaked with the positioning.

Max mumbled to himself, "Usually the darkness shows up once or twice in a year."

The thick scent of death and blood thickened the air.

He stared at the dead woman and then his knife. "During the Tinder Killer shit, when Darryl was acting up and being

crazy...her dark side increased a lot. A whole lot...but never twice in a week.”

My breathing grew into rapid pants.

I let go of her hand and looked down at my fingers—hard and calloused from years of fighting. Now blood covered each digit. It hadn’t come from Lunita, it was the couple’s blood.

I didn’t regret many things in life, but today...I sank in shame.

*Mysh, I wish I could start this day over. I would change so much.*

“We can’t tell her.” Maxwell scowled at me. “Innocent people. This is a secret you must keep.”

Regret swarmed all around me, seeping into all of my senses. Wet and sticky, it was a bitter taste on my tongue. A spoiled odor coating my nostrils. A deafening sound numbing my eardrums.

It was a heavy stone in the center of my chest, dragging me farther and farther into the depths of a dark pool of sorrow.

It was hard to breathe.

Hard to piece things together in my head.

Hard to see past the dead bodies.

Hard to decipher the pain tearing me apart.

The only thing I knew was that...I deserved it all.

“Man. Goddamn it. What the fuck did I say? I tried to tell you.” Maxwell poked two dots into the woman’s calf and then sliced a curvy smile under them. “I begged you to send Em back to Russia. Boris, Blue, and I could have taken her. I told you that if not, then we would have a serial killer situation in Italy.”

Lunita gestured at him and whispered in Spanish, “*See what he’s doing. He’s not right in the head.*”

I stared at her in horror and then turned to Maxwell.

“But no.” Still drawing on the woman, Maxwell carved a circle around the eyes and smile. “I have it handled. That’s what you said.”

Sweat beaded along my forehead.

*How will I tell my mouse? Is he right? I can’t tell her this.*

“I told you that boy was hers. I fucking said it.” Maxwell dropped the knife, picked up the dead woman, and carried her over to the small white love seat across from us. “I pointed to the cornrows as evidence.”

Next, he carefully positioned the woman so that she was sitting up. “Did you listen? No.”

Sighing, Maxwell rose and studied her.

She had long, blonde hair parted down the middle. On the right side, Lunita had yanked out a chunk of it. Blood still dripped from the scalp and the rest of that side was matted with drying blood. Red lipstick painted her lips and had smeared some of her cheeks. That had probably happened during her struggle with Lunita. Her white shirt and pants were ripped and dotted with blood.

“Damn it.” Shaking his head, Maxwell shifted the woman, probably to make sure that she was perfectly vertical.

Lunita turned to me and tapped her forehead twice.  
“*Crazy.*”

“Fuck.” Maxwell leaned over again, buttoned the top of the woman’s shirt, and brushed the side down. “Okay. That’s done.”

Maxwell went back to get his knife and then walked to the man. He still lay in the center of the doorway with his neck slashed open. Stab wounds littered his chest.

“Don’t you fucking tell her about this.” Maxwell sneered. “Listen to me. Don’t you fucking do it.”

*Emily would never forgive herself.*

My heart ached for my mouse. I wanted to take away her pain and fear. But I had no power to do that. I was helpless. No

amount of men or guns could save the day.

Maxwell kneeled by the man and stared at his neck. “When I said to just drop the issue on Paolo, you should have just did it...”

Black dots appeared in my eyesight. Then, my vision blurred a little. I blinked through it and tried to catch my breath.

“But, what do you do?” Maxwell lifted the man’s arm and poked two dots on his hand. “You must fucking have *your* way. But, then that...dark side...will have *her* way and in the end...no one is thinking of Emily.”

Pressure built in my chest. My breathing didn’t improve. It was as if the air was sucked from the room.

*Get control of yourself.*

I returned my view to in front of me.

Lifeless, the dead woman stared back. Her eyes were wide in shock. Her mouth hung open as if in the middle of a scream.

I shivered.

“Now what?” Maxwell continued, “Dead people. Do you care? Probably not. Psycho piece of shit.”

Lunita turned from him and watched me.

I had no idea what was going on in that shattered mind.

But to my surprise, she took my hand and squeezed it. Our fingers intertwined. That gave me some strength to keep my emotions at bay.

I looked back at Maxwell. He must have been finished drawing the smiley face because he stood with his arms crossed over his chest. Then, he pointed at someone. “Eh, you two. Carry him to the couch.”

Two of my men appeared and did as he said.

Maxwell watched them and nodded. “Yeah. Make sure dude is next to his wife.”

They placed the man there.

“Come on. Fix his shirt and pants.”

One of the men looked my way.

I nodded.

They straightened the man’s bloodied outfit and then left the room.

Maxwell stepped out into the hallway. “All of you, leave, but guard the exits. And when the Butcher or Boris arrive, let them through.”

Maxwell shut the door and began pacing in the center of the room. Every few steps, he nervously glanced at Lunita and then looked away. “Fuck. This is going to be a long, bleak never-ending night.”

With Lunita’s hold on me, I gained the ability to speak. “Why...would you call Jean-Pierre down here?”

“Because the monster is evolving.”

Lunita sucked in her breath.

I gritted my teeth. Anger sank into my muscles, pulling me out of the despair. “I told you before not to call her that.”

“Oh, yeah.” Maxwell continued to pace. “I forgot. I’m supposed to have proper respect for someone who just murdered two innocent people for no fucking reason but that they volunteered to take an orphaned child.”

Lunita turned her view to the floor as if trying to hide in shame.

Maxwell stopped in front of me and tilted his head to the side. “How are you going to fix this?”

I let out a long breath. “I plan to keep Paolo with us.”

“You think?!”

“Lower your voice when you talk to me.”

“Man, I’m about to lower your ass to the ground and stomp your head out.”

Someone knocked on the door.

I let go of Lunita's hand and rose.

"You might as well sit the fuck down, little soldier."  
Maxwell stomped off. "It's probably the Butcher."

"That is why I stood. He needs to understand—"

"You need to shut the fuck up!" Maxwell stopped in front of the door and scowled at me. "I had this sexy maid in my room, admiring my lemon tree and probably close to sucking my dick and here we go for some more fucked up shit. So, I don't want to hear it."

I remained standing and fisted my hands to the side.

Maxwell opened the door.

The Butcher stepped in with his signature violin case. Instead of his usual suit, he wore all black—pants, long sleeve shirt, and boots.

For some reason that made me frown. "Let us get something clear, Butcher."

Jean-Pierre strolled toward the couple and studied them. "What must be clear, Lion?"

"I do not know what you are here for, but—"

"He's here because I asked him to be here." Maxwell stepped in front of me, like he was itching for a fight. Perhaps, we both were. Surely, slamming my fist into his face would relieve some of the tension.

I stared back at him and saw that he was possibly thinking the same thing.

Jean-Pierre cleared his throat and walked over to us. "Kazimir, while you are typically in control of matters, I do believe Maxwell is the best person to help us maneuver *this* situation."

"Us?"

Jean-Pierre touched his chest. "I am Emily's friend."

"I know what you are doing—"

"And what is that, Kazimir?"

“Looking for weaknesses to exploit and—”

“Do you think Emily is a weakness?”

“Do not twist my words.”

“It was not a twist. It was simply a question.” Jean-Pierre strolled over to Lunita and stopped two feet in front of her.

“Personally, I see Emily’s...condition as a strength—one that I am happy to be a part of.”

I pointed his way. “You are not a part of—”

“He is.” Maxwell got back in front of my view. “And you’re going to shut the fuck up, before I shove your ass out of here.”

I curved my lips into a maddening smile. “Oh, please. Shove me.”

At his side, Maxwell flicked open his pocket knife.

I winked at him. “You will need more than that.”

“Two people dead. Lunita back for the second time. You still haven’t learned anything. Huh?”

I tensed. “Maxwell, I do not mind you taking control, but —”

“I don’t give a fuck if you mind or not.”

“Gentlemen.” Jean-Pierre returned to us. “We are wasting valuable time.”

I quirked my brows. “What?”

Maxwell gestured to Jean-Pierre. “Go on, man. Do your thing.”

The Butcher went off to the dining area and grabbed a chair.

*He must go.*

“Maxwell, I give you control on this. You were right about everything. Fine. However,” I spoke through clenched teeth, “What is *he* supposed to be doing?”

Jean-Pierre brought the chair over and placed it two feet in front of Lunita.

She tossed him a wide, odd smile, showing both rows of her teeth and even the pink of her gums.

Maxwell edged a few inches away.

Jean-Pierre bowed in front of her. “Nice to meet you.”

A strange giggle left her.

Maxwell shook his shoulders as if getting rid of a cold chill.

I blocked his view. “Maxwell? What could the Butcher do to help us?”

“This...dark side is...evolving.” Maxwell lowered his voice. “That’s why I called Jean-Pierre.”

“That explains nothing.”

“Come on, man. Piece it together.” Maxwell rolled his eyes. “Jean-Pierre is our resident serial killer. He is here to give expertise on madness.”

“Wait a minute.” Stunned, Jean-Pierre waved his hand. “I am not a serial killer.”

We stared at Jean-Pierre.

He lowered into the chair and placed his violin case on his lap. “I am a killer, but not...a *serial* killer.”

“Motherfucker, you made a violin bow with a blade to carve people.”

I nodded. “And you do a whole ritual, playing music and probably doing things to the dead bodies.”

Lunita grinned.

Jean-Pierre shook his head. “I do not do things with them —”

“Killers just shoot and keep it moving. Serial killers bring props and take joy in it, so you’re a serial killer, Jean-Pierre. No judgement.” Maxwell looked back at me. “Are you going to sit down and let me take control of this?”



I held out my hands. “How is Jean-Pierre being a psychopath going to help Lunita?”

The Butcher cleared his throat. “I am not a psychopath either. I may be well-versed in pain, but it is merely—”

“Shut up.” I turned back to Maxwell. “I just need you to explain to me what is going on.”

“Look, man.” Maxwell pointed to Lunita. “Demily needs to talk to him.”

Lunita looked behind her and spoke in Spanish, “*Who is Demily?*”

I sighed. “*You are.*”

“*But I’m Lunita.*”

“*Tell him that.*”

She shook her head. “*I can’t.*”

Maxwell backed up. “She really...does speak...and...in Spanish.”

Jean-Pierre leaned forward and switched into the language too. “*How long have you spoken Spanish?*”

“*All my life.*”

“Hold up.” Maxwell backed up some more. “First...you all have to speak in English so I can follow what is going on.”

Lunita looked away.

Jean-Pierre raised his eyebrows at her action.

It made me uneasy the way he studied her like some lab scientist going over a project.

I frowned. “The Butcher must leave.”

Maxwell sucked his teeth. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“Either he goes, or I break his fucking neck.”

“Man, I thought you had Big Dick Energy, but I think you more so have Big Head Energy.”

Lunita snickered.

I glared at her.

She whispered in Spanish, “*Max is funny.*”

“*He isn’t.*”

“What the fuck are you two saying?” Max pointed at me and then Lunita. “Keep it in English before I shoot the both of you in your legs.”

“You need to calm down.”

Max continued to point my way. “And you need to chill out. Besides the whole psychopath thing, Jean-Pierre should be here.”

“For what reason?”

“I feel like Jean-Pierre is something close to Em’s work husband.”

Rage boiled through me. “What?!”

Jean-Pierre raised both hands in the air. “I have no idea what he is saying!”

“Man, chill out. Let me explain.” Maxwell held up one finger. “Work-husbands and work-wives don’t fuck. They just work together and maybe eat lunch and laugh and shit—”

“Maxwell.” Jean-Pierre shook his head. “Let us end the metaphors. We are losing time.”

Someone knocked.

“This is so fucked up.” Maxwell rubbed his hands and headed off to the door.

I turned to the Butcher. “Work-husband?”

“I have no idea what that means.”

I noticed the way he kept his feet to the side as if making sure he could jump up fast. Only a few feet lay between us. I could grab his neck.

Lunita whispered, “Max is mad.”

Jean-Pierre leaned forward. “Are you afraid of Maxwell?”

Lunita shook her head.

“Then, why do you look away when he talks about you?”

She swallowed. “I...don’t like when he is mad at me.”

Jean-Pierre nodded. “His thoughts of you are important?”

Lunita touched her chest. “It hurts right here.”

*Maybe, the psycho can help.*

I went back to the couch and sat down by her.

She took my hand and gripped it hard.

Jean-Pierre quirked his brows at me. “Do you accept my participation?”

What else could I do? Maxwell had been right before. It was time to start listening to him and helping my mouse.

I gritted my teeth. “You can stay.”





# Chapter 31

## Flowers in the Hair

### Kazimir

Maxwell returned with Boris.

As soon as Lunita spotted him, she blushed and shyly waved.

I frowned. “What are you doing?”

She whispered in Spanish, “*That’s Boris.*”

“*And?*”

“*He is so hot. I want to kiss and cut him.*”

I leaned her way and growled, “*We discussed this. You are mine. That means, no one else.*”

“*She is yours. Not me. I am my—*”

“Yo!” Maxwell stepped our way. “No more Spanish.”

Jean-Pierre watched us. “Interesting. Lunita has her own desires and needs that are completely separate from Emily.”

Maxwell turned to Boris who was watching Lunita in utter fascination. “Clean up the bathroom, then run a bath. Oh. I need you to go to my room and get my old radio with the CDs. Make sure they are all Coltrane.”

Boris didn’t turn away from Lunita. “I understand.”

Maxwell continued, “Also, there’s a black bag in my closet with yellow smiley faces drawn on it. Get that shit. It has all types of products and stuff.”

Jean-Pierre gestured to his case. “Lunita, would you like to see my bow?”

She bobbed her head.

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “Is that necessary?”

He responded, "I think this could be a fun exercise."

*Psycho.*

Jean-Pierre snapped open the case. "I will let you hold the bow, Lunita, if you will answer some questions."

Boris left, but looked to be dragging himself away.

Maxwell walked over to the couch with the dead couple and stood over there as if he found more comfort with the couple than us.

Lunita gave the Butcher a sad smile. "I don't talk."

Jean-Pierre lifted the case. His legendary bow gleamed back at us. "And I do not let people touch my bow."

A sense of wonder filled her eyes. Lunita unfolded her legs and placed her feet on the carpet.

"However, tonight we can both do things that are out of the ordinary." Jean-Pierre took the bow out of the case.

She reached out for the bow.

He pulled it back. "First, I have a question."

"Yeah." Over by the dead couple, Maxwell crossed his arms over his chest. "First question should be a simple one."

She bit her lips and looked his way.

"Why didn't you talk to me?" Max asked. "All this time you could talk? That's bullshit."

Lunita blinked several times and then looked away. "I used to talk to you."

"No. You didn't."

She bobbed her head up and down over and over. "I did. I swear I did."

"When?"

"Always."

"What kind of answer is always?" Maxwell shifted his weight to the other foot. "I need to know when you talked to me."

“In the sewer.”

Maxwell twisted his face in confusion. “What time in the sewer?”

“After I killed Mr. Roberts.” She slashed the air with an invisible knife.

Maxwell inched back. “The foster parent?”

Lunita bobbed her head again.

“Naw. That was Em.”

Lunita sneered.

“But...” Maxwell scratched his head. “When was another time?”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” Suddenly, Lunita began touching her cheeks with her fingers and sliding them to her chin. Each time they came to her chin, she would start over and bring them back to the top of her cheek.

Jean-Pierre watched her. “Then perhaps, the question should be different. When did you *stop* talking to Maxwell?”

Instead of sliding her fingers down her face, she began scratching her cheeks

“No.” I grabbed both of her hands and placed them in her lap. “Do not hurt yourself.”

“It is *my* body.”

“It isn’t.”

She hissed at me. “Stupid.”

Jean-Pierre nodded. “Why is he stupid?”

“He knows nothing.” She tried to take her hands away.

I held them in place. “Then, tell me what I *should* know. Answer Jean-Pierre. Why did you stop talking to Maxwell?”

An angry expression spread over her face. “Because Max started running away and crying like a little bitty girl.”

“Eh, don’t be rude.” Maxwell lowered onto the couch’s arm farther away from the dead couple. “I don’t even know



what you're talking about—”

“In the alley. You ran screaming like a girl.” Then, she bared her teeth at him like she was a wild animal getting ready to charge. A loud hiss left her.

Maxwell leaned away. “You better chill the fuck out.”

“Little. Girl.” She frowned at him. “Baby.”

“Thank you.” Jean-Pierre held out the bow. “You can hold it, but you must not hurt yourself, Maxwell, or me.”

I scowled. “Or me.”

Jean-Pierre grinned. “Somehow, I forgot to add your name, Kazimir.”

“I bet you did.” I released Lunita’s hands.

“And.” Jean-Pierre twisted the blade. “We also must talk about your ritual.”

Lunita tilted her head to the side and had it all the way slanted and leaning against her shoulder.

“Yo.” Maxwell stood. “Stop doing that.”

Fast, she straightened her head.

Jean-Pierre spoke, “The ritual, Lunita.”

“I don’t understand.” She shook her head.

“The chant about Jesus.” Jean-Pierre traced a holy cross in the air. “The cross that you put in the chest. Slicing the throat. Cutting off the penis.”

She giggled. “Penis.”

Jean-Pierre grimaced. “Is this a religion for you?”

“No, silly. It’s so the angels can find them.”

“You want the men to go to heaven?”

“No.” Her eyes went wild. “I want them to go to hell.”

“Are you sending them to hell for God? Helping him out?”

She held her hand out. “Give me the bow.”

“So...” Maxwell pulled his gun out the shoulder holster. “She can take it. But, don’t be cute.”

I growled at him. “Put that gun down, Maxwell.”

“Fuck that.” Maxwell checked for bullets and then closed it.

Lunita showed Maxwell the middle finger.

Maxwell put the gun to his side. “You can stick that up your ass.”

Lunita pointed at him. “You can stick that up *your* ass.”

I glared at Maxwell. “Put the damned gun away.”

“The fuck I will.” Maxwell came closer. “In fact, I might just shoot her in the leg if she talks slick again.”

She smirked. “Never. Never. Ever.”

Jean-Pierre handed the bow to her. “You do not think Maxwell could shoot you?”

Silent, she held the deadly violin bow and ran her finger around the smooth wood.

Tension rose in the room.

Everyone watched her, possibly waiting for her to make a violent move.

*This was not a good idea.*

I sat on the edge of the couch ready to jump out of the blade’s reach. A bead of sweat trickled down my cheek.

Fast, she slashed the air, triggering a rippling effect from everyone. Jean-Pierre jumped up. His chair fell back. I grabbed her shoulders. Maxwell pointed the gun at her leg.

She opened her mouth in shock. “What?”

Maxwell lowered the gun. “Motherfucker, nobody trusts you to not kill them.”

“But...” Lunita blinked. “You all are my... everything.”

Clearing his throat, Jean-Pierre picked his chair back and sat down. “*We* are your everything?”

She nodded.

I let go of her arms. “No slashing the air.”

She let out an exasperated breath. “Another rule?”

“Yes.”

“Too many.” She frowned. “No fun. No fun at all. I’m going to go—”

“Don’t.” Jean-Pierre held out his hand. “We are not done talking.”

“I can’t slash the air.” She pointed at the dead couple. “Can I slice them?”

“Hell no,” Maxwell said.

Jean-Pierre shrugged. “I do not see the problem with that.”

I shook my head. “Exactly what a serial killer would say.”

“Did you not help Lunita pile body parts?” Jean-Pierre rose from the chair and walked over to the couple. “They are dead. Let us have some fun with Lunita.”

She grinned. “I like the Butcher.”

“Come on, man.” Maxwell shook his head. “How are we going to give the couple back to the family all fucked up—”

“We are not giving them back.” I quirked my brows. “Why would you think that?”

“Because—”

Lunita rose, stopping Maxwell’s words. He turned his attention to her.

Gripping the bow, she headed to the dead man.

I felt uneasy about the entire situation and followed her over.

As soon as she made it to the corpse, she ran her hand down his chest. Then, her fingers touched a stab wound, she pushed one finger inside. “Mmmm.”

Fascinated, Jean-Pierre widened his eyes. “Which part do you want to cut first?”

“The penis.” She giggled.

“Why do you laugh?”

“Because the word is *dick*. Everyone knows that.”

“I will remember.” Jean-Pierre gestured to the woman.

“Why not her first?”

Lunita slid her digit in and out of the stab wound like she was finger fucking it.

“Lunita?” Jean-Pierre leaned his head to the side. “You do not want to talk about that?”

She nodded. “I want to play with his dick too, but the mean old lion won’t let me. Will you talk to him?”

I frowned.

Jean-Pierre shook his head. “I do not think he would listen to me.”

Lunita moved her finger from the stab wound. “Can I keep this bow?”

Jean-Pierre walked over. “I can get you something close to it.”

I shook my head. “Absolutely not.”

Maxwell went over to the balcony and opened the door. “I second that.”

Lunita poked the man’s crotch with the end of the bow. “They think they’re my mother.”

“How was your mother?” Jean-Pierre dove his hands into his pocket.

*He thinks he’s a damned doctor.*

Still, I said nothing. I didn’t want to admit it, but... Jean-Pierre was steadily gaining a connection with her, possibly faster than I could have. If he could get many answers, then I would stand back and let him.

“My mom...was so sad...” Lunita traced the point of the bow to the man’s knee. “But...she was so pretty.”

Jean-Pierre quirked his brow. “What did she look like?”

“Big afro. Curly. Big brown eyes. Brown skin. Like a chocolate bar. Hershey.” Her bottom lip quivered. “Like me, but...much prettier.”

I glanced at Maxwell, hoping he would confirm.

He nodded and pulled a joint out of his pocket. “This shit is too heavy. I need to smoke.”

I turned to her. “Your mother taught you Spanish?”

Nodding, she frowned at the new wound she was making. “Not much blood is coming now.”

“The dead normally don’t bleed for very long.” Jean-Pierre shrugged.

Maxwell clicked his lighter. I signaled for him to go further out on the balcony. He backed up.

With a wild smile, Lunita slid the bow’s blade back and forth on his leg. “I’m making music.”

Jean-Pierre grinned. “It is a beautiful song.”

I rolled my eyes.

Jean-Pierre came closer to her. “Did your mother like to sing or—?”

“I don’t talk about her.” Lunita changed legs and began slicing the other leg. “Too mean. Too much...hurting.”

I got to her side. “Did she hurt you?”

Lunita lowered her voice. “Daryl was her favorite. I should have killed him, instead of her.”

*What?*

Maxwell coughed over and over from the balcony.

I looked his way.

Maxwell had dropped the joint. It lay on the ground. Still coughing, he started hitting his chest.

*Hold on.*

I rubbed my forehead, trying to remember Emily's past. Her mother died at least a year before the fire happened. Maxwell couldn't remember what had happened.

Later, her father apparently struggled with raising them. Meanwhile, Maxwell's father doubled down with the sexual abuse.

*But...Lunita killed her mother?*

I swallowed. "H-how did you do it?"

She stopped slicing at the thigh, tilted her head to the side, and leaned it against her shoulder. "What?"

"How did you kill your mother?"

"Oh." She kept her head like that and looked at the ceiling. "Um."

Maxwell walked into the room and watched her.

His joint still lay on the balcony's ground. Smoke rose from the tip.

"Uh...Oh yeah." Lunita straightened her head and began to saw at the leg. "Anytime Daddy left, she stuck the needle in her arm...she always lay so still in her bedroom. Frozen. Sleepy. Very slow to...move..."

My heart boomed in my ears. "What needle?"

Maxwell spoke, "Em's mom must have been on heroin."

"Then, I put the pillow on her face." A dark giggle left Lunita. "I laid on the pillow."

Maxwell and I exchanged looks. I think that left us both speechless. Once again, anytime Lunita said something, more questions came about.

"B-but..." Maxwell took two steps forward. "But why?"

Humming, Lunita stopped slicing the leg and flicked the blood on the carpet.

"Yo, Lunita?" Maxwell clapped.

Jean-Pierre held his hand up. "Give her some time."

“Fuck.” Maxwell walked back out the balcony and picked up the joint from the ground. “I don’t know about this. This is like a séance or something. Sometimes it’s better to just leave the dead and other shit alone.”

Lunita stopped flicking the bow and gazed off at Maxwell. She bit her lip.

He remained on the balcony and smoked.

She watched him and whispered, “He’s mad at me again.”

Jean-Pierre sat on the couch, right next to the dead woman, as if it were a completely normal thing to do. “Why is it so important for Maxwell to not be mad at you?”

“No...happily ever after.” She set the bow on the ground and walked away. “But...at least...I wanted *some* happy...for him. For me.”

I followed her, not willing to let her have more than three feet away from me. Right when I thought she was going to sit on the black couch, she began hugging herself and pacing.

*She’s on edge. This isn’t good. Maybe, I should stop this.*

Jean-Pierre left the couch and picked up his bow. “What do you mean no happily ever after?”

Lunita paced. “I...I want to go now, but...she’s still crying so...I can’t...”

I stopped her. “Who? Emily?”

Lunita nodded.

“You can see her?”

Lunita nodded.

Maxwell groaned from the balcony. “Man, let her go. This shit is not okay.”

I trembled. “What is Emily doing?”

“Laying in the basement. In a ball. Crying.” Lunita frowned at me. “Paolo must stay.”

“I know.”

She walked around me and returned to pacing. “Not fair.”

I turned around. “About Paolo?”

“About everyone!” She fisted her hands. “I...I was...”

Still holding his bow, Jean-Pierre backed up and leaned against the wall, watching us.

I ignored him and got in front of her. “What, Lunita?”

“I...” She frantically looked at Maxwell and then turned away. “I-it was supposed to be a big...”

“What?”

“A big wedding on the roof.” Her chest quickly rose and fell. She touched her head. “Flowers in the hair. Tons of them. All over.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Who’s wedding?”

Lunita’s eyes watered. “It...was *our* place.”

I stepped to her. “Who’s place?”

“A wedding on the roof.” She moved her hands around. “Everyone there. Family. Friends. Happy. Music. Flowers. So many.”

She went silent and stared at Maxwell.

“Pretty flowers.” Her voice screeched as she touched her head. “Even in my hair.”

I looked at Maxwell.

He gazed back at us like we were insane. Smoke left his nostrils. He had his hand in mid-air as if he had been about to bring the joint to his lips, but froze.

Lunita lowered her voice to a shaky whisper. “Wedding on the roof...flowers...in the hair.”

I moved my view from Maxwell and turned to her.

“But...they...” Tears edged by her lids, but didn’t spill over. Suddenly, she began hitting and scratching her face. “Hurt! Hurt!”



“No!” I ran to her and grabbed her hands, lowering them to her side. “Don’t hurt yourself!”

She fought against me. “Why?! Why me?!”

I pulled Lunita close to me and wrapped my arms around her.

Those tears spilled from her eyes. “Hurt!”

Then, her body didn’t tremble, it quaked against me. She tried to get away from my hold, but I kept her close to me, unable to let her go.

*Goddamn it.*

Even though everyone that hurt her was no longer there, I was desperate to protect her.

Lunita gave up escaping my embrace, looked at me, and screamed. “No wedding on the roof!”

My heart hollowed in pain.

Snot dripped from her nose. Sobbing, she screamed again, “No flowers in the hair!”

The room went quiet except for Lunita’s sobs, which sounded like waves slamming against a rocky shore.

It was in that moment when I noticed Maxwell walk fast past me. I couldn’t see his face. I had no thought to ask where he was going. All my concern focused on Lunita.

When Maxwell left the room, she went limp against me, but continued to sob.

I lifted Lunita up and carried her to the couch. Once there, I cradled and rocked her back and forth. “I love you.”

Still crying, she moved her view to me.

“I love you, Lunita.”

She trembled. More tears left those beautiful brown eyes.

“And you will get your happily ever after, the wedding on the roof, and even those flowers in your hair.”

Her bottom lip quivered.

“I will give you all the flowers.”

“S-silly lion.” She leaned her head against my chest and closed her eyes.

I watched her slowly go from trembling to being sound asleep.

Time passed, and I pictured a little version of Emily sitting in her room in Harlem, imagining her future wedding with her best friend. Wind blowing through her little braids. Her eyes sparkling with hope and life.

*And they snatched her dream away.*

Jean-Pierre disrupted my thoughts, “After Emily has the baby, we should take her to New Orleans.”

I had forgotten that he was still in the room. I looked up.

Jean-Pierre wiped his blade on the couch and then strolled over to the violin case like he was having a nice evening walk in the park. “There is a voodoo woman that could possibly help Emily and Lunita.”

My expression shifted to neutral.

“Perhaps, she cannot join them into one person.” He clicked open the case, placed the bow inside, and then shut it. “But, she should be able to heal Lunita and Emily from a lot of their pain.”

I eyed him.

This moment had provided valuable information to us, but also to him. He could take it to Fela or any of my other enemies. Sometimes psychological warfare was more dangerous than bullets and guns.

*I will have to kill him before we leave Italy.*

Jean-Pierre picked up the case and faced me. “Since my return to Italy, Fela has attempted to contact me several times.”

I sneered. “And?”

“I have not answered any of the calls. I chose Emily’s side and I will see it through. This choice was a difficult one. A few times, I wondered if making the decision was correct.” Jean-Pierre turned his view to her. “But tonight, I am certain that I have chosen correctly.”

I studied him. “What made you certain?”

“Your love for her.” Jean-Pierre smiled. “It is worth fighting for.”

I frowned. “And powerful for those who are intelligent enough to manipulate my love for her.”

“The person who properly cares for Emily becomes a friend to the Lion.” He walked off. “By the way, we should all meet to discuss killing Fela tomorrow.”

*I don't care about Fela or anything else. Just Emily.*

He stopped by the door and turned to me. “I am going to check on Maxwell. He is a good man.”

I swallowed.

“Do you need me to get anyone?”

I nodded. “Find King David, and then tell him to get Baba.”

Jean-Pierre tipped an imaginary hat and left.





# Chapter 32

## Roses are Blue

### Blue

David and I had just left Lunita.

On the elevator, we stood next to each other and I wondered if David felt the same sickening dread that I did. What would happen tomorrow when the Mouse woke up?

*Emily will not forgive herself for what Lunita did to the couple?*

I knew that she would be full of so much pain. I wished I could shoot it away.

*Life is so unfair.*

Discomfort settled in my chest. Suddenly, my breathing grew shallow and quick.

*How can I help her when I could not even take care of her this evening?*

The elevator became a cold confined steel box, imprisoning me. Suddenly, I had an irrational fear that the floor would just fall out, leaving me to crash to my death.

My heart raced.

*I want to get off this elevator.*

My back stiffened, and my senses went on high alert. Anxious prickles raced up my arm and spread to the rest of my body.

*Stop it. You're just full of fear right now.*

Trembling, I hugged myself.

David must have sensed my panicked worry because he wrapped his arm around my waist and stroked my cheek with his other hand. His touch was soothing.

I shuddered and leaned against him, breathing in his masculine scent. He smelled like a man should smell—hard work and sweat, power and testosterone.

His warmth brought calm to my nerves. I wanted to stay there forever. My heart slowed to a more normal pace.

I could think better next to him.

*I will just...ask her what she needs of me...and listen...and do my best to help her.*

David brushed my hair away from my face, putting it behind my ear. His deep, baritone voice filled the elevator. “Everything will be fine. I am here for you and will always be.”

My anxiety calmed, but then the guilt came.

I closed my eyes. “David...”

“Yes?”

“I froze.”

He tightened his hold. “Our bodies have a natural system—fight, flight, or freeze. It is a natural response when we feel threatened.”

“But Lunita was not threatening *me*.”

“People can experience this response whether the danger is real or not, and especially for perceived threats.” David touched my chin and lifted my view to him.

I opened my eyes and took in his chiseled face.

“Do not feel bad for freezing. Any rational person would perceive Lunita as a threat, even if she is not coming their way.”

“But—”

“Keep your head up and your heart strong. Do not second guess your actions this evening.”

I blinked.

“Tell me this.” He leaned his head to the side. “Do you want to leave Italy now? Are you scared to be around the

Mouse? I could secretly work out a way for you to leave without anyone—”

“No. Never.” I shook my head. “I do not want to leave Emily’s side.”

He studied me.

“That is the last thing I am thinking about. I want to be there for her.” Then, I frowned. “Wait. Do...you think I should not be next to her?”

“Of course not. I am trying to look after you and consider your safety.”

I let out a long breath. “I...care for her, David. Being there for Emily has taught me about myself and given my life purpose. I will only leave if she is done with me.”

He curved his lips into a smile.

“I am just mad that I was not truly there for her. I understand what you are saying about the body’s response to fear and freezing, but...I was afraid. Terrified. I should not have frozen. I should have been more courageous—”

“Courage does not mean you do not get afraid. It means you will not let your fear stop you, and it sounds like...not even Lunita can scare you away from Emily’s side.”

The elevator hummed to a stop.

The doors opened.

He released me.

Immediately, I missed his touch.

We stepped off together, and he placed his hand against the small of my back. Calm washed over me again.

We walked down the hallway, I rubbed my face with both hands. “You know what? I am better now. I can go back down there and—”

“No.”

I looked at him. “David, I am fine now—”

“You are taking the night off.”



“I will not.”

His hand glided against the small of my back, sending shockwaves throughout my whole body.

I stopped walking.

“Maxwell and Kazimir will be hovering over Lunita like protective helicopters for the rest of the evening.” With that soothing hand, he tugged me forward. “Rest because they will just tell you the same thing that I am saying.”

I gritted my teeth and continued walking.

A low chuckle left him.

“What is so funny, David?”

“When the Lion told me that you had gotten on the elevator with Lunita, I raced past him. My whole stomach caved in.” He shook his head as if in disbelief. “All I kept thinking was that...I may have lost...”

“What?”

We stopped at my door.

“Never mind. I was being dramatic.”

“What did you think you lost?”

He gave me a sad smile. “I thought I lost the possible love of my life. I was cursing God the whole time we ran down those stairs.”

*Love of his life?*

I widened my eyes.

Those alluring blue eyes penetrated me like a thousand arrows, and I found I enjoyed the pain. I swore the air around us went still.

“Blue, I have been with many women, and...none ever matched up...and always I searched for this special type of woman.”

My heart boomed in my chest.

“I yearned for the sort of woman who did not *need* a man. Instead, men needed her, and not just for sex, but so much more. A true...completely breathtaking woman. Strong, powerful, and deadly.”

My heart stirred from his confession.

“The first time I saw you in Paris, I was intrigued, but the Lion needed his kidnapped mouse. I had to focus.” He shrugged. “Then, we returned to Moscow, and you began to rise higher in Harlem Crew’s ranks. Men whispered about your sexy body and lush scent, and I pulled back, not wanting to be grouped with them, not wanting to be another man lusting after you.”

My breathing grew heavy.

“It was hard. Now we are in Italy and more and more, I am finding it difficult to not...”

I stiffened, waiting for his next words.

“To not take you. Claim you and thoroughly make you mine.”

I bit my lip.

He moved his gaze to my mouth. “Do not bite that sexy lip. Instead, let me do that.”

Shock and lust barreled into me.

He leaned in, and there was a sharp intake of his breath.

Barely an inch separated us.

My breasts rose and fell in time to my rapid breathing.

“Damn it.” An intense passion vibrated through his voice. “I am supposed to be comforting you, not trying to devour you.”

“Maybe...” My body hummed with longing. “Maybe, a good devouring is just what I need.”

Groaning, he captured my lips, sweeping me up into a sizzling kiss that was a whiplash of pleasure. His mouth was hungry and demanding, and I yielded to his desire.

The hallway around us vanished.

There was nothing but him.

His tongue was wet and skilled like a lover's touch. Our mouths worked together in harmony. His grunts and sighs of pleasure were music to my ears.

Groaning some more, he pressed me against the door and ravished me some more. His hands were rough and possessive as they gripped my waist.

*Oh.*

Bewildering pleasure and delicious aches poured through me. The friction of our bodies was electric. Every inch of my skin tingled with desire, so much desire that it was too damn soon when he broke away.

Panting and dazed, I almost begged for him to return.

His voice went husky and dark. "I knew once I kissed you, I would not be able to get enough. I would want more and more."

There was a raw need in his eyes that made my heart slam against my chest.

I wanted more of that kiss.

I wanted more of him.

I wanted his skin on my skin.

I wanted his hands everywhere.

I wanted him to make me his.

And damn it...I wanted to be his too.

It might not have been the best idea, but I whispered, "Come inside."

He licked his lips.

My heart nervously beat, waiting for his response.

He gave me a sad smile. "Any other night, I would not have waited for your invitation. I would have already had the

door open, you on the bed, and been moving deeply inside of you... but tonight...is not that night.”

My nipples stiffened, yearning for his attention. “I... understand.”

“Do you really?”

“Yes. You need to be next to the Lion. This is an emergency.”

“Yet.” Passion rode his voice. “You are so captivating. You make me want to forget about my duties to the Lion, and only spend time with you.”

I considered what Kazimir would do if David skirted his duties to have sex with me, especially on an evening when Lunita had appeared.

I sighed. “That would be a very dangerous move, David.”

“But, it would be worth it.” He raised his hand and traced the side of my fingers with his fingers.

I turned my head and found his fingers with my lips. I gave each digit a kiss. “There will be other days.”

“True...but...” A low groan left him. “Perhaps, we have time for a few long kisses between your thighs.”

I blinked.

“I have surely spent many nights thinking about those kisses.”

His phone rang. Anger spread across his face. Leaning away, he let out an exasperated breath and pulled out the phone.

I gave him a sad smile. “It must be hard being one of the most important men in Italy.”

He looked at the screen and then answered, “Yes, Misha. What do you need?”

I quirked my brows.

*What does the Mosquito want?*

“What? Are you sure?” David frowned. “Then, I will deal with them immediately. Yes. Yes. I understand.”

He hung up and put the phone in his pocket.

I eyed him. “What did Misha say?”

“Five Black Axe soldiers snuck onto the island. They are near the hotel. Misha’s people have their positions. He doubts they came to attack. In fact, they are probably here to do recon.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Some men and I will go and kill them.”

I nodded. “I will go with you and—”

“You will remain here to get rest.”

“Do you think I cannot shoot a gun and help out?”

He smirked. “I believe you can shoot better than me. It is what keeps me up in bed most nights with a hard cock pointing to the ceiling.”

I melted and did my best to gather myself. “David—”

“Rest. There will be plenty of days to fight this week.” He dug into his back pocket and pulled out a silver card. Next, he pressed it against my door.

It opened an inch.

I quirked my brows. “You have a key to my room?”

“It is the hotel’s master key. Therefore, I can enter anyone’s room.” He pushed the door open wider and then scowled. “What the hell is this?”

*Huh?*

I looked in that direction.

*Oh.*

Roses, thousands upon thousands of roses, bloomed on every available surface of my room, from the floor to the windowsills and the mantelpiece. Their petals swirled from a pure white to the deepest, most solid blue imaginable. Some

blooms were storm-cloud blue and sat in crystal vases. Others were lavender-hued or powder blue and rested in gold vases—a perfect pair to the blooms they housed.

*I didn't even know you could make roses these colors.*

There were even blooms of periwinkle and sapphire—glistening in their rarity and trapping my view.

*Who did this?*

They sat on my nightstand, my desks, and even on the floor, transforming my space into an enchanted garden of various shades of endless blue roses. And there was an all-consuming floral scent perfuming the air.

*Oh my God!*

It was so beautiful. Enchanting. There was a great poetry to the flowers, even the way they were placed, all cascading in various colors and in certain patterns as if completely intentional.

Whoever did it, had taken their time and really thought every placement out.

*Holy...Mother Mary.*

No one had ever made such a bold and huge romantic gesture like this.

David stomped into the room. “Please tell me that you did this.”

“I did not.” I followed. “When I left at least five hours ago...none of this was here.”

A blue envelope lay on the bed.

David gritted his teeth and gestured at it. “Do you mind if I see who this is? It is a security breach after all.”

Shocked, yet curious at who it could be, I nodded.

He snatched it up and tore through the blue envelope. When he pulled out the card, he growled. “The Butler.”

*Giorgio...*

David folded the card and put it in his pocket. “Now I know why Louis was searching for your room this whole time. But do not worry. I will deal with the Butler for you—”

“Oh, no.” I waved my hands. “I have control of this situation—”

“Still, there should be a conversation—”

“I am managing this.”

David leaned his head to the side. “Managing?”

“You know? Um. Dealing with it.” I touched my chest. “Listen. Giorgio only sent these roses to me because I thought that the roses *you* delivered earlier this week were his, so I told him thank you in the meeting, but Giorgio got mad and said he did not send them and then...”

Rage shot over his face. So much so that I stopped talking and stepped back. “What?”

David rubbed his forehead. “Someone else sent you roses this week?”

I blinked. “You mean you did not send those either?”

“No. I have not sent you flowers at all. I planned to do all of that in Moscow.” He looked at the roses and rubbed his head again. “Apparently, I need to catch the fuck up. There is quite a bit of competition for your attention this week.”

*Wait. Who sent those damn roses?!*

My head twisted in utter confusion. Now I was out of possibilities of who it could be. Giorgio and David made sense, there was no one else on my radar.

*Who could it be?*

“Goddamn it.” David pulled me out of my thoughts. “Well, the first thing I will do is have several men take these out and then—”

“No.” The word left my mouth fast.

He raised his eyebrows.

I cleared my throat. “I mean...”

I scanned the breathtaking view. “David, after today’s horror, this is a welcoming sight. I...like them. A lot.”

“Of course.” His face shifted to a neutral expression.

“Are you...okay with that?”

“It is your room, Blue,” he spoke through clenched teeth. “And...you did have a rough night. I care more about your feeling better than...getting rid of the Butler’s...*antics*.”

Anger radiated off him.

David looked like he planned to break Giorgio’s neck when he saw him.

Fear hit me.

I kept my voice steady. “David.”

“Yes?”

“I will handle this. Not you.”

“There will still be a *conversation* between us.”

“There is no need for a conversation, if I am going to talk to Giorgio.”

His expression did not change. I was now talking to the Lion’s number one. “As I said, there will still be a conversation between us.”

My stomach twisted. “Please, let me handle it.”

“I am sorry, Blue.” David scanned the space. “But this is the way of men.”

“These roses are between Giorgio and me.”

“It does not matter. I kissed you. Tasted those sexy lips. I want you fully. There will be no other competition when it comes to you.”

*Oh. Wow.*

I swallowed. “Please, David. Let me handle it.”

“The only thing that will save Giorgio this evening, is that I have to kill someone else.”



“Okay. Hold on.” I held my hands out. “I do not like the way you worded that.”

“Yet—” His phone rang. He mumbled to himself, “Goddamn it. Can I have one second to myself?”

That neutral expression cracked. Anger bled through. He wrenched the phone out and answered. “Yes? Misha, I am on the way. Yes. Yes. I am well aware that you know exactly where I am at this moment. Give me one fucking minute to say goodbye!”

He hung up the phone and sighed. “Okay.”

“David, I just want you to let me handle Giorgio on my own.”

“Get some rest, Blue. It will be long day tomorrow.”

“I will, but I still want you to promise—”

“Why? Do you care for him?”

“I care that you two end up being violent over me. It would be a waste of bullets and blood.”

“It would not.”

“You know what I am trying to say. We are already at war and the Mouse is...going through a lot. We do not need a new problem between the French and the Brotherhood. You are the Lion’s number one. Any thing you do—”

“I know my position. That is why Giorgio’s and my conversation will be discreet.”

“There’s no need to have a conversation at all.”

“And yet I tasted you and now a conversation must be had with the Butler and whoever else sent those flowers.”

“Okay, but—”

“Regrettably, I have to go, Blue.”

I pursed my lips.

David gazed at me as if wanting one last kiss before leaving.

And then he closed the distance between us.

*Fuck.*

I lifted my face to meet those lips.

A man's voice sounded in the room. "David, they are close to climbing over the walls!"

*The Mosquito?*

I looked around for where the voice was coming from.

David scowled. "I am coming, Misha."

*Where is he talking from? Valentina was right. He is creepy.*

David backed up. "I will see you later."

"Okay."

"Fucking Mosquito." David walked off and then stopped at the opened dresser drawer near the door. He leaned his head to the side and studied it. "Was this always open or did Giorgio take something out of it?"

*Oh, God. Is that my underwear drawer?*

"Um..." I went to it and gazed inside.

It was completely empty.

There was no way I was going to tell David what had been inside of it.

I shrugged. "It was empty, and you have to go."

"Hmmm." David shut the drawer. "Get some rest, Blue."

"I will. Thank you for helping me."

"It was my pleasure." David left.

*Wow.*

I turned back to the drawer.

*Did you really need to take all of my clean panties, Giorgio?*

I held my hands to the side of my head and took in all the roses in the room.

There was one thing I had to admit. Even though I had witnessed the horror of Lunita, Giorgio's roses and David's kiss would be the only things I would be thinking about this evening.

*And who sent that first set of roses if it wasn't Giorgio or David? And was that the same person who texted me or was it someone else?*

I looked at the dozens of sky-blue roses on my dresser and touched one of the soft petals. The soft silkiness smoothed against my fingertips.

*Giorgio...*

I shook my head.

Then, unfortunately, a grin spread over my face too.

*What am I going to do with you?*

I thought about the rage on David's face.

*Damn it. More important. What is David going to do to you?*

At that thought, an imaginary Maxwell appeared before me. There, he smoked a joint, pointed at me, and said, "Management."

*Yes. Yes.*

I straightened my shirt, walked out of my room, and closed the door.

*Where the hell is the Butler's room anyway?*





# Chapter 33

## No Secrets

### Kazimir

The elevator rose.

I held Emily in my arms.

I was confused, lost, and angry. Darkness saturated my mind, clouding every thought. My heart pulsed with unease, making my chest hurt.

Wassily stood by my side. He was the only solid, reassuring presence I had at the moment.

I gazed down at my mouse. Even though dried blood drops decorated her face, she looked so sweet and innocent.

*Mysh, I am sorry.*

I let out an exasperated breath and looked at Wassily. “Blue should be fine by now. Where is David?”

“King David texted me that there were Black Axe men near.”

“How did he find that out?”

“Misha.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

*This shit show in Italy must end soon.*

Wassily continued, “David grabbed up several men and went to take care of them.”

I calmed. “Good.”

Other number ones would have needed me to order them to do it. David always took the initiative and swiftly acted, probably understanding that I was in the midst of a hurricane of maddening emotion.

*He is the best number one I have ever had.*

Emily would have been proud of him.

That thought made me look down at her.

*Mysh...will you ever forgive me for pushing you and bringing Lunita out?*

Wassily turned to me. “Do you need me to do anything, sir? I am here.”

*Help me figure out what to do next.*

But, I would never ask him such a thing. He was new and still learning his position. Plus, he was a man, and I believed I needed the softness of a woman in this situation.

*Baba will help. She will know what I should do next.*

But, first I had to make sure my mouse was safe and clean of all the blood. Maxwell had told me before that she could not wake up in this state. For once, I would follow his lead and do my best to make sure that didn't happen.

“Wassily, I need you to find Maxwell.” I put my view back on the doors. “I will need his assistance this evening.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am hoping Maxwell is in his room. If not, then contact Misha and have him find Maxwell.”

My cousin had become a bit...odd where Maxwell was concerned. If anyone knew the exact location of Maxwell at any time, it would be Misha.

Wassily nodded. “I will get him immediately.”

*But will Maxwell be able to truly help tonight?*

Last time I had seen him, he had stormed out of the room in the middle of Lunita's speech about the wedding on the roof. It was clear that as a little girl—Emily or...Lunita—fantasized about marrying her best friend. Perhaps, she saw Maxwell as the one person that truly loved her, and hoped to be together with him forever.

*Flowers in the hair...*

My heart ached.

Lunita's words had shaken me to the bone. I could barely comprehend the pain and sadness that I experienced just from hearing of her suffering as a child.

*How did Maxwell feel? Angry? Uncomfortable?  
Brokenhearted?*

I looked back at Wassily. "If Maxwell seems upset...let him stay in his room."

"Yes, sir."

I needed him tonight, but even more Emily would need him in the morning. If it were a question of her or me getting Maxwell's help, it would always be her.

Maxwell had to be mentally strong.

*Perhaps, I...should get Misha involved with...helping him?*

The elevator slowed, then stopped at the top floor.

The doors slid opened.

I walked off with Emily.

Wassily remained in the elevator.

Several of my men waited for me in the hallway.

Keeping my nose close to my body, I headed to our suite.

*Come on, Maxwell. Please be okay.*

One of my men rushed forward and opened the door.

To my surprise, the scent of weed drifted to my nose—earthy and fruity fragrance.

*Maxwell?*

I stepped inside.

*Is he here?*

The smooth sound of a saxophone filled the large suite.

Next, Maxwell's voice sounded from the master bedroom. "Ladies, put the towels over there and light some candles. It will keep us all at ease."



Relief washed over me.

*Thank God.*

I carried Emily into the suite.

Once I entered, I spotted three female members of Harlem Crew. They hurried to me and held out their arms.

I didn't see him, but Maxwell's voice sounded from the balcony. "Yo, Kazimir. Give Em to Inessa, Luda, and Anya. They know what to do."

*But I do not know them.*

I pursed my lips, not wanting to let her go.

"Come on, man." Maxwell appeared at the balcony's opening and blew out smoke. "It's already going to be a long night. Give Em to them."

"What are they going to do?"

Maxwell frowned. "Anya used to have a little salon in some place called Korolev—"

"That is outside of Moscow—"

"I don't give a fuck where it is. Anya knows how to do hair better than the both of us." Maxwell gestured to the woman. "So, let Anya get Em's hair together first. Then, we will wash Em up."

I pierced them with my gaze. "Take care of Emily and make sure—"

"They know what to do, man. Give Em to them so we can talk." Maxwell walked back out on the balcony, leaving a trail of smoke behind him.

All three women took Emily from me. One had her upper body. The other carried the middle. And the last held onto her feet.

"Be careful and very gentle." I sneered. "She's pregnant."

As they carried her off, Anya bobbed her head. "Yes, sir. We will be very careful."

*You better be or I will kill all of you.*

I watched them disappear into the bathroom with my mouse.

The separation didn't ease my already frazzled nerves. If anything, my chest began to hurt.

*Can I truly trust these women?*

Maxwell yelled from the balcony, "Man, if you don't get your ass out here."

The jazz song shifted to a new one. A gong banged. Cymbals came next. Then, some other instrument began playing four notes over and over.

Then, a saxophone played, making sense of all the notes and pulling the song into a meditative rhythm that calmed the tempo.

I headed to the balcony.

The jazz music followed.

Outside, thousands of stars lit the dark sky and surrounded the bright, half-full moon. There would be a few more days before it would be full. Cool air brushed against my skin.

Tapping his foot to the jazz song, Maxwell stood by the railing.

For a second, my mind went to last night. Emily and I had made love on this very balcony in the rain. It had been such a perfect moment. Our wet skin slipping against each other. Our moans colliding with the sound of the storm.

And so much pleasure.

I swallowed down all my regret, wishing I could return to that moment.

*Mysh...*

I walked over and stopped at Maxwell's side.

Without looking my way, he handed me an unlit joint and a lighter. "I figured you would need this, and you can't smoke mine because you're always spitting all over it."

I took the joint and lighter. "I am surprised you are here."

“Me too.” Maxwell continued to smoke his own joint.  
“Lunita...everything she said...that shit fucked me up in the head. I don’t know if I will ever be okay.”

“What part messed you up?”

“All of it, man.”

*Lunita killed their mother. I would have to tell Emily.*

Is that why she didn’t have a memory of her mother? Was it pain and guilt that made her block it all away?

I lit the joint and handed him back the lighter.

*How do I tell her...everything?*

Together, in silence, we smoked and looked at the moon. There was nothing else to do, but calm our hurts and try to figure out the next step to healing. The marijuana had a soothing effect that numbed all my senses, and I welcomed it. The pain in my chest went away. I hoped it would never return.

*Should I see...Dr. Stovall about this?*

Another cool breeze blew by us.

The same jazz song continued. It must have been a pretty long length. Then, out of nowhere the musicians began chanting the same phrase over the steady rhythm.

I quirked my brows. “What are they saying?”

“A love supreme.”

“Is that the name of the song?”

Maxwell nodded.

I flicked ash over the railing. “Then, this song is about love?”

“Yeah, but not a love for a woman.”

“Then, the love for what?”

“Love for God.” Maxwell took a hit and then blew out smoke. “Coltrane struggled with drug and alcohol addiction.”

I inhaled my own joint, understanding finally how someone could choose drugs to escape. It was a quick fix to numb the pain and somehow cope with the tragedy of a day. The only problem was that the logical side of me knew that the marijuana was just a band aid.

I blew out smoke and watched it disappear into the night.

“The notes mirror Coltrane’s quest in getting free of that shit.” Maxwell stared at the stars. “X told me that this song was a spiritual declaration that Coltrane’s musical devotion was now intertwined with his faith in God.”

“You played this before.”

“I did.”

I looked at him. “And why do you play this song, when you take care of Emily?”

“Because X loved Coltrane. He used to play his albums over and over on Saturday, cleaning the house and shit. Then...later...when Emily had her episodes...he would play it then. It was the only thing that kept her still. So...when I hear Coltrane, I’m more relaxed than when I smoke weed.”

“And this music relaxes Emily and Lunita too.”

“Yeah.”

I thought back to Xavier. We had barely exchanged many words before Sasha’s men killed him along with my Uncle Igor. Now, I wished I had picked his brain more about Emily. But back then, I thought I knew everything there was to know about her.

I gazed at the half-full moon. “Xavier gave Emily and you a strong foundation after the horrors that occurred.”

“I guess. I damn sure would have been worse off without him.” Maxwell sighed. “Man...if X were here...shit would be better. Everything would be wrapped up like a tight bow.”

I looked at him. “Would it?”

“Yeah.”

“I do not know about that.”

“Man, X would have known what to do.”

I focused on my joint, placed it to my lips, and inhaled.

*Hmm. So much better. I will need to be mindful of how much I use this to stay calm.*

Maxwell took me out of my thoughts. “You don’t think X could have helped us right now?”

I exhaled smoke. “When I arrived in New York, the city feared the Tinder Killer. It was pure terror in the streets and all over the papers. People were in restaurants whispering about it in fear that they might be the next victim. The police had begun a manhunt. Emily would have been caught.”

“Well...maybe X didn’t have shit completely wrapped up, but...at least...Lunita would not have been talking and having a breakdown this evening.”

“Perhaps, that is the problem.”

“How’s that?”

“Lunita should talk more and let it out. Maybe that will be how Emily heals.”

“Yeah, but everything Lunita said...” Maxwell stared off at the stars. “Everything she said...it broke my heart, man. Made me want to kill somebody. I don’t like feeling that way.”

“Sometimes healing can be ugly.”

“Then, we’re definitely healing because this shit is as ugly as it gets.” He stopped looking at the night’s sky and frowned at me. “By the way, do you understand the plan for tomorrow?”

“What plan?”

“Anya is going to do Em’s hair perfectly. No cornrows or anything. Nice and blowed-out just right.”

I twisted my face in confusion. “And?”

“Then, Em will never know that she went dark tonight. Bodies gone. Everyone keeps their mouths shut.”

I scowled at him.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Maxwell, I am not lying—”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“No secrets.”

Maxwell blew out a long breath. “I should fucking throw you off this balcony.”

For some reason, that made me smirk. I inhaled some of the joint.

Maxwell leaned against the railing. “Kazimir.”

“Yes?”

He looked at me. “I don’t want Em to have to dig deep into this muck and—”

“Why not? Avoiding all of this never helped. And I have already messed things up. I will not add lying to the pile of mistakes for this week—”

“Fuck that. Avoiding this will be easier, until we—”

“Easier for who, Maxwell?” I pointed my joint at him. “Would it be easier for you?”

“Fuck you, man.” He looked away.

*I must remember that this is hurting him too.*

Killing people was so much easier than trying to dissect everyone’s trauma and emotions. I was the last person qualified for this job.

I gritted my teeth. “You say it is better to stay silent about this.”

“I do.”

I gazed at the lit joint. “But, I promised Emily that we would never have any secrets.”

Maxwell directed his view to the dark sea below us.

“You think I want to tell her what happened tonight?” I held out my hands. “No. It is the last thing that I want to say to her.”

“Then, keep it chill and don’t—”

“By the time Emily wakes up, everyone in this hotel will know what happened. If not me, then Emily will find out from someone else.”

“You’re the Lion. Threaten everyone to keep quiet.”

“I will not lie to her.”

“Yeah, but...” Maxwell rubbed his forehead. “I’m scared, man.”

“Of what?”

“Of breaking her with this shit.”

Cold shivers ran through me. “Me too.”

“What the fuck are we going to do if she breaks down?” Maxwell touched his chest. “I won’t be okay. If she feels pain, I feel it too. If her heart is broken, then mine is shattered.”

“I understand that more than you know.” I twisted the joint in my hand. “But...I cannot make any more mistakes when it comes to her...and lying would be a big one for us.”

*I have to stop fucking up.*

Someone tapped on the glass.

We looked that way.

Baba stood in the doorway. She wore a disapproving expression which told me that she was not pleased with me either. “I was told that you wanted a reading this evening.”

I scowled at her. “Why did you not warn me about Lunita?”

“How does one warn someone about something that is intense and unfathomable to understand?”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “By simply saying it.”

Her voice rose. “I would rather discuss your audacity for thinking you could get rid of my Paolo.”

I groaned in annoyance. “Baba, you are not new to the Brotherhood. His father was a traitor—”

“He is an innocent little boy that is protected by a force that you cannot understand. Do not get in the way of Paolo’s destiny again or you will find yourself in real danger.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Is this what the cards say?”

She jabbed her finger at the air. “This is what *I* say.”

I gritted my teeth. “Maxwell, you, and...Lunita have been very convincing this evening. Therefore, I have already decided that the boy—”

“Paolo.” She sneered.

“That Paolo will remain with us. Do we have an understanding?”

Baba crossed her arms over her chest. “I already knew that Emily and you would raise Paolo once he came into all of our lives. And...unfortunately I knew that you would be too hard-headed to except that very fact.”

Maxwell chuckled.

Baba put her gaze on Maxwell. “You should come with us too. I would love to give you a reading also?”

“Hell to the no.” Maxwell put his back to her. “I already told you in Moscow, Baba, that I don’t fuck with that card reading shit.”

“I assumed that after your time in New Orleans, you would be more open to—”

“I’m even more closed to that shit because of New Orleans.” He spun around. “And who told you about that?”

“I have visions of you.”

Maxwell gave her a skeptical look. “Yo. How about you don’t have any more visions of me?”

“I cannot control my visions and what I see. They come to me whether I want them to or not.”

“Yo...when it comes to me, I need you to ignore that shit.”

I eyed her. “What have you seen for Maxwell?”



“Come on, man.” He wagged his finger at me. “If you play with this shit, then demons and things will attach themselves to you.”

I grinned. “Is that how it works?”

“Whatever, man. Keep on playing with this shit if you want.” Maxwell returned to his joint.

“Baba, I would like to know your visions for him.”

Maxwell groaned. “Man, I’ve heard enough this evening.”

“The visions were beautiful and loving,” Baba said. “My advice to you, Maxwell, is to hold on to your lemon tree.”

Freezing, he held the joint in mid-air.

Baba’s face held a warm smile. “One day, you will be planting that same lemon tree with the love of your life. It will be in front of your new home. She will laugh as you tell her the story about how you grabbed the tree. Years later, your kids will pick lemons from that tree and make the sweetest lemonade. And even later, your grandkids will pick from it too and hear the story from their parents, and your grands will smile because they know how funny their grandpa can be.”

Maxwell remained silent.

Baba directed her view to me.

The smile left her face. The disapproving glare returned. “Emily’s healing is directly related to Paolo’s healing.”

*What?*

I tensed.

*Could that be true?*

Baba pointed at me. “Do not tamper with their connection again.”

My heart boomed in my ears. The pain in my chest reappeared.

I spoke through clenched teeth, “Is that what the cards say or is this your love for him overshadowing everything?”

“It is the cards. It is my love.” She sneered. “*And* it is common sense, Lion.”

The line of my jaw twitched. “Then, let me *truly* see what the cards say.”

Having the boy around us would make things difficult in Moscow. But as Maxwell had said, I was the Lion. If Emily needed Pavel’s son to heal, then I would change and reshape the Brotherhood’s ancient philosophies to keep him safe and my mouse’s mental balance restored.

In the end, nothing would be too much for my mouse.

I would destroy most of the Brotherhood to ensure this.

*But first...let us see what the cards say...*

“Here.” I began to hand my lit joint to Maxwell. “Take this.”

“No, Kazimir.” Baba shook her hand. “Bring it.”

“What?”

She walked off. “By the time I am done reading, we will both need that joint.”





## Chapter 34

### But then the Lion met the Mouse

#### Kazimir

Baba remained quiet the whole journey to her office.

To keep my nerves down, I twisted the joint in my fingers.

*What will she say? Will it be good or bad?*

I didn't think I could handle anymore darkness this evening.

*Let it all be good.*

Once we made it to the office, Baba opened the door and entered, but didn't turn on the lights. Darkness loomed through the room, hiding her from my view.

Squinting, I entered. The carpet muffled my footsteps.

Seconds later, she struck a match and lit four candles one by one. The candles sat on a large wooden desk in the center of the room. Once the match hit the wick, the candles crackled and flames appeared, spreading an orange-red glow across the entire space.

*Why not use your lamps?*

Then, I studied the candles. They were black and in the shape of human skulls—all with gaping mouths as well as holes for their eyes and nose. Each skull rested on a corner of the desk.

I inhaled the fragrance rising from them. The skull candles had a distinct scent, but I couldn't identify it.

“What is this scent?”

“Palo Santo. It means *holy wood*.” Baba put the matches down and went over to one of the many boxes stacked against the wall. “The tree that it comes from is native to Peru, Ecuador, and other South American countries.”

“Holy wood. Is there a spiritual significance?”

She rummaged through a box. “For thousands of years, the wood, resin, and even oil have been used for medicinal purposes as well as clearing away negative energy.

Not wanting to sit yet, I took the space in. My view fell on all the packed boxes in the room.

“Baba, do you want me to have some of my men come in here and help you unpack?”

“That is unnecessary, Kazimir.”

“Why?”

“We will not be at this hotel for long. The time to head back to Moscow will be soon.”

*Good.*

Several paintings hung on the walls, telling stories of medieval Italian times—knights in silver armor on horses, princesses wandering through candlelit halls.

*Hmmm. What is this?*

I walked over to a painting of dueling dragons.

Baba snickered.

“What?”

“The Mouse was also drawn to that same painting. She kept looking at it the whole time she was in here.” Baba continued to search through the box. “What do you see?”

I stared at the image.

Two dragons of white and black faced each other, preparing to duel.

The white dragon had bright scales that gleamed like steel in the sun. Each scale was a perfect circle.

The black dragon’s scales were different. They were sharp, the shape of triangles, and the color of an eclipsed night sky. This dragon’s tail was coiled, ready to strike.

“I see dragons about to fight each other.”

“Look closer, Lion.”

I leaned forward to get a better view.

It was in that moment I realized that the dragons actually stood on a large mirror.

*What?*

I squinted.

In the mirror, the white dragon’s reflection was black and the black dragon’s reflection was white.

Baba spoke, “Now what do you see?”

“Perhaps, these dragons are reflections of their own souls.”

“Then, could they ever really fight themselves?”

I moved my view from the mirror and truly studied the creatures. Earlier, I assumed that they were about to duel because they seemed to be facing off. Now I peered into each dragon’s eyes.

“They are assessing each other.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps...to understand the unknown part of themselves. The part that is hidden away.” I swallowed. “The part only reflected in the mirror.”

“Very good. At times, you can be a great thinker, Kazimir.” She yanked out a large bottle of vodka and then grabbed two glasses. “It is unfortunate you were put on the path of crime. You might have been the most famous philosopher of our time.”

I eyed the vodka. “Do you think you should be drinking while reading cards?”

She set the bottle and glasses on the desk. “You tell me. Is reading cards like driving, Kazimir?”

Frowning, I walked away from the painting. “You are in quite a mood this evening.”

“There were two people with big hearts that came to this hotel with the singular purpose of saving a little boy’s life.”

Baba twisted off the top of the bottle and then poured vodka into both glasses. “Now, they are dead.”

I went over to the chair across from the desk. “You had nothing to do with that.”

Without putting the top back on the bottle, she set it next to her and sat down in her chair. “I could have stopped it, but I knew what would happen if I did.”

I stiffened and didn’t lower into my chair. “What would have happened?”

“You would have been forced to take Paolo to Moscow. David would have found another couple in Russia. They would have come to your new house, and on that day, Lunita would have killed many more. Boris, Blue, as well as some of your men and Harlem Crew.” Baba picked up the glass full of vodka. “Also, your baby would have miscarried.”

Still standing, I gripped the edge of my chair.

“I let a nice couple die to save six men, four women, and an unborn child.” Baba took a large gulp of vodka, wiped her mouth, and put the glass down. “The only reason why I will be able to sleep tonight is because I know what your son will be, the people he will save, and all the change that will come from him.”

I widened my eyes. “What change?”

She went into her desk drawer and took out a glass ashtray. “Give me that joint, Kazimir.”

Frowning, I handed it to her. “So...I truly will have a son?”

“You will.”

Grinning, I sat down. “Will he take over the Brotherhood and rule with a mighty hand? Be a legend just like his father?”

“Take a drink from your glass and settle in.”

“Let us make this clear.” Not taking the glass, I leaned back in my chair. “I want all answers to everything tonight.”



“Shall I give you the meaning of life too as well as the exact location of God? Perhaps, I can tell you every detail when it comes to what happens when you die?”

I sneered.

“Now let *me* make something clear, *young man*.” She pointed the joint my way. “Your cards disappeared. New ones arrived.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that the Universe is so exhausted with you that it is trying a new approach to get through to your hard head.”

“How do cards appear and disappear.”

She placed her hand under the desk. Then, she brought it back up, gripping a large deck of cards. Next, she put the cards on the desk.

I gazed at this new deck. The first card was solid blue with a large bright full moon on it.

“Pick them up, Kazimir.”

Intrigued, I did as she said. The cards warmed against my palm. “Are you sure these are for me?”

“Who else would they be for? I have never seen them in my life.” She placed the edge of the joint to one of the candle’s flame. Once the tip sparked, she brought it to her. “Before I do any reading, I say the person’s name to prepare myself. I have everyone’s cards in a particular box. Yours were gone and these sat in the place of the old ones as if they were there the whole time.”

“I am...partial to the moon.”

“Good. Let us see what the moon will tell you today.” Then, she inhaled the joint like it was her first breath of fresh air. The tip turned fiery red. She closed her eyes and didn’t exhale.

“But, how will you read these? They do not look like tarot cards.”

Finally, she exhaled smoke. “As you hold those cards, I want you to think about the questions that you want to ask me this evening. Do you already know them?”

“Yes.”

“What are the questions?”

“First, how can I heal Emily? Second, will we be victorious with Fela? And finally, will the boy...” Tension gathered in my shoulders.

“What?”

“How will the boy survive with us?”

She studied me. “Shuffle them.”

I did as she said. The cards easily slid between my fingers.

Meanwhile, Baba smoked the joint and took a few more sips of the vodka. The earthy smell of cannabis mingled with the scent of palo santo thickened the air.

I shuffled to my liking and set the cards on the desk. “Are we both just going to get intoxicated this evening?”

Baba blew smoke to the side. It swirled around the skull candle closest to her. “We all must find a way to unwind, Kazimir.”

“And why is that? What do you see?”

She formed her lips into a straight line. Her eyes turned cool, without any hint of emotion. “I told you that the man that left Russia would not be the man that returned.”

“I remember.”

“But, do you believe me?”

“So much has happened, I no longer know myself, so yes, I believe you.”

“What has been the change?”

“I...” My voice grew hoarse. “I love Emily different.”

“Different how?”

“Before my love was full of passion, lots of lust, and an all-encompassing desire to possess her in every way.”

“And now?”

I shook my head. “Is this discussion necessary?”

“How has the way you love Emily changed?”

“Now, I want to heal and protect her. I want to love her so much that all her pain withers away. I want to make her happy for a lifetime, not just one day. I want to...”

“Continue.”

I stirred in my seat. “Begin the reading.”

She shook her head. “Separate the cards in as many piles as you want, and then pick the first card.”

Sighing, I reached over and divided the cards into five piles. Then, I picked one card from the third pile’s bottom and lay it on the desk without turning it over. “Here.”

“This deck that your energy has drawn is an interesting set. It comes from the idea of moonology.”

“Which is what?”

“The cycles of the moon have a huge effect on our health, our mood, our relationships, and our work.”

“I have always believed that.”

“Then, you are truly in sync with the moon. Possibly because you are a Cancer—”

“I am a Leo. It is the lion.”

She rolled her eyes, took a hit of the joint, and then exhaled. “The moon empowers you during certain phases. However, this reading will tell you about your personal moon phases in your days to come.”

“I do not understand.”

“Kazimir, in this situation,” she pointed at me. “you are the moon—turning dark to light, traveling across the cosmological signs and making them your home.”

I frowned. "How can I heal Emily?"

"Turn over the card."

I did.

The card showed a new moon. Under it were two lines, displaying golden words.

I read them out loud. "***New Moon. You must go through a powerful change to begin the cycle.***"

"Change." Baba flicked the ash in the ashtray. "To heal Emily, *you* must change. And if you change, everything changes around you. Your men. The Brotherhood. Even your enemies."

"I am already changing enough."

She wagged her finger. "Two innocent people died this evening, and the blood is as much on your hands as it is on Lunita's. Change some more."

My stomach twisted.

She gave me a sad smile. "The fact that you did not dispute what I just said, at least shows me that you are already changing on the inside."

I shrugged. "I did not want that couple to die."

"The Kazimir from last year would not have given their deaths another thought, but then the Lion met the Mouse..."

I sighed. "But then the Lion met the Mouse."

She leaned over and handed me the joint.

With no protest, I took it.

"Tonight, Lunita did what Emily could not. She put her foot down with you when it came to Paolo." Baba leaned back in her chair. "Unfortunately, Lunita's methods only deal with blood and death."

I inhaled the joint.

"Turn over the next card. Let us see how you can make this change."

I exhaled smoke, grabbed the top card from the first pile, and flipped it over.

Baba laughed when she saw the image.

Nervous, I put it on the desk.

In this image, A lion's face had been painted in the center of a full moon. Under it the gold words proclaimed, "***Full Moon in Leo. Don't let pride get in your way.***"

Baba grinned. "I think I like these cards a lot."

"And I think you may be a little too high." I reached for the ashtray, stamped out the joint, and placed it out of both of our reach.

"I do feel quite better." The grin remained on her face. "But, what is pride, Lion?"

"Honest confidence in oneself."

"My mother used to tell me that pride can cost you everything, yet leave you with absolutely nothing."

"I do not see how this relates to healing Emily."

"Your own pride is keeping you from fixing the broken parts of your heart."

"There is nothing broken in my heart."

"No?"

"None when it comes to Emily—"

"And what about Pavel?"

The line in my jaw twitched. "What about him? I did what needed to be done."

"And how do you feel?"

I looked at the joint, wishing I had not stamped it out. "What does this have to do with Emily's healing?"

"Paolo is a bright light in this dark war. You would know that if you would allow yourself to look into the light and feel its glow."

I closed my eyes.

“Kazimir.”

I opened my eyes.

“How can you heal Emily, if you are not willing to heal yourself.” She gestured to the pile. “Pick the next card.”

“I would rather you find the other deck.”

“That deck is no longer available to you.”

Sighing, I leaned over, took a card from the last pile, and turned it over.

Baba whispered, “Interesting.”

On this image, a full moon greeted my eyes. It was my favorite phase of the moon. She always sat there so bright, glowing in the darkness and reminding me about mysterious powers that I would never be able to comprehend.

I had met Emily on the night of a full moon.

I looked at the gold words and read them, “***Full moon. Surrender to the Divine.***”

“I wonder, Lion, do you even know what it means to surrender?”

I gritted my teeth.

She placed her hands on the desk and threaded her fingers together. “Surrender is misunderstood by many. It is considered weak when it is one of the bravest things a human can do.”

I ran my fingers through my hair.

“But, to surrender to the Divine?” She held her hands up in the air and whistled. “To understand that you may not have *all* of the control, and that people and things are coming into your life due to a bigger picture that you cannot see or understand.”

She lowered her hands. “You accept each thing, each person, each situation...and do so with love...*that is* surrendering to the Divine.”

I swallowed.

“When Paolo first came to us, I saw his visions just as clear as day.”

“What did you see?”

“Your laughing and wrestling with him in a garden. And Pavel’s ghost stood off in the distance smirking.”

I opened my mouth in shock.

Baba pushed the other glass of vodka my way. “Then, I stopped seeing Paolo’s visions a few days later.”

“Why?”

“It was my fault. I fell in love with that little boy, so much that I cannot read him as much as I would like.”

“But...you think Pavel can see us?”

“I *know* he can. I feel his energy whenever you are around me. He is following you, hoping you will do the right thing.”

A cold chill ran up my spine.

Baba looked around the room. “I feel him now.”

The candles’ flames wavered as if Pavel’s ghost flicked them. The room brightened with the light of a hundred candles and then dimmed. It set the hairs on the back of my neck on edge.

*Goddamn it. I have smoked too much tonight.*

My hand shook as I grabbed the glass and took a long gulp of the vodka. The cold bitter liquid spilled down my throat.

“Pick the next card. We must see if you will be victorious with Fela.”

“But, how do I heal Emily?”

“That question was already answered. You heal her by healing yourself.”

“And how is that?”

“Open your heart and let Paolo in.”

Frowning, I took another sip of the vodka.

“The only reason why you will not accept that little adorable boy into your life is because you have regrets for killing Pavel—”

“I did it for Emily—”

“Emily did not want you to kill Pavel. I was there. She unraveled right in front of me—”

“Still, it was to keep her safe—”

“Do you really think Emily has difficulty keeping herself safe? Should I refer you to the two people that died this evening.”

I slammed the glass down on the desk. Some of the vodka spilled out. “A message needed to be sent to everyone.”

“And what was the message?”

I yelled, “Do not fuck with my mouse!”

She watched me with a bored expression. “I must inform you that even with Pavel’s death, more people will bother your mouse and you.”

I sneered at her.

“Pick the next card, Kazimir.”

I did.

The next one showed a bright orange moon hidden behind several trees. At the bottom of the card, a white mouse nibbled on cheese.

*A mouse. Is that good...or bad?*

I couldn’t even read the words. Instead, I shivered in disbelief, picked up the glass, and took another swig of vodka.

Baba leaned over and read the golden words, “**Full Moon Eclipse. Conclusions are within reach.**”

“I do not like that a mouse is on the picture.”

“Be lucky that it is a white mouse and not a black one.”

“What does that mean?”



She let out a long breath. “That is Emily in the forest. Of that I have no doubt.”

I slid my finger along the glass. “She is eating cheese. Is that not good?”

“It is a great sign. That speaks to enjoyment and pleasure. Yet...”

“What?”

“The cheese also points to nourishment. The mouse is feeding itself. Surviving, but...” She scratched her head. “Hmmm. No. I do not think that is what the cheese means.”

“Then, get your jeweled stick and figure this out. Where is it anyway? Did you lose it along with my true cards?”

She ignored me and studied the card. “Emily will be the one that ends this war with Fela, however, she learns something within this victory. That is the cheese. But...for a mouse, cheese can be food or bait to a trap.”

“Wait.” I rubbed my chin. “What do you mean she will be the one that ends the war?”

“That is what this says.” Baba pulled the card closer to her. “But that is not what worries me. I am missing something. Hmm. The forest means spiritual renewal.”

“Why?”

“Because when one enters a dark enchanted forest, they go through a journey that has them leave as a new person.”

“How does Emily end the war?”

Baba gestured to the cards. “Let us see.”

I quickly grabbed one from the pile in front of me and flipped it over.

A sliver of a moon peaked over a massive mountain. A small man played a violin by a campfire.

*A violin? This better not have anything to do with the Butcher.*

I read the words, “*Mutable Moon. Someone is near that can help you.*”

“Hmmm.” Baba took a sip of her vodka.

“That is quite enough drinking for now.”

“The moment you can tell me how much I drink is the moment you have gained several years over me.”

I scowled.

She set the glass back down. “This card deals with the Butcher.”

“Goddamn it. Does the card at least mean that I can kill him in Italy.”

“Kazimir it says *help*, not kill.” She picked up the card. “However, I do not think this means that the Butcher is the one that can help you.”

“Good.”

“But, he knows who could.” She tapped the card with her finger. “A campfire warms you from the cold, but it also can burn you.”

I groaned in annoyance.

“Have patience, Lion. I am trying to understand this.” She rubbed the edge of the card over and over. Then, she looked at the ceiling. “The Butcher knows the person that can help, but perhaps...there is some fear that this person can be more *harmful* than helpful.”

*Who is this person?*

Baba looked at me. “You must go to the Butcher and ask him about this.”

“I would rather kill him.”

Baba rolled her eyes. “You do understand that the Butcher as well as Paolo will be integral in helping Lunita heal.”

“Oh really? Now the Butcher? How long is this list going to be, Baba?”

“Very long.”

“I do not want the Butcher around my mouse.”

“We are discussing Lunita, not Emily.”

Sighing, I considered what she had already said. “But... Emily will heal from our keeping Paolo around?”

She nodded.

“And I will have to work on healing myself through accepting Paolo?”

“That is also correct.”

“Pavel’s ghost is haunting me—”

“I did not say haunting.” She raised one finger. “I said he follows you around, hoping you will do the right thing.”

I pointed my finger at her. “No more marijuana during our readings.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Let us not forget that Emily will end this conflict.”

Unease spread through me. “But, will she be safe?”

“The white mouse eats cheese.”

I shook my head. “Whatever that means.”

“I am tired, Lion. Let us go to your last question. It was about Paolo surviving in Moscow.”

“Yes.”

“You know the answer to this question, Kazimir.”

“I do not. He is a traitor’s son.”

All the lights on the candles flickered.

I stiffened.

*Pavel? No. I do not believe in ghosts.*

Baba spoke, “When you appeared in Paris, I was worried for my grandson. I had already heard the stories about the Lion. Then, I began seeing the visions. And to my surprise, I saw you dressed in a tuxedo and kissing Emily on a roof, she had flowers in her hair and—”

“What?” Cold shivers ran through me.

She blinked. “I believe this vision was of your future wedding.”

So cold with terror, I hugged myself.

“Are you okay, Kazimir?”

“When did you see this?”

“While you were in Paris. I also saw the vision of the lion being ridden by the mouse—”

“Back to the vision of my kissing her on the roof...”

“O-kay.” She raised her eyebrows. “When I saw that, I must say that I was surprised at Emily’s brown complexion. I remember the old days of the Brotherhood and their many prejudices. Your relationship would have never happened in my time.”

I placed my hands in my lap, still unable to get the idea of my kissing Emily on the roof out of my mind.

*Flowers in her hair?*

Baba continued, “When I saw that vision, I knew that my grandson would be safe. You did not have the mindset of the ones that came before you. I told David to help you as much as he could and make sure that the Lion’s lover returned immediately.”

“David did a good job.”

“Tell me, Lion.” She leaned her head to the side. “When you fell in love with Emily, did you ever worry about what the Brotherhood would think or even how they would react to your relationship?”

“Not for one second. If anyone had a problem, I would kill them.”

“Yet, you’re second guessing Paolo’s survival as if you are not the Lion.” She frowned. “I believe you are using the Brotherhood as an excuse.”

I groaned in annoyance.

“Most of the Brotherhood has accepted your love and even respect the strength of your mouse. She has proven herself to them through violence and death.”

I didn't want to smile, but I did. How could I not? Surely, Emily's strength and deadly nature would garner respect amongst killers. That was one of the things that made me fall in love with her.

Baba gathered the cards up. “The Mouse will protect Paolo, and you will too. And Paolo will grow strong, and become a fierce, powerful man.”

“And rainbows will appear within the sunlight and we will all dance and laugh.”

Baba put the cards in one pile. “You doubt me?”

“I think you are skipping over the part where Paolo discovers that I killed his parents and wants revenge.”

Still holding the cards, she rose from the chair and walked away.

I raised one eyebrow. “Baba?”

“There will be a few dark periods but—”

“What dark periods?” I stood.

She faced me. “Not all of the Brotherhood will accept Paolo or even Emily. Many will think that the Brotherhood is now being run by a woman.”

Rage coursed through me. “Let them say that to me.”

“New enemies will come after your marriage and the birth of your son.”

“Then, parts of Russia will be bloody.”

“I see that too, but you and Emily always survive.”

“And when Paolo grows up, does he ever discover what I did to his parents?”

She turned away. “As I said, there will be dark periods, but it always shifts to light.”

“Baba, I do not want that little boy to be my future assassin.”

She placed the cards into the box and looked at me. “Sometimes I wish you could see what I see. There is so much love—”

Someone knocked on the door.

I glanced over my shoulder. “Come in.”

The door opened.

David stepped in and widened his eyes. “Kazimir? I had no idea you were in here.”

“I needed a reading.”

Baba walked over. “If you did not know Kazimir was in here, then you came for me?”

David sniffed the air. “Have you been smoking, Baba?”

“What is wrong, David?”

“The boy woke up and started crying for the Mouse. I decided to get you to help calm him.”

“Oh, that poor baby.” She rushed to the candles and leaned over. Before she could blow them out, the flames left on their own. “Thank you, Pavel.”

David and I exchanged looks.

“I am coming, little pumpkin.” She hurried past us and rushed out of the office.

I followed. “I am coming too.”

Baba blinked and slowed her pace. “What?”

“I am coming.” I got to her side and glanced at David. “Did you get the Black Axe soldiers?”

“They are dead.”

“What about my mouse?”

“Maxwell and Boris were playing cards by the door, against some other Harlem Crew soldiers. He told me she was

in bed and peacefully asleep. I assumed you were in there with her.”

“Soon.” I opened Baba’s suite door and gestured for her to walk through. “First we need to get the boy.”

“Get the boy?” Baba stopped in front of the door. “And what do you want to do with him?”

“He wants the Mouse. Perhaps, we should...bring him to her.” I walked off. “That is of course if he can be peaceful and not wake her up.”







## Chapter 35

### Was it All a Dream?

#### Emily

With my eyes closed, I lay on the cold floor huddled into a ball—my arms wrapped around my head and my knees up to my chin. I rocked back and forth, crying out loud. So much sorrow flowed within, and I couldn't understand why. My sobs rose around me, sounding like sick, bubbling moans. For some reason, that made me cry out more.

I had no idea how long I went on.

I just knew that I cried until I had no tears left and a hollow emptiness moved through my body.

Then, I lay in silence.

Footsteps sounded.

I opened my eyes.

A little girl stood in front of me, wearing jeans and a blue shirt with a picture of a gray mouse on it. She had beautiful brown skin. Her eyes were bright and clever like she knew more than she should. Two long, thick plaits framed her heart-shaped face. In her right arm, she held a floppy plush teddy bear whose fur had begun to wear away.

Something about her gave me a familiar feeling, and brought me calm.

She knotted those little eyebrows together. "What are *you* doing down here?"

Slowly, I sat up. "I don't know."

"At least you aren't crying anymore." Her eyes brightened. "It was too loud."

"Was it?" I scanned the space. "Where... am I?"

"You don't know?"

I shook my head. "I don't."

"Then, you should wake up."

"I am up."

"O-kay." She ran off.

"Hey! Wait." I rushed to stand and then jogged after her.  
"Don't go."

Giggling, she disappeared up a set of stairs.

"Hold on!" I followed the giggles and ran up with her.  
"Where are you going?"

I hurried up three flights of winding stairs made of hard wood. The walls surrounding the stairs were grey like the ash in the sky after a fire. So unreal, I touched them and the wall gave way under my fingers.

*Where am I?*

I climbed step after step.

*This is...weird.*

When I reached the top, I found the little girl standing in front of a brown door and frowning.

As soon as she grabbed the knob, I spoke, "Hey. Where are we?"

She turned my way and opened her mouth in shock. "Why are *you* up here?"

"Because..." I glanced around the hallway. Something unsettled me about this place. "Because...um...I was following you."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"You should just wake up." The little girl opened the door and walked inside.

"But, I am up." I followed her into a small living room.

The scent of frying chicken hit my nose.

Dark green paint peeled and cracked on the back wall. The wood floor creaked from my steps.

“What are you doing?” The little girl collapsed onto a green couch with faded brown cushions.

“What is this place?” I scanned the space.

In the right corner, a small TV played the news and sat on top of a DVD player.

Intrigued, I walked towards the TV.

On the screen, a Black woman with a blonde weave reported about a ten-year-old Black boy who was kidnapped. Apparently, it had been three weeks and the police had just decided to start searching for him.

“Oh no.” I stepped closer to the TV. “Maybe. I can help. I could get Harlem Crew to—”

The screen switched to cartoons—Batman running after the whole cast of the Proud Family.

“What?” I blinked and turned to the little girl.

She held a black remote and swung her legs back and forth. “You need to go.”

I shook my head. “Why did you turn from the news? I could probably find the boy—”

“Like Daddy said the police don’t care about no Black kids.” She kissed the top of her teddy bear.

“Don’t say that. We could save him.”

“He’s probably dead by now.”

“But...” I went over to the couch and sat next to her. “Listen. Even if he is dead...then...I can...take care of the person who did it.”

She gave me an odd look. “That’s not how *this* works.”

“What works?”

A little boy walked in from the hallway and sat down in front of the TV. He wore black jeans and a black shirt.

But that face...it made my heart stop.

I widened my eyes. "Daryl?"

Chuckling at the TV, he didn't turn around. "Get them, Batman!"

"Wait a minute." I covered my mouth with both hands and whispered, "This is a...dream?"

Daryl laughed more and began hitting the floor. "He's going to get them!"

"This must be a dream. But, then who are you?" I turned to the little girl, but she was no longer on the couch.

Instead, she stood by another door next to the hallway and peeked inside.

"What are you doing?" I left the couch and went to her.

"Shhh." The little girl opened the door another inch.

I leaned that way and checked to see what she was looking at.

A strange guy fucked a woman with a curly afro. She was bent over a dresser. The man appeared thoroughly pleased. His soft moans echoed through the room.

"What the hell?" I caught the woman's reflection. She looked bored and ready for the sex to end.

And it did.

The man trembled for a few seconds and then let out a deep sigh of relief. Then, he pulled his wet dick out of her, yanked up his pants, and set something on the dresser.

I tried to figure out what the object was, but the little girl closed the door fast and rushed back to the couch.

I turned her way and lowered my voice. "What the hell is going on?"

The man left the room and walked right through me like I was made out of nothing.

I held up my hands. "Wait...Maybe, this isn't a dream. Am I a ghost?"

The little girl let out a low chuckle.

“Oh no.” I nodded. “I must be dead.”

Then, the woman walked out of the room, stepped through me too, and frowned at the little girl like she was in trouble.

Meanwhile, Daryl continued to enjoy his show.

Next, the man left the apartment without saying goodbye to anyone.

“Okay.” I lowered my hands. “If I am ghost, then this must be hell. But then, Daryl isn’t talking to me. Or is that Daryl?”

The woman went to the little girl and glared. “Come here.”

Sighing, the girl grabbed her teddy bear tight, got off the couch, and walked over to the woman.

It was weird. Although I stood right next to the woman, she never acknowledged me.

I waved my hands in front of her. “Hello? Hello?”

When the little girl got to her, the woman bent over and whispered, “You keep your mouth closed, Lunita.”

I shrieked and stepped back. “Oh shit.”

The woman continued, “I saw you open that door. Always got your nose in grown folk business. Don’t you say anything to your daddy.”

“I won’t, Mama.”

“Don’t forget.” The woman rolled her eyes and headed in the opposite direction. “Curiosity killed the cat.”

“Wait.” I pointed at the woman as she disappeared into what I assumed was the kitchen. I swore I caught the glimpse of a stove with a boiling pot on it.

“That’s my mom? Because...” I pointed to the little girl. “You are Lunita. And that’s me? I mean... Yeah. I’m Lunita. So...you are me, and I am you.”

The little girl let out an exasperated breath. “Go away.”

I began looking around the apartment. “But this place doesn’t look familiar. Well...dreams don’t have to be exact. Right? And...I don’t know if I remember what the living room looks like anyway. So many memories burned away in the fire. No more pictures...”

Then, Daryl disappeared, but little Lunita remained standing next to me.

I squinted. “Where did he go?”

The cartoon shifted to the Sopranos.

“How did that happen?” I quirked my brows. “The remote isn’t in your hand.”

Suddenly, the front door opened.

A man walked into the apartment, and I recognized him instantly.

“Oh no.” I froze. “T-that’s daddy.”

I didn’t know why, but my stomach twisted. Fear rushed through me. “Can he see me?”

He walked past us and set his lunch bag on the couch. Then, he went to the door that Lunita had been peeking in, but he didn’t enter. He just stood in the doorway and stared.

“What is he looking at?” I leaned to the side and caught my mother passed out on top of the bed with her shoes on and a spatula in her hand.

“Goddamn it.” Dad quickly closed the door, rushed across the room, and opened the kitchen door. “Well, at least she turned off the stove this time.”

I looked at Lunita. “What is going on?”

She whispered, “Just wake up.”

“But...” I shivered. “I don’t want to leave you here. This feels like something bad is going to happen.”

Suddenly, Dad stood next to us.

“Fuck.” I edged back.

He towered over Lunita. “What are you doing up so late?”

“I wanted to see the Sopranos.”

“Didn’t I tell you that the show was too violent.”

She pursed her lips.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Anybody come over to visit your mother today?”

She slowly shook her head.

He frowned. “Now if I find out that you lied, you know your behind will be hurting for a week.”

Lunita stepped back.

I got in front of her. “Listen. I can tell you what happened —”

“Did someone come over?” He walked through me.

I spun around. “I must be a ghost. No. No. This is a dream or...”

Little Lunita shivered. “Umm...”

“You better speak up,” Daddy said. “Always got stuff to say any other time. Don’t be quiet now.”

“Umm...” Lunita squeezed the teddy bear to her chest. “Well...”

He growled, “Go on. Did anybody come over here today?”

“One man came over.”

“Yeah?”

Lunita stepped back. “Yes, sir.”

“And what happened?”

Lunita looked at the floor. “Mama and he went to...talk in the bedroom.”

“I bet they did.” He sneered. “Go to sleep. You hear me?”

Lunita nodded.

Daddy stormed off, slammed open that door, and yelled, “Had Joey up in this house slinging drugs! Huh?”



Mom woke up.

“Oh no.” I widened my eyes.

Daddy grabbed Mom from the bed and began shaking her hard. “Answer me!”

Mom looked to be in a daze. She blinked her eyes. “What did you say?”

“Oh yeah. You told me you would quit. Then, had some man in my bedroom. What am I going to do with you?” He slapped her hard.

“No.” I edged back.

The bedroom door closed, but booming noises and screams echoed through the apartment.

Daddy yelled, “I go off and work!”

Boom!

“And you do drugs!”

Boom!

Shivering, I held the sides of my head. “I don’t like this dream. I don’t like it.”

Daddy yelled some more, “Got this drug dealer in our apartment and around our kids!”

Boom!

“We have to stop this.” I turned to Lunita.

She had already left my side and was climbing out of a window.

“Good idea. Let’s get out of here.” I chased after her. “Lunita, wait for me!”

The window led to a fire escape.

I went out the window, but didn’t see Lunita.

Her footsteps rang overhead.

Heart pounding, I rushed in that direction, climbing up the metal staircase. It clanged against the brick building. The air

stank of smoke. A faint orange glow pulsed from the other apartments.

“Lunita!” Stumbling, I used the cold iron railing to keep my balance. “Wait!”

She kept on going. “Just wake up!”

“But, is it all a dream?” I gazed down. The view below us was black and endless. That made me stop. Cold wind blasted against my skin. I shivered and whispered to myself, “Or did that really happen? But, I don’t remember any of that.”

I turned my view up and saw Lunita all the way at the top.

“Wait!” I went back to chasing after her. My legs ached. “Just talk to me for a minute!”

Above me, she climbed onto the roof.

It felt like forever before I finally got there myself. Panting, I climbed over the ledge and stepped onto the roof.

And what I saw...thoroughly confused me even more.

Little Lunita rushed off to someone else, and it was a woman that looked exactly like me.

I whispered, “Who is this?”

Joyfully, this woman twirled and swayed in the center of the roof.

“W-what the fuck?” I remained near the ledge and watched her.

Then, the moonlight hit her face.

My heart stopped.

This woman could have been my twin. Same age. Same height. Same face. She wore a white sundress that glimmered in the moonlight. Her hair was pulled back into a bun. Tons of flowers decorated her hair—roses and daises, lilies and tulips.

“Then...who is this?” I muttered. “Is this...actually Lunita? Or...is it the little girl?”

I remained frozen in place.

The only thing that saved me was the fact that it was a beautiful experience to watch my twin dance. She swayed in the wind, her dress gracefully flowing around her with every movement. Her toes pointed and arched as she glided across the roof like a ballet dancer.

She glowed more brightly than the stars in the sky.

The little girl ran to her and abruptly stopped her dancing. “Hey.”

The woman paused and looked down. “What?”

“She’s been with me the whole time.” The little girl pointed my way.

“Fuck.” I seized back, nervous that I might be in trouble.

My twin with the flowers shrieked and stumbled back. “Then...who’s in charge?”

The little girl shrugged her shoulders.

Then, my twin stared at me and leaned her head to the side like she was an alien or something. That flower covered head lay right on her shoulder. “I hope M isn’t in charge. He always gets us in trouble?”

I blinked. “Who is M? Who are you? What the fuck is going on?”

The twin straightened her head. “I guess we have to kill her.”

I touched my chest. “Me? Not me. I didn’t do anything.”

Fast, they raced my way.

“Ah!” Screaming, I spun around and began to climb over the ledge. “Oh shit. Oh shit.”

Hands gripped my shoulders. I had no idea how they got to me so quickly, but those hands were strong and unyielding.

“No.” I fought against them, but none of it helped. “No. No.”

Together, they pushed me over the railing.

“No!” I fell backwards, tumbling down into dark nothingness.

Screams ripped from my throat.

And then, I woke up in a sitting position, with my hands in the air.

*I'm not dead.*

Panting, I blinked several times.

*I'm not dead. It was a dream...or something...*

It took me a minute to gather myself. I gazed around and was shocked by this new sight. I recognized the bedroom suite. Kaz and I had already slept in here.

But there was a tiny difference.

*Is this a dream too?*

On my left, Kaz lay next to me, snoring. His big hand rested on my thigh. He must have had his arm around me while we slept, and then I moved it when I sat up.

That part was normal.

I turned to my right. There, Paolo slept in a ball with his thumb in his mouth. His face looked peaceful and innocent. Little snores left him.

*O-kay...Kaz, let Paolo sleep in here? Why?*

Utterly confused, I slowly moved Kaz's hand and took my time sneaking out of bed. There was too much to unpack and I needed answers.

When my feet hit the floor, something nuzzled my toe.

*What's that?*

I stiffened and checked to see what it was.

Harlem licked my toe.

Smiling, I tiptoed to the door.

He trotted after me, wagging his tail.

*Don't wake up Kaz, buddy.*

I opened the door inch by inch, and stepped out into the hallway.

Wassily and three armed men stood there.

*Okay. This isn't a dream. I'm truly back.*

I took my time closing the door behind me.

In the light, I realized I was wearing a thin, white night gown. I touched my head. A silk bonnet covered it.

*O-kay.*

Silent, the men watched me with intrigued expressions.

I snatched off the bonnet.

My hair fell down along my face, silky and freshly pressed. A sweet fragrance drifted from it.

*What the fuck? My hair is...different. Something must have happened.*

I turned to Wassily.

He looked terrified.

I cleared my throat. "Did I...did I turn into Lunita?"

He slowly nodded.

"Damn it." I tapped my fingers against my thigh. "Okay. Okay. Uh...where is Max? I have to ask him something."

"Kazimir made Maxwell go to his room three hours ago." Wassily looked at the door. "Perhaps, we should wake up the Lion and—"

"No. Let Kaz sleep." I shook my head. "Oh, but wait. When did Paolo get in the bed?"

"The boy was crying for you. Kazimir and Baba went to his room. Kazimir picked him up, told him he had to be quiet, and brought him to you."

I raised my eyebrows. "Kaz carried Paolo to me?"

Wassily nodded. "The boy stopped crying, lay next to you, and went back to sleep. I left the room. Then, I believe...I heard Kazimir snoring several minutes later."

“And this was about three hours ago?”

Wassily nodded.

“I must have really did something crazy for Kaz to bring Paolo in there.”

Wassily pursed his lips together.

I wanted to ask him *exactly* what happened, but I knew it would be better to ask Kaz or Max. Anyone else would probably be too scared to tell me. And only God knew what Kaz would do if they accidentally upset me.

*Max is fine, so that's good.*

Still, I asked the questions that terrified me the most. “Are...Blue and Valentina alive?”

“Yes.”

“Boris, David, and Baba?”

Wassily nodded.

“The French?”

He nodded again.

*Okay. I won't ask any more questions.*

I headed off, wishing I had put on my slippers. At least the plush carpet smoothed against my toes.

Harlem trotted after me as if excited to be on a late night adventure.

Wassily got to my side. “Are you sure we should not wake up Kazimir?”

“I'm sure.” I walked down the hallway. “I just want to see if Max is up. If he is, I have to ask him something.”







# Chapter 36

## Healing Power

### Emily

When I approached Max's door, smooth jazz hit my ears. The silky, calming tones were a mix of genius improvisation and deep rhythmic patterns played by a saxophone, trumpet, and piano. Clean and layered notes vibrated into the hallway and permeated the air.

I leaned against the door and just listened to the beauty of the music.

It eased my nerves.

Wassily gazed at the door. "You do not think he is awake?"

"Max is up. He can't sleep with anything on. Everything has to be silent." I tapped on the door. "When I go in, you all stay out here."

Wassily nodded.

I knocked again.

The jazz music shut off.

Then, the door opened.

Max stepped into the hallway, wearing only black silk pajama pants. The sight instantly reminded me of how powerfully built he was. Usually his clothes hid it all. His chest was sculpted. Those arms packed with thick muscle, and hard lines etched his flat stomach.

I swallowed.

Without saying anything, his gaze went to my night gown, then Wassily and the other men.

Nervous, I kept my voice low. "Hey."

Max raised his eyes brows, but remained quiet.

“Can I come in?” I tapped my barefoot against the carpet.  
“I have some questions.”

He studied me. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“Who am I talking to right now?”

“What?”

“Is this Lunita or Em?”

I frowned. “Boy, if you don’t let me in this room.”

“Welcome back, Em.” Grinning, Max stepped away. “I wasn’t sure, since you showed up half-naked.”

“What? I’m not half-naked.”

“I can see your nipples and that you don’t have on any panties.”

I hugged myself. “Really, Max? Stop looking.”

“You’re the one that showed up like that.”

“Well...” I stepped into his room. “You’ve seen me naked tons of times, so stop looking.”

“True that.” Max looked down at Harlem as my puppy trotted inside. “Eh. You better not piss on anything in here.”

Wagging his tail, Harlem ignored his uncle and sniffed around the room, checking out all the rows of sneakers Max had on one side of the room.

“Yo. Get away from them.” Max clapped. “Those are collector items.”

Harlem rushed away and began sniffing along Max’s bed.

Wassily and the rest of my men remained outside.

Max shut the door.

I checked out his space.

The window’s drapes were pushed aside, letting moonlight spill in.

Max flipped the light switch.

I glanced over my shoulder. “What song were you playing?”

“Coltrane’s Blue Train. 1957. Pure artistry.”

“X used to play that a lot?”

“He did.”

I scanned the space.

Max’s room represented a true bachelor’s pad. His king-sized bed only had one pillow. The rest them lay on the floor near the foot of the bed. An opened bottle of brandy sat on the nightstand.

He spoke, “You know Coltrane used to be in Miles Davis’s band.”

I bobbed my head. “Yeah. Coltrane was on Davis’s *Kind of Blue*.”

“And *Milestones*.”

I turned, still assessing Max’s space.

*He’s changed, but he’s the same too.*

A video gaming console stood next to the HD television. He must have been in the middle of a battle. Two fighters were frozen in mid-air with their feet pointed and fists raised, defying gravity and physics. One wore all black armor and a silver cloak. The other had on white clothes.

Max went to the shelf where a small device was and pressed the button.

That beautiful jazz song came back on.

Max bobbed his head with the rhythm. “Miles gave Coltrane the freedom to push the limits and experiment. He understood the young Coltrane was the motherfucking man.”

I noticed a stack of old Jet magazines on top of his black suitcase. The glossy covers were worn thin and bent. X loved that magazine. He considered himself a connoisseur and had hundreds of issues. In Prague, Max must have grabbed several of X’s things and kept them with him.

*Damn. I miss you, X.*

Max swayed back and forth with the trumpet's playing.

I grinned. "But, didn't Coltrane get kicked out of Davis's band?"

"Yeah. Coltrane had a bad heroin habit. Thelonious Monk grabbed him later, but that was after Coltrane's spiritual awakening."

I remembered what X would always say. "That was when he became a preacher on a horn."

Max chuckled. "X would be proud."

I walked by his bed and sniffed the air. The room smelled of spice, marijuana, and...lemonade.

*Does he have a new weed strain or something?*

I inhaled, loving this scent.

Then, I saw the lemon tree near the opened balcony doors.

Barely three feet tall, it stood regal. It's brown curving branches held big yellow lemons with green stripes.

"Hell yes." I walked toward it, never seeing lemons look like that before. "Where did you get these?"

"When we went to kill the Italians." Max headed over to me. "It's my souvenir from Italy."

"That's right. Blue did say you had a tree when you left the helicopter."

"Yeah. I'm still trying to think of a good name." He held his chin as if pondering the great mysteries of life. "I'm considering Lemonisha."

I chuckled.

"It also could be Meadowlark Lemon. You remember him?"

"The Harlem Globetrotter."

"Exactly." He went back to bobbing his head to the music. "But the problem is that I'm getting very feminine vibes from

the tree, so it will probably be Lemonisha.”

“I like Lemonisha.” I reached out to touch one of the lemons.

“Oh hell no.” Max swatted my hand.

“Ow.” I opened my mouth in shock. “What is wrong with you?”

“You think you could just touch my baby like that? No dinner and a movie?” Max shook his head and picked up a small water bottle. “Fuck that. This is my little princess. She requires jazz and poetry, moonlit walks and an emotional connection.”

He squirted a watery mist onto the leaves. “Yeah. Lemonisha.”

I rolled my eyes.

“She’s a choosy lover, Em. Not just anyone can touch her.”

“So...this is your daughter or girlfriend?”

He stopped spraying the water and glared at me.

“I’m just saying, Max. You’re being real extra right now by not letting me just grab—”

“Don’t touch her.”

“But...” I pointed at one of the lemons.

“Hell no is the answer to that question.”

“But, you didn’t even know what I was going to ask.”

“You want to take a lemon off my baby and cut it open. Don’t you? Admit it.”

“Well...yes.” I smiled. “Because they are all striped like a zebra. I want to see what’s inside—”

“Hell no.”

“But—”

“Pink.”

I quirked my brows. “What?”

“It’s pink on the inside of the lemons.”

“Really?!” I rubbed my hands together. “Now I have to see what’s inside and eat some of it too.”

“You touch Lemonisha and we are fighting.” His glare deepened. “In fact...I feel like you’re too close to her. Back it on up, Em.”

“Just wow.” I raised my hands in the air and took two steps back. “A brother get a tree and start acting brand new?”

“Facts.” Max misted the leaves some more. “This is my new baby. That means that Lemonisha and you are going to have to learn how to share the awesomeness that is me.”

“I’m not sharing shit.” I sat on his bed. “I’ve been around you longer, so this chick better know her position and play it.”

Max paused from spraying the tree. “Is that how you would be with a *human woman*?”

“What do you mean?” I leaned against his headboard.

“I’m going to be meeting the woman of my dreams very soon.”

“What?” I frowned.

“I see my future wife in my dreams all the time.” Max placed the bottle near the tree. “Baba said my lady and I will plant this tree in our yard. Plus, my kids and even grandkids will pick lemons from it.”

I looked at the tree. “That’s a beautiful future.”

“You really think so?”

“Of course, Max.” I swallowed. “I just hope Baba sees *me* picking lemons from the tree too, with your nephew.”

“Of course Max Jr. and you can pick lemons, but the Lion better keep his ass away from her. Dude is spoiled and stingy. He might uproot the tree and take it back to Moscow.”

“But...”

“What, Em?”

“You would be in Moscow too. Right?”

He shrugged.

My heart ached.

*Better be in Moscow.*

Max crossed his arms over his chest and stared at me.

*I might as well get to it. He's no fool.*

“So...” I placed my hands in my lap and twisted some of the nightgown’s fabric. “I have some questions.”

“I’m not answering anything in regard to you going *full-Lunita* last night. Kazimir and I agreed that he would be the one to tell you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Plus, you know my stance.”

“Which is what?”

“The less you know the better.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not helping me heal.”

“If you knew what I saw and heard last night, you wouldn’t think that way.”

Goosebumps pricked my skin.

*Don't think about it. I'll know sooner or later...Just focus on what you wanted to know.*

“So...” I twisted more of the gown. “I happen to have questions about something else.”

Max leaned his head to the side. “What?”

“Do you remember what my childhood living room looked like?”

“Why?”

“Just answer me.”

“Yeah. I remember.”

I frowned.

*But, why can't I remember?*

I let out a long breath. “What color was the couch?”

“Green and brown.”

*That’s it. That’s how it looked in my mind. Good.*

“What else do you remember, Max?”

“The walls were green. I figured that’s why the couch was green and brown. For some reason, when I walked into the apartment, I would feel like I was in a forest.”

I gave him a sad smile. “Did I have a DVD player?”

He nodded. “Under the TV, in the right corner of the room...I think. Yeah. That’s right. Before, it was in the left corner, but the kitchen door would always bang into the TV or something. I remember your dad telling mine that one night.”

I gazed in shock. “Why do you remember so much?”

He shrugged. “I’m shocked that you even want to talk about this. You usually never do.”

“It never seemed important. Plus...”

“What?”

“So...” I held out my hands. “You may think I’m crazy if I tell you this—”

“Oh no. You are crazy. No discussion needed on that. I thought we both agreed you were crazy a long time ago.”

I frowned. “I’m being serious, Max.”

“Shit. Me too.”

“Listen.” I touched the side of my head. “I was...walking about in my mind tonight and I met a little girl. She had on jeans and a blue shirt with a mouse on it. Do you ever remember me wearing a shirt like that?”

“No way. You hated mice and roaches. You never would have worn that.”

“Oh.”

“But, I do remember when your English or history teacher would call you a naughty mouse, and you would be so



annoyed.”

“Hmmm.”

“But, tell me more about the little girl.”

“She had these two long plaits on the side of her face.”

Max nodded. “Your mama always braided your hair like that. Daryl would pull one side, and I would pull the other, and you would wrestle us to the ground.”

“I don’t remember that, but...” I widened my eyes. “My mom...what did she look like?”

“Look in the mirror. You look like her now, but several shades darker.” He formed a big circle around his head. “She used to wear this huge curly afro. X used to call her Loxy Brown.”

“Loxy Brown?”

“For Latino Foxy Brown. She was Afro Latina.”

I tensed. “Wait. She *did* have a little accent. Why didn’t I notice that before?”

“Who had an accent?”

“My mom. I saw her tonight.” I tapped the side of my head. “When I was walking around.”

“Say what now?” He headed over to the night stand and picked up the bottle of brandy.

“Okay, so I saw her and my father. And even Daryl. Crazy shit happened. My parents had Lunita in the middle of their fucked up marriage. Well...me...because I’m Lunita.”

Still holding the bottle, Max lowered to the bed. “Alright. Then, what?”

“The little girl...Lunita...she ran up the fire escape—”

“You always did that when you would get scared or really mad.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Max took a swig of the brandy. “Whenever you went missing, I would be the only one that could find you. Sometimes your dad would even go to me to search for you, knowing I could grab you fast.”

“So, no one knew I would go to the roof, but you?”

He stared at me in shock. “How did you know that you went to the roof?”

“That’s what happened in my head. She ran up the fire escape and went to the roof.”

“Why do you keep saying in that way?”

“What way?”

“In your head.”

“Because...at first I thought it was a dream. Then, I thought it was a memory...but now...”

“What?”

“Now, I feel like...it’s a place in my head.”

“Em.” He took the top off the brandy.

The jazz song switched to a slow tune, but I couldn’t concentrate. This had all my attention.

Max took a long swig from the bottle.

I sighed. “I know that this sounds crazy, but I followed the little girl to the roof and up there, I swear I saw Lunita.”

Max moved the bottle from his mouth. “What?”

“She was on the roof in this pretty white sundress, dancing and looking so gorgeous. Oh. Oh.” I pointed at him. “She looked like my twin in every way. She had these flowers in her hair.”

He froze with the bottle in mid-air, staring back at me in pure terror.

I gave him a sad smile. “Is this too much?”

He set the bottle on the nightstand. “I don’t even know what is *too much* anymore. These past weeks have been

kicking my ass.”

“How?”

“I was up in New Orleans learning all types of crazy shit about my family—”

“What crazy shit? What family?”

“We’ll talk about that later—”

“I want to talk about it now.”

“Why, Em?”

“Because...”

“What?”

“Because I love you...and I don’t want you to be dealing with things on your own.”

“Em, you have your own shit—”

“Fuck that, Max. Are we in this together or not?”

He looked away. “Forget about that. What we need to discuss is the fact that Lunita brought up...”

“What?”

He ran his hand over his head. “Man, she said some crazy shit to us tonight.”

“Who is *us*?”

“Jean-Pierre, Kaz, and me.”

“Oh, no. J.P. saw me being a hot mess?”

“Jean-Pierre loved that shit. Lunita and him were vibing. He let her hold his bow.”

I frowned. “The one with the blade?”

“Facts.” He looked back at me. “But, that’s not what is important. Lunita said that she used to dream about a wedding on the roof with flowers in her hair. She was crying about it.”

Confusion filled me. “Why did she even say that?”

Max shrugged. “She was being weird around me. Jean-Pierre was digging and trying to figure out why. Then, all that came out.”

“I don’t understand.”

Max gave me an odd look. “Lunita...well you...as a little girl...would fantasize about marrying...me on the roof.”

“Oh.”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Oh.” I covered my mouth with both hands.

“That’s what I’m saying. That shit fucked me up. She was crying too. Unfortunately, there has been no amount of weed or liquor that can get her pain out of my head tonight. I tried jazz. Lemonisha helped. The music and that lemon scent really started clearing my mind. Then you showed up.”

“Oh no. I’m sorry.” I moved closer to Max and scooted right to his side, wanting to comfort him, but...not sure if I could.

Three inches ran between us.

He shook his head and gave me a sad smile. “You’re so funny, Em.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t ever apologize to me.”

I smirked. “I can, if I want to.”

He turned away and stared at the lemon tree. “I wish I could help you, but I feel like...”

“What?”

“I feel like I might be broken too...”

“You are.”

He blinked, but didn’t look my way.

“Baba says we have to heal each other.”

“Baba need to stay out of my business and get our asses out of Italy safely.”

“Facts.” I looked at the tree too.

A new song played. These jazz notes spiraled into the air, fluttering and floating like butterflies.

*I must do it.*

Trembling, I scooted closer.

Two inches lay between us.

Max raised his eyebrows, but didn't look my way.

I moved over again.

Now, there was only one inch.

*Now...is the time...*

Gritting my teeth, I lifted my hand and placed it on his shoulder.

*There. Baba said touch so...*

His muscles tensed under my fingers, yet he didn't move or make a sound. The warmth of his smooth skin seeped into mine. Tingles ran from the tips of my fingers across my arms and to my neck. And in that moment, we linked together like two puzzle pieces.

*We're touching.*

My throat felt tight, but no nausea rushed up.

*Okay. Should I say something? No. That would be stupid. But then...not saying something...isn't that dumb too?*

My gaze dropped to his shoulder, wondering how to word what was going on in my mind.

I couldn't find anything.

So...the quiet remained.

My heart raced.

Sweat beaded on my forehead.

Still, no disgust appeared. No bitter taste. No repulsion.

This touch between us...it comforted me...I couldn't pull away.

Then, suddenly he slowly turned and put a steady gaze on my face.

*Oh no.*

Nervous, I widened my eyes. For some reason, I tightened my grip on his shoulder as if scared he was about to move it away.

But, he didn't.

Max simply locked those eyes on me, piercing himself into the depths of my soul.

And the trumpet's melody played on, serving as a soundtrack to the moment.

A cool breeze flowed in from the balcony, bringing the sweet scent of lemon to my nose and making me lean toward him, so that my arm touched some of his back.

*This is...good.*

I pressed down a little harder.

And as if resulting from some supernatural shift, the nerve endings in my fingers became hypersensitive. Something was happening with our skin-to-skin contact. Not sexual, but definitely entrenched in love. It was stimulating pressure. Soothing sensations. Heightened awareness on a spiritual level.

A bonding touch.

Never had I felt so connected to Max until this moment.

Never had I felt so attached to him.

So safe.

Something moved between us.

Was it more love or a deeper understanding?

What was this magic?

Was it hormones? Endorphins or serotonin? Oxytocin or cortisol? Or was it other natural chemicals that I didn't know about?

I couldn't define it, but I knew it was something with big scientific names and purposes that were outside my realm of understanding.

Could touch put me...*us*...into this hazy state of consciousness—this higher level of healing?

Surely, I felt a healing power moving...flowing...vibrating between us.

I looked into Max's piercing gaze and whispered, "Do you...want me to...let go?"

"No."

"So..." I ran my hands up to his neck.

He shivered under my touch.

I kept my hand there. "We...should touch each other more."

"Says who?"

"Says Baba and...me..."

"But, how do you *truly* feel?" He looked down at the bed. "Do you want to vomit?"

"No."

He looked back at me. "No?"

"Not at all."

"Then...maybe *you are* healing..."

"Maybe." I inhaled and exhaled over and over, revving myself up.

"Wait a minute, Em. I see that determined look." He raised his eyebrows. "What are you about to do?"

*You can do it.*

Max slowly shook his head. "Em?"

"I'm going to hug you."

"Listen. You need to take this one step at a time."

*Do it. You got this.*

“Em.” Terror filled Max’s eyes. “I’m serious.”

“Why do you look more scared than me?”

“Because, man. You know why.”

“I don’t. Tell me why?”

“When you’ve tried before, you threw up on the ground.” Max moved his view back to the bed. “Do you have any idea how that made me feel?”

“That was then. This is now.”

*Go ahead. Quick. Hug him. Just...lean in...*

I blew out a long breath and inched closer.

“Oh, shit.” Max seized back a little. “You better not throw up on my bed.”

Harlem barked from the ground as if cheering us on.

“Yo, Em. Maybe we should just keep it at one touch for tonight.”

“Be quiet.” I edged closer. “I’m concentrating.”

“Holy fuck. You’re really going to do it.” He closed his eyes, and I wrapped my shivering arms around him.

And this hug was...infinite. It was an enveloping of healing power. A glowing intimacy within the darkness of my soul. It was immortal. Overwhelming, yet also somehow subdued. Erasing and savoring. It was swelling emotions, breaking through the binds of pain that had bricked up around my heart for so long.

I swore I felt this popping in my chest. This gasping of my heart. This cleaning of my insides.

This hug...

it was...

everything and nothing,

everywhere and nowhere,

but most of all...



it was love.

Sighing, Max put his arms around my waist and pulled me closer to him, encasing me further in this ancient heat of humanity—this poetic exchange of sensations.

I trembled against him and couldn't move away. I loved his warmth, his energy. His scent of marijuana and lemons and spicy cologne all in one.

Tears brimmed near my eyelids.

Embarrassed, I tried to hold it in, but couldn't.

And there, I sobbed in his hold. I lost myself in his warmth, loving him more than I ever had before.

Max tightened the hug. "I love you, Em."

My throat grew hoarse. "I love you too."





# Chapter 37

## Pancakes

### Kazimir

In my dream, lions lurked and roared. They had huge paws and sharp, pointed claws. Their eyes glowed, and their golden manes fluttered in the breeze.

Snarling, I walked toward them as a lion myself, ready to pounce on any one of them that sought to challenge me. Each time my paw touched the ground, the world vibrated and thunder crackled in the darkening sky.

All the lions stepped out of the way, clearing a path for me to walk through.

That was when I noticed a breathtaking lioness among them. She was unlike any other. Smooth, black fur coated her sleek body. Her eyes were different too—one pupil was black and the other was silver.

Blood dripped from her claws.

My breath caught in my throat.

I yearned for her instantly.

Preparing to dominate her, I prowled her way, determined and desperate.

Intelligence flickered in her eyes. She did not back away. Instead, she bared her fangs as if daring me to come forward and meet my doom at her claws.

The air around us buzzed with life and energy.

Then, she leapt my way.

Roaring, I jumped up to teach her about the power of an alpha.

It was in that moment when I woke up.

*No. What happened next?*

I yawned and blinked my eyes open.

For a moment I was confused.

A young Pavel sat up in bed and stared at me.

*No.*

I tensed.

*Y-you're dead.*

My heart pounded against my ribs, strong and fast.

*Is this your ghost haunting me?*

Then, he fluttered those long lashes and pointed to the empty pillow between us. A soft voice left his lips. “*Mysh?*”

I stared him in shock.

*Wait...It is Paolo. Why did I think...*

The boy tapped the pillow with his tiny hand as if trying to help me understand. “*Mysh?*”

*I forgot. I let Paolo sleep with us.*

I sat up. Pain pulsed at my temples.

*No more vodka, and absolutely no more marijuana.*

I stretched my arms.

Paolo widened his eyes as if he were worried I was going to grab him.

I lowered my arms and studied him.

*Am I really going to have us keep him?*

Avoiding my gaze, the boy turned his view to his tiny hands and tapped his thumb against his palm.

*Could I really do this?*

Paolo was the very spitting image of Pavel. There was no denying it. Same long silky black hair and big brown eyes. Same pointed nose and high cheek bones.

*If Mama were here, she would squeeze those cheeks and start singing to you the way she would with your father...when he was young.*

My heart ached. Anytime I thought of her, a constant tugging began deep in my chest. Her death had been the worst kind of pain.

*What would she say to my keeping Paolo?*

Suddenly, the lamp on the nightstand behind the boy blinked off and on.

Confused, I tilted my head to the side.

Then, the lamp stopped.

I shook my head, wondering if I imagined it.

*No more drinking. No more smoking.*

Then, I looked down at the empty pillow. Now that I was fully awake, I understood what Paolo was trying to tell me.

My nerves charged awake like a ball of electrical wires.

I growled. *“Mysh.”*

Paolo looked back up at me and nodded.

“Where the hell is she?”

Paolo shrugged his little shoulders.

*Goddamn it! What if it was Lunita who woke up?*

Fast, I yanked the blankets from me, left the bed, and stormed away. *“Mysh!”*

Behind me, a little voice sounded. *“Mysh!”*

I stopped in mid-step, turned around, and stared at Paolo.

The boy opened his mouth.

I spoke in Russian, *“I say mysh. You say Emily.”*

He blinked.

*“Do you understand?”*

Paolo gave me a slow nod.

Then, the door opened, and the love of my life hurried in.

*There she is.*

Harlem trotted after her.

The door slammed shut.

My mouse strolled over to me and placed her palms on my chest. “Kaz, what have I told you about screaming my name like a crazy person?”

“I do not remember your having a problem with it.”

“I am always telling you to stop it.”

“Then, never leave my side.” I grabbed her waist and pulled her to me, drinking in her image. Those sexy brown nipples poked against the thin white gown.

*She was walking around like this?*

A low groan left me.

If the boy had not been in here, I would have ripped the gown off and let her hypnotize me with that lovely pussy.

Speaking of the boy, he rushed off the bed and screamed, “*Mysh! Mysh!*”

*What?*

I frowned.

*I thought we had an understanding, Paolo.*

“Aww. Hey, baby.” She tried to leave my arms.

I kept her to me and sneered. “Where did you go?”

Paolo got to Emily and hugged her legs.

“When I woke up, I went to Max’s room.” She looked down at Paolo and spoke in Russian, “*Did you have a bad dream, baby? Is that why you were with us?*”

“*Bad dream.*” Paolo touched the top of his head. “*Boom. Everywhere.*”

“*Oh no.*” Somehow Emily slipped out of my hold and rubbed his back. “*You had a dream about the bomb?*”

*“Boom, mysh.”*

*“I’m so sorry.”* She bent over, picked him up, and rose.  
*“Don’t worry. No more booms will happen.”*

Paolo leaned his head against her shoulder.

Frowning, I watched her walk off. “Why did you go to Max’s room?”

“I had questions about the apartment I grew up in.” She carried Paolo over to the bed, set him down, and switched back to Russian. *“Are you hungry, baby?”*

He smiled and bobbed his head.

*“What do you want?”* She raised her hands high in the air.  
*“How about a whole bunch of pancakes?”*

Giggling, Paolo bobbed his head again.

*“We are going to order all the pancakes in the hotel.”*

Paolo opened his mouth in shock.

*“With tons and tons of syrup.”*

He grinned.

She reached for the phone.

“I have it.” I held my hand up, went to the door, and opened it.

Wassily stood on the other side. Worry creased his face.

“Get us some breakfast. Pancakes, fruit, eggs, and toast.” I rubbed my head. “And coffee. Lots of it.”

Emily called out, “All the pancakes, Wassily. And lots of syrup.”

Rolling my eyes, I shut the door and turned around.

Now Paolo sat in her lap and lay his little head against her breasts.

*My breasts.*

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared. “You do not leave without waking me up.”



“I told you why I left, Kaz.” Emily ran her hands along Paolo’s braids. “And we can talk about this later.”

“We will talk about it now.”

She turned my way. A warning lay within her eyes.

I sneered.

She smirked. “What made you let Paolo stay in here?”

I gritted my teeth. “We will talk about *that* later.”

She sighed. “I did something bad last night?”

“Bad is subjective.”

“Kaz.” She gave me a sad smile. “How bad?”

“You would be heartbroken about it.”

She grabbed the end of one of Paolo’s braids and twisted it around her finger. “Blue is alive, along with Max, Boris, and David. I confirmed that the French are fine too. Before I left, Max assured me that I didn’t harm anyone in Harlem Crew either.”

A tight knot of dread wedged in my throat. The very idea of seeing Emily suffering in sadness made me sick to my stomach. I would rather shoot up tons of men, than watch a tear leave those beautiful eyes.

She shook her head. “All I remember is being mad at you...and walking off to meet that couple.”

Sighing, I unfolded my arms and went over to the nightstand. Once there, I picked up the remote control, sat down next to Emily on the bed, and turned on the television. “Let us have a relaxing morning, get some breakfast, and then discuss last night later.”

The screen showed the local news. Everything was in Italian. I changed the channel several times and stopped when I saw cartoons.

Paolo moved his head from Emily’s breasts.

On the screen, a black bird ran around with half of an eggshell on his head.

Paolo shrieked, “Binky!”

I frowned and set the remote down on the bed.

*There, that should keep him busy.*

Paolo grinned at the screen.

I turned to Emily.

She had been watching me with a sad expression. “Did I...”

I tensed.

Dancing, the bird wiggled his hips and flapped his wings. The stupid eggshell remained on his head.

Paolo chuckled.

Emily lowered her voice. “Did I kill the couple?”

*Of course, my mouse, would figure it out, before I told her.*

Surely, I wore a strained expression.

She closed her eyes. “Oh my God.”

*“Mysh.”*

She remained like that.

The line of my jaw twitched. “It was all my fault. I take full responsibility for their deaths.”

She opened her eyes. “Were. . .?”

“Yes?”

“W-were they bad?”

“They probably were—”

“No, Kaz.” She shook her head. “Did you have any indication that something was actually wrong with them?”

“That is not important—”

“It is to me—”

“Their deaths are on my hands—”

“Not if my hands were the ones to kill them—”

“Stop it.” I sneered. “I pushed you, knowing how you felt about the boy. It made Lunita come out and—”

“That has nothing to do with my killing two innocent people—”

“It was not you.”

“It was.”

“Enough. That was Lunita.”

She moved her view to the television. “Where are the bodies now?”

“Everything is cleaned up.”

“I want to see what I did.”

“Absolutely not.”

She turned back to me. Those beautiful eyes watered. “Kaz, how am I going to learn my lesson, if I don’t at least—”

“If anyone should learn a lesson, it is Lunita.” I scowled. “And besides, the bodies are surely disposed of by now.”

“What about their family and funeral expenses and weren’t they taking care of other kids—”

“We will send money.”

She shook her head and returned her view to the television. “Money doesn’t replace lives, Kaz. I have to go to their family and—”

“Absolutely not!”

She snapped her view to me, and so did Paolo.

*Damn it. Stay calm. This information is hard enough.*

I cleared my throat and calmed my tone. “David is in charge of taking care of the family.”

Paolo moved his view back to the television, but I could sense that his attention was no longer on it. There was a survival energy pulsing through him. He straightened his posture and fisted his little hands.

*Do you think you will protect her from me?*

I put my attention on Emily. “Whatever you want to do for the couple’s family, tell David. But for now, you have other things to deal with.”

“Like what?”

“Helping me end Fela.”

“But...” She trembled. “They were innocent people?”

“Is anybody ever innocent in this cruel world?”

“Yes, Kaz.” Tears left her eyes.

*Fuck.*

My heart broke into tiny, jagged pieces.

Helpless, I reached out to wipe her tears away.

Paolo glanced over my shoulder, looked at me, and then stared at her.

Quickly, she dabbed at her tears, but more came.

Paolo completely turned around. “*Mysh.*”

Wiping the tears away, she gave him a weak smile and whispered in Russian, “*No. I’m fine, baby. Look at the television.*”

The boy looked unconvinced. Instead of turning back around to watch the television, he hugged her. His small arms barely wrapped around her waist.

Closing her eyes, she embraced him back.

*Baba is right. The boy is good for her.*

I leaned forward, put my arm on her shoulder, and pulled her to me. The boy came along for the ride, nestling into the nook between her and my body. And there we huddled in this big hug of entangled arms and sorrow.

I got lost in the rhythm of her breathing.

She whispered, “I should be put into a facility for the mentally—”

“Never—”

“Kaz, I need help—”

“Then, who will watch the boy?”

She looked up at me. “What do you mean?”

“Lunita was adamant that Paolo remains with us. I now agree.”

Emily’s bottom lip quivered. “Are you...serious?”

“Baba declared that the boy and you would heal together. And that...everything will eventually be okay. I believe that too.” I kissed her forehead. “And...”

“What?”

“Baba said that Paolo’s life would be better with *us*. He would grow up to have an amazing, loving life. And even our son would be the sort of man that would change the world.”

She parted her lips. “Did she really say all of that?”

“Yes.”

“W-would that...make up for what I did?”

“What *Lunita* did.”

“Lunita and I are the same person.”

“Trust me when I say this, Emily. You two are not the same person. Do not punish yourself for her crimes.”

She pursed her lips.

“If you need to shed tears for the couple, I understand.” I let out a long breath. “But, do not carry this sorrow yourself. *Please*, give it me. Let me hold onto the guilt and pain, the disappointment and anger.”

More tears spilled from those beautiful eyes.

“That guilt and pain is mine.” I kissed her forehead again. “All of it is mine, just like your heart and soul.”

Someone knocked on the door.

*Goddamn it.*

“One moment, *mysh*.” I wiped the tears from her face and left the bed.

As I headed to the door, I heard Paolo whispering to her in Italian. Slowing my walk, I glanced over my shoulder and saw him patting her back.

A sad chuckle left her. “I wish I knew what you were saying.”

He nodded. “*Mysh*.”

She switched to Russian. “*I am better because of you. Thank you.*”

Relief washed over me.

*She’s going to be okay with this...eventually.*

I turned back around and opened the door.

Several members of the hotel staff pushed in carts topped with silver trays of covered food. Sweet and savory aromas rose from them.

Emily gave the boy a sad smile. “*Pancakes.*”

Paolo’s face brightened. “*Pancakes.*”

The staff began to set up on the side of the room.

David entered.

I quirked my brows. “Any news?”

“The Butcher wanted to come up here to check on Emily this morning. He was adamant about it. So, I respectfully told him to go back to his room.”

Sarcasm laced my voice. “I am sure he understood and headed back.”

“There was a small scuffle among his men and ours, then he understood and left.”

I considered what Baba said about the Butcher knowing someone who could help us defeat Fela.

*We shall talk later, Jean-Pierre. Do not worry about that.*

I smirked. “Any more sign of Fela’s men?”

“None.”

“We should hold a meeting to end this.”

“I assumed you would say so. The hotel is preparing a banquet room now. What time will the Mouse and you be ready?”

Emily spoke for me, “In an hour, David.”

He and I turned her way.

She rose from the bed, grabbed Paolo’s hand, and walked the boy over to where the staff set up. “Make sure everyone is there too. Misha, Harlem Crew, the French, and of course our people.”

David nodded. “Anything else, Emily?”

“Make sure the table and space is sufficiently cleaned for Giorgio,” Emily said. “And have a bowl of sweets for Max. Everyone should be relaxed and united.”

“I will.” David nodded again and looked back at me. “Do you have anything else for me?”

“No tea.” I grinned. “Just coffee.”

“No, David.” Emily helped Paolo into a chair. “Make sure there is tea, juice, and water too. We want *everyone* comfortable.”

I frowned.

“Got it.” Smiling, David left.

I looked at my lioness as she placed several stacks of pancakes and a large portion of eggs onto a plate. “*Mysh*, I like when you take the lead.”

The hotel staff hurried away, but didn’t close the door.

Emily carried over the plate to me. “I’m glad you don’t mind my taking over. I’m just ready to leave Italy.”

“I believe we all are.”

“Let’s do this meeting. Figure out a plan. And get the hell out of this country.” She handed me the plate along with a fork. “Eat, baby. It’s going to be a long day.”

Beaming, I took the plate and fork. “This is for me?”

“Of course, Kaz.” She headed back to the table. Her ass perfectly swayed under that gown.

She picked up another plate, placed one pancake on it, and a small spoonful of eggs. Then, she put the plate in front of Paolo. “*Here you go, baby.*”

I beamed some more.

*I got mine first.*

Paolo grabbed his fork. “*Pancakes.*”

Emily winked at him. “*Tons of them.*”

*She will be a good mom to our son.*

This soothing sensation flowed through me. It was like a warm hand on my heart, enveloping me in calm and making my skin tingle.

Suddenly, I caught movement on the side of the room, stiffened, and snapped my view there.

*What was that?*

The damned lamp flickered on and off again.

Unsettled, I frowned. “Wassily!”

The lamp stopped flickering.

He rushed in. “Yes, Kazimir.”

“Get rid of that lamp over there.” I gestured with my fork. “Something is wrong with it.”

*And it is...creeping me out.*

“Okay, sir.” He hurried that way.

Music sounded from the television.

Paolo chuckled. “Binky!”

Emily laughed with him. “*He is a silly bird.*”

Still standing by the door, I forked up some eggs and watched Wassily simply lift the lamp from the nightstand and walk off with it. The plug trailed behind him.



Confused, I held the fork of eggs in front of me. “Did you...unplug it?”

Wassily shook his head. “It was not plugged in.”

*But...*

A cold shiver ran through me.

Wassily left with the lamp. Emily and Paolo laughed at the dumb bird on the television.

And I gazed at the nightstand, wondering about things that I was scared to admit out loud.





# Chapter 38

## Healthy Vagina

### Blue

My phone's ringing woke me.

Yawning, I grabbed the device, turned it on, and placed it by my ear. "Hello?"

David's sensual voice rode the line. "Good morning, sexy. Did you have a long night?"

Another yawn left. "I did, but I am ready for whatever you need."

"Mmmm."

I blinked.

*Oh. I didn't mean it that way, but...*

David continued, "My people told me that you were searching for the French's rooms last night."

*Are there no secrets in the Brotherhood?*

I gazed around at all the blue roses surrounding me. It was like waking up in an enchanted garden. A smile spread across my face as I breathed in their fragrance and watched the bees flutter from flower to flower

*I can't believe you did this, Giorgio.*

"Blue?"

"Oh. Yeah, I looked for the French, but I did not find their rooms. This hotel is bigger than I thought." I rubbed my eyes and sat up in bed. "Do you know which rooms they are in?"

"I do. But, you have more important duties to attend to this morning."

"The Mouse is awake?"

“She is.”

I rushed with moving the covers away and left the bed. “I will be there in—”

“No need to go to her. She wants everyone to meet in an hour. I will text you the location in the hotel. And, she was adamant about your sitting next to her.”

*Then, Emily is truly back.*

“Thank you for telling me, David.”

“I wish I could have brought that message to you in person, and...”

My body hummed with all the possibilities.

David cleared his throat. “However, I have plans, Blue, and you will enjoy them soon.”

I blushed.

“See you at the meeting.” David hung up.

Riding a natural high, I set the phone on the nightstand, next to several vases of blue roses. Then, I slipped out of my pajamas, maneuvered around the vases of roses on the floor, and hurried to the shower.

My mind ran with my possible duties ahead.

*Is Emily shaken? Did they tell her what she did? If yes, then how is she holding up?*

Last night had been a lost cause. I tried to check on the Mouse, but Kazimir’s men wouldn’t even let me step onto the floor. Then, I continued my search for the French, strolling hall after hall. Security refused to give me any clear answers. David probably ordered them to keep it a secret from me.

*He really has to let me take control of this.*

Irritated, I stepped into the shower and turned it on.  
“Men.”

While David had spent time in Paris and taken on the suave style of the French, he still had the dominating possessive quality of a typical Brotherhood man.

*I will have to talk to him. He must understand that I do not like him taking control of my situations.*

Warm water streamed down my body.

I began soaping myself.

The scent of sandalwood and lavender rose in the air.

“Huh?” I looked at the brown soap. “This is not mine. Did Giorgio change my soap too or is this from the hotel?”

*Relax. He just did the flowers.*

I leaned into the warm water. The spray massaged my back and neck. Washing some more I thought more about last night.

After giving up on the search for the French and trying to check on Emily, I took the stairs to the roof.

No one was up there, but it wasn't exactly empty either.

A table stood in the center, complete with a white linen tablecloth, gold-rimmed plates, crystal glasses, and two chairs. An arrangement of blue roses and peonies filled a porcelain vase. Unlit candles lined the border of the roof.

*Whoever invited me up, had planned for a romantic evening?*

I washed off the sudsy bubbles on my skin.

*But who texted me to go to the roof? Giorgio or this...third person who sent the first set of blue roses?*

Feeling clean enough, I shut off the shower, opened the door, and screamed.

Dressed in a designer suit with sparkling diamond cufflinks, a shimmering rose tie pin, and blue leather gloves, Giorgio leaned against the bathroom door and curled his lips into a wicked smirk. His eyes wore the sparkle of a horny devil.

I covered my breasts and inched back in the shower, hoping to hide myself a little more. “What the fuck are you doing in here?”

“I figured you needed a clean pair of panties for today.” He pulled out a blue pair that I had never seen before. “These will be perfect. Pretty, blue, and made from natural fabrics to maintain a healthy vagina.”

“What?”

“Some of your panties were made of synthetic materials like nylon and spandex that don’t allow that sweet area to breathe—”

“Stop talking about my vagina and my panties and get out of my bathroom!”

The smirk never left his face. “So, you do not need a clean pair?”

I frowned and then let out a long breath. “Leave the panties on the sink.”

“No way.” His face twisted in disgust. “And let the panties get dirty with whatever germs are—”

“Get out!”

He reached his hand to the side and grabbed a big blue towel.

*Wait. I thought the hotel towels were rose-colored. Did he change the soap and towels? Or am I losing my mind?*

He brought the towel over to me. “I heard you were looking for me last night. Here I am.”

I blinked.

“Now you have me, and you ask me to leave?”

I snatched the towel from him and quickly wrapped it around me. “You know damn well you should not be in my bathroom or—”

“Says who?”

“Me.”

“Unfortunately, I have decided that *your space* is my favorite place to be in when I yearn for peace. I like your energy.”

“You can like my energy outside of my bathroom, especially when I am naked and taking a shower.”

“Your being naked in the shower is the best time to be near you.” Giorgio handed me the blue panties. “Did you like the soap I bought for you?”

I widened my eyes and grabbed the panties. “So, you did change things in my bathroom?”

“Absolutely. The hotel’s toiletries, towels, and toilet paper were not sufficient enough for my lover.”

“Giorgio, you cannot come into my room and redecorate everything and...wait a minute. Did you say *your* lover?”

“You did not like the flowers?” That smirk left his face.

I swallowed. “Well...yes...I did like them.”

The smirk returned.

“But, hold on.” Now toweled up, I left the shower.

He didn’t move, forcing me to rub against his hard body.

A grunt left him. “Watching you shower has been the highlight of my year.”

I opened the door and hurried out of the bathroom. “Giorgio, I am not your lover—”

“You are.” He followed me into the room. “I wish you had a choice in the matter, but you do not.”

I spun around. “You cannot just tell me that I am your lover and—”

“I can.” Giorgio crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you going to pretend like you are not turned on by me?”

I stepped back.

“Go ahead and admit it, so we can get past any bullshit you are telling yourself.”

I sighed. “Yes. You turn me on, but you are with the French which makes everything extremally difficult.”

He quirked his brows. “How?”



“Giorgio, you know damned well the Brotherhood and Corsican tend to be sworn enemies, and it is only the Mouse that is keeping everyone from not killing each other...yet.”

“What does that have to with you and me?”

“Starting something with you would be very difficult for me—”

“It would not.” He unfolded his arms. “Especially, if you come over to the civilized side, and work for me.”

“I am not working for you.”

“I heard Emily went dark again.” Giorgio scowled. “And you were with her.”

“I was fine.”

“I doubt that. Emily is dangerous on her own. As this... *dark* entity, I do not like that you are around her—”

“You have no choice in the matter.”

He let out a long breath. “I want to protect you.”

I bit my lip.

“Surely, you can take care of yourself, Blue, but that does not mean that large parts of my heart and soul are not indebted to making sure you are safe.”

My body warmed. “Giorgio...thank you, but I plan to remain by Emily’s side. Not even her darkness can change that.”

He shook his head. “I do not like the idea of living in Russia.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Why would you be living in Russia?”

“You know why.” Giorgio closed the distance between us. “I like being in your space. If that means, moving to that cold, dirty country, then that is what I would do.”

I looked up at him. Shock filled me. “Giorgio, nothing is going to happen between us.”

“No?” He licked his lips.

Heat sparked in my core. “No.”

“I believe our first meeting was fate.”

“We fought on the ground.”

“And I loved every second of it.”

My breath caught in my throat.

“Then, I *chose* to be by your side for the rest of the time in Italy. Together, we saved the little kid and helped King David deal with the atrocious matter of his ex.”

I swallowed.

“But...*this*...this feeling when I see you, this energy, this need, this hunger to be with you...” Giorgio frowned. “*This* was not a choice for me.”

I went speechless.

“Blue...falling for you has been beyond my control.”

My heart thudded hard in my chest.

Without warning, Giorgio’s mouth was on mine like a starved man battling desperate need. I gasped as my lips parted and he plunged his tongue inside my mouth, triggering my body to respond on its own accord. His mouth tasted like vanilla and honey.

Lusty tingles speared through me.

A low moan escaped me, and vibrated against his lips.

Still devouring my mouth, he embraced me, pulling my body against his.

*Damn, Giorgio.*

The panties fell from my hand.

Moaning again, I clung to him, riding the sparks of passion moving through us. It was heaven. I felt like I was floating in the clouds among angels.

Plus, this kiss was different from the one last night. With David’s kiss, my body and pussy throbbled with hot yearning, instantly I was desperate to have him.

With Giorgio's kiss, flames of passion burned and then blazed through me, searing my soul with ecstasy.

Honestly, I didn't know which kiss I preferred better, just that I never wanted to choose between the kisses.

Was it selfish to want both their kisses and the men, all the time and every day?

When Giorgio broke the kiss, I panted and looked up at him. My chest rose and fell like I'd been running.

"I will not stop pursuing you, Blue."

"O...kay."

"And King David will have to step aside."

At the mention of David, I edged back. "Hold on."

Giorgio quirked his brows. "What do you mean hold on?"

"I am a single woman capable of dating who I want and making my own choices—"

"*Dating*? Is that what you think we will be doing?"

"What else would it be, Giorgio?"

"My intentions are utter possession."

"Excuse me?"

"You will *only* be with me—"

"Giorgio, be happy that I am willing to even date you with all these complications of the Brotherhood and Corsican—"

"You will not be dating David."

I pointed my finger at him. "David and you will not tell me what I can or cannot do. I have had quite enough of the both of you."

Giorgio frowned. "I am all for a woman's independence, but you *will* get David killed if you think that is how it will be \_\_\_"

"What?" I moved away from him. "If you are saying that, then we are a no."

“You do not make that decision.”

“Out of my room.” I gestured to the door. “You are insane.”

He remained there and crossed his arms over his chest. “What do you mean David will not tell you what to do either?”

“Why are you asking questions, instead of leaving?”

Giorgio gazed around. “Does he know about the flowers?”

I sighed. “Yes. And he wants to talk to you about it, but I have told him that I will—”

“Oh no. I *truly* would love to talk to David about the flowers.” Rage covered Giorgio’s face. Where once he appeared like a sexy model taking a coffee break from a runway event, now I saw the true essence of him—violence and murder.

*What the hell would Maxwell tell me to do? I must talk to him about this. I need better instructions on how to manage.*

I calmed my voice. “Giorgio, there is no need for you two to talk about anything. If I am dating you both then...that is just...what it is.”

Death lay in his eyes.

“And...I do want to say...thank you for all of your romancing.” I pointed to the breathtaking roses. “After everything I went through last night, this was a much needed and appreciated surprise.”

His angry expression softened.

“I was so happy to see the flowers. No one has ever done anything like this for me.”

The smirk returned.

*But, did he...invite me to the roof? How can I ask without starting a new argument?*

“And...” I cleared my throat. “Let’s say...if you asked me to go up to the roof for a romantic dinner, that would be nice too...if that’s what you did...or would do...”

He raised one eyebrow.

*God, I am so bad at this. Like really fucking bad.*

Giorgio studied me. “Did someone ask you to have a romantic dinner on the roof?”

*Jesus Christ. That wasn't Giorgio either.*

“No.” I shook my head. “I am just saying that—”

“I ask because when Louis and I were monitoring activity in the hotel to find your room, the hotel staff was ordered to place several items on the roof. I found the list interesting—candles, gold dinnerware, a bouquet of *blue* roses, etc.”

I tapped my barefoot on the carpet. “Interesting.”

“Very.”

“Would you...happen to know who ordered the delivery up there?”

“I would.”

Excitement hit me. “Good. Who was it?”

“You do not know?”

“Giorgio, why would I ask you who it was, if I *did* know?”

“So, there is nothing going on between you two?”

“I do not even know who did it?”

“But, are you *dating* others?”

“Besides...I guess you and David that is a no.”

“You are not dating David.”

I held out my hands. “Who the fuck ordered the stuff to the roof?”

His phone rang.

“You have too many damned admirers.” He scowled at me, pulled the phone out, and placed it against his ear. “Yes, Louis? I am aware of the meeting. We are on our way. Yes. I said *we*. Let everyone know that Blue had to put her clothes on.”

I blinked.

He hung up. “Everyone is in the conference room right now. Louis said that the Lion and Mouse are waiting for us.”

“Shit.” I picked up the panties from the floor and rushed to my closet.

“Those panties are now dirty. I should get you a new pair —”

“Oh. Be quiet. You already made me late.”

“Well, they all know we are on the way.” Giorgio grinned. “I told Louis to announce it to everyone in the room.”

I groaned.

*That’s just what I fucking need.*







# Chapter 39

## The Clown Show

### Kazimir

The hotel's ballroom was an enormous space, paneled in dark wood. A massive chandelier hung in the center of the room, made of a thousand hand cut crystals. Each one reflected the sunlight that poured in through the tall windows.

Two men carried a massive flat screen into the room—six feet wide and long. They placed it against the wall and plugged it in. Misha's face would soon appear on it.

In the center of the room, a long table stood with several chairs surrounding it. Boris, Wassily, and others sat there, waiting for us to begin.

On the other side of the room, a smaller table had been set up and covered in croissants, donuts, teas, coffees, and several juices.

And most important, near the long table, my mouse stood by the window, gazing out of it. The black fedora on her head, cast a shadow across one side of her face.

I scowled.

*She knows exactly what she's doing to me.*

Today, she looked like a naughty female boss out of a classic black-and-white mafia movie—black stilettos, black tailored suit pants that showed off the fullness of her ass, and black leather suspenders.

Meanwhile, her black buttoned shirt hugged her body and was unbuttoned down to the waist to reveal a blood red bra. Her supple cleavage was on full display for any man's eyes.

I sneered.

Even more, her lips were painted a deep devilish red. I imagined rings of that color all over my cock as she sucked it.

Plus, her hair was pinned back into a tight bun behind her head, just begging to be unraveled by my hungry fingers.

*I should cancel this meeting and fuck her on the table, just to show her who really is the boss.*

Then, Emily had the audacity to place a diamond cross on the bra cup over the right breast as if she was not the embodiment of a gangster's wicked wet dream.

We'd had an argument about that damned outfit before arriving.

I told her she couldn't wear it to the meeting.

She told me I had no say in the matter, to which I roared, and she laughed and strolled away.

I didn't push it. I had already caused enough trouble. The last thing I wanted was for Lunita to come out during the meeting.

So, I gritted my teeth.

The door opened.

I looked that way.

David entered the room, carrying a huge pearl white fur coat in his hand. "Here you go, Kazimir."

"This is perfect." I took it.

"Also, the French are on their way."

"Good." With the coat, I headed across the room and then stopped by my mouse. "It is cold in here, *mysh*. I had this brought to keep our son and you warm."

She moved her view from the window and hit me with a skeptical look. "Really, Kaz?"

"Are you not cold?"

"You know damn well I'm not cold."

"Surely, your breasts are—"

"I'm about to stick that fur coat up your ass."

“Are you aware that no one has ever threatened to stick anything up my ass and continued to breathe?”

Noise sounded behind us.

Jean-Pierre’s voice came next. “Aww. Is that chamomile tea I smell?”

I frowned.

Emily turned around. “I was told you prefer tea over coffee.”

“George Orwell said that tea is one of the mainstays of civilization.” Jean-Pierre strolled to the small table, picked up a cup, and perused the tea selection.

Louis bypassed the tea area and sat at the long table.

The rest of the Perfumed Pansies lined the wall next to many of Harlem Crew.

I scanned the Pansies.

*Where is Giorgio? Who cares? As long as he isn’t in here disrupting another meeting.*

I returned my view to Jean-Pierre as he poured hot water into his cup.

Last meeting, the Butcher had been decked out in silk pinstripes, gold buttons, and diamonds.

Today, he wore a three-piece chocolate brown suit with a blue shirt and blue pocket square. Diamond studs glinted from his earlobes, and his shoes were polished to a mirror shine.

“And brown sugar too?” The Butcher stirred his tea and placed his view on me. “Finally, someone in the Brotherhood who knows how to properly host a meeting.”

“Forget about the sweetness of your tea, Butcher,” I growled. “Your only focus should be on taking down Black Axe.”

Continuing to stir his tea, he strolled to the long table. “I believe I have an interesting card up my sleeve.”

I eyed him, thinking about Baba's reading and how Jean-Pierre was supposed to know someone that would help me.

Right when I was going to ask him, Valentina sashayed into the ballroom, wearing only a sapphire blue corset and blue tailored pants.

"You too?" I held out my hands. "Is this a burlesque show or a meeting?"

Valentine glared. "You better not be talking to me."

I pointed at her. "I would rather the French and every other man in this meeting not be ogling my wife and sister."

"Emily is not your wife yet." Valentina rolled her eyes. "Especially, if you think you're going to tell her what she can and cannot wear."

Emily snapped her fingers. "Preach."

I slowly turned to my mouse and sneered. "Preach?"

Valentina continued, "And you know I will shoot you in the leg before I let you tell me what to wear."

The Butcher spoke, "I find both of your outfits to be exquisite, appropriate, and elegant."

I returned my view to him. "Jean-Pierre, have you ever heard of the Russian Omelet?"

"I assume you are not discussing eggs and caviar."

"Oh no." I stalked over to my chair which was right across from him, and placed the fur coat on the table. "A Russian Omelet is when you cross your enemy's legs. Then, you fold him by pinning his shoulders to the ground upside-down, and placing his legs above him. Next, you sit on his legs, folding the base of the spine."

I clapped my hands hard. "This creates a perfect fatal snap."

With a bored expression, the Butcher took a sip of his tea. "Sounds too complicated."

I smiled. "But, very worth it."

“I prefer the Deadly French Kiss. Have you heard of that, Lion?”

I frowned.

“It is when you give a swift, hard, cold-cock punch to your enemy’s face while he is standing near a wall.” The Butcher placed his cup on the table. “Then, you drive his head into that same wall, with no mercy, causing the back of his skull to fatally shatter.”

“You made that up.”

“I could show you how real it is.”

“Oh, *please* show me.”

My mouse got to my side. “That will not be necessary, fellas.”

Jean-Pierre tipped an imaginary hat. “Just trying to be helpful, Emily.”

Suddenly, the flat screen beeped twice.

We all turned that way.

Misha’s face greeted us. He had his headset on. Again, he sat in a dark room with people walking around behind him.

“We should begin soon.” My mouse tapped my hand and then lowered into her seat. “Sit, baby.”

*You think you are in control of me, mysh? Yet, I cannot make you button up that shirt.*

She eyed me as if hearing what I said.

Frowning, I sat down anyway...but not because she told me to.

David hurried back in with some of our men. He gestured for them to go to the wall. Then, he sat next to me.

*Alright. Let’s get this over with. Where is everyone else?*

On the screen, Misha cleared his throat. “Valentina, did you get my message this morning?”

“I did,” she said. “And the answer is a big no.”

“But, Natalya is loving ballet.”

“She is too young to even be in a class.” Valentina squinted her eyes. “And I know *who* you think will be teaching her, and that is a no too.”

My mood brightened. “My precious Natalya in a little tutu, prancing on a stage. I would rent out the Bolshoi Theatre just to see it.”

Misha grinned. “My thinking exactly, Kazimir.”

I tapped the table. “Then, *my* vote is yes.”

Valentina sneered at me. “You have no vote in this—”

“Why not?” I quirked my brows. “Surely, my vote is worth double points next to yours and Misha’s.”

Smiling, Emily shook her head.

Valentina held up her hands. “In what world do you exist in where you think that you can outvote her mother?”

“In *my* world.”

“The King is here!” Maxwell walked in, carrying that stupid lemon tree.

*I see this meeting is going to be a clown show.*

Several Harlem Crew soldiers followed him inside.

Maxwell went to the end of the table near Valentina. His crew of soldiers flanked behind him. Then, he placed the tree right on the table, smoothed some of the leaves, and lowered into his seat.

Valentina scowled at him.

He winked at her. “Love the corset, little mama. If you have a difficult time getting out of that, you know where I stay.”

“Homey!” Misha chuckled from the television.

*Oh, God. When is this damned meeting going to begin?*

Unfortunately, I looked at my idiot cousin.

Misha's face brightened. One would have thought he saw Santa Clause bringing in tons of presents for him. "Maxwell, have you landed on a name for her, yet?"

I groaned in annoyance.

Maxwell shrugged. "I'm seriously thinking it will be Lemonisha."

"And her middle name?"

"Oh shit, Misha." Maxwell rubbed his chin. "You think she should have a middle name?"

"Absolutely. She must. This is an elegant tree that we are discussing."

Most of us gazed back and forth at them.

Meanwhile, Jean-Pierre sipped his tea and hummed in enjoyment.

"You know what?" Maxwell looked at the tree. "I agree. That's why I fuck with you, Misha."

My cousin chuckled. "And this is why *I*...fuck...with you."

I growled, "Can we start the meeting or do you two need a room?"

Emily snickered.

Maxwell frowned. "Why would we need a room, man? Something is wrong with you, Kazimir."

Misha frowned too. "I concur, Maxwell."

"Well concur and then get to telling us something important, Misha." Then, I pointed at Maxwell. "And next time do not bring that tree in here."

"Fuck that." Maxwell grimaced. "If Lemonisha can't be here, then I won't be here either."

Emily chuckled.

I paused.

The joy on her face was the only reason why I didn't get up and throw that damn lemon tree out the window.

She had taken the death of the couple better than I thought. Granted, I knew she mourned for these strangers on the inside. Yet, on the outside, she maintained a tough exterior.

Emily grinned at the lemon tree and chuckled again.

I held in my sigh.

*Maxwell truly is good for her.*

Emily cleared her throat. "We just need Blue, and we can begin."

"No problem." David rose from his seat. "I will get her."

Jean-Pierre wagged his finger. "That will be unnecessary, King David. Giorgio planned to escort Blue to the meeting."

*What?*

David did not sit back down. "Oh, did he?"

Louis pulled out his phone. "I will call Giorgio."

I knew the Butler was developing a little crush on my mouse's number one, but I had thought it sizzled out by now.

*Very interesting. That was what all the commotion of the guns was about in the other meeting. Giorgio is really into Blue now.*

My mood brightened even more.

*I wonder how I can use this against the French?*

"Hey." Louis spoke into the phone, "Are you still with Blue? Good."

David gripped the edge of the table.

I caught the motion, but doubted anyone else noticed.

"The Lion and Mouse are waiting," Louis said. "Yes. We are ready. Hurry. Hmmm. Are you sure? Alright. I will."

David's knuckles turned white.



*Hold on. David likes Blue too? More than...a simple attraction? But...*

My bright mood dampened.

Louis put his phone up. “Giorgio said that Blue and him are on the way. She just needs to put on her clothes.”

David’s skin turned red, and rage radiated from him.

*No. This is not good at all.*

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

I turned to my mouse.

Always observant, she caught David’s reaction too.

David clenched his teeth and sat down. And he didn’t appear calm in any way. In fact, he looked like a ticking time bomb, ready to explode at any moment.

*Damn it. We will definitely have to kill Giorgio, regardless of what my mouse thinks.*

Emily cleared her throat. “That’s fine. We can wait for them to show up, and then start.”

Ten minutes passed filled with Maxwell and Misha discussing possible middle names, David seething on the side of me, and my thinking of ways to get rid of Giorgio without pissing my mouse off. Unfortunately, I couldn’t come up with any efficient ways.

The only thing that kept me at bay was the lovely view of my mouse’s cleavage.

I leaned her way and whispered in her ear, “After this meeting, I am going to stuff my cock in your mouth and when it is time for me to cum, I am going to spray it all over your breasts.”

She grinned, and did not dispute my statement.

I grunted.

*Such a good mouse.*

Blue hurried in, followed by Giorgio who wore a smirk and nodded at David as if he had already won Blue’s heart.

*Yes. We will kill him. No one disrespects my number one.*

Maxwell and Misha continued to joke about names, while Valentina offered a few of her own ideas that they ignored.

As Blue and Giorgio got to the table, I leaned back in my mouse's direction and whispered, "We will need to discuss my killing the Butler."

Emily widened her eyes and kept her voice low. "Why would we hurt the Butler?"

"I believe David is interested in Blue—"

"He is, but that doesn't mean we kill Giorgio—"

"It does—"

"It's just competition, Kaz. Pick a team and relax."

"A team?"

"Team David. Team Giorgio. But absolutely no Team Kill Anybody."

I rolled my eyes. "If the Butler disrespects David again, I will be Team Bomb the French."

"Stay out of it, Kaz."

*But...I want David to be happy.*

Annoyed, I leaned back in my seat.

Emily cleared her throat as Blue sat by her. "Let us begin."

I nodded and was about to speak, but Jean-Pierre stood.

Sighing, I glared at him. "What now? Do you need more brown sugar for your tea?"

He shook his head and even appeared a bit nervous. "I have brought a...special guest to add his expertise to this mission of ending Black Axe."

I frowned. "Who?"

Maxwell touched his forehead. "Oh fuck. You sure this is a good time, man? Shit is already uneasy."

“I believe this is the best moment.” Jean-Pierre turned and gestured at one of his pansies. “Bring Timur in.”

*My godfather? What rock did Jean-Pierre find him under?*

Two men rushed out of the room.

*What is the Butcher playing at now?*

I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for the true clown show to begin.





# Chapter 40

## Secrets from the Past

### Emily

*Timur? Isn't that Kaz's godfather? And...Eden's father?*

In silence, we waited for J.P.'s men to return with our new guest. The heaviness of the moment weighed on me.

I hit J.P. with a questioning look.

*What are you doing, J.P.? We do not have time to waste.*

He gave me a sad smile.

*You better know what you are doing?*

I turned to Kaz. He had his arms crossed over his chest. A skeptical expression covered his face. The last thing my baby needed was another reason to dislike the Butcher.

J.P. thought it would be a good idea to bring Timur to Italy. Why? What could this man offer to us that would actually help the situation?

I didn't have doubts.

Just questions—tons and tons of them.

Sighing, I considered all of the things I knew about Timur. He had been best friends with Kaz and Valentina's father. Thus, eventually becoming their father's number one.

Later, Timur has been given the high position of watching over their mother, and had taken a bullet for her. I couldn't remember if that promotion were before or after Kaz had been kidnapped as a toddler. I just knew that Timur had searched out the kidnapper, killed him, and returned with the kidnapper's head and an unharmed little Kaz.

I thought back to the photo of Fela—naked, leashed, and on his knees. There had been several young Russian men around Fela. Among the men were Uncle Igor, Kaz's father,

Adrik, Roland, and Timur. Adrik had been the father of Kaz's old friend, Zahkar. Additionally, Adrik was also the one who chained Fela, due to Fela messing with his sister.

*Hmmm. So, Timur knew Fela from back in the day. But how would that help us now?*

For some reason, I looked at Max. Currently, Boris and he were exchanging odd glances as if they knew something that no one else did.

*What is up with them?*

Then, Max pulled his gun from his holster and placed it next to Lemonisha.

*What the fuck?*

Max put his view on me.

I quirked my brows.

He mouthed four words.

*What?*

I leaned forward and squinted as Max mouthed the words again. I focused on his lips and did my best to read them.

*This...man...is...crazy.*

I widened my eyes.

*Oh hell no.*

I took out my own gun and put it under the table.

Probably noticing my action, Kaz uncrossed his arms.

Then, J.P. spoke, "That gun will not be necessary, Emily. My father-in-law is not combative."

Max snorted.

*O-kay.*

I eyed him. "Why did you bring Timur here?"

J.P. frowned. "I think it would be better for *him* to explain \_\_\_"

"Don't waste our time, J.P."

“I would never take your time for granted, Emily.”

Kaz gestured for three of his men to come over. Next, he leaned my way and whispered, “Put your gun up, *mysh*.”

I did as my baby ordered.

The three guys arrived and gathered behind me.

Kaz spoke in Russian, “*Guard my mouse*.”

Misha’s voice filled the air. “If Timur is here, perhaps I should have Roland come onto this call.”

Kaz rolled his eyes. “We do not need the Bear. We need Fela’s location. Since we are on that topic, have you discovered where he is?”

“Fela keeps moving,” Misha said. “I do have eyes on one of his daughters.”

Louis spoke up, “Which one?”

“It appears Fela has given Black Axe’s command to a daughter named, Ufuoma.”

The French exchanged glances.

Max tilted forward. “How do you say that?”

Misha smiled. “Ooo-foh-ma.”

“I like that.”

I focused on J.P. “What do you know about her?”

“Fela has ten sons and ten daughters. Latifah and Ufuoma are the oldest of his daughters. They are both thirty-one and presently battling for the top position. Now with Popobawa dead, there probably is a lot more internal fighting.”

Louis added, “Both women have different mothers.”

I placed my hand on the table and threaded my fingers together. “The day I talked to Fela on the beach, I remember seeing Latifah.”

“Word?” Max asked.

“Yeah. She was the one with the braids.”



Max nodded. “And the nice ass.”

Valentina chuckled.

Max whistled. “How many wives does Fela even have?”

“Seven.” J.P. checked his watch. “However, Ufuoma’s mother is the most important of all the wives.”

I made note of that fact, hoping we could use it against Fela. “What’s the first wife’s name?”

“Fara. She’s the first wife and always remains by his side.”

Louis placed his hands on the table. “At times, Fara will be sent to business dealings to represent Fela.”

Kaz nodded. “I have met Fara. Very no nonsense. She could make the biggest calculations on money and shipments in her head and right on the spot. It would piss Uncle Igor off, each time he had his men use calculators to confirm her answers. She was always right.”

J.P. shrugged. “We had the same experience with Fara.”

Kaz put his view on the television screen. “I have often wondered if Fara was the true brains of Black Axe’s business operations. While Fela handled the more violent and political aspects.”

J.P. chimed in, “Find Fara and you will discover Fela.”

On the screen, Misha shook his head. “I have yet to see any signs of Fara, but my people have been monitoring Ufuoma. I believe she will eventually contact her mother or father soon.”

Kaz tapped the table. “Perhaps, we should give Ufuoma a reason to call her parents.”

I eyed him. “What are you thinking?”

“Bring mayhem and chaos to Black Axe businesses in the Calabrian region.”

J.P. shook his head. “Black Axe has been battling the Sicilians and ‘Ndrangheta on a daily basis. The Brotherhood’s

mayhem would be nothing to them, especially when Italy is now *their* territory.”

Kaz glared. “Have you forgotten that I have a special sort of mayhem?”

“Putting a hole anywhere in Calabria will not piss off Black Axe, but it will definitely unite all the Italian organizations against the Brotherhood.” J.P. let out a long breath. “Do you really need more enemies?”

*Hell no.*

The door opened.

Everyone placed their view in that direction.

Two men escorted Timur into the room.

*He’s as big as Roland.*

Although Timur used a brown cane and leaned on it heavily with each step, there was no sign of weakness. He wore a well-tailored blue suit with a gray shirt and tie, but the muscles were apparent. Timur worked out, probably lifting small cars for fun.

J.P. rose and gestured to his chair. “You can sit here, sir.”

Timur waved him away and limped over to the huge window near Misha’s screen. “I have sat for too long. Today, I want to walk and stand.”

Appearing a bit nervous, J.P. didn’t sit back down.

When Timur passed Max, the man warmly nodded at Max.

Instead of greeting him back, Max put his hand on his gun and watched him.

*Okay. What the hell is going on?*

Max wasn’t trigger happy. He preferred alternate methods to violence. Therefore, this response told me to monitor Timur too.

*Whatever is going on, this is a puzzle piece to what happened when Max was with the French.*

I made a note to ask Max about it later.

Timur stopped at the massive window and let out a loud sigh. “Italy.”

Forever impatient, Kaz scowled.

“I have not been here for a long time.” Timur lifted his view to the sky. “And all the pretty birds flying around. All of them are so lovely. Are there eagles in Italy or—”

“There’s no need to look at the birds.” J.P. hurried over, even shifting his fast-walk to a light jog.

Max shook his head. “Yo. Definitely don’t look at the birds.”

J.P. got to him. “Sir, we should really get to any information you may have about Fela.”

Timur limped away from the window, faced our table, and scanned all of our faces. “My. My. The Brotherhood has changed quite a bit. Women and all this colorful skin?”

*Say what now?*

I raised my eyebrows.

Kaz groaned. “What the hell is this supposed be about?”

Before J.P. could answer, Timur looked at Kaz and grinned. “The cub is now a full grown lion.”

Kaz tensed.

Timur chuckled. “You were such a little bastard as a kid. Once you figured out how to work that tiny penis, you would run up to us and piss on our shoes. I used to daydream about kicking you across the hallway.”

Kaz growled, “What information do you have on Fela?”

“Lots, boy.” Timur slowly raised his hand and pointed. “And you will mind your elders. Your mother taught you better than that. Do not disgrace her.”

Kaz blinked.

Timur nodded at J.P. “I do believe I would like a chair. Can someone bring it to me?”

One of the men that escorted him in, rushed to get one.

Timur directed his attention to me. “Kazimir, your father would have never approved of this relationship.”

I opened my mouth in shock.

“That is quiet enough from you.” Kaz rose from his seat. “Either get to—”

“But your mother.” Timur bobbed his head. “She would have been very happy. She never cared about skin color, wealth, or where a person was from. Your mother only looked at the insides—the heart, brain, and soul.”

Kaz paused from saying anything.

“And this woman,” Timur pointed at me. “For you to have her next to you...it tells me that she is not only beautiful on the outside, but even more gorgeous on the inside.”

*O-kay...I'll take that.*

I tapped Kaz's leg.

Sighing, he sat back down.

“Now, we shall talk about the past, and you will need to be patient because...” Timur blinked and tapped his head with one finger. “Sometimes my memory is not that good. It is all the snakes moving around inside of my brain.”

*The snakes?*

J.P. cleared his throat. “Here you go, sir.”

A man placed a chair next to him.

“During the Soviet years, Fela arrived in Russia to study... I believe he studied poetry if I remember correctly.” Timur lowered into the chair. “It doesn't matter. All the women loved Fela in college. To them, he was this exotic, muscular man with a nice accent. Adrik's sister went to school with him along with my sister, Celina.”

I blinked, trying to remember where I had heard the name Celina before.

*Isn't Celina the chick that stole the codes after Uncle Igor died? She's the whole reason Eden was kidnapped...*

I caught Misha's scowling expression and confirmed the answer was yes.

Kaz shook his head. "We already know the story. Adrik caught Fela with his sister and beat him up the first time. On the second time Adrik caught Fela with his sister and she begged for Adrik to not harm him, so he enslaved and treated him like a dog—"

"No. No." Timur waved Kaz away. "It was more than that. Adrik despised Fela for more than messing with his sister. It was about the size of Fela's penis—"

"Yo." Max held out his hand. "Butcher, get your boy. This is getting crazy."

J.P. held up one hand. "I believe this is going somewhere."

Timur shrugged. "It was true. Adrik talked about Fela's penis all of the time. And we must remember that Adrik was in love with my sister, Celina and she would rave about Fela's penis too. Remember these were backward times."

Misha spoke from the screen, "Celina had relations with Fela too?"

Timur let out a long sigh. "That brings us to California, and how I arrived there."

*Huh? I thought we were still in Moscow with Fela and Adrik's sister.*

Without explaining any further, Timur continued, "The King sends Fela back after Fela exposed Adrik of trying to take over the Brotherhood. Everything became busy in Moscow. However, I had to find my sister. Which brought me to California..."

Kaz shook his head. "I am not following any of this and do not see how—"

"Celina fled to America, thinking that she could hide from me here, but she could not." Timur released a loud laugh.

I didn't know about anybody else, but the sound shoved me on edge.

*Something is wrong with this guy.*

“No one can hide from me, especially not my sister. I found Celina in Watts, hiding among African Americans. Somehow she had met a nurse named Valerie. And this nurse...gorgeous—dark ebony skin, large curly afro, and the prettiest smile on the West Coast.” Timur coughed into his hand. “Valerie had started a clinic in the area. Three levels. The third floor was where she lived.”

Timur began violently coughing.

J.P. gestured at his men to get Timur water.

Timur coughed again and then cleared his throat. “Valerie’s place was small. Two bedrooms. An even tinier kitchen. And do not let me tell you how small the bathroom was—”

“What the fuck does this have to do with Fela?” Kaz’s voice rose in the air. “This is not helpful at all.”

Timur scowled at him.

One of the French handed Timur a cup of water. Nodding, Timur took the cup and drank.

I leaned Kaz’s way. “Perhaps, we should give him a minute, baby. I’m at least...interested with where this is going.”

Kaz pursed his lips.

Timur watched our exchange and handed the cup back to the man. “Very intriguing. She has you by the balls, cub.”

*Oh God.*

Kaz spoke through clenched teeth, “Get on it with it.”

“Valerie, the nurse.” Timur formed his lips into a wide smile. “She provided free examinations and abortions to women with low-incomes. Somehow my sister Celina got her parasitic hooks into this nice nurse. I followed this Valerie around for several days, trying to get a read on her. The only thing that I discovered was that she was a good person with a big heart.”

J.P. rubbed his forehead as if nervous that he might have made a mistake bringing in Timur.

I raised on finger. “But how did you figure out that Celina was even with Valerie?”

“The tracker.”

*You had a tracker on your sister?*

“Anyway, one night, I broke into Valerie’s clinic and slipped into her apartment where I knew Celina had been hiding in her extra bedroom.” Timur banged his cane hard on the floor. “Suddenly, bang!”

Fast, Max had his gun pointed at Timur’s head.

I tensed.

Ignoring the gun targeting him, Timur chuckled, “Bang. Bang. Valerie hit me several times in the head with a bat. Can you believe that?”

Frowning, Max lowered his gun and put it back on the table.

“She gave me some good swings. I fell out. Blood dripped from my forehead. Being the good nurse that Valerie was, she took care of me, even though I broke into her place.” Timur lay his cane across his lap. “But, she also gave me a good talking to. My English had been pretty bad during that time, but I learned a lot of curse words that night.”

Kaz turned my way and frowned at me. “*Mysh...*”

I scowled at him. “Be patient, baby.”

Sighing, Kaz put his view back on Timur.

“After the commotion, Celina comes out of the room. Very pregnant. This was why she fled Russia. I had no idea.” Timur shook his head. “Always, my sister gave me trouble, but my mother made me watch over her. Well...I demanded that Celina immediately abort the baby and return to Moscow with me. Valerie instantly interrupted me. She was a woman of so much spirit and not scared of me at all. She told me that it was

Celina's body and her choice. I laughed, and Valerie threatened to hit me again with the bat."

*I like this Valerie.*

Timur moved his attention to the window and gazed at the birds flying by. "I was forced to stay in California and watch over my sister until she had the baby. Plus..."

Timur faced us. This time a sad expression covered his face. "Plus... Valerie... she began to seep into my... hard exterior. I had a hotel room, yet I stayed in Valerie's bedroom most nights."

Max muttered, "Russians and sisters. Soon as one of you motherfuckers see a sister, your dicks just—"

I shushed him.

"Finally, it is time for Celina to have her baby. Valerie helps her give birth, and..." Timur gazes off in the distance. "Such a beautiful little girl. Curly hair, hazel eyes, and such a golden complexion. The moment I saw her little face, I vowed to protect her."

Max turned to me.

*What?*

Max grabbed his forehead and turned back to Timur.

J.P. stirred and blinked several times.

*What am I missing?*

Timur frowned. "Celina confessed that it was Fela's baby. Knowing how the Brotherhood had treated Fela, she did not want the same fate for her child, which was why she had fled."

*Oh shit. So... Fela had a daughter with Celina?*

Timur let out an exasperated breath. "Three days later, Celina disappeared. We only knew because the baby kept crying for her mother. We rushed to the room, and there was a letter in the crib right next to the baby. It only had three words. *I am sorry.*"



J.P. stumbled back to the window as if someone had hit him.

*What?*

Timur frowned. “Celina did not return to her child for many years, but by that time... Valerie and I had married and raised Eden as our daughter.”

“Oh!” I shrieked, not meaning to say that out loud.

*So...holy fuck. Eden is Celina and Fela's daughter? What the fuck?*

That was why Max was blown away. He figured it out before me. Clearly, he knew what Eden looked like since he had just come from France. I had only seen a few pictures here and there.

Louis left his chair, carried it over to J.P., and gave it to him. The Butcher looked to be having a difficult time, comprehending it all.

Timur continued as if he had not just dropped a mega bomb into the room. “Keeping Eden’s true identity a secret proved to be a problem. I could not take them back to Russia. I only had a few of my closest friends come to Valerie and my wedding. Your father was there, Kazimir.”

Stunned, J.P. sat down in the chair.

Louis remained by his side.

My lion looked to be equally speechless.

“Secrets and secrets. Years go by, I find it difficult to remain in the Brotherhood, so I retired and invested my money. The King wanted to kill me for leaving. Rolan fought for my safety. He also knew the secret.”

Misha widened his eyes.

“By this time, Fela is no longer a sweet-talking college student.” Timur tapped his fingers along the cane. “Fela is now a rising force within Nigeria. He becomes a major player in not just politics, but the criminal underworld. If you want to do any major dealings on the continent of Africa, you must go to

Fela, and he would make the connections to whatever criminal lord or country you wanted to do business with.”

Kaz tilted forehead. “Fela does not know that his daughter is Eden?”

“No idea.” Timur shook his head. “By now, it does not matter. But back then, I worried. Fela would have made a move to get her. Every year, I took many trips to various parts of Nigeria, watching and checking on him.”

Kaz quirked his brows. “Why?”

“I planned on killing Fela. It was my top priority.” Timur smiled. “Valerie knew Fela’s story and argued against it. So...I monitored Fela for years until I knew there would be no chance that he would come for Eden.”

Everybody remained silent.

There was too much to process.

Timur continued, “I know Fela very well. His first love is his country. Next is his family. Then, it is God. This is the exact order, and that is how others have beaten Fela. When you threaten these things, then you control him.”

Kaz considered that statement and then nodded. “What do you suggest?”

“Jean-Pierre explained to me that Fela is hiding.” Timur glanced at J.P. “It is a simple matter to get Fela out of his spot.”

“How?”

“You must threaten Nigeria.”

J.P. still appeared stunned from Eden’s ancestry. He cleared his throat. “How can we threaten Nigeria?”

Kaz grinned. “Do not worry about that. I have a plan.”

Everyone looked at him.

Max shook his head. “Man, you better not be trying to bomb Nigeria.”

Kaz directed his attention on David. “I do not need to bomb it, but...I can point a nuke in that direction.”

Misha let out an exasperated breath. “Kazimir, if Russia points a nuke in Nigeria’s direction, America and England will know within minutes.”

Kazimir smirked. “I am counting on that.”

“All the news outlets will report that there is some possible war about to happen—”

“Yes.” Kaz’s smirk deepened. “And no matter where Fela is, he will know what is going on.”

“And every country in the world will be demanding that the president explain Russia’s reasoning—”

“Then, he will need to be useful and come up with one.” Kaz shrugged. “Just make sure that whatever he says, there is the word lion within the message.”

Misha scowled. “This is a drastic move—”

“Bothering my mouse is drastic. The nuke is a friendly threat.”

That odd dark chuckle left Timur. “Yes. I agree with the little cub. Fela will hurry out of the hole he is hiding in. He loves Nigeria more than himself.”

“There we have it.” Kaz clapped. “Finally, a simple solution.”

Misha gritted his teeth. “One involving a nuclear weapon and possibly starting WWII.”

Ignoring his cousin’s comment, Kaz looked at David. “Misha and I will execute the threat to Nigeria. However, I will need you to gather the French, Harlem Crew, and our men to grab any of Fela’s family.”

David nodded. “Misha’s people are monitoring Ufuoma. We can surely grab her.”

“Ufuoma will be used against her father.”

Timur chuckled at Kaz. “Now, you are thinking, little cub.”

Kaz grimaced. “I am now the Lion.”

“No.” Timur wagged his finger. “You will always be *little cub* to me.”

Sighing, Kaz returned his view to Misha. “Try to find more of Fela’s children’s locations and then send them to David. *Everyone* must team up and grab as many of his kids as possible.”

Max spoke, “I’ll manage Harlem Crew on this.”

J.P. tipped that imaginary hat. “And I will direct my people.”

Kaz gestured to Blue. “I want you with them. We need all high-level soldiers on this.”

Blue nodded. “Alright.”

I tensed. “Okay. Then, Blue and I will stay together and search—”

“No, *mysh*.” Kaz rose from his seat. “While the others execute the plan, you and I have to take care of more important duties for today.”

I looked up. “What’s that?”

“We are taking Paolo to the beach.”

“Yo.” Max stood. “That sounds like a vacation to me.”

“Kaz, I’m not swimming at the beach while everyone risks their lives—”

“*Mysh*, you need a break.”

“I concur.” J.P. got up from his chair. “Leave Fela’s kids to us.”





# Chapter 41

## The Siberian Train Wreck

### Kazimir

The elevator doors slid open.

I looked down at Paolo and spoke in Russian, “*Give me your hand.*”

The boy raised his view to me and seemed close to crying. Earlier, he had not been happy to leave Baba’s lap, but I wanted to surprise my mouse, and unfortunately, *he* was a part of it.

I frowned. “*Paolo.*”

Looking terrified, he wrapped his little fingers around my hand. They barely cradled my palm.

“*Good.*” I guided him off the elevator and down the hallway.

All of my men followed.

I hadn’t planned on touching him, but he was so awkwardly small among my twenty men and me. I feared he might get lost, resulting in Lunita, Emily, and Baba killing me. It was clear that this boy’s presence would keep Emily calm. And I would do anything for my mouse.

*Let us hope I do not regret keeping him.*

Minutes later, we walked into the hotel’s fully operational kitchen. It was around 1000 square feet. And it wasn’t just a sweep of stainless steel and stone, but a labyrinth of food preparation that extended in every direction.

Wassily and the rest of my men entered and gathered around us.

Paolo opened his mouth, took everything in, and tightened his hold around my hand.

*Are you nervous?*

For some reason that made me look at the space from a child's eyes, trying to figure out what he saw.

*Hmmm.*

I had to admit that the kitchen exuded a symphony of smells, tastes, sounds, and colors. High-pitched notes sang out from the electric mixers whipping egg whites. Butter-drenched lobster tails sizzled in scalloped-copper pans. Onions bubbled in red sauces. Grease crackled under slabs of meat and fat. Three women in white coats pulled racks of fresh bread out of ovens. Meanwhile, two chefs chopped vegetables and shouted out orders to the waiters.

On our right, a woman wearing a pink chef's coat, scurried over to us. Sweat glistened on her forehead. She began to speak in Italian.

I immediately interrupted her, "I need the kitchen for an hour. Have everyone leave."

She gave me an apologetic smile and switched to English. "I am sorry, sir, but we do not rent out—"

"Now." I glared at her.

She blinked. "I must...get the hotel manager to come and explain this policy—"

"Then, be quick." I checked my watch and turned to Wassily. "Grab several televisions and bring them in here. I want to stay up-to-date with today's news."

"Yes, sir." Wassily headed off with six men.

Paolo and I remained by the wall.

I didn't need the *entire* space, but I didn't want chefs and waiters mucking around and bumping into me.

The kitchen staff gave us a few confused glances as they continued to work. Others whispered among themselves.

I gestured at one waiter. "Get me two aprons. One for me and the other for the boy."



The waiter's face reddened as he rushed away.

I gazed down at Paolo.

He darted his little eyes here and there, drinking in every aspect of the kitchen's activity.

Soon, the waiter returned with two white, traditional aprons. I let go of Paolo's little hand, put one apron on myself, and then lowered to one knee. "Come here."

Paolo stepped forward—wide-eyed and fidgeting his hands at his sides.

I did my best to put the apron on him. The kitchen clearly didn't have a child's size. The apron hung off his small body. The bottom dragged on the floor.

*Hmmm. Should I keep it on or off? No. Mother would say that I must not get him dirty.*

The door opened on my side.

I rose.

A short, balding man entered. He wore a three-piece suit with a red power tie and gold cufflinks. His hair was slicked back, and his hands clasped in front of his waist.

The chef in pink got to his side and gestured to me. "This man wants me to just clear the kitchen and let him use it for an hour. Please tell him that it is not our policy."

The man looked at me, glanced at my men, and then returned his view to me. "Mr. Solonik?"

I nodded.

"I am sorry for the delay, sir." He turned to the chef. "Everyone is due for a break. Take an hour off—"

"But, we have orders for several rooms—"

"Anything for Mr. Solonik." The man scowled. "Hurry."

With a shocked expression, the chef stumbled back and shouted out the order for everyone to leave. With no delay, they shut off stoves as well as ovens and hurried away.

Paolo watched the whole situation with widened eyes.

*Take note, little one. You are now growing up with the Lion. Things will be different.*

Right as the last of the staff left the kitchen, Wassily and my men arrived with six televisions.

“Come on, Paolo.” I headed off to an empty stainless steel counter, grabbed some cutting boards, and knives.

Paolo got to my side.

I looked down at him and spoke in Russian, “*Are you ready to cook?*”

Silent, he stared at me.

“*Well,*” I leaned my head to the side. “*Are you?*”

Slowly, he nodded.

I lowered and tried to grab him.

He shrieked and stepped back.

I wagged my finger at him. “*Get back over here.*”

Frowning, he came to me.

I picked Paolo up. He barely weighed anything.

*We need to get some food in you. Your life in Moscow will be hard. You'll need muscles and height to fight.*

Sighing, I sat him on the counter and assessed his little frame. “*Did you know that your father and I grew up in Siberia together?*”

Paolo slowly shook his head.

“*In the beginning, it was a rough and hungry life, but...not a bad place. My brothers still live there. Maybe...I will introduce you to them.*” I handed him a sharp knife.

Paolo had to hold the knife with both hands, just to keep it above his lap. He put his gaze on the blade and slowly twisted it in his hands.

“*My brothers are much older than me. My father had them with his first wife. They do not agree with my life, but do not mind taking my money.*”

I tapped my right foot.

*And they loved your father...like he was their own little brother.*

Wassily and the men set the televisions on counters a few feet in front of us. Then, they frantically searched for places to plug them in.

I returned my attention to Paolo. *“When your father was your age, he loved my mother’s bear paw stew. When we lived in Siberia, she made it every Sunday.”*

Paolo snapped his view to me. *“Bear?”*

*“Bear.”* I nodded and then slashed my hands in the air. *“Roar.”*

Terrified, Paolo leaned away.

*Hmmm. Perhaps, I should not have done that.*

Sighing, I called over one of my men.

He came over. *“Yes, sir.”*

*“Bring me fresh loaves of bread—braided if possible. I also want two bowls, large spoons, lamb, pastrami, corned beef, pickles, mayonnaise, ketchup, sour cream, horseradish, and dill relish.”*

*“Yes, sir.”* He headed off and began rummaging around the space.

Paolo raised his hand.

I quirked my brows. *“Yes?”*

*“Train wreck?”*

Shock hit me. *“That is correct, Paolo. We are making my famous Siberian Train Wreck. I...came up with this sandwich...when your father and I were kids.”*

My heart ached.

*You made a train wreck sandwich for him, Pavel?*

I made sure to not let the sadness show up on my face. *“You are a very observant little kid.”*

Paolo put his view back on the knife.

*“But, back to my mother’s bear paw stew.”* I leaned against the counter and smiled. *“This is a really exotic Siberian dish.”*

My man hurried over with some of the items I had requested—bread, mayonnaise, horseradish, large slabs of cooked lamb. After placing them on the table, he rushed away.

I raised both hands in the air. *“First the bear paws are marinated.”*

Paolo looked at me.

*“You must understand that a bear’s paws are tough meat.”*

Paolo opened his mouth.

*“Then, she fried and stewed them for a long time.”* I lowered my hands. *“My mother claimed that it had to be eaten hot and right out of the pot.”*

Paolo twisted his face in disgust.

I chuckled. *“It was not a dish for the faint of heart. However, your father and I always asked for second servings.”*

Wassily and my men finally got the televisions working. Each screen showed various shows and commercials.

*“Wassily, make sure they are on the news and then mute them.”* I grabbed a loaf of bread and returned to talking to the boy. *“We must cut these in half for our special surprise for mysh.”*

Paolo’s face brightened. *“Mysh.”*

*“No. No.”* I gave him a stern look. *“Only I call her that. You are to say Emily.”*

He nodded. *“Emily.”*

*“Mysh is my name for her.”*

*“Emily.”*

*“Perfect.”* I gestured for him to get closer. *“Come. Let me show you.”*

My man brought over more ingredients.

Paolo scooted over with the knife still in his hands.

*“Get a loaf and follow what I am doing.”* I took my time slicing through my loaf. *“My mother told me that every man—no matter his wealth or status—must have at least five dishes that he can make on his own.”*

Paolo put the knife down and picked up the bread. The loaf fumbled in his little hands, but he gained control and picked up the knife.

*“Mother taught me how to make bear paw stew.”* My heart ached. *“She told me to make it for my new wife on the first night of our honeymoon.”*

I chuckled. *“Do you think our mouse would like such a dish?”*

Paolo quickly shook his head.

I frowned. “Hmmm.”

Paolo carefully cut some of the loaf. While he didn't make a perfectly straight line, he had come close.

My man carried over the last of the ingredients. “Should I do something else sir?”

“Not now.” I grabbed another loaf, sliced it, and switched back to Russian for Paolo. *“Mother also taught me Pelmeni.”*

*“Dumplings.”* Paolo smiled and continued to jaggedly cut through his loaf.

*“That's right. They are dumplings.”*

I smirked.

*You cooked that for him too, Pavel?*

The ceiling lights blinked in the room.

My men gazed up.

Wassily shook his head. “I will get the manager to come and check on these lights—”

“No.” I waved him away. “Leave it. Perhaps, there are other things going on besides the hotel’s wiring.”

Wassily gave me an odd look. “O-kay, sir.”

I returned to Paolo. “*There is a great debate in Russia on where pelmeni originated from. Some say Ural. Others say Siberia.*”

Paolo finished cutting the bread and separated the halves.

“*I have seen men killed over this very topic.*” I cut one more loaf. “*In fact, if a man stood in my presence and said that pelmeni was a Ural dish...*”

Paolo stared at me.

“*Well...it would not be a good day for him.*”

I caught a headline slide over one of the screens and pointed. “Wassily, turn the television up.”

Bobbing his head, he picked up one of the many remotes in front of him and pressed a button.

Without needing me to tell him, Paolo grabbed a bowl and began spooning mayonnaise and horseradish into it.

*How many times did you make my sandwich for him, Pavel?*

The ceiling lights blinked.

I tensed.

*Are you really near us?*

The television’s volume rose, disrupting my thoughts on Pavel’s ghost.

**“Good afternoon, I am Nicole Palmer with breaking news.”** The woman directed a stern expression to the screen. **“Russia surprised the world today, by changing the coordinates of one of its top nuclear missiles, named *the Tsar Bomba.*”**

I grinned.

A map of Nigeria appeared on the screen.

**“U.K. military tracking systems picked up the shift in the missile’s target, reporting that *the Tsar Bomba* was aimed directly at Nigeria’s federal capital, Abuja.”**

Paolo mixed the mayonnaise and horseradish together.

*“Good boy.”* I patted his back and returned my attention to the screen.

Footage of people hurrying away in Abuja played on the screen.

**“All in Abuja and surrounding areas are on high alert.”** The news woman continued. **“Within this hour, government buildings, places of worship, and schools are presently being evacuated due to this possible threat.”**

I crossed my arms over my chest.

*What do you think, Fela? Would you like to humbly end this?*

The screen shifted to U.S. President Cumberland standing at the podium. With furrowed brows and pursed lips, the ruddy man appeared exhausted and not at all happy about the news.

**“The U.S. declares that this is a reckless move on Russia’s part.”** The screen shifted to a view of England’s House of Commons Chamber. **“U.K. Prime Minister Bryant held an emergency meeting with the Members of Parliament and declared that this move is a clear violation to the United Nation’s Security Council Resolution.”**

I laughed.

**“Meanwhile, the Kremlin has yet to give a response. Analysts believe that if Russia launches this missile, it will be dangerous to the region and destabilizing for the entire country. Even more, this can trigger a global war.”**

I gestured to Wassily. “Mute it for now.”

He did as I asked.

I looked back at Paolo.

The boy had been watching the screen too.

*How much do you understand?*

And then he looked my way and pointed. “*Boom?*”

“*Yes, Paolo.*” I nodded. “*If they keep messing with my mouse, everything will go boom.*”

The boy blinked.

“*When you grow up, make sure that you find your own mouse to make things go boom over.*”

We returned to putting together my signature sandwiches. I cut various meats. Paolo stacked. Soon we had several sandwiches wrapped. Wassily found bags of chips in the pantry. Knowing that my unborn son needed lots of nutrients, I threw together a salad for my mouse.

Suddenly, chuckling sounded outside of the door.

I looked up.

Emily entered with Blue. “Oh, there they go. I was about to tear this hotel up.”

I frowned. “What are you doing here? I told you I was putting together a surprise.”

“I was looking for Paolo and they told me you took off with him.”

My frown deepened. “You are ruining my surprise.”

Emily shut her eyes and turned around. “There you go. I can’t see what my awesome babies are doing.”

I looked at her clothes. She had done as I instructed and prepared for the beach. She had a thin white sundress over a yellow bikini.

*Hmmm. I will rip that dress later today.*

“Hey, buddy.” Blue winked at Paolo and then backed away. “Alright. I will go now.”

“Thanks for helping, Blue.” Emily waved goodbye. “And don’t forget. You are a single adult woman. You can date them both and there should be no problem with—”

“Date who?” I set the bowl of salad down.



Emily kept her back to me. “Mind your business, Kaz. I am talking to Blue—”

“*Who* will you be dating?” I stared at my mouse’s number one.

Blue cleared her throat. “We were just talking about—”

“Girl, it is none of his business.” Emily shook her head. “Go ahead and meet up with the guys, and be careful.”

“O-kay.” Blue walked off.

I roared, “Blue!”

She stopped and turned around with widened eyes. “Yes, sir.”

I picked a knife and pointed the tip at her. “Team David.”

She stepped back.

Emily sucked her teeth. “Girl, ignore him. Who you date has nothing to do with Kazimir.”

“You heard me, Blue.” I spoke through clenched teeth, “Team David.”

“That’s quite enough.” Emily spun around and scowled at me. “Stop it.”

Blue fled the kitchen.

Emily rolled her eyes. “Never talk to my number one like that.”

“You told me to pick a team. That is what I did—”

“You pick a team to root for. Not threaten her with who to pick—”

“Blue is Brotherhood. She is forbidden to date a Pansy. Do you understand how much shit everyone would give her?”

“No one would care.”

“Wassily.” I gestured at him. “Tell my mouse.”

Wassily grinned. “It would be a topic of jokes, if she did.”

“There we go.” I nodded. “Team David, and we kill Giorgio to solidify the matter.”

“Mind your business, Kaz. Who Blue dates has nothing to do with you. Stay out of it.”

I sneered.

Emily gazed at the counter. “Aww. Did my favorite guys make me something to eat? I’m so hungry too.”

Paolo picked up one of the wrapped sandwiches. “*Mysk.*”  
*Seriously, Paolo? We have gone over this.*

I groaned in annoyance.





# Chapter 42

## The Beach

### Emily

It was a perfect day for a beach picnic.

The warm sun shined bright within the blue sky. Seagulls floated on the salty cool breeze, lazily passing by fluffy white clouds.

The white sandy beach spread out before us. Rumbling ocean waves swayed back and forth on the shore.

Earlier, Kaz had spread a large blanket on the sand and then set up our picnic. I was so used to people doing everything for him. It was odd to watch him put plates, silverware, and bottles out. He even made Paolo, Harlem, and my plates—Siberian train wreck sandwiches, chips, Caesar salad, and slices of fruit.

*Look at my man.*

But that wasn't what impressed me the most. Kaz's swim trunks clung to his body, and it was a sight to behold—sculpted muscles and rippling skin, thick thighs and a perfect ass.

He caught me watching and grinned at me, knowing damn well I was drooling over him.

*Yeah. You know you look good.*

Lucky for him, Paolo was there. I might have said fuck the sandwiches and had his cock in my mouth.

*Mmmhmm.*

Kaz licked his lips. "Eat, *mysh*. There will be time for other things later."

Paolo pointed at the sandwiches. "Train wreck, *mysh*."

“Yes.” I smiled. “*Did you make all of these sandwiches, baby?*”

Paolo bobbed his head with excitement.

A stern expression spread over Kaz’s face. “He must start calling you Emily.”

“Kaz, he can call me *mysh*.”

“Only I call you that.” Kaz frowned. “Do you see Maxwell or Valentina calling you *mysh*? No. They know better.”

Paolo watched us.

“You are so spoiled.” I rolled my eyes. “Drop it.”

Paolo snickered.

Kaz quirked his brows.

“Guys, thank you for making these sandwiches.” So hungry, I devoured the train wreck fast. When it was gone, I licked my fingers and munched on chips.

Paolo ate barely half of his and rushed away to play.

So greedy, I grabbed the other half of his remaining sandwich and destroyed that in minutes.

“Yes, *mysh*.” Kaz smirked, and hadn’t even touched his. “My lion cub is hungry.”

I chuckled. “Also, you can make a really good sandwich, baby.”

“Soon I will make you my Bear Paw Stew.”

I paused from licking my fingers. “Say what now?”

“You will see how yummy it is.”

“But...is the name a metaphor or does the stew truly have bear paws in it?”

Kaz winked. “Roar.”

“I can’t with you.” I shook my head and pulled the notebook out of my bag. “Alright. I figured since we have a little down time, we could discuss our wedding.”

“Yes.” Kaz gave me two thumbs up, which looked strange. I was used to him pulling triggers or slapping powerful men. Today out on the beach, this was a more relaxed Lion, and I absolutely loved this version too. He ran his gaze over me. “But, first you should take off your sun dress. I want to see that yellow bikini.”

“Focus.” I grabbed a pen. “Alright. Let’s talk about the wedding. First we should decide on—”

“The lions.”

I frowned. “Kaz, you are not serious.”

A few feet from the picnic blanket, Paolo giggled as Harlem chased after him. A bunch of seashells were in Paolo’s hands.

Happy to see him enjoying himself, I let out a long breath.

*I hope we can keep giving Paolo days like this. I’m glad Kaz is trying.*

Kaz disrupted my thoughts. “Lions represent both bravery and prosperity.”

I turned back to him. “We are not having lions at our wedding.”

“I do not see what the problem is—”

“You want them out of the cages—”

“Because they are lions and should run free—”

“Not at our wedding, baby.”

He sneered.

“Don’t do that.”

He remained silent.

“You know I like to spoil you, Kaz, but lions? Can we have some limits, please.”

The sneer softened. “Can we compromise?”

“There we go.” I snapped my fingers. “Let’s compromise. What are you thinking?”

“We can shorten it to only three lions.”

I leaned away. “Hold the fuck up. How many lions did you want at the wedding initially?”

“Ten to—”

“You are fucking crazy.”

“*Mysh*—”

“Don’t *mysh* me. You want people terrified and being chased by lions during the reception?”

“Fine.” He frowned. “One lion.”

“Okay.” I sighed. “One lion in a cage.”

“*Mysh*—”

“Oh my God. We will not have a lion roaming around our guests and us.”

“The lion must be free.”

“Now, I’m saying no lions. I can’t believe I was even considering one.”

Kaz grumbled.

“How about this?”

He eyed me.

“Once I went to a Chinese wedding in New York, two men performed a lion dance, they were dressed in huge lion costumes and I believe the dance was to give good luck to the new couple and—”

“Those are not real lions, *mysh*.”

“Then, I give up. No fucking lions.” I raised both hands in the air. “Plus, you already want several lion ice sculptures towering over people. I feel like we have the lion theme set.” I wrote lions down on the notebook and then put a long line through it.

Kaz glared at me. “If I do not get my lion, then I expect to do a lot of things to your body on our wedding night.”

I quirked my brows. “What things?”



“You will find out if I do not get my lion.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever. Let’s talk about the location. Do you have a place in Moscow that you want to have it at?”

“I do, but...”

I looked up from the notebook. “But, what?”

“This may be radical thinking on my part, *mysk*.”

“*You* being radical?” I smirked. “No way.”

“I am being serious.”

“What are you thinking? Having the wedding at a damned zoo inside a lion cage?”

He placed his hands in his lap. “Actually, I promised Lunita a wedding on the roof.”

Shock hit me. A cold shiver ran through my body. I tensed and did my best to maintain some form of composure.

“What?”

“Lunita dreamed of marrying Maxwell.”

I dropped the pen.

“And...she imagined this wedding on a roof...” He searched my face. “She also wanted flowers in her hair.”

*Like in my...dream?*

Kaz continued, “I think that...if we do this, it could be a good thing for Lunita and you. But, in the end...this is *your* wedding, not hers.”

Speechless, I looked away from him and let my view run over the blue sky. I didn’t have the language to describe how I felt. What words existed for this feeling? What response could I truly give him?

I couldn’t get mad because Lunita was me, and Kaz was accepting of the both of us. I couldn’t be happy because I felt on the outside of all of this. Never in my life had I imagined marrying Max or doing anything on a roof. In fact, the first time I had truly been on the roof was when I saw Lunita in my dream.

But, the oddest part...was that my heart warmed from the suggestion, and I couldn't truly pin point why. Was Lunita inside of my body, watching this and pushing her enjoyment of the idea into my heart? Or was it my true feelings? Did I want this...even though I had never thought of it?

“*Mysh?*”

I didn't turn to him. “When...I saw Lunita...”

“Yes.”

I gripped the side of the notebook hard. “She was dancing on the roof in a white sun dress...with flowers in her hair.”

Kaz scooted over and placed his hand on mine. “We do not have to talk about this, if you do not want to.”

“I need to.”

I stared at the notebook. “Part of me wants to ignore Lunita's existence and have you...never say her name in my presence or even bring her up...”

“And the other part?”

“The other part of me...wants to...embrace her...this...”  
My bottom lip quivered. “Deep inside of me, I know that I can't run from *this* anymore.”

“We do not have to do the roof or flowers, if you do not want to.”

My heart boomed in my ears.

Why was I terrified? What scared me so much? Was it the roof? Or was it something else?

*I need to pursue this, and figure out why.*

Swallowing, I raised my view to him. “If we have the wedding on the roof...then...”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Then, we do it in Harlem.”

He gave me a sad smile. “Where it all started?”

For some reason, I shivered in fear. “Yeah.”

“It is your decision.” He squeezed my hand. “I will give you time to think about this.”

“Alright.” I swallowed. “I’ll make a decision by the time we get back to Moscow.”

“Fine.”

I inhaled and then let out a long breath. “Kaz...you are being amazing.”

“Only because I have been in trouble a lot in Italy.” He smirked. “This is my attempt at erasing the bad with good.”

“Your accepting Paolo...” My eyes watered. “That means so much to me. How are you doing with him?”

He pursed his lips.

“What?”

He ran his fingers through his hair.

A soft chuckle left me. “Why are you being weird about answering?”

“Baba told me that Pavel is around us, making sure that I take care of his son.”

“Oh.”

He shrugged.

I looked around us. “Like...for real?”

Kaz nodded. “I think it is true.”

“Why?”

“Just trust me.”

“So...how do you feel about that?”

He went silent and put his gaze on Paolo playing with Harlem. Sand now covered most of my puppy. Some sand had even gotten into Paolo’s braids. They must have been rolling around in it. I would definitely have to redo his hair.

I directed my view back to Kaz. “You didn’t think that Pavel’s death would hurt so much?”

Kaz remained quiet.

Now it was my turn to squeeze his hand. “I’m always going to be here for you. It’s fine to be sad, Kaz. It is perfectly okay to properly mourn your cousin...your best friend. It’s even okay to feel guilt. It all would just be between you and me. That’s the benefit of having each other’s back. We love with no judgement. We hold each other when we are suffering and in pain.”

Kaz looked at me. “I love you, *mysh*.”

“I love you too.”

“And know that...wherever we have our wedding, it will be big, luxurious, and...”

“And?”

“It will have many lions.”

“I see you’re trying to get thrown off the roof.” I laughed.

Near the shoreline, Paolo shrieked with joy. “Baba!”

Harlem barked and rushed off in our direction. Paolo hurried after him, seashells falling from both hands.

I looked behind us.

Wearing a large sun hat, Baba stomped forward with a big bag in her hand. One of Kaz’s men carried a chair and picnic basket behind her.

When she got close, I waved. “Hey, Baba.”

“Hey Baba?” She frowned. “Yet, no beach invite from the Lion or the Mouse?”

Kaz groaned in annoyance.

She shook her head. “Does Baba not like the beach? The sun? The ocean?”

Kaz growled, “This was my attempt at a family picnic—”

“Is Baba not family?” She gestured for the man to put the chair next to me. “Does Baba not like picnics?”

Kaz looked at me as if wanting help.

I chuckled.

Paolo got to Baba and hugged her legs. “*Swim, Baba! Swim!*”

“Okay. Okay.” Baba placed her bag next to the chair. “*You must give us some time. The Lion is about to apologize.*”

Paolo stepped back and widened his eyes. Then, he turned his view to Kaz.

The Lion scowled. “I was not about to apologize.”

Baba glared at him.

Kaz sighed. “Sorry. Next time you will get a proper invite.”

“That is all Baba needed.”

I smiled. “Do you have any visions of the days to come?”

“No, but I did see the news.” She glared at Kaz. “The U.S., Britain, France, Albania, Norway, and Ireland called for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council.”

Kaz shrugged. “And?”

“When will the missile’s coordinates be changed?”

“When Fela’s head is separated from his body.”

Baba sighed. “I worry that this move could cause a great conflict between Russia and other countries.”

“And my only worry is keeping my mouse and unborn son safe.”

Baba directed her attention to me. “Take control of this and do not let *him* have the missile pointed at Nigeria for too long.”

I nodded.

Baba took off her sundress and headed off with Paolo and Harlem.

Kaz rested his gaze on my breasts. “Back to that bikini.”

“Wow. I thought we were making wedding plans.”

He licked his lips. “Get rid of that dress.”

Slowly, I grabbed the sides of the dress and slipped it off. The cool breeze brushed against my skin.

Kaz grunted. “Tiny. Just how I like it.”

“Thank you for this day.”

“I want more days like this.” He rose from the blanket and held his hand out. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Baba has the puppy and boy. Now it is my time to eat.”

I grinned. “You already had a yummy sandwich.”

“Now I want your pussy.”

Loving the idea of his mouth on me, I took his hand and got up. “This was an amazing surprise.”

Kaz guided me away.

“But, I feel bad that everyone is out, trying to fix this situation with Fela and we are just chilling on the beach.”

“Get used to it, *mysh*. You are on the top, not at the bottom. That means that at times, others *do*, while you relax.”

Instead of heading back to the hotel, he led us further down the beach.

I glanced his way. “Where are we going?”

“I have a special surprise waiting for you.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, *mysh*.”

“Well, whatever it is, I am down. You have outdone yourself today.” I squeezed his hand. “I love how...you have really embraced having Paolo around and...thank you for talking to me about Pavel’s...ghost.”

Kaz shrugged. “Besides Pavel haunting me, Lunita was pretty adamant about accepting Paolo. Therefore, I gave in. I do not want to see her popping up again.”

I widened my eyes. “Me either.”

“Kazimir! Kazimir!” Wassily jogged to us, holding a phone. “The Mouse has a phone call.”

We stopped.

I reached for the device.

Kaz took the phone, before I could touch it. “Who is on the phone?”

Wassily frowned. “Fela.”







# Chapter 43

## Management Lessons

### Blue

After traveling by helicopters, we were back in the Calabria region.

Maxwell drove a black Maserati Ghibli through the narrow streets of Camini.

I sat in the passenger seat.

Boris stretched out in the back.

I prayed no Italian cops would stop us. The vehicle already smelled of marijuana mixed with the odor of fresh leather. Maxwell had a huge bag of marijuana lying next to the gear stick.

Ahead of us, David drove in a van full of Brotherhood and Harlem Crew.

Following behind us, the French packed two vans.

The ride had been peaceful with Maxwell playing some American hip hop music.

Then, Boris decided to bring up my unintentional love triangle. Intrigued, Maxwell shut the music off. I caught them up about the kisses, roses, and roof date.

Next, Boris tried to offer his advice.

“Naw, Blue. Don’t listen to Boris.” Maxwell clutched the wheel with one hand and smoked a blunt with the other. “If you try to date them both in secret, then you roll into murky moral territory.”

“But, if you do not keep it secret, then someone will die.” Boris chuckled in the back.

We sped past rugged buildings covered in graffiti.

“Doesn’t matter.” Maxwell blew a smoky circle. “Keep it honest. If you end up finally picking one of them, then you have a meaningful future ahead of you.”

Boris chuckled again. “Or they end up killing each other.”

I glanced over my shoulder and frowned. “This is not funny.”

“Sorry, Blue.” Boris tried to purse his lips and then laughed again. “This is just hilarious.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why is this funny to you?”

“Because you are the most awkward person I know when it comes to relationships. Half the time you never even realize they are trying to ask you out.”

“What? People never ask me out.”

“They do. You just always change the conversation to guns. Which scares most guys away.” Boris chuckled. “And now King David *and* Giorgio are going to try and get you out of your shell. This is going to be entertaining.”

“It will not.” I looked back at the road.

Several women strolled along the road, wearing skimpy outfits and smoking cigarettes.

“Shit. I won’t lie, Blue. It’s already entertaining to me.” Maxwell took a puff of his blunt. Thick lines of smoke left his nostrils and filled the car.

I lowered the window.

Maxwell smirked. “Yo, Boris. Did you see how David looked in the meeting when Louis said Blue had to put on clothes?”

Boris’s laughter rose in the car.

I blushed. “Giorgio was overexaggerating. I had on a towel.”

“Towel?” Maxwell blew out more smoke. “Shit. David is still going to beat Giorgio’s ass for that.”

“But I was covered with the towel.”

“It’s a Dick Thang, Blue. David got to at least choke Giorgio now.” Maxwell handed me the blunt. “You’re going to need this.”

Sighing, I grabbed it. “So...teach me about managing.”

“And you are getting advice from *Maxwell*?” Boris laughed some more.

“Fuck you, Boris.” Maxwell put up his middle finger. “I’ve got mad knowledge on this. You should have seen me in Harlem. I had tons of chicks on my dick. It was a carousel of beautiful women—all shapes, ages, and sizes. And not one cat fight or lie. They knew about each other.”

“Teach me how to do that.” I placed the blunt to my lips and inhaled a mouthful of smoke. It was hard to not cough. Exhaling, I shook my head. My eyes watered.

“First thing you have to do, Blue, is tell each guy that you aren’t seeking an exclusive relationship.”

I coughed a little and then cleared my throat. “Would it really be that easy?”

“Either they are down, or they are not. It is what it is. They don’t proceed like you want them to, then point to the fucking road,” Maxwell continued. “Frankly, you need time to see their competitive instincts anyway. Last thing you want to do is give the pussy to a punk ass motherfucker.”

Boris snorted.

I reached my hand to the back, giving the blunt to Boris. “Since everything is so funny to you. What is *your* advice, Boris?”

Boris grabbed the blunt. “Find out who the third person is. That is more important than trying to manage David and Giorgio.”

“It does not even have to be a big mystery.” I scowled at Maxwell. “Will you tell me who it is?”

“Man, I’m out of that shit.” Maxwell waved me away. “Look at Boris smoking. Usually, he is trying to be the top boy scout and shit.”

“After spending time with the French,” Boris coughed. “I have learned to enjoy myself as much as possible. You just never know when a bullet can take you away.”

“Exactly, Boris.” Maxwell nodded. “Loosen the fuck up.”

I frowned. “Please, tell me.”

“You know who it is. You’re just not taking the time to put it together.” Maxwell tapped the side of his head. “Figure it out, Blue.”

I shook my head.

“Anyway, when you fuck with more than one person, you have to get your scheduling together. Decide in your mind which one will get odd days and which one will get even ones \_\_\_”

“Giorgio should get the odd days.” Boris leaned forward and handed the blunt back to Maxwell.

“Good point, Boris. He’s an odd dude, so odd days.” Maxwell bobbed his head. “Next, you have to think about how your other relationships may be impacted by fucking with two dudes.”

I quirked my brows. “Like...the Brotherhood’s thoughts on my dating a Pansy?”

“Exactly. May want to keep that shit secret around the Lion.”

I sighed. “He already said that he was Team David.”

“See. That’s just Em being in his head. She’s all about teams. She used to do that shit with my chicks. Certain ones she was a cheerleader for. Others she side-eyed.” Maxwell inhaled his blunt and then exhaled. “Don’t listen to the Lion. He’s going to support his boy the whole time.”

I gritted my teeth.

“Anyway...back to management...you don’t need to just manage their dicks, but their minds and *your* time.”

“Manage their minds?”

“They will both have *different* needs. You can’t treat each one the same. Plus, you’ll also have to organize your time and energy when showing them love.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “This is a lot.”

“Eh, fucking with more than one lover is not for the weak, baby.” Maxwell handed me the blunt. “Either you’re about that life or you die trying.”

I took the blunt and got one last puff.

“Now this is the worst one.” He held up one finger. “You will have to decide what you’ll do if you encounter one lover while spending time with the other.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “I never want to be in the same room alone with the both of them.”

Maxwell shrugged. “Unless...you want a threesome, then you do want that to happen.”

“Threesome?” Boris roared with laughter.

“Would you be quiet?” I rolled my eyes and inhaled some of the blunt. I made sure not to get too much this time. Already, I was beginning to feel light-headed. “Anyway, I would not have a threesome.”

Maxwell eyed me. “Why not?”

Boris chuckled. “Because she is already awkward in bed.”

I took another puff of the blunt.

“Wait. Hold up.” Maxwell widened his eyes. “Did you two fuck?”

Boris and I went silent.

“Oh, shit!” Maxwell hit the dashboard and laughed. “Wait until I tell, Em.”

I turned around and glared at Boris. “I thought we were going to keep that a secret?”

“I did not say anything.”

I handed him the blunt. “I was not awkward during our... time.”

Taking the blunt, Boris gave me a sad smile. “You accidentally head-butted me three times and kneed me in the crotch afterwards which...I still do not know how you did that.”

“Ouch, Blue.” Maxwell shook his head. “Listen. You can’t be head-butting dudes during the threesome—”

“I am not having a threesome—”

“You might.” Maxwell winked. “Tell them that you want a threesome for your birthday.”

Boris coughed and then laughed.

“Might be dope.” Maxwell bobbed his head. “They’ll be competing and shit, trying to hit it better than the other one, doing all types of crazy dick angles to make you scream, and they will be battling to show each other who can make you cum louder.”

I opened my mouth in shock.

Up ahead, the vans slowed down and turned into a large parking lot.

“Put that blunt out, Boris.” Maxwell followed the vans. “Looks like lesson time is over. Guns ready?”

Boris and I spoke in unison, “Yes.”

Minutes later, Maxwell parked and then looked at me. “Don’t worry, Blue. I got your back for today, but after this... I’m taking the training wheels off, and you’ll have to ride that bike down the street on your own.”

“What?”

“Understood?”

“No.”

“Good.” He left the car.

Utterly confused, I got out of the car too.

*Well...at least...Maxwell will be my training wheels today...I hope that is a good thing.*

The three of us headed off.

David already stood in the center of a circle of thirty men. They were combined of the Brotherhood and Harlem Crew.

We walked up to them right as he finished handing out orders.

“Remember.” David scanned their faces. “We do not want the twins or Fara dead. If you spot them, follow them and contact me. Do not try to grab them unless you have a clear opportunity that will not involve violence.”

Most of the men nodded, then all of them headed away.

Maxwell came to my side. “We have the twins’ location?”

David nodded. “Misha’s people think they spotted the twins in this village’s marina, along with Fela’s first wife, Fara. However, they are not certain. Meanwhile, it appears that if it is them...then they are loading up a yacht to head away.”

Maxwell crossed his arms over his chest. “And what about Fela’s daughter, Ufuoma?”

“Let us wait for the Pansies to arrive, before I explain.” David put his gaze on me.

I stirred and looked away, feeling uncomfortable.

*Boris is right. I can be awkward.*

The French parked and left their vans.

In minutes, they gathered around us.

Giorgio tried to stand next to me.

Maxwell switched over to that side. “Sorry, man. Blue has to focus today.”

Giorgio hit me with an intense gaze. “There will be time later.”

I blushed.

Boris stepped to my left as if helping Maxwell do the... training wheels...thing.

I put my view on David.

He glared at Giorgio. “Get in line, Pansy.”



“Pansy?” Giorgio touched his shirt with one of his blue-gloved hands. “Are you talking to me, little toy prince.”

The French chuckled.

“What did you say?” David began to walk over.

Maxwell and Jean-Pierre got between them.

Then, the Butcher spoke first, “Gentlemen, the time for fighting is not now. Let us end one war, before starting another.”

David backed away. “Next time.”

Giorgio held out his gloved hands. “Shall we schedule an appointment?”

Boris laughed.

Maxwell walked back to me and whispered, “That was an opportunity for management, Blue.”

I kept my voice low. “How?”

He groaned. “Tell them motherfuckers to stop tripping.”

I blinked.

David clapped his hand several times. “Alright. Let us get on with it.”

We all gazed his way.

“First of all, welcome to the isolated town of Cinquefrondi.” David gestured around us. “We are in the southern region of Calabria. Due to violence and younger generations wanting to live in the city, everybody left. For a long time, this town was mainly full of old, abandoned houses.”

I checked out the jagged buildings near us.

Maxwell spoke, “Town still looks abandoned to me.”

“Fifty percent of the town’s properties are still empty.” David placed his hands in his pockets. “In recent years, migrants have started taking over and reviving the area.”

Jean-Pierre frowned. “Which means that Black Axe has a heavy presence here?”

David nodded. “I’m sure they know we are here.”

I moved my view up to the windows, making sure nobody was by one and pointing a gun at us.

As if David caught that, he turned my way. “The Brotherhood’s snipers are on the roofs. Even more are throughout these empty buildings and on guard.”

“Then, this will be easy-peasy.” Maxwell rubbed his hands. “A quick nab and grab.”

“Not so quick.” David directed his attention to Maxwell. “Misha explained that once Russia faced the missile in Nigeria’s direction, Ufuoma went silent. Her phone and laptops are off, possibly even damaged. No credit cards have been used. For the past hour, her voice or even mention of her name has not come on any communication in this area.”

Maxwell shrugged. “Smart on her part.”

“It is.” Jean-Pierre nodded. “We probably should have counted on that.”

Maxwell leaned his head to the side. “Then, what’s the plan?”

“We need some people to check her place. If she is not there, then wait. She may return.”

The Butcher raised one finger. “We will take on that job.”

“I will send the location.” David turned to us. “The marina that the twins and Fara were spotted at is only three blocks from her place. Ufuoma has a yacht there as well as her mother. Several guards are already on the vessels, patrolling with AK-47s.”

“Yo.” Maxwell rubbed his chin. “I bet Fela saw the missile move, and realized that he should get his wife and daughter out of the area.”

“I am thinking the same thing.” David pointed his way. “That is why I think *you* should be near the Marina. There is a

hotel on the same side with a perfect view of their vessels. It has a bar.”

“Blue, Boris, and I can hang at the bar, looking like tourists and shit. Lots of people of color are around here, right?”

David nodded. “Nigerians, Gambians, Eritreans, and Guineans represent the largest number of African migrants in this area.”

Maxwell asked, “Many work with Black Axe?”

“Not that many in this area. Black Axe keeps their business operations in other places.”

“Alright. I see.” Maxwell lowered his hand. “Ufuoma didn’t want to shit where she ate.”

The Butcher twisted his face in disgust.

David pulled out his phone. “I will be in contact with everyone. Keep me updated. If you see Ufuoma, Fara, or the twins, let me know. I will send an army that way.”

“Hells yes. Come on Team Sexy.” Maxwell winked at Boris and me. “We’re heading to the bar.”

*Team Sexy?*





# Chapter 44

## Team Sexy

### Blue

Maxwell drove us to the hotel.

It was less than five minutes away.

He parked us on the hotel's side, sandwiching us between a yellow sedan and an old black jeep. "Alright, Team Sexy."

The hotel was a shabby peach-colored building.

I scanned the area.

The sun was out, the sky was blue, and the air smelled like cut grass. A couple of kids kicked around a football on the opposite side of the parking lot.

The marina resided on the left full of yachts and other vessels. The marina was a strip of white, barnacle-covered docks jutting over shimmering blue water. A canopy of tall, thin pine trees hugged the shore, like guardians against wind and rain. The waterline was tranquil, except for the wake of the occasional speed boat or jet ski. Further down was another series of docks and piers, bait shops and boat rentals.

I returned my view to the luxury yachts. There were seven of them. The enormous yachts appeared modern, white and elegant. Each had dark tinted windows and two or three decks. Their polished exteriors reflected the ocean and the sun. Each had a name, but they were written in foreign languages.

"Check the third yacht on the left." Maxwell tapped his window. "You see the brothers with the Ak-47s?"

I caught two brown-skinned men on that yacht, talking to each other. They kept their Ak-47s at their sides. One smoked a cigarette. The other laughed.

I bobbed my head. "I see them."

“That must be Fara’s or Ufuoma’s yacht.”

“There are men on the smaller yacht to the left,” Boris said. “They quickly walked by like they were patrolling but I think I spotted a gun.”

I looked at that one. “Maybe, that’s Ufuoma’s yacht since it is smaller. Perhaps, her mother would have the bigger one.”

“I don’t know.” Maxwell shrugged. “Ufuoma is making moves for her father. She might have the bigger yacht to ship guns and drugs. That’s how I would do it if my daughter were in the life.”

I blinked. “Would you let your daughter be in this life?”

“Never. Too much blood and violence.” Maxwell pocketed his keys, reached in the back, and grabbed one of the many fedoras next to Boris. “If I have a little girl, she’s going to do fancy shit. Be a ballerina or something like Misha’s chick.”

I watched Maxwell put on the fedora. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going in disguise.” The black brim of the fedora shaded his eyes. “Fela definitely knows me.” Maxwell checked his reflection in the mirror and then placed sunglasses on his face. “You should put a hat on too.”

“That will make us look suspicious.”

“I’m sure they know that one of Em’s people has blue hair.” Maxwell faced me. “Grab a hat from the back.”

I glanced behind me and reached for the fedora closest to me. It was thick and white with a black band around the edge.

Already wearing a tan fedora, Boris pulled out a gold gun.

*What?*

I picked up my hat and studied Boris’s gun.

The barrel and trigger guard was gold plated. The handle looked to be polished mahogany and had skulls and crossbones carved in them.

Boris checked the bullets, nodded, and then put the weapon in his holster. "I am ready."

I frowned. "Where did you get that gun?"

Boris put on a black coat and buttoned it up. "Maxwell bought it for me."

"Why?"

"Because I deserved it." Boris winked, opened the door, and left.

I looked at Maxwell. "I want a new gun."

"Blue, you already got three people after you." Maxwell frowned. "Stop being greedy."

Sighing, I put on the hat.

Maxwell remained on guard and looked around. "We're in enemy territory, so keep your eyes open and your guns hidden, but close."

I zipped up my light jacket to conceal the two guns in my holster.

"And hurry up. I need to piss." Maxwell left the car and shut the door.

I piled out and followed Maxwell and Boris to the hotel.

As we headed there, a man in a tattered, long black coat shuffled past. He had pale skin, black hair, and a nice face. He must have been in his early thirties. He gave us a wide berth and avoided gazing our way.

Yet, there was something off about him.

Slowing up, I glanced over my shoulder.

A silver bat hung out the bottom of the man's coat.

*Who is that?*

"Blue, pay attention." Maxwell was already at the hotel restaurant's door.

Boris stood next to him.

I hurried over. "The guy that walked past us has a bat."



“Good for him.” Maxwell opened the door. “How about focus on the motherfuckers with the AK-47s.”

*Good point.*

We entered the hotel’s restaurant entrance.

With yachts across from it, I expected a better setting. However, the place had the feel of a neighborhood tavern with a few dedicated drinkers. It was dark and dingy—stained brown carpet, pea-green walls, twenty tables, and several black chairs faded by decades of bottoms sliding on their seats. A few lights dangled from the ceiling. Acoustic music played in the background. A stale beer scent rode the cigarette smoke swirling in the air.

We continued toward the bar. It was made of oak. The stools were hardwood with no cushions.

“Order us some drinks. I want a double whiskey on the rocks.” Maxwell headed off. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

Boris and I sat down.

The bartender wore a dingy white shirt with a greasy rag lying over his right shoulder. Of course, he spoke in Italian.

Boris fumbled around with some Italian words. Surely, he did better than I would have.

After a few minutes of back and forth, the bartender nodded and left.

I eyed Boris. “You ordered?”

“I think I did.”

“Since when do you know Italian?”

“While you were being romanced, I have been studying ways I can be more helpful for Emily.”

I frowned. “Do you really think I am sexually awkward?”

Boris curved his lips into a smile. “I do, but I like it.”

I shook my head and assessed the rest of the space.

There were only two other customers in the place. Two women with dark brown complexions. I guessed they were in

their late twenties. Talking with each other, they sat at a table near a window, sipping wine and nibbling on bruschetta.

I checked them out, making sure they didn't have any signs of being involved with Black Axe.

*No guns or other weapons. Unless they have them in their purses.*

Both women looked to be shorter than me. One had long, black hair past her shoulders. The other had tight, kinky curls that bounced around her ears, whenever she laughed.

Boris put his attention on them.

My phone buzzed.

I looked away, pulled it out, and answered, "Yes?"

David's smooth voice sounded. "Did you all make it to the hotel restaurant across from the Marina?"

My heartbeats increased. "We did."

"Any danger?"

"Not yet, but we spotted the yachts with the guards and AK-47s."

"Alright. Two minutes ago, Misha captured a picture of Ufuoma with the twins and her mother. They were leaving a store a few blocks away. He will be sending the image to your phones."

"Okay. Do you think they are heading this way?"

"I do. If you spot them, call me."

"I will."

"And Blue..."

"Yes?"

"Soon...we *will* talk about Giorgio."

I swallowed. "I just...want to clarify that I was not naked with Giorgio."

"I know."

“You do?”

“I watched the footage.”

I shrieked. “There is a camera in my room?”

“The Lion wanted cameras in all rooms.”

*So...you know we kissed...*

David continued, “Baba used to tell me that, when love is not madness, it is not love. I never understood what she meant. Even when I thought I was in love years ago.”

I tensed.

“Now I truly understand what she was saying.”

“David—”

“We will talk about it more later.” David hung up.

I widened my eyes, not excited about that conversation. I did my best to calm myself.

*Shit. I will just manage...him...somehow...*

I thought back to all the things Maxwell told me. He explained that if David or Giorgio didn't proceed like I wanted them to, then I was to point to the road. Unfortunately, I didn't want to point to any road. I desperately yearned for it to somehow all work out. Maybe, I was crazy to think it could. Perhaps, I was in fact being greedy.

*David will have to understand. Right?*

Still, my stomach twisted with nervousness.

Boris nudged my arm. “Look behind you.”

I checked over my shoulder. Maxwell was back from the bathroom and now sitting at the table with the two women. Already, his arm was over the chair of the woman with the kinky curls.

Loudly chuckling, he gestured for us to come over.

*What is Maxwell doing?*

Boris and I left our stools and headed to the table.

When we approached, Maxwell grinned. “Yo. Grab a chair. These two beautiful ladies are from the U.S.”

Boris got two chairs and brought them over to the table. Grinning, he sat right next to the woman with long, black hair and held out his hand. “My name is Boris. What is yours?”

She shook his. “Suzanne. I’m from Los Angeles. Have you ever been Boris?”

“I have been to California, but not Los Angeles.”

I twisted my face in confusion.

*When did you go to California?*

I lowered into my chair. At least, my chair faced the window. This gave me a great view of the yachts.

Maxwell hit his woman with his signature panty wetting smile. “My bad, beautiful. I didn’t get your name.”

She chuckled. “Eve.”

“Eve? That makes so much sense.” Maxwell took off his sunglasses. “You damn sure look like the first woman created by God.”

She laughed.

Maxwell licked his lips. “Do you have a man, Eve?”

“I’m newly divorced.”

Suzanne chimed in, “She finally got rid of that idiot controlling husband.”

Eve shook her head at her friend. “Hey. I married when I was super young.”

Maxwell raised his eyebrows. “Did you two have kids?”

“Yes.” Eve nodded.

“Oh shit.” Maxwell bobbed his head. “I love kids. Who’s watching those babies now?”

“No one.” Eve laughed. “They are grown and in college.”

“What?” Maxwell held out his hands. “Woman, how old are you?”

“Forty-two.”

Maxwell waved her away. “Baby, I don’t believe that.”

I put my view back on the window. More men were on both yachts. Their weapons were no longer at their sides, but in their hands. Their faces darted around as if searching for someone.

*Do they know we’re here?*

Boris’s voice disturbed me. “Suzanne, how old are you?”

“Thirty-five.”

Maxwell whistled. “When I say Black don’t crack... Jesus.”

I returned my attention to the window.

That odd man from earlier with the bat, suddenly walked by. His long black coat swung around him. Some black and white item was tucked in his side pocket and half peeking out. Continuing to walk by, he gave a quick glance at us through the window and then hurried his steps.

*Who is that? And is he an enemy?*

I leaned forward and watched him head away. That bat still dangled under his coat. I caught the tip of it swaying back and forth.

A minute later, he was out of my view.

Eve tapped Maxwell’s shoulder. “And how old are you?”

Maxwell licked his lips again. “Old enough, baby. Old enough.”

“Yes.” Boris nodded. “We are very old.”

“I don’t know about that.” Suzanne chuckled. “I may need to see some identification.”

“Come on, baby.” Maxwell winked. “Black don’t crack for men either.”

Boris nodded. “We are older than the both of you.”

Maxwell frowned. “Chill, man. Let me talk.”

Grinning, I checked the other people walking by our window. Besides the one guy in the long, black coat, everyone else appeared normal and unarmed. There was a man holding his little girl. A couple strolling hand-in-hand. And an older man walking a tiny black dog.

“So,” Maxwell leaned closer to Eve. “I have this breathtaking suite some miles from here. Got the sweetest smelling pink lemon tree in there, just waiting for your attention.”

I shook my head.

“I could helicopter you over.” Maxwell gestured to Suzanne. “And you too, sweetie. We can do a little double date situation. Boris and me. You and Eve.”

Suzanne smirked. “I still need to see identification.”

Eve smiled at me. “And what is your name?”

*Yeah, guys. Remember me? Blue?*

I looked away from the window. “My name is Blue—”

“She’s our younger sister.” Maxwell lowered his voice. “Blue’s a little special so we are super protective of her.”

*Special?*

“You know what I’m saying?” Maxwell winked at them. “She’s always with us because we love her so much. We keep her close.”

The bartender brought over our drinks. Chocolate milkshakes filled three glasses. Each had a straw. Whipped cream and sprinkles topped them.

The bartender nodded and then left.

Maxwell pointed to the glasses. “Man, what the hell is this?”

Boris frowned. “I thought I ordered whiskey.”

“Come on. These ladies already think we’re young.”

The women laughed.

Smirking, I took my milkshake.

“I am still working on my Italian.” Boris picked up his milkshake and began to drink it.

Maxwell waved his hand. “Naw, man. Don’t drink that. Go get us some respectable alcohol.”

Cursing under his breath in Russian, Boris rose and left.

I sipped on my shake. Cold chocolate danced over my tongue.

*Delicious.*

Maxwell glanced at Suzanne and then Eve. “So, why are you two in Italy?”

Eve spoke, “I’m a doctor. After my divorce, I wanted to check off items on my bucket list. One of them was travel. Another was volunteering for Doctors Without Borders.”

“What’s Doctors Without Borders?” Maxwell asked.

“It’s an international humanitarian medical organization. Non-governmental. Most of its projects are in conflict zones,” Eve said. “I’m in this area to provide medical care to the migrants and refugees that have landed in the Italian port of Reggio Calabria.”

“Damn, you’re an angel type?” Maxwell whistled again. “You don’t know this, but I’m a sucker for a woman who protects and takes care of others.”

I looked at her. “How long have you been volunteering here?”

“A month. I plan to extend my time. So many need help.”

“Interesting.” I placed my glass down and checked the window view.

No one walked by.

However, several huge trucks parked near the yachts. Men and women in black utility jumpsuits began unloading the trucks and carrying huge wooden boxes to the yacht. It took at least four people to lift each box.

*What is going on now?*

Eve continued, “Thousands of men, women, and children arrive here, fleeing conflict, persecution, or other serious human rights violations.”

Boris returned with two glasses of whiskey and sat down.

“There we go. Good job, man.” Maxwell clapped. “By the way, ladies, we are handling your tab. Order anything.”

I turned to Suzanne. “You’re a doctor too?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m a specialized security executive. I just came to visit my bestie.”

My phone buzzed.

Boris asked Suzanne something, but I didn’t catch it as I pulled my phone out.

This time it wasn’t a phone call.

An unknown number sent a text.

*This must be from Misha.*

I pressed on it.

An image greeted my eyes.

In the picture, four people walked out of a store.

I spotted the twins instantly. I remembered them from when Emily met with Fela on the beach.

The male twin had on a long, money green leather trench coat that concealed most of his jeans. The coat bulged on the side, telling me he had a big weapon under it.

The female twin wore a green pants suit. She had her holsters on display. A green Ak-47 was attached to her right hip and a gold and green handgun was on the left.

*Nice guns. I’m taking those from you.*

An older woman strolled on her right. She had beautiful gray dreadlocks that swept into an updo. Very stylish, she wore a yellow dress.

*This must be Fara.*



And next to her, I knew the woman had to be Ufuoma. She donned tailored black pants, a strapless yellow top, and black heels. A gun holster was on her hip, but I couldn't figure out what type of gun from this angle.

I tapped Maxwell's arm, taking him away from his conversation with Eve. "We have a picture of Ufuoma and Fara."

"Good," he whispered. "You caught the trucks being unloaded by the yachts?"

I nodded, more surprised that he saw them. I figured that he had been too busy talking to the women.

"Got to be weapons. Fela is planning something." Maxwell leaned in closer. "Keep the conversation with these women. We're blending in pretty nicely."

"Here's the picture." I handed him the phone.

Maxwell grabbed it, looked down, opened his mouth, and froze.

I blinked. "What? Do you recognize them?"

Boris laughed with the women.

Maxwell shook his head. "No fucking way."

"What?"

Maxwell leaned back my way and pointed at Ufuoma. "What do you think is hanging from her ears?"

*Huh?*

I checked the image and stared at her earrings. "Silver stars. I guess."

"Exactly. Stars." He gave me back the phone. "That's my wife."

"What?" I was about to laugh, but movement caught me on the right.

A group of people began walking by our window.

I tensed, recognizing all of them.

The twins, Fara, and Ufuoma. An additional ten men in yellow and black followed them.

*Fuck. Fuck.*

Maxwell whispered, “Keep it chill, Blue.”

I swallowed, wishing I had on sunglasses.

They continued forward, engaged in conversation. Then, Ufuoma as if sensing us turned our way and stopped right in front of our window. Meanwhile, Fara continued walking with some of the men.

But the twins and other men waited next to Ufuoma.

*Oh shit. Oh shit. Can she still see my blue hair?*

Suzanne laughed at something Boris said.

Ufuoma tilted her head to the side.

*Fuck.*

Maxwell did a fake chuckle. “Yeah, man. So crazy. Don’t you think so, Blue?”

“Y-yes.” I bobbed my head “So funny.”

Then, everything happened so fast.

Ufuoma reached for her gun.

Maxwell yelled, “Duck!”

Ufuoma aimed at me and fired.

I lunged away and collapsed on the floor.

Glass shattered.

The women screamed.

Bullets rang out.

Blood sprayed around me in a fine mist, but I didn’t know who’s blood. The smell of gunpowder burst into the air.

On the floor, I crawled as fast as I could, hoping Boris, Maxwell, and the women didn’t get hit. The stained carpet burned against my palms.

Yelling sounded in a foreign language that I didn't understand.

*Goddamn it!*

More bullets fired. Their echoing cracks reverberated off the walls.

As soon as I could find a safe place, I was going to blast the shit out of them.

*Fuck!*





# Chapter 45

## Shots Fired

### Blue

Bullets whizzed loudly through the air, piercing wood, shattering glass, and shredding leather seats.

I managed to crawl into a booth and hide under the table. Sweat stung my eyes.

*Dear God!*

Blinking, I zipped down my jacket and pulled out the blue cross dangling around my neck.

*Lord, please protect me.*

I kissed the cross, grabbed both guns from their holsters, and clutched them to my chest.

*Please.*

Hoping everyone was okay, I scanned the area behind me and searched for any Black Axe soldiers.

*Fuck.*

The bartender's dead body lay over the bar. A fountain of blood spurted from a gaping wound in his throat, splashing down his face and onto the floor.

A dozen bullet holes riddled the wall behind him. Wet red splatters of blood painted the bar. A crack spread out in a star-like pattern across the mirror.

*Shit.*

I peeked around the booth to check the table where I had been.

*Please, God. Are they alive?*

I didn't see Maxwell or Boris. Unfortunately, what I did see...made an ache spread through my chest like I'd been

stabbed over and over.

Sobbing, Suzanne knelt on the floor, cradling Eve's convulsing body.

*No!*

Blood bubbled out of three bullet holes in Eve's chest.

*It's our fault that she's dead.*

Sadness gripped my heart.

*We should have never talked to them.*

Tears streamed down Suzanne's face. "E-eve, n-nooooo. Nooooo—"

"Suzanne, come here," Boris muttered from the side, but I couldn't see where he was.

*Boris is alive!*

Quickly, ten of Ufuoma's men climbed through the shattered window, wearing black and yellow suits.

*Shit.*

A few scanned the bar.

I stayed hidden and readied my guns.

*Shit. Shit.*

One of them spotted Suzanne and fired. Bullets tore through the back of her head. She dropped to the ground. Her hand twitched next to Eve's body.

*Life is so cruel.*

Those Black Axe soldiers crept past the women's dead bodies.

Ufuoma remained on the other side of the window, scanning the space. Each of her arms was outstretched. Each hand held a gun and was pointed in my direction.

*I am going to fucking kill you, Ufuoma!*

Too bad, I had to deal with the soldiers first. I aimed at the closet man to me and fired.

The first one fell into a table.

*Son of a Bitch.*

I glanced back by the window. Ufuoma disappeared. Either she lowered and hid or she ran to another entrance.

*Goddamn it.*

The other soldiers frantically searched for where my bullet had come from.

Yet, none ran to cover.

Inhaling as much courage as I could, I leaned back out and shot the second guy in the head.

A third one turned and tried to dive behind a booth. I shot him in the throat.

Black Axe soldiers scrambled, jumping for cover and shoving tables and chairs out of the way. Someone else got the fourth and fifth guys.

Probably Boris.

*Is Maxwell okay? Please, tell me he is still alive.*

I shot at a few guys that had ducked behind an overturned table and missed all of them.

*Damn it!*

Then, everyone stopped moving for what seemed like an eternity. Tension gathered in my shoulders. I tried to keep my breathing down.

The only sounds were of dripping blood and the ticking of the clock near the bar.

Continuing to aim, I leaned back into my hidden space.

Suddenly, glass cracked on my right like someone was stepping over it.

*Where did that come from?*

It sounded like it was behind me.

Slowly, I inched back, searching for the source of the noise.



My heart boomed in my ears.

For a second, I thought I was hearing things.

Then, the sound came again.

*Definitely, behind the bar.*

Shivers raced down my spine. I kept both fingers on the triggers and watched that area, waiting to see who it could be.

The male twin popped his head up.

*Got you.*

Fast, I pulled the trigger. The bullet sped out and hit him in the forehead. Blood gushed out of his skull.

A woman's high-pitched screams pierced the air.

It must have been his sister.

*She's close to him.*

I readied for her to pop up too.

*Come on.*

I gripped the guns hard.

*Don't you want revenge?*

Screaming, the female twin jumped up and peppered the area several feet across from me with automatic gunfire. An arc of bullets flashed out of the chamber. Tears and mascara streaked down her cheeks. Her face was contorted into a mask of anger and hatred.

Thankfully, she had no idea where I was.

*God, help me.*

I aimed for her head.

She moved so fast. I only got her in the shoulder.

She screamed and hid.

But, now the Black Axe soldiers knew exactly where I was.

Waves of bullets raked my area's table, snapping the table's legs in half and carving up the side of the leather booth.

*Ah!*

I scooted back so fast, my butt burned.

*Jesus!*

More shots fired, but not in my direction. All I could hope for was that Boris was covering me.

Men cried out in pain.

*But, is Maxwell okay?*

The last thing I wanted to do was tell Emily that something had happened to him.

*Please, God. Get us out of this.*

More shots echoed in the space. Gunpowder residue puffed on the air and it seared my nostrils and stung my eyes.

Over the firing, Maxwell screamed out, "Blue, you good!?"

Relief crashed over me. "Yes!"

Shots rang out as if they were trying to get Maxwell.

Terror ripped through me.

*Don't you fucking hurt him.*

My heart thrashed in my chest.

Then, a foreign language rose in the air.

*Wait. Is that French?*

I peeked out from the booth.

Louis stood by the window and sprayed bullets from a machine gun, blowing bodies apart. Chunks of gore exploded in the air.

*Okay!*

Adrenaline and fear pumped through my veins. I rushed away from the booth and crawled to overturned tables closer to the bar.

Black Axe returned fire at Louis.

He rushed out of the way.

One soldier stood up to go after him.

I aimed, but someone else shot him in the head.

*Okay.*

I went back to scrambling away and getting as close as I could to the bar.

I wanted to get that damned female twin.

*Then, I will shoot Ufuoma.*

It was hard to breathe. The air was thick with gunpowder. It burned my nose and stung my eyes.

More gunfire erupted behind me.

I continued toward the bar.

When I got to the side, I peeked around the corner.

The twin held her brother in her arms and rocked him back and forth.

*There you go.*

I aimed at her.

Suddenly, a bullet zipped by, almost getting me in the eye.

I jumped back.

*What?*

On my right, Ufuoma ducked her head out of the restaurant's kitchen door, aimed at me again, and shot.

*Oh shit!*

I fell back, slamming into a chair and almost getting shot in the side.

*Fucking bitch!*

She aimed again and pulled the trigger.

*No!*

My body tensed. I saw my death rushing toward me.

But, her gun simply clicked.

No bullet came out.

I almost vomited all over the floor.

*Thank you!*

Barely recovering, I raised my gun and pointed at her head.

*Bye, bitch!*

She looked up from her gun and widened her eyes.

Right as my finger tightened around the trigger, someone knocked my hand away.

*What?!*

The bullet ricocheted off the floor and hit the ceiling.

My gun fell to the ground.

*Who did that?*

I aimed the other gun at the person.

“Maxwell?!” I shrieked. “What the fuck? I had her!”

“I told you that’s my future wife.” Scowling, he left my side and glanced behind him. “Cover me.”

“What do you mean cover you?” I picked up the other gun.

“Pay attention, Blue.” Maxwell jumped up from the ground and raced toward Ufuoma.

“Shit!” I turned in the other direction, shooting at anyone who might aim for him.

To my surprise, I spotted more French climbing through the window and gunning down anyone in black and yellow.

*Yes!*

I let out an exasperated breath and looked back at Maxwell.

Ufuoma must have raced off because she was no longer in the kitchen’s doorway.

Meanwhile, Maxwell got to it and pushed through the double doors.

*Damn it. What do I do?*

I returned my view to the twin.

She still rocked her dead brother.

*This is for Eve and Suzanne.*

Fast, I shot her in the head. Her body slumped against her brother.

Boris got to my side. “Thank God. You are still alive.”

“You too.”

“Barely.”

“Maxwell went after Ufuoma.”

“He said not to shoot her because it is—”

“His future wife.” I rolled my eyes. “I do not care. I am at least getting a bullet in her leg. She tried to kill me.”

More French piled into the restaurant, telling me that the Black Axe soldiers were all dead.

Putting one gun in my holster, I rose and scanned the area.

Dead bodies were strewn all over the restaurant. Entrails and brain matter were splattered on the walls and overturned bullet-riddled tables.

Someone spoke behind me, “Blue?”

I spun around.

Giorgio greeted my eyes.

Worry creased his face as his gaze assessed me. “Did you get hit?”

“No.” I reloaded my gun.

“Misha called and told us that Ufuoma and crew were heading your way,” Giorgio said. “Jean-Pierre thought you all would get into trouble.”

“He was right.” I headed toward the kitchen. “Now, we have to get Ufuoma and make sure she does not kill Maxwell.”

Boris got to my side. “Remember. Maxwell does not want her dead.”

Giorgio walked on my other side. “And the Lion and Mouse want to use her as a hostage.”

Thinking about Eve and Suzanne, I gritted my teeth. “And I just want to put one bullet in her arm or leg.”







# Chapter 46

## The Clown

### Blue

We stood in front of the kitchen's double doors.

Boris cocked his gun's hammer back and took a deep breath. His brows knitted together in concentration. "We should hurry."

I readied my guns, pointed them forward, and held them with firm grips. "I will lead."

Giorgio frowned. "You will not."

"Why not?"

"You must be careful, Blue." Giorgio stood at the edge of the kitchen doors with his guns at his side. "We still have a passionate love affair to embark on."

Boris snickered and slowly opened the doors.

"Perhaps, we should focus on staying alive." I tried to go through the doors and followed Boris inside.

Giorgio jumped ahead of me. "Excuse me."

I widened my eyes. "Get out of the way."

"Gentlemen are supposed to die first." He walked off.

"No one will die." I was two steps behind him, my guns leading the way into the kitchen.

Giorgio pulled a beretta out.

"Be careful, Butler." I breathed in deeply and let it out slowly. My heart beat fast but my grips on the guns were smooth and relaxed.

We went deeper into the kitchen. The hardwood floor creaked under our feet, singing out with a deep, resounding ring that filled my ears and did not fade for a long moment.

Further in, Giorgio curled his lips in revulsion. “Look at this mess.”

The kitchen had been trashed.

Ufuoma had clearly fought against Maxwell.

Shards of dishes probably broken in a fight littered the floor. Tons of knives lay on the ground.

“This is a disgrace.” Giorgio rubbed his shoulder with the barrel of his gun as if suddenly getting itchy. “Just walking through here makes me want to shower.”

“Do you think we can focus on the part where we get Ufuoma and keep Maxwell alive?” I stepped over several of the sharp blades.

“But this mess—”

I hissed. “Ignore the mess.”

“No sign of them here.” Boris accidentally kicked over a pot of white sauce. It pooled on the floor around his feet.

I jumped away from it and checked further ahead of us. “Shit. There is blood over there.”

Boris frowned. “Are you sure it is not food?”

“Definitely blood.” I hurried over.

Giorgio went over to the stove and turned it off. “Too dangerous to keep on. I mean seriously...one of them could have turned it off. Just a simple action.”

I rolled my eyes. “Would you get over here?”

Blood drops dotted the floor in front of me. I crouched down by them and realized that they led to a path further away from us.

Boris arrived, leaving white sauce footprints behind him. He stepped to my side. “You are right, Blue. This is blood.”

I stood. “It better not be Maxwell’s blood.”

“I am sure the blood is his.” Giorgio stepped to my other side. “If it was hers, he would have her in his arms right now.”

Boris and I glared at him.

Giorgio shrugged. "I am just stating the obvious."

"It better not be Maxwell's blood." I gritted my teeth and followed the trail of blood drops.

We hit the end of the kitchen and walked down a wide, long hallway, lit only by one dim bulb. Up ahead, a door violently swung back and forth.

Giorgio kept my pace. "You must understand that Ufuoma is well-versed in *Dambe*."

I quirked my brows. "What is *Dambe*?"

"It is an African combat sport which originated in Nigeria," Giorgio said. "It is thought to date back several centuries."

Boris asked, "Like boxing?"

"More primal. It is not a game. This is a lifestyle." Giorgio got in front of me, guiding us down the long hallway. "Dambe fighters remain in camps where they train and live with one another. Popobawa was one of the best in the sport. My understanding is that he taught his sister, Ufuoma how to fight."

"Well," I shrugged. "He is dead, and she will be too."

With his gun, Giorgio gestured to his hand. "She will not be that easy to kill. In Dambe, their hand is their spear. I witnessed her gouging out a man's eyes in seconds, for a late shipment. It was so fast, I almost choked on my own spit."

"Then, I will not let her get close to my face—"

"Or your body." Giorgio frowned. "Blue, keep several feet between you and her—"

"I am not afraid of her."

"Yes, but you must not forget about our passionate romance." Giorgio stopped in front of the swinging door. "I would rather you have *both* eyes when I make love to you."

Boris snorted.

“No one is taking out my eye.” I shoved past them and pushed the door open.

We were now in the back of the restaurant.

Even more shocking, a man stood on the other side, pointing a shotgun at us. A long black coat lay next to his feet. He had on a white buttoned shirt with black suspenders.

Shock instantly hit me.

*This is the man from before.*

However, I couldn't guarantee it.

Earlier, I saw his face.

Now he wore a demonic clown mask that was frozen into a predatory grin. Most of the mask was white, except for the mouth, nose, and eyes. They were all black.

Still, thick lines of white thread were sewn over the eye holes and mouth as if the clown had been viciously cut and then stitched back together.

The effect was chilling.

A bulbous black nose protruded from the face, adding an air of cruelty.

*Umm...*

Boris, Giorgio, and I raised our guns in unison.

Keeping the shotgun on us, the clown spoke, “I have no problem with you all...at this time.”

I swallowed. “O-kay.”

The black and white stitched holes of the eyes stared at us with malice. “However, if you touch Ufuoma or bring her any harm...then I *will* have a problem.”

Giorgio slowly stepped forward. “What if I said that I was friends with her?”

“You are not.”

Giorgio sighed. “Do you have any idea who you are pointing a shot gun at?”

“I do.” The Clown gestured the weapon’s point my way.  
“You two are Blue and Boris from the Mouse’s Harlem Crew.”

I blinked.

*What the hell?*

“And you,” The Clown put the shotgun on Giorgio. “You are the Butler, although you would rather people call you the Priest, but it never stuck.”

*The Priest?*

Giorgio’s frown deepened. “And you are?”

“One would think my nickname was obvious.” He laughed.

Giorgio sighed. “Do they call you the Clown?”

“Good job, Butler. I would make you a balloon shaped in a nice little animal, but I do not know how to do that.” The Clown shook his head. “All I know how to do, is kill.”

Giorgio inched forward and lowered his guns to his sides. “That does not sound like a very nice clown.”

“Yet, I do well for myself.” The Clown cocked his head to the side. “Put your guns on the ground.”

Giorgio stepped closer. “Are you aware that you are interfering in something that—”

“Put your guns on the ground, Butler, or you will have quite a mess around you.” The Clown whistled. “One you will be unable to clean.”

*Jesus Christ!*

Boris, Giorgio, and I slowly set our guns on the ground.

Loud gunfire sounded far off and in the direction of the yachts. People screamed. Something exploded.

*What is going on over there?*

Since we were behind the restaurant, we had no view. It was just noise on top of noise.

Another explosion sounded.

The Clown turned that way.

Quickly, Giorgio seized the opportunity and charged for the Clown.

*Be careful!*

I grabbed my gun fast from the ground.

Right as Giorgio was a foot from him, the Clown looked at us,

“Back up!” The Clown pointed the gun at Giorgio and pulled the trigger.

Giorgio jolted to the side, barely missing the round. It skidded by him. Giorgio fell to the ground.

I shot the Clown’s leg.

“Ah!” The Clown jerked to the side and fell to the ground.

Giorgio jumped up and dove for him. They fell to the ground and wrestled.

I ran to them and aimed my gun at the Clown’s head.  
“Hey! Stop it!”

They froze.

Then, the Clown looked up at me.

I yelled, “Drop that fucking shotgun and get away from the Butler!”

Sighing, the Clown let it go. The shot gun tumbled from his hands and clattered against the ground.

Boris hurried over, picked up the shotgun, and checked for other weapons. “What is going on today?”

“Entirely too much, my friend.” Giorgio rose and brushed off his shirt and jacket with a handkerchief that he must have pulled from somewhere in his suit jacket. “It is quite a messy day.”

“Damn, clown.” Boris kicked over the black coat and revealed the silver bat.

“Oh, well. Nice meeting you, but bye-bye.” I got ready to pull the trigger.

“Do not shoot him, Blue!” Giorgio tucked the handkerchief back in his pocket. “The accent sounds Sicilian. I am pretty sure he is heavily connected. His death would probably trigger an even bigger war.”

*We don't need that.*

I took my finger off the trigger.

Boris held onto the shotgun, left the bat by the coat, and looked at the Clown. “Should we pull off the mask?”

Giorgio let out a long breath. “I doubt we want to know who this is.”

*I already know. I remember that face. Too gorgeous to forget it.*

The Clown remained silent and stayed on the ground.

Giorgio studied him. “What I do not understand is why you are by yourself, masked, and trying to protect Ufuoma? I thought the Sicilians were staying out of this.”

The Clown said nothing.

Boris walked over to us. “Perhaps, it is love.”

Giorgio brushed the top of his jacket. “A Sicilian falling for a Nigerian. That would be a very tragic, secret Romeo and Juliet story, involving many bombs and lots of blood.”

“Plus,” I grinned. “Maxwell already decided that Ufuoma is his future wife.”

The Clown snapped his view to mine.

*Hmmm. You must really like her.*

I winked at him. “Take off the mask.”

He sat as still as a statue.

Another explosion sounded. This one rattled the ground and grabbed all of our attention. Then, high-pitched screams shattered the air.

“Forget the mask.” Now wielding the Clown’s shotgun, Boris jogged that way. “We should check that out.”

“Shit!” I raced off after Boris. My heart hammered in my chest. “We have to make sure Maxwell is okay.”

Giorgio rushed to my side. “And keep *yourself* safe also.”

It took some time to get around the building. Once we did, the view was insane.

In front of the restaurant was a chaotic war.

Masses of people fled the area in every direction—parents with their kids, couples running and screaming, even stray dogs whimpered and rushed away.

*Holy shit.*

We slowed down and took it all in.

Several helicopters circled Ufuoma’s and Fara’s yachts. Brotherhood hung out the helicopters’ sides, shooting at the Black Axe soldiers on the yachts that were holding AK-47s.

I knew King David must have been on one of the firing helicopters.

*Be careful, David.*

The helicopters might as well have been war fighter planes. Bullets twisted down through the air, smashing into both yachts. Some pelted the water. Other bullets hit the hulls, shattering glass and splintering wood.

“Oh.” Giorgio turned and gave me a sad smile. “I forgot to tell King David that you were not dead.”

“What?”

“He was upset that Black Axe shot down the restaurant.” Giorgio turned his attention back to the madness. “So, he went a bit...crazy and said something about killing everybody.”

I touched my head with the side of my gun. “Excuse me?”

“To be fair, I did not care about anyone at the time either. At the thought of your being dead...I was a bit...upset myself.”



*No...this is because of me? Please, don't say that.*

On one side, a man kneeled over a woman whose face was blown off, and screamed at the top of his lungs as he stared at her bloody red remains.

Across from us, a tall man had been knocked down and trampled by a crowd of people trying to escape the carnage. He lay on the ground, squirming and convulsing in a pool of blood and urine.

*No.*

“Blue!” Boris pointed forward. “Look!”

The side of one helicopter burst into flames as one of its rotors broke into a hundred pieces, shattering in a hail of spinning metal blades.

*Oh my God!*

The helicopter careened out of control. Its engine howled. Then, it crashed into the deck of one of the yachts and exploded.

Sparks rained down on Black Axe soldiers. Clouds of dark black smoke shot through the air.

The yacht violently rocked. Flames burst in that section.

My heart boomed in my ears. The stench of burnt flesh filled my nose. Bile rose in my throat.

Some Black Axe soldiers scrambled to the other side of the yacht and sprayed the other helicopters in the air with bullets. Others lost their balance and fell into the ocean. Sections of the yacht were on fire. Wood and metal sailed through the air, leaving trails of soot.

Meanwhile, the French remained on the ground, blasting tracer rounds toward the yachts.

The water around the yachts was tinted with blood. Dead bodies floated in the water. The railings of the yacht looked like they had been painted with blood too.

I stared at the destruction, and a feeling of doom settled over me.

“What...the hell do we do?” Hysteria burned through my veins, pumping my body up with adrenaline.

Giorgio took in everything. “Perhaps, the mission is still on.”

Boris muttered, “Maxwell.”

“Yes.” I scanned the space. “Where is Maxwell?”

“Uh. No. No.” Boris slowly shook his head and pointed. “I think I see him.”

I looked in that direction. “Oh. Come on Maxwell! Are you suicidal today?”

Currently, the idiot chased Ufuoma right onto the biggest yacht that was currently being fired on by Brotherhood and the French. Flames and smoke covered the hull.

“Shit!” I raced toward the yacht, making sure to dodge the direction of bullets. “We’ve got to help him.”

Giorgio and Boris called after me, “Blue, wait!”

My legs burned. “Hurry!”

*I will not return to Emily without Maxwell.*





# Chapter 47

## Yacht Rock

### Blue

I didn't know how we got aboard the yacht without getting shot by either Black Axe soldiers or one of our own people.

Perhaps, David or the Brotherhood saw us and halted the attack. I figured that because once we got close, lots of the firing toward the yacht ceased.

Still, chaos ensued around us.

We crept on the side of the massive yacht, staying away from the bloodied, enflamed railing and stepping over dead bodies.

Boris rushed ahead. "I think I saw Maxwell go into that door on the side."

The yacht rocked under my feet.

I stumbled backward and slipped on blood.

Giorgio caught me. "I have you, my love."

A rush of heat flushed through my body.

I cleared my throat and left his arms. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

I blushed.

We headed after Boris.

Four Black Axe soldiers rounded the corner, spotted us, and fired.

*Shit!*

Shoving Giorgio to the ground, I ducked. A bullet sailed over my head. I shot back, getting one guy in the head.

With the Clown's shotgun, Boris fired on the last three. They collapsed into a bloody heap.

"Blue." Unharmd, Giorgio got up and straightened his jacket. "You saved my life."

"Sure did." I ran forward and stepped over the dead soldiers.

Giorgio came up behind me. "I guess that means that I now owe *you* my underwear."

"What?" My face twisted in shock. "No. That is not what it means—"

"I believe that is the deal we have going—"

"No. This is not something that I have agreed to—"

"Understand this, Blue. My underwear will be in your room soon—"

"Keep your damn underwear with you—"

"It will be clean—"

"I do not want your—"

"Guys!" Boris peeked into an opened door. "I see them!"

"Good." I raced to Boris as he disappeared through the door.

Giorgio called after me, "We will discuss my underwear later!"

"We will not!" I stepped inside.

The hallway was made of dark cherrywood, with floor to ceiling windows and a polished wood floor. A sweet fragrance tickled my senses.

For now this section hadn't been destroyed.

Meanwhile, several feet up ahead...Ufuoma was whipping Maxwell's ass in the center of the hallway.

*Oh my.*

Giorgio, Boris, and I stood there in shock, watching them.

Ufuoma was a blur of whistling punches and kicks. Her feet moved faster than my eyes could follow, dashing in and out of range to deliver devastating attacks.

Simply taking the abuse, Maxwell stumbled back as his arms rose to defend his face, then his chest, and then back to his face.

*Maxwell, what are you doing? Punch back!*

This was complete bullshit. I knew he also was a good fighter, but the whole time with Ufuoma, he remained defensive, instead of attacking.

Ufuoma aimed for his chest and attacked.

Maxwell managed to block Ufuoma's wild punches.

I leaned my head to the side. "Clearly, I can shoot her now."

"Maxwell does not want us to." Boris let out an exasperated breath. "We must respect that."

I sucked my teeth. "And if Ufuoma ends up killing Maxwell, then what will we tell the Mouse?"

Boris didn't answer as he jogged forward.

*Damn it. Men!*

Giorgio and I rushed after him.

Up ahead, Ufuoma screamed and charged for Maxwell again, flailing her fisted hand.

*Shit!*

Fast, he twisted around the punch and gently grabbed Ufuoma's wrist in mid-air.

Exhausted, Ufuoma fell backward into the wall and slid down it.

*Thank God.*

Maxwell jumped on top of her. His massive hand clamped down on her neck. Next, he straddled her body probably so she couldn't get away. "Are you tired yet?"

She bared her teeth at him. “I will never be too tired to kill you!”

“Yes.” Giorgio smiled. “It must be love at first sight.”

I scowled.

We made it to the happy, violent couple.

I stared in shock as Ufuoma somehow flipped Maxwell over and straddled him.

Laying on his back, Maxwell grinned and let out a full belly laugh. “You really are one bad ass chick.”

“I am.” She grabbed a small knife from inside of her shirt and got ready to stab him. “And now you are going to—”

“Hey!” I pointed my gun at her. “Drop the knife, bitch!”

Ufuoma kept the knife above her hand and glared at me. “Bitch? Do I know you?”

Keeping my aim on her head, I hurried over. “You shot at me like you knew me.”

“Aww. The Afro-Russian with the blue hair. It was an easy target.”

“Oh, really?” I placed my finger on the trigger.

“Drop the knife, Ufuoma.” Maxwell folded his arms behind his head. “Once she does, Blue, put the gun away.”

Ufuoma slung the knife to the side.

*Forget that. I want to shoot her.*

I kept the gun on her head and smirked. “Easy target?”

“Blue.” Maxwell sneered. “Put the gun up.”

“What about Suzanne and Eve?” I stepped closer. “I should at least be able to put a bullet in her—”

“Put the fucking gun down!” Maxwell yelled and then let out a long breath. “Damn. I’m tired as fuck.”

Ufuoma tried to rise from Maxwell.

“No, baby.” Maxwell shook his head. “Relax.”



“Stop calling me baby.” Frowning, Ufuoma climbed off him. “I am not your baby.”

A boom burst near the hull.

The yacht violently pitched severely to the side, throwing me off balance. I slammed into the wall as hard as a sack of potatoes and almost dropped my gun.

Ufuoma spotted my weakness and charged for me.

*Yes. Come here.*

I tightened my grip on the gun and headed her way.

The yacht bucked like a wild mare.

Shrieking, Ufuoma fell back.

I stumbled forward, skidding across the floorboards. “Ah!”

I saw the guys rolling and slipping our way too.

*Jesus Christ!*

The damn yacht must have been at a sickening angle, halfway lying in the ocean and maybe about to sink.

The yacht groaned and screeched in agony.

Maxwell tried to stand up straight, but couldn't. He leaned over in a strange way. “Yo!”

The rest of us remained on the floor at odd angles.

There was a loud crunch as if the floorboards were about to give way.

*No. No. Please!*

We all stared at the floor.

Thank God nothing happened.

“We have to get the fuck off of this motherfucker.” Maxwell looked around and kicked the door open next to him. “Come on!”

“Where are you going?!” I staggered to my feet, barely able to keep my balance. My head spun.

Giorgio grabbed my hand and helped me forward. “Are you alright?”

“Y-yes.” I glanced back. “Where is she? We can’t let her escape.”

Ufuoma looked around for a second, sighed, and then followed us as if knowing her percentage of survival rose with us.

*Okay. We finally have her.*

Somehow, I stumbled into a small bedroom. The bed had overturned. Mattresses and sheets were flipped to the side. I continued forward at the crazy angle. The yacht leaned over so much, it was hard to tell if I was going up, down, or sideways.

“Hell yes!” Maxwell pointed forward. “There’s a balcony.”

Boris widened his eyes. “And?”

“We are going to jump off that motherfucker.” Maxwell headed our way and then grabbed Ufuoma’s arm. “Come on.”

She snapped her arm free. “What do you think you are doing?”

“Saving my future wife!” He gripped her arm again, but this time it was firm. “Unless you want to die on this boat?”

She swallowed.

“I doubt you will die here. Baba said we will plant Lemonisha in front of our house and all of our kids will drink lemonade and shit.”

She didn’t fight him. “W-what? I-I do not understand anything you are saying.”

“I’ll explain later.” He tugged her forward.

She remained there. “W-where are you taking me?”

“To safety, baby.” He slipped his hand down her arm and took her hand. “I told you that I’m now your protector forever.”

Ufuoma glanced back at me as if I could help her. Horror covered her face.

*She must think he is absolutely crazy.*

I shook my head.

*Well...he is crazy.*

Maxwell guided her toward the balcony. “We will jump together.”

*Do we all have to jump?*

My body tensed.

Boris stood in front of us, staring at the balcony. “There has to be another way.”

The yacht screeched and emitted a metallic rattle.

“Yo! You hear that?” Maxwell shoved Boris forward. “Hurry, man!”

Boris stared back at us. “Is the ocean going to be deep enough near the yacht?”

“Man, if you don’t jump your ass off this balcony, then I’m going to throw you.”

Boris pointed at Maxwell. “Why can’t you go first?”

“Because I’ve got my wife.”

Ufuoma widened her eyes. “I am not your wife!”

Maxwell pointed at the balcony. “Boris, I need you to be down there so if she tries to escape, you can grab her.”

“Why not have Giorgio do it?”

“Man, look at the Butler.” Maxwell pointed to us. “He’s only concerned for Blue’s safety.”

I glanced at Giorgio.

He watched me and smiled. “It is true. Everyone else could die here, but you.”

“Thanks a lot, Giorgio.” Maxwell rolled his eyes and returned his view to Boris. “Come on, man. Don’t punk out. Be real with it.”

“We could die from the fall.”

“Eh!” Maxwell hit Boris’s back. “Connect to your big dick energy, man.”

“This damned day.” Boris quickly opened the door and rushed onto the balcony.

Maxwell yanked Ufuoma onto the balcony. “Can you swim, baby?”

“I am not your baby—”

“You are. You just don’t know it yet—”

“You should be locked away in a mental hospital—”

“As long as you are in there with me.”

She loudly sighed.

“God, please watch over me.” Boris climbed onto the rail, took in a deep breath, and then jumped.

*Oh Lord!*

I rushed over to the edge.

Boris’s shirt flared out as he fell. Once his body hit the ocean, water splashed around him. The surface rippled.

Seconds later, Boris’s head popped up. He screamed with joy, “I am alive!”

My heart hammered in my chest.

“Alright, baby.” Maxwell guided Ufuoma to the balcony’s edge and helped her over the railing. “You want to jump hand-in-hand or separate?”

Her bottom lip quivered.

She gazed down and then looked at him. “Hand-in-hand.”

I blinked.

*For real?*

Maxwell hit her with that signature panty-wetting smile. “I’m growing on you. Aren’t I? You know what? Don’t answer. I feel the vibes.”

She frowned.

“Alright, baby.” He tightened his grip on her hand, stared at the sky, and then looked at the water. “On three. Okay?”

“Y-yes.”

“One. Two. Three.”

They jumped into the water. Their clothes rippling out like a parachute and flailing with the fall. They hit the ocean together, doubling the splash around them.

Giorgio took my hand. “Are you ready?”

Before I could answer, the yacht violently bucked and lurched to the side, heading downwards into the ocean with enough speed to surely drown us instantly.

“Ah!” I screamed.

My heart raced.

Together, we rushed over to the railing.

There was no time to think or prepare myself. I gritted my teeth.

Giorgio roared, “Jump!”

We did, tumbling through the air. Wind whipped around us. We plummeted into the freezing ocean with a massive splash and an explosion of ripples.

Prepared for the impact, I held my breath as water encased my entire body.

I barely had time to crane my neck before the yacht exploded, sending a bright flash of light in front of me.

I lost the hold on Giorgio’s hand.

Panic gripped me.

I closed my eyes.

A wave of water crashed into my body, sending me away.

Another boom came.

My body jerked deeper into the water as if it were an invisible hand wrenching me further down.

*No. No. No.*

My lungs burned, begging for oxygen.

I opened my eyes. The salt burned my lids and stung my nose.

The world around me was now a dark and deep endless blue. So much water all around. It rushed past me in a torrent. Billowing waves surged and collided. Then, the waves crashed into me, smacking me like a thousand fingers and driving me to the ocean floor.

*Please!*

I struggled to swim to the surface, trying not to swallow any water. My body twisted in rage against the cruel waves. I kicked my legs furiously, fighting the watery pull.

*Come on. Come on.*

Inky blackness poured over me, blinding my view. I felt like I was sinking deeper down into the ocean.

I didn't know if I was now under the yacht or simply too deep in the water.

Planks of wood dove by me.

I kicked my feet fast and moved my arms, but with no oxygen, I began losing energy.

Fear consumed me.

*Lord!*

More waves tossed me up and down, making me feel like I was being buried alive by the treacherous ocean.

*Help!*

Without a single breath of air, I clung to consciousness like a sailor clinging to a mast during a raging storm.

*God! Please!*

A lifeless corpse slammed into me with tremendous force, knocking the last bit of air out of my lungs. Water filled my mouth and invaded my throat and nose. My eardrums felt close to bursting from the pressure.

*I don't want to die now!*

Then, darkness consumed me.







# Chapter 48

## A Dead Man's Wishes

### Emily

Kaz gave me a nice family picnic on the beach.

It ended up being an emotionally romantic experience stimulating all my senses. Kaz's Siberian Train wreck sandwiches excited my tongue and filled my stomach. The sun warmed my face. Waves crashed and lapped against the powder white sand. Seagulls cawed off in the distance. The salty cool breeze fluttered through my hair.

It was a much needed peace after these violent days of getting rid of our enemies and learning about the horrific reality of my mind.

Soon, Baba showed up to hang out with Paolo and Harlem. Due to that, Kaz and I seized the opportunity to head off and get some steamy time.

We'd been walking hand-in-hand on the beach, when Wassily rushed up to us. "Kazimir! Kazimir! The Mouse has a phone call."

We stopped.

I reached for the device.

Kaz took the phone, before I could touch it. "Who is on the phone?"

Wassily frowned. "Fela."

I parted my lips in shock.

Wassily gestured to the phone. "I muted it, but was unsure what to do."

I let out a long breath. "Give me the phone, Kaz."

"Absolutely not. If Fela wants to end this, then he deals with *me*."

“I get it, baby, but the goal is to end this, not *who* ends it —”

“You and my son have been under enough stress—”

“And you’ve been through a lot too.”

“I am a man. I can handle it—”

“And because I’m a woman, I can’t?”

He groaned in annoyance. “*Mysh*, you know what I am trying to say.”

“I do.” I gave him a sad smile. “But, if Fela wants to talk to *me*, then let him.”

Wassily stirred, probably unsure of if he should walk off or remain standing in front of us.

Kaz gestured to the phone. “And if Fela brings out Lunita with whatever mental game he may be running through this phone conversation?”

I grinned. “Then, you take Lunita to Fela to finish the conversation face-to-face.”

The line in his jaw twitched. “You think that is funny?”

“Sorry.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “Like I said, *you* have been through a lot too. Let me handle this, baby.”

His brows furrowed. “I will put it on speaker.”

“And you will not interrupt or jump in—”

“I will, if necessary—”

“Kaz, I want to finish this in the coming days.” I swallowed. “Let me talk.”

He curled his lips upwards into a fang-baring sneer, turning very much into the lion that he was named after.

I kept my voice calm. “Please, baby.”

He tightened his grip on the phone, and then rubbed his forehead. “Do you know how difficult it will be for me to quietly stand to the side while some man possibly threatens you?”

“If it happens, just remember that I’m not a punk ass bitch. I’m equally lethal to you.” I shrugged. “And, please know that when I show up, I can give out as many head shots as you.”

He gave a half smile, yet anger still cornered his lips. “It is one of my favorite qualities about you.”

“Then, let me do what I do.” I held out my hand.

Sighing, Kaz didn’t hand the phone to me, but he did press the screen and turn off mute.

Pressure built in my chest. I stepped in closer. “Hello?”

Fela’s voice rode the line. “It is good to talk to you again, Emily.”

“Is it?”

“I am actually shocked that the Lion let you talk to me at all.”

“Then, why ask for *me*?”

“I hoped that you would be the most rational of the two.”

“I’m not.”

“Hmmm. Let’s hope you are wrong about that.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I believe that you are a woman of your word. You took care of Pavel’s son. That tells me that a dead man’s wishes holds weight with you. Is that not true?”

“It matters on what the dead man’s wishes are? What are yours?”

“Not so soon, Emily. I must say one thing.”

“What?”

“There are limits to war, Emily. I do believe that you crossed them today.”

*What the hell is he talking about?*

“Limits?” I sucked my teeth. “You worked with my brother Darryl to have me kill Kazimir and possibly die from it. You had members of the Brotherhood terrorize me so much

in Moscow that I lost my other twin baby. You kidnapped Pavel's little boy to puppet Pavel's moves, traumatizing that little kid and ruining his life. I can go on, but you get where I am going. I believe we are well past limits."

A dark chuckle left Fela. "Yet, you safely stand on the beach with Kazimir and Pavel's son, and I made sure no one shot you. That is a limit that I have not crossed."

Fast, Kaz got in front of me.

Wassily gestured for our people to hurry over.

I stiffened. "Is that a threat, Fela?"

"It is just to say that you are not untouchable."

"You're not untouchable either or you wouldn't be calling."

Kaz roared, "I should blow Nigeria up right now just for that fucking comment."

Fela's voice never wavered. "I wondered when you would begin talking, Lion. But my comment wasn't a threat. I was just simply clarifying my position."

I took Kaz's free hand and squeezed.

Fela continued, "It appears you both have turned the table on this little game that we have going. You win."

I wore a skeptical look. "So, you are ready to end this?"

"And what will *ending* this mean, Emily? And how does the Lion define it?"

Kaz growled, "The definition begins with your death."

Fela's voice held no fear. "I assumed as much, but what happens after my death? Will that be the end between the Brotherhood and Black Axe or will you be bringing more terror to my people and country?"

Those question shocked me. It was as if Fela had already made peace with the idea of him having to die. Kazimir dealt with death. I was sure in his mind, he would have liked the idea of Black Axe being completely obliterated. But, I was not

interested in any more deaths. For me, Fela's death would be enough. His people should not have to be punished too.

Fela spoke, "Your silence makes me nervous."

"Give us a minute." I looked up to Kaz.

Kaz muted the phone.

I widened my eyes. "What do you think? Do you want more than Fela to die?"

"You know the answer to that, *mysh*."

"And you know how I feel about that too."

He groaned in annoyance. "You see them as innocent people only following their leader."

"I do."

"Then, my foot goes down with Fela's death. His people's fate is on you."

I touched my chest. "Me?"

"It's your move. I trust you. I just do not trust *him*."

"Okay." I nodded.

Kaz unmuted the phone.

I cleared my throat. "Fela, my hope is that with your death, your puppeting and trouble making ends. Would that be correct? Or do you have others in Black Axe ready to pick up where you left off?"

"Many disagreed with my moves in these past years. My daughter, Ufuoma was one of them." His voice became tense. "You've already met her, since your people have captured my wife, Fara and Ufuoma."

I blinked.

*We got them! Good job, everybody.*

Kaz curved his lips into a huge smile.

"I would like you as a woman of color to protect my wife and daughter." Fela's words grew shaky. "I don't want them

suffering at disgusting Russian hands because of me. I know what those men are truly capable of. They're slaughterers."

*We may really be able to end this.*

Fela continued, "I am hoping you can persuade the Lion to keep them safe."

Kaz smirked.

I shook my head. "I will need a lot from you to persuade him."

Silence served as Fela's response.

To my shock, Kaz remained quiet.

My nerves frazzled. We were so fucking close to this being done, but everything had to happen properly. While I had gotten myself out of many tough situations, this was on a high international level of chaos.

Fela spoke, "One of the most revolutionary concepts that humanity learned in the 20th century is that time is not a universal measurement."

I quirked my brows. "Are you talking about Einstein?"

"I am. Einstein determined that time is relative—in other words, the rate at which time passes depends on your frame of reference." Fela sighed. "It doesn't matter how much our lives are governed by the same seconds, minutes, hours, days, and weeks, regardless of where we live on the globe, time will never be absolute."

"And *your* time?"

"It is ending, but perhaps...it is *also* beginning."

"How?"

"I've walked this planet with two clear missions—freedom to Nigeria and power to my people."

For some reason, sadness hit me.

"I believe that...my death will finally complete those missions and time will continue on for my people in its proper manner."

“In what way?”

“I want my daughter safe and solidified as Black Axe’s leader. I also want Black Axe fully in charge of Calabria region with the Lion’s blessing. She will carry on my two missions of freedom to Nigeria and power to my people.”

I checked Kaz’s reaction.

He kept a stern expression.

It was impossible to read him. All I could understand was that if he truly disagreed, he would have interrupted.

He’d said he trusted me, and now he was showing it.

*Think. What would my lion feel good about?*

I continued to watch my baby. “Some of the Brotherhood would need to be in place in this region and closely working with Black Axe to regain trust.”

Kaz smiled.

*I got it right? Okay. Good.*

“I would only feel comfortable with *your* people or the French working with Ufuoma,” Fela said. “No Brotherhood. Do you think that is a possibility?”

Kaz rolled his eyes. “You are not in a position to demand anything, Fela.”

“Correct, yet I am not truly out of *all* options either.”

Kaz scowled. “There is a missile pointed at your beloved country—”

“And no matter how many men surround your mouse on that beach, there is a gun pointed at her head.”

I shivered.

Kaz sneered. “If something happens to my mouse, then your daughter and wife die in the most brutal ways, your country becomes only dust and flames, and I spend the rest of my life hunting you down, and when I find you, there will only be blood and cruelty.”

My heart boomed in my ears. “Fela, we were close to a solution and ending this. Stop the threats.”

“You are correct, Emily. Men are ruled by their egos. This is why women truly rule the world.” Fela’s voice shifted to calm. “I see that you brought Pavel’s son out on your beach day too.”

I gritted my teeth.

“This tells me that you are a woman of honor,” Fela said. “It speaks volumes to your character.”

My nerves didn’t steady.

*You better keep Paolo out of your fucking view.*

I took the phone from Kaz. “What else do you want to end this, Fela?”

“First, my daughter remains in place with Black Axe running the area—”

A low rumble left Kaz. “Only if she keeps Black Axe’s focus on making money and not seeking revenge for her father’s death.”

“Ufuoma is smarter than me. She keeps emotion out of her decision.”

Kaz spoke through clenched teeth, “She better or she will die too.”

“Also, as I said before, only the French or Emily’s people will work with Black Axe. I do not want the Russians around her or my people. Will you make sure of that, Emily?”

I shrugged. “Keep talking.”

Fela added, “I also want no harm coming to Nigeria.”

I nodded. “The missile’s coordinates change after your death.”

“I want them changed before my death.”

Kaz crossed his arms over his chest. “Then, you will need to give yourself up with no trouble on Black Axe’s side.”



“I agree,” Fela said. “I come to you. Then, you show me that the missile has changed and my daughter and wife are free. Next... you kill me.”

I widened my eyes.

A skeptical expression covered Kaz’s face.

“But understand this,” Fela said. “I do not want Kazimir killing me. I want Emily to pull the trigger. No one else.”

Kaz snatched the phone from me and muted it. “No, *mysh*.”

“Why not, Kaz? This ends if I kill him—”

“When you look at Fela, what do you see?” Kaz leaned his head to the side. “Be truthful.”

“I don’t get the question.”

“Tell me what you see.”

“I see a man.”

“Exactly. And that is the last thing you should see. He is a monster, nothing more or less.”

I let out a long breath.

“Do you even want to kill him, *mysh*?”

My throat went dry.

“Be honest.”

Dread hit me. “Days ago, I would have loved it if we could have found another option, but now...”

“Now?”

“I’m so done with Italy. I could pull the trigger myself and end this.”

He studied me. “His death may be too much for your mind right now—”

“We are not doing that—”

“Doing what?”

“Treating me like a fragile little woman. I already got you to stop being so protective because I was pregnant. Don’t start being extra because—”

“Of Lunita? Yes, *mysh*. I will be extra when it comes to possibly doing things to bring her back.”

I pointed to the phone. “I’m killing Fela. Take it off mute.”

He glared at me.

“Kaz, we’re done talking about this. *I* aim the gun at his head. *I* pull the trigger.”

“And if you break down?”

“Would it be wrong to say that I trust you to help me?” I gulped in fear. “Would it be...too selfish to lean on you some more?”

“I would do anything for you. Never question that.” He pursed his lips.

“Then...it is settled. I want to go back to Moscow. If it means shooting Fela, then so be it.”

I could tell that Kaz wanted to say a whole lot more. Instead, he unmuted the phone.

“Fela,” I lowered my voice. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, Emily. I have another demand.”

Kaz growled, “You have demanded enough!”

I whispered, “Kaz.”

Fela spoke, “I want to die on the beach. At sunset. When the sun dips into the ocean.”

My heart ached.

Kaz rolled his eyes.

Fela continued, “I pick the beach—”

“I do not trust you to pick it.” Kaz shook his head.

“Kazimir, I am a man planning my death, not an attack. I beg you to give me this wish.”

Kaz looked at me.

I nodded.

Kaz sighed. “Fine. You pick the beach, but give us the location five hours before we meet.”

“That is fair,” Fela said. “Then, it is settled. Tomorrow, Emily and I will sit alone on the beach and talk. Your men must be at least thirty feet away. When it is confirmed by video that my wife and daughter are free, and the missile’s target has changed, then Emily can kill me.”

“I do not trust you.” Kaz shook his head. “Why this way? What would make you think that we would not just kill you as soon as you step onto the beach?”

“Emily. That is what makes me think it.” Fela said. “My spies said that she battled you to honor Pavel’s last wishes. I believe she will do the right thing when it comes to my death.”

Then, the phone clicked.

Instantly, Kaz barked out orders at Wassily. “A few of you grab Baba, Paolo, and the dog, I want them off the beach and in the hotel. The rest of you remain surrounding Emily until we get inside.”

Several ran off with Wassily.

The others drew in closer and formed a tight circle around us.

Kaz placed his hand in the center of my back. It was a tender gesture sending shivers down my spine. His fingertips nudged me forward. “*Mysh*, I still disagree with your killing him.”

I walked at his pace and stayed by his side. “I know, but I’m down to end this in any way possible.”

“You will have on a bullet proof vest and two guns.”

“Okay.”

“And there will be twenty gunners aiming at his head. If he moves in any way that I do like, he is gone.”

“Be careful with that, Kaz. I’m sure he has an emergency plan in place if we don’t honor his wishes.”

“If I was him, I would.”

“We go into this safe and with our eyes open.”

“I will be with the men around you.”

“I’m fine with that.”

“*Mysh.*” Kaz stopped us and turned to me. “Nothing can happen to you.”

I gave him a weak smile. “Nothing will. Tomorrow, Fela will die, and then we will go home.”

We continued towards the hotel.

When we arrived, another man approached us and stopped by Kaz. “The helicopters with King David and the rest have arrived. They are landing right now.”

“Good.” Kaz nodded. “Have everyone meet us in the conference room.”

*I hope everyone is okay.*





# Chapter 49

## Missing

## Kazimir

Emily went to check on Paolo and Harlem.

I headed to the conference room.

Less than an hour later, men began piling into the space. Battered and bruised, some stumbled in with swollen eyes and cheeks. Others sported bandages and had to be helped to chairs. It looked like they had been to war and barely survived.

By the time all had arrived, the conference room was packed to the brim. A few stood just outside the doorway. There was no way for anyone else to enter.

The mood was somber.

Shocked. Devastated. Defeated.

Meanwhile, many of the higher players were absent. There was no Maxwell, French, and barely any Harlem Crew.

*Even more important, where is King David?*

I knew he was okay because Wassily mentioned that King David announced their return. That very fact kept my nerves steady.

I wasn't ready to lose another close person to me.

However, for this entire job David had never reported back.

*This is odd.*

I checked the TV screen. It was still blank.

Misha had not come on either.

*What the hell happened out there?*

I rose from my seat.

The room went silent. All focused on me.

I tensed. “Where is King David?”

No one responded.

Just as I was about to roar, Maxwell appeared with Boris.

Their clothes were ripped and wet.

I raised my eyebrows. “Where is everyone?”

Maxwell scanned the room. “Em isn’t in here yet?”

“No.” I walked around the table and headed to him. “Now, my question—”

“Look, man.” Maxwell checked over his shoulder as if nervous he was about to get in trouble. “We are going to have to handle this very carefully because everyone is already high on emotion—”

“Where is King David?”

“He took the helicopters back with Harlem Crew to Ufuoma’s yacht—”

“What?” Anger surged through me. “For what fucking reason? Did we lose Ufuoma or Fara?”

“Naw. I have them both in my suite with guards on the inside, balcony, and outside—”

“Hold on.” I continued walking his way. “Why are they in *your* suite? Bring them here—”

“No way, man. Last time I brought Paolo’s mom, you all killed her for some simple bullshit. I’m not risking that again.”

Seething, I stopped right in front of him. “Maxwell.”

“Yeah.”

“Did I miss the announcement declaring David and you as the new leaders of the Brotherhood?”

Sighing, Maxwell held up both hands. “Just let me explain, man.”

“Explain and do so quickly.”



“First of all, the French never got on the helicopters to return because some of them are missing and then David isn’t here because he’s fucked up that you know...” Maxwell’s bottom lip quivered. “Because...Blue is...probably...you know?”

I widened my eyes. “Dead?”

Maxwell let out a long breath.

*No wonder David isn’t here.*

I ran my fingers through my hair.

Maxwell lowered his voice. “We have to be very careful about how we deliver this to Em.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

“David is all types of emotionally fucked up. Motherfucker plans to just circle the damned ocean and shit. It’s fucking dark. You can’t see shit, but I couldn’t convince him otherwise. I mean...if we couldn’t find Blue when it was light...then, how are we going to...”

I became quiet, mulling over the insanity of it all.

*Emily’s number one is dead. This won’t be good.*

While I hadn’t been close to Blue, the new soldier had been growing on me. I loved the way she made Emily smile.

My mouse needed that.

*And now...*

Maxwell disturbed my thoughts. “Most of Harlem Crew went back with King David. Nobody wants to accept it. Shit.” Maxwell shrugged. “My heart is broken. *I don’t want to accept it either.*”

“Accept what?” Emily strolled in.

Maxwell’s forehead wrinkled as he looked away.

Pressure built in my chest. The need to grip my heart came to me, but I fought through it.

Emily stopped by us. “What’s going on?”

I cleared my throat. “We have a problem, *mysh*.”

“What?” She eyed Maxwell. “Did we lose Fela’s daughter and wife?”

I shook my head. “Not that.”

“Then, what?”

“Let us go in the hallway to talk about this. Maxwell is actually catching me up on everything. He could further explain what happened.”

Maxwell shook his head.

*Really?*

I sighed. “We should talk about this in the hallway.”

Emily continued to watch Maxwell. “Why aren’t *you* talking?”

“Cause there’s a lot to digest, Em.” He pursed his lips.

“A lot to digest?” Emily stepped back and scanned the room. Her gaze fell on Boris who appeared exhausted and was slumped against the wall. Next, she slipped her gaze over several Brotherhood’s faces.

Finally, she turned back to me. “Where’s Blue and the French?”

I tensed. “Maxwell said that the French never got on the helicopters?”

She continued to watch Maxwell. “Why not?”

He looked her way. Sadness filled his gaze. “They wanted to keep searching for Blue.”

She took another step back. Her expression went neutral which told me that she was masking her emotions from us.

Instantly, my chest felt like it was being squeezed.

Emily fisted her hands at her sides. “What happened, Max?”

His jaw tensed. “There was a restaurant shooting. Then, I chased after Ufuoma. She ran to her yacht. Boris, Giorgio, and

Blue followed us there. So...because David and the French were shooting up the yacht, it began to turn over and sink. That forced us to get off the motherfucker fast. Last time I saw Blue, she was jumping into the ocean.”

Emily crossed her arms over her chest. “Why were they shooting up the yacht?”

Maxwell quirked his brows. “Well...David thought Blue had died in the restaurant, but she didn’t. Either way, he got emotional and went Rambo on Black Axe.”

*What?*

I blinked.

David was typically calm and collected—the very opposite of me. The last thing I needed in a number one was for him to match *my* energy.

*David and I must have a talk. Only I can go...Rambo.*

Emily looked at me. “Any more helicopters here? I’m going out to help David and everyone search—”

“You are not.” I gritted my teeth.

“Yo, Em.” Maxwell inched closer to her. “David called in the Italian Coast Guard. There’s fucking divers and shit out there. All types of people are searching right now.”

“I can still...go out there and...” She grabbed the side of her skirt and twisted the material with her fingers. “The more people help the faster we can find her. Right?”

“Em.” Maxwell held his hands out. “I don’t want to say this, but Blue is probably—”

“Then, don’t say it.” She glared. “We just need to keep looking.”

“David and the French are already out there with the Italian Coast Guard.” I breathed through the mounting pressure in my chest. “With Fela still alive and possibly full of vengeance, I need you safe and at this hotel.”

Emily gave no response.

Maxwell watched her. “Em...are you okay?”

Her voice grew shaky. “N-no. Not at all.”

*God damn it, Blue. Stay the fuck alive!*

If she turned up safe, I would have a talk with her too.

Pissed, I turned my attention to the room of people.

“Everybody leave! Now!”

Confused expressions covered most of my men’s faces. Still, they all dragged themselves up and rushed away.

Boris was the only one who remained. His gaze remained on Emily. Usually, I would have been annoyed, but I knew my mouse would need him in that moment.

Once everyone else left, I pulled out my phone and tried to dial Misha, but something odd occurred.

The screen read, “**No cellular service.**”

“What?” I looked at Maxwell. “Check your phone. Is it on?”

“Should be.” Maxwell took his out, touched the screen, and quirked his brows. “Oh shit. It’s off, man. What’s going on?”

“Something is wrong.” Right as I headed to the hallway to grab Wassily, the lights shut off.

*What?*

The room was plunged into darkness, and I could feel my heart thump against my chest. “*Mysh?*”

“Right next to you.” She grabbed my hand. “Max?”

“Here, Em.”

Her voice came out shaky. “Give me your hand, Max.”

I raised my eyebrows.

*She’s going to touch him.*

Maxwell sounded even more surprised. “For real, Em?”

“Come here,” she whispered in the darkness. “I won’t lose anyone else. Boris, where are you?”

His voice came out too damn happy. “Coming, Emily.”

I squeezed her hand, making sure she remained safely next to me.

The door screeched open.

Wassily hurried in with his cellphone light on. “Security had just notified me that ten guys wearing clown masks had rushed onto the property. Then, communications ceased, and the lights went out. I sent a group to investigate.”

“Clowns?” Boris turned on his phone’s light and held it by his face. “It must be that Sicilian guy from earlier. He had on a clown mask.”

We all turned to him.

“What did you say?” I tightened my grip on Emily’s hand. “What Sicilian?”

Boris shrugged. “When Blue, Giorgio, and I ran after Maxwell and Ufuoma, there was this man in a clown mask with a shot gun. Giorgio figured he was with the Sicilians due to his accent or something. He said we couldn’t shoot him. Either way, we guessed this man was trying to protect Ufuoma, but there was so much going on that we left to get Maxwell—”

“Yo.” Maxwell took out his gun. “I never saw a fucking clown out there.”

*First Blue is missing. David has lost it. Now...clowns?*

I turned to Wassily. “Have everybody cover the outside perimeter, block stairwells, and also guard the sixth floor where the women are. Do not let them get Ufuoma or Fara. And if you catch these men, do not kill them. Just bring these clowns to me.”

“Yes, sir.” Wassily hurried away.

My head spun. “Sicilians trying to save Black Axe? That doesn’t make sense.”

Boris shrugged in the dimly lit darkness. “Could be love.”

*Love? What is going on tonight?*

“Oh, hell no.” Maxwell shook his head. “Fucking clown better step back from my wife.”

Emily and I looked at him.

Her words came out as a shriek. “Say what now?”

“My wife.” Maxwell waved her away. “Long story, Em. I’ll explain later. All I’m saying is that no one is taking my wife right now.”

“Max, who the hell is your wife?”

“Ufuoma.”

“The hell she is.” Emily sucked her teeth. “If Blue doesn’t come back, I may torture the fuck out her—”

“Eh! No one is torturing her. What the fuck, Em?”

“Stop worrying about that bitch, when we should be thinking about Blue—”

“Would you calm down? Why she got to be a bitch?”

“She’s the enemy.”

“Eh, you’re just fucked up about Blue that doesn’t mean you can take it out on her—”

“Watch me.”

“Okay. Okay.” I waved my hands. “Everyone, calm down. No one is torturing anyone...yet.”

Emily growled, “Then, I want to go after these clowns.”

“Calm. Down.” I turned her way, but could barely see her. “Our people outnumber the men in masks. Whether dark or light, no one is taking anything from us tonight. On that I can guarantee.”

“Outnumbered or not, I want to shoot somebody.” Em let go of my hand. “Give me a gun, Max.”

I gritted my teeth. Part of me understood how my mouse felt. With the possibility of violence, the pressure in my chest

was beginning to ease. Killing a bunch of idiots in clown masks would be just the thing to calm the senses. I almost wanted to let her go out on a brutal rampage just to dull her pain about Blue.

However, I had to make sure she was safe, and that Lunita didn't pop up this evening.

Maxwell pulled out his other gun. "Here, Em. Just don't think about shooting my wife."

Emily groaned in annoyance.

Boris kept the phone's light on us.

I could see her in some of the brightness. "*Mys*h, there will need to be some rules for this evening."

"I know. Stay safe. Stay close to you." Emily made sure her gun was loaded. "Meanwhile, let's just go to these chicks to guarantee that nothing happens to them, and we could probably ask them some questions—"

"Wow." Maxwell held up his gun. "Hold up. We don't all need to go up in my fucking suite, asking anybody shit—"

"You're right. We should move the hostages to another area that is more secure." Emily walked off. "Then, we'll get some information on Fela—"

"Naw, Em." Maxwell hurried after her. "No one is moving them and they're not really hostages."

She let out a long breath. "Would you stop fucking around, Max?"

"I'm not."

"She is not your wife—"

"I dreamed about her—"

"Dream about someone else who isn't the daughter of our enemy!"

The lights came back on, showing me that Maxwell and Emily were by the door, glaring at each other.

My phone rang instantly.

I answered, “Yes.”

Misha’s voice came on. “I will need a vacation once you all leave Italy. My people and I have been busy all day dealing with your—”

“Who are the damn clowns, Misha?”

He loudly sighed. “A thank you for all I do would be nice.”

“Your being alive is thanks enough. Who are the clowns?”

“Rocco Vizzini and his people.”

Further confused, I spoke through clenched teeth, “The Clown? What the hell is he doing messing with me?”

“On that, I cannot answer, cousin. The rest of the Vizzini Family’s communications were phone calls from them looking for him all day. None of the others have anything to do with what he is doing.”

“Then, do you think Rocco is working with Fela?”

“I have not seen any evidence to point to it. But, I must stress to you that if you kill Rocco you will have all of Italy after you—”

“I am well aware of the consequence.” I scowled. “But, do they understand how many missiles I have?”

Misha loudly sighed again. “Cousin, we have Rocco moving through the hotel’s service stairwell. However, we also have your people heading to them. This should be a simple solution.”

I curved my lips into a smile. “Then, Rocco and I will have our own conversation.”

“Do not shoot—”

I hung up the phone. “Boris was right. The clowns are Sicilians. Vizzini Family to be exact.”

Emily frowned. “I thought they were staying out of this.”

“Not Rocco. Apparently, he is moving separately from his family, but I do not know why.”



“This could be Fela on some bullshit.” Emily gave Maxwell the gun back. “The more that time passes, I’m becoming worried that Fela’s demands on the phone were not a surrender at all, but one step of us walking into a trap.”

Maxwell eyed her. “Fela said he was going to surrender?”

“He called to offer his life up for his daughter and wife,” I said. “The only thing is that he wants Ufuoma controlling Italy and leading Black Axe. Additionally, he wants Emily to kill him.”

Maxwell squinted his eyes. “Who the fuck is Fela to make demands? Plus, I don’t like Em being close to him.”

“I agree.” I nodded. “But, my mouse has other thoughts.”

Emily crossed her arms over her chest. “I want this shit done, and I know I can kill Fela fast, if I’m close to him.”

Maxwell and I exchanged glances.

She glared at us. “What?”

“Em, this shit sounds like a trap.”

She nodded. “I agree, but it also gets Fela close.”

He bobbed his head. “What if it is a ploy to grab his daughter and wife?”

“Then, we should move them somewhere else,” she countered.

Maxwell tapped his foot. “Where are we meeting?”

“He’s picking the beach.”

“What the fuck?” Maxwell held out his hands. “Fela picks the place and how it goes down? He decides what happens after he dies and who controls the region? What am I missing?”

Emily shook her head. “Do you have a better solution to get rid of Fela? Misha couldn’t even give us his location? Do you have it?”

Maxwell began pacing. “I get it. I get it. But...this shit is making me nervous. This is his second time supposedly

surrendering. I don't trust this motherfucker.”

“Oh really?” Emily smirked. “Isn't he going to be your father-in-law?”

“Naw. He has to die—”

“And your *wife* is going to be okay with it?”

“Eh.” Maxwell pointed at her. “Mind your business.”

She rolled her eyes.

I shrugged. “I must admit. I agree with Maxwell, but I also understand my mouse. Therefore, I plan to be close to Emily and have her surrounded by men targeting his head the whole time.”

Maxwell stopped pacing and looked at me. “You're *really* going to let her shoot Fela?”

*Maybe.*

I stayed quiet.

Emily turned to me. “Kaz? Why aren't you answering? We already agreed I would do it.”

“*Mysh*, when I imagined Fela's death, it was flames and excruciating pain—”

“I want out of Italy.” She frowned. “Let's end this shit the way we already decided—”

“Yo, what about Fela being Eden's father?” Maxwell looked at me and then her. “Do you think JP will want to save him based on that?”

I scowled. “The bigger question, Maxwell, is why you would think that *I* care about what Jean-Pierre wants. Fela dies tomorrow. Perhaps, my mouse shoots him. Maybe, I slice his fucking head off. Or, he thinks he is smart, puts some plan in place, and I simply evacuate us and nuke this whole fucking country.”

Maxwell widened his eyes.

“Regardless, this ends tomorrow.”

Wassily stepped into the room and sounded out of breath.  
“We have the clowns.”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “Bring the idiots in here.”





# Chapter 50

## Near Death

### Blue

As I died, I became a spiral of constant motion.

Then, something broke free from my body. Blue wisps, thin and transparent left me, twisting and flickering.

Was it my soul? My consciousness? Whatever it was, it left and I was no longer a body, but a mass of energy.

And I stood in the cosmos, enveloped in endless stars, feeling more connected than ever before.

Moments later, an angel appeared in the darkness, looming above me.

He was pure majestic light and piercing rays of brightness. Brilliant gold and white wings spread out behind him.

With a divine gaze, he studied me.

To say that he was beautiful was not enough.

He was regal.

Glorious.

I was enraptured by his presence.

My movements were sluggish, yet somehow, I stretched my hand out to him, desperate to touch this holy creature.

Unfortunately, the angel did not extend his hand.

Instead, he spoke with a booming voice so familiar, yet alien too. "It is not your time, Blue."

"What?"

He disappeared.

Then, tingling pain washed over me, and I was suddenly very aware of my body again. The blue wisps suddenly surged

back into me.

I hadn't been breathing, so when my lungs inflated with air, I started coughing and convulsing. The cosmos shifted to a blurry distorted existence. I couldn't hear anything other than a high-pitched ringing in my head.

My body spasmed against something...no someone.

Then, soft lips pressed against mine and oxygen pushed through me, flowing into my mouth and down into my lungs.

I coughed out again and began blinking my eyes.

Everything was still blurry and out of focus.

My body convulsed into a coughing fit. Next, water shot up my throat and spilled out of my mouth.

A familiar voice sounded off in the distance. "Breathe, Blue."

I began to breath on my own, yet my mind was still foggy. I coughed again, and my body shook with it.

I blinked.

My vision cleared.

Finally, everything came into focus.

Layers of burnt red and dark gold decorated the sky as if it were close to sunset.

I looked up into a face that was exceedingly handsome. Perfectly sculpted cheekbones. Smoothly shaved. Intense blue eyes.

I almost thought it was another angel, but I knew exactly who it was.

*Giorgio.*

I lay in his arms as he sat on the grass.

My throat burned as I pushed out words. "You...saved...me."

He hit me with a wicked smirk. "And now you owe me even more panties."

For some reason, the absurd statement made me want to laugh and cry all at the same time, yet it was impossible to react in any way. Pain blazed through my chest. Simple movement hurt.

I tried to sit up, but the throbbing in my head and pain in my chest increased. Sighing, I collapsed back against him.

“Rest.” He ran his wet, leather-gloved fingers along my face.

For several minutes, we remained there in silence. His strong arms comforted me. That gloved touch delivered a tenderness that I’d never known.

The sky darkened to black. The moon appeared and stars brightened within the blackness.

Off in the distance, helicopters groaned.

My breathing became slow and heavy.

Remembering what had happened before he brought me back, I broke the silence. “I...saw...an angel.”

Giorgio quirked his brows. “And what did the angel say?”

“That...it wasn’t...my time.”

“It was not.” Giorgio curved his lips into a smile. “We still have a passionate romance to embark on.”

My chest hurt as I let out a low chuckle.

“Rest, Blue.”

“Then...” It was heavy when I breathed in. “Stop...making me laugh.”

“I am not trying to. I am simply speaking the truth.”

Smiling, I closed my eyes and leaned into his warm body. “You...saved...me.”

“The yacht exploded. That impact shoved you deep down toward the ocean floor. It was almost impossible to find you and maintain any oxygen in my lungs. Perhaps, that angel helped me.”



I slowly opened my eyes. “Did...you go...back up...and catch your...breath?”

“No. I spotted you, and continued forward, no longer caring about breathing anymore.”

My heart ached. “That was...dangerous...”

“I would rather die trying to save you, then live my life without you.”

I blinked. “Giorgio...we...just met...”

“Still.” He stared at me, the glimmer of his blue eyes intensified by the pale moonlight. “I cannot fight this feeling that you will be the most beautiful parts of my life.”

The heat of his stare turned into an electric current that coursed through my body, triggering tingling sensations to flow in my chest. My breathing shifted to a steady rhythm.

I was so unprepared for his love and his intensity.

And I got this feeling that I was about to be in too deep with him. Deeper than I was in the ocean. Already, I could feel myself drowning once again, but this time...I yearned for it, this time...I welcomed it.

Giorgio watched me. “Blue...”

“Yes.”

“Do you feel it to?”

The sensation in my chest intensified. With no hesitation, I whispered, “Yes.”

He grinned. “Then, promise me that you will surrender.”

I widened my eyes. “Surrender?”

“To our passion. To our future.”

There was no use in denying this anymore. I had come close to dying. Now it was time to live my life to the fullest and make real decisions.

I swallowed down my fear and whispered, “I will surrender.”

Grinning, he leaned down. I breathed in the seductive scent of him. Then, he pressed his soft lips against mine.

Surrendering, I gave myself over to Giorgio. And it was more than just a kiss, it was a claiming, a devouring. He thrust his tongue inside of my mouth, twisting, twirling, and dancing over mine.

A helicopter loudly flew by us, spilling bright light over the space.

Giorgio lifted his mouth from mine. “Everyone is probably looking for us, especially you.”

Reality rushed back to me. “Oh, God. What about everyone else—Maxwell and Boris? Are they okay? Are they safe?”

Giorgio gave me a sad smile. “I wish I cared, but I do not. I only wanted to do find you, and once I did, I prayed to God that you would breathe again.”

I melted in his hold. “Giorgio, thank you so much.”

“Those words will not be enough.”

I blinked. “No?”

He leaned his head to the side. “You know how to thank me.”

“Giorgio, you already have all of my underwear.”

“I want time with you.”

“After Italy, we can—”

“No.” Giorgio shook his head. “I will not wait. I do not care about the Brotherhood or Black Axe nor the lion and mouse. I do not even care about my cousin, the Butcher.”

“Giorgio, we are in a war with—”

“I want time, Blue. Immediately.”

I swallowed. “Okay. I...will figure it out.”

The helicopter flew back over. This time it shut off the lights and cast a shadow across Giorgio’s face. He frowned as

the helicopter landed several feet from us. Its blades whirled and chopped in the air.

I turned my head to get a better view.

The helicopter looked enormous, a metal and plastic monster. Orange strips painted the black body. The engine was loud, flooding my ears with its thunderous noise.

Giorgio shifted his arms until they were under me. Then, fast he lifted me up like I weighed nothing. I held onto him, feeling safe.

Giorgio rose and carried us over.

On the side, the helicopter door slid open.

David jumped out.

My breath caught in my throat.

*Oh fuck. I forgot...I...like him too... .*

Concern etched David's handsome face. His short hair rippled in the wind.

"Blue?!" David raced over to us. "Your alive! Fuck!"

Giorgio stopped us in front of him. "She was drowning. I found her at the bottom of the ocean."

David's eyes watered. A wild pain filled them, making my entire soul twist. David's voice washed over me. "I prayed and prayed and fucking prayed until my throat burned and my tongue ached and..."

I didn't know why, but tears hit me. "I am fine."

"Blue." David gazed down at me. His jaw tightened. Then, he looked up at Giorgio and let out a long breath. "Thank you...for saving her."

Giorgio remained silent.

David put his gaze back on me and ran it over my body as if inspecting me. "I can take her for now, Giorgio."

"That will not be necessary. She is mine."

David raised his view to Giorgio.

My heart boomed in my chest.

The only other sound was the whirling and drumming of the helicopter's blades.

Both men stared at each other. An intense energy flowed and crackled between them. It didn't feel exactly like vicious anger or competitive primal rage. It was much more than that—soulful, bright, yet...very dangerous like a fire, blazing and burning.

An edge laced David's words. "Go ahead and take Blue to the helicopter. You have her *for now*."

I shivered.

Then, Giorgio carried us away.

Watching me with each step, David kept his pace.

*What am I going to do?*





# Chapter 51

## The Clown Opera?

### Emily

In the conference room, ten men stood in front of us. All of them wore these black and white clown masks with deranged grins, stitched eyes, and bulbous noses.

I didn't know if I should laugh or run.

Meanwhile, one of the clowns stepped forward, telling me that he must have been the leader.

*Is that Rocco Vizzini?*

Max and Boris stood on the right side of the room. While Boris leaned against the wall, Max glared at the clown leader.

*Relax.*

Before the clowns arrived, Max and Boris had grabbed their guns. Now, their weapons lay in their holsters.

I scanned the space.

Several of Kaz's men lined the walls and gripped their guns.

Wassily was armed and on my right.

On my left, Kaz sneered. "Take off your masks."

None of the clowns moved.

"Hmmm." Kaz walked over to the leader and stopped in front of him. The clown leader didn't turn his way. Kaz placed his hands in his pocket. "Did you know the first circus started in England?"

The clowns remained frozen like statues.

"1768." Kaz shrugged. "Or maybe 1769. Does not matter, the man who invented it was six feet tall, and a former sergeant major. He saw war."

I wondered what the clowns' expressions were under the mask—confused or annoyed.

“His name was Philip Astley. They say his showman skills were developed during his military career.” Kaz walked away from the leader and checked out the other clowns. “That fact always stuck with me.”

Kaz turned around and gestured to Wassily. “How do you think this man found the skill for entertainment in a war dealing death and pain?”

Wassily shrugged. “Perhaps because humans can be funny in any situation...even in war.”

“Yes.” Kaz pointed at Wassily and bobbed his head. “Humans are unpredictable and quite entertaining, even in the middle of war.”

Kaz put his attention back on the leader. “Here I thought I was fighting Black Axe and desperately trying to get out of this god forsaken country.”

As if unconcerned and possibly bored, the clown leader placed his hands behind his back.

“And here I find that the circus has come to town?” Kaz leaned his head to the side. “Perhaps, I do not want to leave at all.”

The clowns remained silent.

The door opened.

Four Harlem Crew members stepped inside and walked over to me.

I whispered, “What’s up?”

One leaned my way. “They found, Blue. David is bringing her back.”

“Ah!” The noise just squeaked out of me. Anger, hopelessness, and resentment left my body, and I had no idea they had even been boiling inside me.

Everyone looked my way. Even the clowns.



Relief surged through me.

I let out a long breath. “They found Blue.”

“Yo.” Shock hit Max’s face. “Are you fucking with me?”

The Harlem Crew member shook his head. “I talked to Blue on the phone. She wanted Emily to know, immediately.”

“Oh my God.” Max rubbed his head. “Sweetheart has nine lives like a cat. I can’t wait to see her.”

Boris rose from the wall. “Can I go meet them when they land?”

My nerves calmed. “Go ahead. Then, hurry back.”

Boris left with the four of Harlem Crew.

*Jesus Christ. Thank you.*

“And now for more miracles this evening.” Kaz put his attention back on the clowns. “Do you think you all could disappear?”

Only silence came.

“Let’s give them some motivation.” Kaz gestured to his men. They raised their guns and pointed at the clowns’ heads. Kaz snatched the mask off the leader’s face.

*Oh.*

I didn’t know why I expected some hideous monster’s face—mismatched eyes, a bumpy, uneven nose, crooked teeth.

However, the vision that greeted my eyes was the exact opposite.

Rocco was a good-looking man.

Lush wavy black hair framed his face. His deep-set green eyes sparkled like jewels. His high cheekbones were softly colored, giving him a warm, inviting glow.

It might have been a crime to cover that face with a mask.

Rocco directed his view to Kaz. A heavy Italian accent rode his words. “This could be a miracle, Kazimir.”

“Could it?”

“Just let us go.”

“Not so fast.”

“The Brotherhood is already involved in a complicated war with Black Axe. A wise man would not want to welcome *my* family into this.”

Kaz pointed to his own face. “Does this look like a welcoming expression?”

Rocco pursed his lips.

“I surely did not *welcome* you to this hotel, yet here you are, dressed to entertain.”

“We can go, Kazimir. Let us all pretend like this never happened.”

Kaz spoke through clenched teeth, “Yet, it did happen. Lights off. Cellular service too. Even an attempted escape of *someone* that I am holding here.”

Anger flashed in Rocco’s green eyes. “You are holding a person of interest for the Vizzini Family. I chose to act—”

“Oh really? A person of interest.”

Rocco nodded.

“If I call your Don, he will back this up?”

Rocco said nothing.

“Perhaps, this person of interest is not connected to the Vizzini Family at all. Maybe, it is only *you* that is interested.”

“True or not, Kazimir, what will you do, but let me go?”

“Is that my only option?”

“You are close to winning this war with Black Axe,” Rocco moved his view from Kaz and stared ahead of him.

“But, my family is an animal that you do not want to tango with, especially in this...as you say...godforsaken country. Our eyes are everywhere.”

“Back to your person of *interest*.” Kaz glared. “Explain.”

“Do you know where you are, Kazimir?” Rocco looked at him with a bored expression. “Should I show you a map? Should I talk about the history of this area? How my bloodline has run this region since men were riding horses and fighting with wooden swords?”

“The last man that stood in his so-called *territory* and told me how much he ran it, found a massive hole in his city days later.”

“We are not the French.”

“No. You are not.” Kaz shook his head. “While the French may dress like clowns, they would never hide behind clown masks. That is the option of cowards.”

Rocco bared his teeth. “I hid my identity for my family. No other reason.”

“Your family wanted you to stay out of this. Why get in it?”

Rocco kept that unhinged expression targeted on Kaz. “Be smart, Lion. Let us go. Pretend you did not see us.”

“But, I did. Now I want answers.”

“You won’t get any.”

“No?”

“And you won’t harm me either. While the Lion has a reputation for being a hot head, there is a brain in that skull.”

“You are correct. I will not harm you.” Kaz leaned his head to the side. “Should I bring in Ufuoma in here and harm *her*?”

Instantly, Rocco’s eyes radiated and blazed like a fire. So much so that I was nervous his very stare would burn Kaz.

*Step back, baby.*

Kaz remained there. “Would you like me to place Ufuoma in front of you, grab a knife, and show you what her insides look like?”

Rocco’s face contorted into something inhuman, like a hungry, feral animal on a hunt and ready to kill.

“Eh, Kazimir.” Max frowned. “You think I could talk to dude for a minute?”

Kaz quirked his brows.

“Just a little conversation, man.” Max touched his chest. “I also have questions.”

Kaz walked back to me. “Go ahead, Maxwell. I am getting nowhere.”

*What the hell is going on?*

Rocco’s expression shifted to confused. “Who is he?”

Max strolled over to Rocco. “You don’t know me, man.”

“Then, why do you think that you can talk to *me*?”

“So, check this out.” Max assessed Rocco, looking him up and down. “I’m not as eloquent as the Lion. I don’t know facts about circuses and shit.”

Rocco frowned.

“But, have you ever heard of this opera about clowns?”

Rocco put his attention on Kaz. “Get this guy away from me.”

“Come on, man. Humor me.” Max stepped close to Rocco. Honestly, too damned close. There was barely two inches between them.

Rocco didn’t back up. Instead, he frowned at Max. “It appears this guy wants a hug from me.”

“Naw, man. I just want to know if you ever heard of this clown opera.”

*What the fuck are you talking about, Max?*

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

“You don’t know it?” Max hit him with a wicked smile. “The main character has a wife that is trying to mess with another clown in his troupe. Dude kills them or something.”

Kaz sighed on my side. “Maxwell, perhaps we can get to the point.”

“Come on, guys.” Max smirked. “Someone got to know about this clown opera.”

In the back, one of Rocco’s men muttered, “Pagliacci.”

“Yeah.” Max bobbed his head. “That’s the name. You saw that shit, *buddy?*”

I gritted my teeth.

“I saw it.” Rocco frowned at him. “When I was kid?”

“You like it?”

“Nothing beats Italian opera.”

Max leaned in closer, almost like he was trying to kiss Rocco. But, his expression was lethal.

I stirred.

*Max, calm down.*

Not backing down, Rocco fisted his hands at his sides and glared back.

Max damn near growled. “What’s up with you and Ufuoma?”

*Oh God. Are we back on this chick? Is that really why you’re tripping?*

A vein in my neck throbbed as my body became rigid with annoyance.

I knew Max was now looking for the love of his life, but this Ufuoma couldn’t be the one. Whoever ended up with him would have to be worthy. I doubted that she deserved him.

Rocco’s voice held a murderous edge. “I don’t know who you are, but let me introduce you to me—”

“No need. You’re the Clown.”

“I’m much more than that, *friend.*”

Max stepped back and put his hands in his pockets. “Ever met the Comedian?”

*Who?*

Rocco nodded. “I know him.”

“Now that dude, Rafael. He’s funny, but you.” Max shook his head. “Not so much.”

“You should catch me on a better day.”

“But, I caught you right now.” Max smiled. “If I gave you a balloon, could you twist it into an animal?”

Kaz looked at me as if I could explain what was going on.

I shook my head.

“Balloons are silly,” Rocco said. “Instead, I make shapes out of intestines. That’s how I got the name.”

“Cool.” Max nodded. “Now back to Ufuoma. What is *she* to *you*?”

Rocco turned his view to Kaz.

The Lion stayed silent.

Rocco directed his attention back to Max. “Ufuoma and me... we’re friends.”

“Come on, man. You’ve seen operas and shit. You can paint me a better picture than that.”

“What is *your* name?”

“Maxwell.”

Rocco nodded. “I will remember that name.”

“Good. Maybe, I’ll write that shit down for you, so you’ll never forget.” Max pulled his hands out of his pocket.

I squinted.

*Is there something in his hand?*

Max crossed his arms over his chest, hiding that specific hand out of my view. “Back to this... *friendship*.”

“Kazimir, I have had quiet enough of this man—”

“You came through to save her.” Max whistled. “Must be a pretty strong friendship.”

“Very strong.”

“Friendship with fucking?”

“Maxwell, you must have a death wish. I could book you an appointment to handle that personally.” Rocco flared his nostrils. “Would you like me to do that for you?”

“Keep that appointment.”

“Are you sure?”

“You Italian motherfuckers supposed to be on that olive oil shit, but you mad baby oil to me.”

“I have no idea what you are saying.”

“Basically, you don’t want this smoke. Not with me, partner. Your lungs would go black. Deadened. It would be worse than cancer.

Sighing, Rocco looked our way. “Kazimir, get your puppy. I’m not impressed with his tricks.”

Max’s voice rose. “Did you fuck her or not?!”

*Oh, God.*

Rocco quirked his brows. “Why would that concern you?”

“Because she’s my wife, motherfucker!”

Rocco widened his eyes. “What?!”

“Okay, Max.” I raised my hands. “You had a long night. Maybe, you should go get some rest—”

“Fuck that, Em.” Max stepped closer.

That feral expression returned to Rocco’s face. “While Ufuoma has been promised to a man of Nigerian Royalty, she is not yet married. And you are not that man. So, who are you?”

“What man?”

Rocco squinted his eyes. “You are a mad man.”

Kaz cleared his throat, walked over, and stopped next to them. “Rocco, start giving real answers or I will make you sit in a room with this mad man for the rest of the night.”

“Yeah, man.” Max winked at him. “We can do this all motherfucking night.”

Rocco let out a long breath. “Ufuoma is promised to someone else—”

“Who?!” Max sneered.

Rocco turned to Kaz. “And I am also promised to someone else. However, that has not stopped Ufuoma and I from becoming...friends.”

“So, you’re on some undercover fucking shit with my queen.” Max rolled his eyes. “Kept her a secret. Wasn’t proud to have her on your arm?”

“There were complications put in place by our families—”

“Bet if she was white, you would have made that shit happen.”

“Do not say that.” Rocco snarled. “I care very much about Angel and give her the utmost respect—”

“You call her Angel?”

“I do.”

Trembling in rage, Max unfolded his arms. “Angel. Huh?”

“I just said it.”

I spotted the object in his hand.

*Shit. That is a knife.*

Rocco sighed. “That is my name for her.”

“Word?” Max popped the blade out.

*Oh no.*

Right as I rushed their way, Max raised his hand fast and slashed Rocco’s throat.

*Holy shit!!*

Chaos ensued, almost in slow motion. Rocco’s men rushed for Max. Our men shot at them. Their bodies fell to the ground, one by one.



Kaz opened his mouth in shock as blood sprayed on his face.

And Max slashed at Rocco again as the man began to fall to the ground.

Blood sprayed on Max too, splattering on his face and shirt.

Kaz roared, “Have you lost all sense?!”

Max stepped back and wiped blood off his face. “Motherfucker, do you know what I been through? I want my happy ending!”

“There will no happy ending if the Vizzini Family finds out what you did. They will shut down the airports and block the ports—”

“The big, mighty Lion is scared of Italians—”

“I am tired of Italy!” Kaz stomped his way and wiped the blood drops from his face.

I rushed between them. “Okay. Everyone calm down.”

“She’s mine!” Max yelled back. “I give two fucks about the Clown.”

“I do not want another war!” Kaz tried to step around me. “I want out of here!”

“Okay, baby.” I placed my hands against his chest. His heartbeats slammed under my palms. Red tinted his face.

Panting, he gripped his chest as if he were in pain.

*Baby, what’s wrong?*

“I finally found someone.” Max spit on Rocco’s corpse. “I’m done with you white boys cock blocking.”

“Alright. Alright.” I waved my hands. “Max just go outside for a fucking minute. Take a smoke break.”

Kaz looked like he had difficulty breathing. I could see the tightness in his face.

*Shit.*

“In fact, everybody leave!” I yelled, “Now!”

Quickly, Kaz’s men stepped over dead bodies and headed out of the room.

Max grumbled and left too.





# Chapter 52

## Dead Audience

### Emily

Once everyone left the conference room and the door closed, Kaz slumped against me.

“Baby?” I struggled with keeping his big body up. “What’s wrong?”

“Pressure in my chest.”

“What?” I helped him over to the table. It took too damned long. I could not carry him. His muscles were solid angles, and they never went slack.

My heart boomed in my ears.

When we finally got to the table, he sat on the edge. His chest heaved up and down too fast.

“Okay, baby.” I hugged him hard. “I think you’re having a panic attack.”

Kaz buried his face into the curve of my neck. “Lions... do...not panic.”

I tightened my hold. “Concentrate on your breathing.”

“He...fucking...killed the next Don...in line for the Vizzini Family.”

“Stay in the present moment, Kaz.”

“Rocco was...the golden child.”

“We will figure this out.” I let go, leaned away, and held his face with my hands. “Please, calm down.”

Kaz put his gaze on me.

“Breathe, baby.”

“I am going...to kill him.”

“Breathe.”

Kaz inhaled deeply, and then exhaled.

“Perfect.”

“We should...leave Italy...now.”

“Breathe, baby.”

He returned to slow breaths.

“Just look at me, Kaz.” I kissed his lips and then leaned back away. “That’s it. Don’t think about anything else.”

His face softened. He slowly inhaled and then exhaled again.

I moved my hands to his shirt and undid his tie. “Has this happened before?”

He didn’t respond.

“Sounds like a yes.” I took the tie off and slung it to the floor. “When were the other times?”

“When the French took you.”

I stiffened.

“When Lunita first came...and the second time too.”

*Definitely, panic attacks.*

I undid more buttons, slipped my hands into his shirt, and began tenderly rubbing his chest. His skin was warm.

I started my fingers at his collarbone, massaging my way down to his muscular stomach.

A low groan left him.

His breathing shifted to slow and steady.

“How are you feeling?”

“Good, *mysh* but if you lower your hands some more, I will feel even better.”

I paused and glared at him. “Kaz.”

“But, it is true.”

“You’re so fucking spoiled.” I placed my hand on the bulge pushing at his pants.

“Yes, *mysh*.” He licked his lips. “I can feel all the panic leaving me. Touch my cock some more.”

Smirking, I rubbed the bulge. The long, thick length hardened under my fingers.

Another groan left him. “Yes, *mysh*. Much better.”

“Good.” I unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants. “Why didn’t you tell me about this pressure in your chest before?”

“Because you were already dealing with a lot.”

“Fuck that. We said we would never keep things from each other.”

“Keeping things from you was never my intention, *mysh*. I was only considering you and the baby.”

“We are each other’s foundation.” I slid my hands into his pants, wrapped my fingers around his cock, and gave it a squeeze.

“I apologize.” Grunting, he widened his legs. “If I knew this would be the response, I would have said it much earlier.”

I lowered my hand and brushed my fingertips against his balls.

He moaned again.

I began to pull my hands away.

Fast, he stopped my movement and kept my hand there.

I smiled. “Kaz, promise me something.”

“Only if you keep doing what you are doing.”

“Thank you for thinking of our son and me, but *we* need you too.”

He blew out a long breath.

“We do, baby.” I slipped my hands along his length. “That means that you have to let me take care of you.”

Kaz moved his view to the floor where Rocco and his men lay dead. “We have a new problem.”

“I don’t think so.”

“No?” Kaz put his view back on me. “There are dead Vizzini men right there. That is a serious problem.”

“But, Rocco came here in secret. His family has no idea where he is.”

“Correct.”

“Let’s hide the bodies deep in the ground, kill Fela tomorrow, and quickly get the fuck out of here.” I squeezed his cock again.

He grunted.

“Thoughts on my plan?”

He licked his lips. “That could work. If the family truly does not know where Rocco is.”

“They will figure out that he’s missing in a day or two. Rocco had that thing with Ufuoma. Maybe we can pin it on Black Axe, I don’t know. Either way, it doesn’t matter. Days later, we’ll be in Moscow where no one can touch you. Something pops up. We’ll deal with it from there.”

“*I am* missing the cold of home.”

“By this time tomorrow, everything will be back to normal.” I slid my fingers to his cock’s mushroomed tip and rubbed the sensitive rim.

A loud groan left him.

I moved my hand and stepped back. “Feel better?”

Lust blazed in his eyes. “We are not done, *mysh*.”

“Focus.”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me back to him. My breasts pressed against his chest.

He deeply inhaled me, and then groaned. “I am still in panic.”

I smirked. “Bullshit.”

“I like the way you calm me.”

“Oh yeah?”

His gaze darkened, and his eyelids hooded with desire.  
“Now I want you to ride my cock.”

“Kaz, there are dead bodies in here—”

“You do not want an audience?”

“It is a dead audience—”

“Even better.” He yanked my dress up, grabbed my ass, and lifted me up.

“Kaz,” I straddled him. “But, how does your heart feel?”

Ignoring my question, he captured my mouth with his, kissing me down to my soul and wetting my pussy.

When he finally released my lips, I was dazed with lust.

A low growl left him. Slowly, he slipped my panties to the side.

My nipples stiffened. “Kaz, we are not fucking in here.”

“Are you sure about that?” He guided his cock to my opening.

A wave of heat rippled down my body, settling in my clit.

“Fuck.” I shivered. “What is wrong with us? We shouldn’t be doing this.”

He gripped my hips and then, very slowly he slid me onto his cock. That thickness stretched me and felt so damn good.

“Mmmm.” Moaning, I couldn’t help myself and began slowly rocking my pussy into a steady rhythm.

“Yes, *mysh*.” He slid his hands up my hips, along my ribs, over my breasts, and then abruptly he gripped me by the neck and thrust his cock up hard.

Gasping, I closed my eyes.

“Look at me.”



My body shuddered at his rough order, but I obeyed.

“I like seeing the pleasure in your eyes.” He thrust again and I met him, sliding my hips down, taking him deep.

We moaned in unison.

“That’s right, *mysh*. Ride my cock good.”

Lips parted, I stared into his dark eyes and slammed my body down on his length. He matched my rhythm.

“Damn it.” Fast, he lifted me up, rose, turned us around, and had me on the table. My back smoothed against the surface.

He spread my legs wide and pushed his cock into me, over and over. The table rocked, and my breasts bounced.

Pleasure shattered through me. “Oh!”

Harder and faster, he fucked me on the table, giving me every inch.

Heat exploded inside me.

As he continued to fuck me, my gaze shifted to the dead bodies on the floor.

*Fuck. I forgot about them.*

Their lifeless eyes stared in our direction.

Kaz slammed into me. “Only look at me.”

“But...oh,” I moaned.

His thick cock plunged deep into my pussy. My inner muscles pulsed and clenched.

I moved my view from the dead bodies and focused on him.

My orgasm built.

“That’s it.” He thrust. “Don’t look anywhere else, *mysh*.”

My breathing deepened as the pleasure attacked my nerve endings. I melted into ecstasy.

“Oh. Oh.” My moans mixed with the sounds of our fucking.

Movement on the right caught my attention.

Trembling, I tilted my view that way.

The door was a few inches open.

Someone watched us.

Kaz rammed hard into me.

“Damn, baby.” A moan ripped from me. “Oh.”

I squinted my eyes, trying to focus, but that cock was so good.

“Fuck, *mysh*.”

A little clarity came to me, and that was when I realized that Boris was watching us.

Kaz growled, “Look at me.”

I snapped my view to him.

He pumped harder.

And I forgot about Boris and even the dead bodies, all I could do was focus on the pleasure ripping up my body.

“Oh. Oh.” My body quaked. My pussy tightened. The pressure built deep inside my core. Then a rush of ecstasy obliterated my senses, and my vision went white and my orgasm exploded through me.

“Yes.” Groaning, Kaz slammed into me, his fierce strokes deep and hard as he found his release. His cock jerked and cum flooded my pussy.





# Chapter 53

## Mystery Solved

### Blue

In the helicopter, Giorgio surrounded me with his arms and pressed me against his chest. I shut my eyes and tried to blot out all the chaos of the past few hours—the restaurant shootout, the chase, the yacht exploding, my almost death. I relaxed into Giorgio’s strong embrace as he held me against his chest. I could hear his heartbeat through his suit.

Once we landed back at the hotel, I opened my eyes.

David watched us. No expression covered his face. Swallowing, I leaned away from Giorgio, hoping I wasn’t making David uncomfortable.

But, then David hit me with that handsome. “I am glad you are alive, Blue.”

I let out a long breath. “Me too.”

Giorgio’s body tensed under me.

When the pilot shut off the helicopter, Giorgio lifted my body up, carried me off the helicopter, and continued toward the hotel.

David took the lead and led us into the hotel. Armed Brotherhood crowded the lobby. We headed past them and got onto the elevator.

The ride up was awkward.

Everyone remained quiet.

Still, I thanked God that that I was surrounded by them. I felt overwhelmingly exhausted, soaking wet, and lightheaded. Plus, the shock of being so close to death was finally sinking in. But, their presence kept me balanced.

I couldn't imagine what I would do without Giorgio and David. It might have been fucked up to be thinking this way, but...I did not want to choose. For now...I would try to have them both as long as I could.

Was it selfish? Was it wrong?

Both opposite, one was my sunlight and the other my moonlight. I needed them both in my life, and couldn't survive without the other. Maxwell talked about managing. I hoped he was right. But, they were not the sort of men to be controlled.

Who was I to think that I could?

Still I couldn't fight the feeling of wanting to keep them both.

Would I be their ruin? Or would they be mine?

The elevator doors slid open, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Giorgio carried me off the elevator and looked at David. "Why are we on the second floor?"

"I thought she should see a doctor first."

Giorgio nodded.

David led us forward.

I scanned the space.

The Brotherhood had taken over the entire level and shifted it into a hospital. The pungent scent of blood, alcohol, and sweat hung thick on the air. Wounded men and busy medics lined the hallways. All of the rooms' doors were open, showing their injured inside.

"I had this set up for Blue." David guided us to a room at the end of the hall. A white shirt and jeans lay on the edge of the bed. With closer inspection, I realized they were my clothes.

Giorgio lay me on the bed. "You should get out of those wet clothes and clean up."

David gazed at me. “I agree. *We* should also leave her alone.”

Giorgio frowned.

“Once we do, I will get a doctor.” David turned to him. “Let us go.”

Giorgio groaned in annoyance and walked off with him.

David closed the door behind them.

*Well...they're kind of working together...Maybe they would do the same when it came to our love.*

Hope filled me. I began to peel off my wet clothes. It took me forever to change since I was so exhausted.

Several minutes later, someone knocked on the door.

An older man ducked his head in and spoke in broken English. “I...am...doctor.”

I nodded.

Walking in, he wore a white lab coat. It was splattered with crimson specks of blood. I assumed he must have been healing people for hours.

Dark circles formed under his eyes.

I lay in the bed while he checked my vitals. For a long time, he listened to my lungs. His eyes scanned my face and body, then he took out a penlight and shined it in my eyes, one after the other.

“O...kay.” He noted my temperature, then he looked at my mouth and ears and listened to my breathing. “Not...bad.”

He watched the readout from a little machine that hummed like an insect and then bobbed his head. Once done, he said, “You...stay...tonight.”

I pointed to the bed. “In here?”

“Tonight.” Nodding, he gestured to the bed. “Under... covers.”

Sighing, I got under all the blankets. “Okay.”

“Tonight.” He smiled. “I come...I look...at you a lot. Eat. Drink. Rest.”

I leaned my head back on the pillow. “Alright.”

He left the room.

*Damn it. I wanted to check on the Mouse.*

I forced myself to lie perfectly still, but my eyes roved the room.

This space was not as nice as mine several floors up. It was simply furnished—full size bed, one night stand, and a small writing desk. The tiny bathroom had a shower, toilet, and sink. The lamp on the nightstand was shaped like a rose.

On the wall there was one painting of five men in bright red robes, stretching their hands to the sky.

*Shit. Do I really have to be here all night?*

For the next hour, I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds from outside the door—the wounded groaning in pain, people walking back and forth, hurried Italian words. Some people shouted. Others screamed. I even swore I heard the noise of several rapid gunshots above me.

Finally, someone knocked on the door.

Excited for any conversation, I slowly sat up. “Come in.”

The door opened.

To my surprise, Valentina strolled in with a big bouquet of blue roses. They sat in a large crystal vase.

*O-kay.*

Additionally, Valentina appeared to be ready for an extravagant occasion. She wore a long flowing blue silk dress with a plunging neckline that showed off her ample breasts. It had two splits that went up to her hips. Each time she took a step, those long, perfectly toned legs were on full display.

*Wow.*

Tonight, her blonde hair fell down to her shoulders in lush waves.



Red coated those lips.

She looked like a fashion model strutting on a runway. A queen stepping down from her throne. A goddess preparing to be worshiped.

*Damn. Kazimir and her family really have some good genes.*

“They just told me what happened.” Valentina placed the roses on the nightstand. “Had I known, I might have demanded to be helicoptered to the area. Perhaps, I would still be swimming in that ocean for you.”

“Thanks for worrying about me.” I put my attention back on the roses. A sweet, floral scent rode the room.

*Hold up.*

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

*That...vase looks almost the same...as the other bouquet.*

“The whole operation got out of hand. I heard King David went ballistic due to thinking you were dead.” Valentina strolled over to the writing desk, grabbed the chair, and placed it next to my bed. “He will need to keep his cool in the future or I will get rid of him.”

*God, please tell me that she isn't the mystery person.*

“However, I can totally understand why King David would be so smitten with you.” She lowered into the chair and crossed her legs.

I swallowed. It was hard not to put my gaze on them.

Valentina was beauty incarnate. The sort of beauty that made so called straight women reconsider their sexuality. Being that I was in fact attracted to both sexes, her presence always made things difficult.

However, I had known back in Moscow that I would never cross that line with her. She was the fucking Lion's sister and absolutely crazy.

I witnessed some of the things that occurred between Maxwell and her. They seemed like toxic-want-to-fuck-each-

other frenemies.

*Oh wait! That's why Maxwell said he wouldn't get involved. Shit.*

I could see Maxwell avoiding the entire situation just because Valentina was involved. Had it been anybody else, he probably would have said something.

*No. This is not good at all.*

There were whispers that Valentina brutally killed a ballerina in Prague. It was something about a shoe or book being stuck deep inside the dead woman's ass.

Add the fact that her temper was more dangerous than the Lion's, had me close to racing out of this room. Lucky for her, I didn't have the energy to flee.

*Yeah...I will have to shut this down fast.*

While I had survived drowning, I would not survive Valentina.

As if hearing my words, she curved those full lips into a wicked smile. "I have been trying to taste you since we entered Italy. I imagine your pussy tastes like warm honey."

*Fuck.*

How did one respond to that?

Awkward as hell, I simply stirred on the bed.

Valentina drew tiny swirls onto her exposed thigh. And it was a very very nice thigh. "I have been doing my best to romance you."

*Ignore the legs. Look at her eyes. You have enough love problems.*

Valentina batted those lashes. "And, you should have come up on the roof that night. I had an elegant dinner prepared for you."

"I...Valentina." I gave her a weak smile. "You are breathtaking and...sexy, but I am not interested—"

“Because you are scared?” She hit me with a devilish smirk. “Close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Close them.”

“Why?”

“I want you to imagine something in your mind.”  
Valentina pouted. “Please, Blue. Do it for me.”

Gulping down fear, I closed my eyes.

“Picture this, Blue.” Her voice brushed against my skin.  
“Both of our sculpted bodies are naked and on the bed.”

My heartbeats increased.

“Your nipple is in my mouth. That soft, wet pussy is  
writhing beneath mine. Throbbing. Melting. The only sound is  
the bed rocking and your moans. Your begging.”

I gripped the sheets.

“Can you see it?”

I bit my bottom lip.

“Imagine our bodies, in the tides of passion, moving  
together like waves in a turbulent sea, crashing and receding,  
taking us to far off places both abstract and real.”

My nipples tightened.

*Holy shit.*

I opened my eyes.

Valentina now sat on the bed. Her perfume wrapped  
around me. It was lavender and strawberry ice cream. I could  
taste it on my tongue.

I leaned back. “I am sorry... Valentina, but I cannot...date  
you.”

“Date?” Valentina chuckled. “You would not survive  
dating me, Blue.”

*Oh.*

She tilted forward, providing me with a great view of her cleavage. “I am entirely too much for you.”

I widened my eyes. “I agree.”

“What I am proposing is one evening of my tongue playing with your pussy.”

I blinked. “Oh...uh...yeah. I cannot do that.”

“You cannot let me lick your pussy?”

“No?”

She chuckled. “Are you asking me a question or answering?”

“Uh...I am...answering.” I cleared my throat. “No. I am saying no.”

“Why?” She leaned her head to the side. “Have you lost your pussy?”

“What? No. It is with me—”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Valentina.”

“Then, let me see it.” She grinned. “Let me make sure it is still there.”

I opened my mouth, closed it. “It is fine.”

“You will never know unless you let me see.” She slipped her hand toward the blanket and began moving it away.

“No.” I brought the blanket back up. “I am not going to let you see it.”

“Then, you will never know if you have lost your pussy or if it is still attached to you.”

“I am fine with that.”

She moved in closer. Barely three inches ran between our mouths. “At night, I think of your sexy body, naked and on my bed. Spread eagle.”

*Holy shit.*

I panted a little.

She inhaled me. “And I am pushing the tip of my tongue between your pussy lips, teasing your clit. Wouldn’t that feel good?”

I bobbed my head. “Yes.”

*Wait.*

I shook my head. “No. I mean...that would not. And...no.”

Laughing, she rose from the bed. “I am too gorgeous to chase *anyone*, but I will be nice and give you an open door policy.”

My breathing finally steadied.

“Perhaps, you can let me taste you on your birthday. I would fly you to wherever you want to go, take you shopping, show you the best time of your life.” She winked. “No budget.”

“Thank you...for that offer, but...the answer is still no.”

“We will see, Blue. You have not been spoiled until you have been treasured by a Solonik.”

*I bet.*

Sighing, she tossed that long blonde hair over her shoulder. “Let me know when you are done playing with boys.”

All I could do is nod like an idiot.

“By the way, they are both outside of your door.” She eyed me. “Which one do you want to see first?”

I parted my lips.

“Do not worry.” Laughing, she strolled away. “I will make the decision for you.”

“Wait, Valentina.” I held out my hand.

She left.

My head reeled from the crazy admission.

*The Lion’s sister was trying to fuck me? Jesus!*

I scanned the room as if unsure that it truly happened.

*What the hell is going on in my life? Is it the new shampoo I bought? Or something else?*

Then, the door opened, and both men walked in.

*Oh, come on, Valentina.*







# Chapter 54

## Read the Room

### Blue

Giorgio and David walked in.

Both gorgeous, yet absolutely opposite.

They had changed into new clothes looking like two models from very different fashion brands.

Giorgio could have modeled for a high-end fashion house putting out *Cocktail Attire*. Tonight, he wore a blue designer waistcoat with blue pants and a silk white shirt. The fabric glimmered and cascaded as he walked.

A shimmering diamond pin sat at the top of his blue tie. His cufflinks sparkled with diamonds too, glistening like the stars in the night sky.

And the designer suit was tailored to perfection. It fit him nicely, hugging every curve of his athletic body.

He'd just shaved too. Now, his face was devoid of stubble. Every angle and line was as smooth as glass.

*I can't believe you risked your life to save me.*

I swallowed.

*You're right. You will get all my underwear.*

I smiled as he lowered into the chair that Valentina had been sitting in.

Grinning, he crossed his legs. "You look much better."

"I feel better too."

His cologne had a floral undertone with a hint of rosemary and musk. It smelled nice and clean.

I tried not to swoon. "I cannot thank you enough for pulling me out of that ocean."

“You can thank me enough and you will. I am writing a list of ways.”

Clearing his throat, King David stood three feet away from Giorgio and right next to the bed.

I turned to him and smiled.

David could have modeled for a fashion designer focusing on *Business Casual*.

He dressed in a midnight black shirt that clung to his muscular chest in the most enticing ways. The sheen of the material reflected the dim light. His pants hugged his chiseled legs and presented a prominent bulge in the center that was hard to look away from.

Tonight, he had a gold crucifix pinned to the upper right side of the shirt. I gazed at the small Jesus and then moved my view to the crown of thrones enveloping his head. They looked so real and sharp.

*This is new.*

Tears filled my eyes and there was no reason I could think of why they would come.

*Stop it. Don't cry.*

David had talked about praying so much for my survival. I wondered if the addition of the cross represented his strengthened faith in God.

I let out a long breath and moved my view to his handsome face.

Those sharp, defined cheeks gave him a youthful attractiveness, yet they also made him look sensually masculine. He'd let his hair on his jaw grow out. Knowing David, he was too busy to keep it shaved. Now, the silky fuzz of hair covering his jaw made his lips seem plumper and brought more attention to the Bible verses tattooed under his chin and all over his neck.

Usually, his blond hair went back in waves and teased his ears. Tonight, it looked fashionably tussled. Additionally, the

scent of his cologne was a cocktail of pheromones and a dash of mint.

*How could I ever choose? It is impossible.*

David focused those blue eyes on me. “Valentina said that you wanted to talk to both of us.”

I gritted my teeth.

*Thanks a lot, Valentina. Fucking asshole.*

How could I get out of this? What did one say when they were in the room with two people that they were falling for?

*Management.*

“Okay.” I straightened my back as I sat in the bed, hoping to pull in a more self-assured energy. “So...I wanted to thank you both for saving my life. Both different levels, but...thank you. I almost died and...now...I want to live to the fullest. I don’t want to deny myself anything.”

They gazed at me.

“And.” I swallowed. “I know it is not a secret that I have had...interactions with the both of you—”

“What sort of interactions?” Giorgio leaned his head to the side.

David curved his lips into a wicked grin.

“Um...” I shook my head. “We do not need to define or describe anything—”

“We do.” Giorgio targeted me with an intense gaze.

I gulped down fear.

The door opened.

“Eh. Is this Blue’s room?” Maxwell ducked his head in.

*Thank God!*

“Yes.” I waved him in.

“Oh, shit.” Maxwell looked at Giorgio and then David. “You’re busy. I’ll check you later—”

“No!” I might have screamed it too loud. “Come in. Please.”

Meanwhile, Giorgio never turned that intense gaze from me.

“Shiiit.” Maxwell widened his eyes as he walked in. “I see it is mad packed in this motherfucker.”

Maxwell still wore the same outfit from earlier today, but now it was dingy and sprayed with blood.

*Is that fresh blood?*

I squinted my eyes. “Did you just kill someone?”

Bobbing his head, he went over to the other side of my room and opened the window with a screech. “Yeah. I just sliced a motherfucker’s neck.”

David quirked his brows. “Who?”

Maxwell pulled out a joint. “The Clown.”

“What?!” Giorgio unfolded his legs. “Not...Rocco Vizzini. Perhaps, it was just someone that was dressed like a clown—”

“You think I’m the type of motherfucker to just go randomly killing people dressed like clowns?”

“Better a random clown than Rocco.”

David let out a long breath.

“Chill, Giorgio.” Maxwell lit the joint. “I’ll deal with whatever I have to deal with—”

“An army of Made Men heading your way?” Giorgio shook his head. “Because that is what is coming—”

“Are these motherfuckers zombies or something?” Maxwell rolled his eyes.

“What?” Giorgio twisted his face in confusion.

“If they don’t have supernatural powers then all I need to do is have enough bullets—”

“You will need a lot more than bullets. You will need an army.” Giorgio sighed. “That is why I made sure Blue and

Boris did not kill Rocco when we saw him earlier. There was no need to initiate a new war—”

“Fuck that clown. Motherfucker was trying to take my wife.”

David blinked. “Your wife?”

“Long story.” Maxwell blew out smoke. “Shit will be fine. Let’s stop talking about it.”

Giorgio and David turned back to me.

“Um...” I cleared my throat. “No. We can keep talking about that—”

“Or we can talk about your interactions with David.” Giorgio leaned back in his chair. “Anything I should know about?”

David crossed his muscular arms over his chest. “Since we are having an open discussion on *interactions*, I am wondering if there are any new developments.”

I glanced at Maxwell.

He whispered, “Management.”

*Fuck.*

I looked back at them. “So...I like you...both...a lot.”

David shifted his weight on one foot.

Giorgio frowned.

“And um...okay, so...” I held out my hands. “Well...I am an independent woman.”

David raised his eyebrows.

“I am also single.”

Giorgio’s frown deepened.

I swallowed. “We are also in modern times where we can date whoever we want. We can...take our time to get to know each other—”

“Have you kissed King David?” Giorgio eyed me.

“So...”

David answered for me. “Most definitely we have kissed. And, I plan for us to do more.”

“Is that right?” Giorgio rose from his seat.

They both squared their shoulders as if getting ready to fight.

“Oh shit.” Maxwell blew out smoke and left the window. “Hey, guys. This is sort of a hospital, so we need to keep it nonviolent—”

“But, what have *you* done with Blue, Giorgio?” David uncrossed his arms and glared. “I know about one kiss, but has there been another—”

“Most definitely, *King*.” Giorgio sneered. “And as you said, I plan to do more.”

“Yo.” Maxwell got between them and held his lit joint at his side. “Alright. So we have established some plans. I think this is a good time to just give each other space and let Blue get some rest. She almost died and shit.”

Giorgio turned to me. “You are right. You *were* single at the time you kissed him. That is fine. *Now*...your being single. Not so much.”

“Oh.” I blinked.

“You are correct, Giorgio.” David nodded. “She is not single. She is taken. Therefore, the few interactions you had, see them as good memories and move on.”

“Wait.” I raised my hands in the air. “Listen. I almost died so I am not going to choose between the two of you.”

Fast, they both glared at me.

Rage filled their eyes.

*Shit.*

The intensity of those stares made my heart race and my pulse hammer in my throat. I felt like a trapped animal, like an exhausted deer being eyed by two hungry wolves.

Giorgio hissed. “*What did you say?*”

“Yes, Blue.” David growled. “Can you further explain?”

I was frozen in a cage of terror, desperate to break free but unable to escape.

*Come on. Get it over with.*

I looked at Maxwell and swore his expression appeared nervous.

I deeply inhaled and then exhaled. “I...would like to...date you both.”

Silence was their only response.

*Well, at least I finally said it.*

Maxwell didn’t smoke more of his joint. Instead, he gazed at me in shock.

*Okay. Am I doing bad or good?*

I turned to Giorgio and then David. “I do not want to disrespect you two, but I will not choose because...I like you both.”

The room felt like it was heating up.

Sweat beaded around my forehead.

I wiped my face. “I think that we can have designated days or set times when I can spend time with you.”

Maxwell slowly shook his head, and he was doing some sort of motion with his hand. Unfortunately, the hand was still at his side, so I wasn’t sure what the movement was.

*Is he wagging his finger?*

I blew out a long breath. “And I will make sure that I meet both of your needs—”

Maxwell coughed. “Stop.”

I tensed.

*What?*

“I have a better idea, Blue.” Giorgio turned his glare to David. “If *you* cannot make a decision, I will make it for you.”

I raised my eyebrows.

David put his view onto Giorgio. “I was thinking exactly the same thing.”

Then, everything happened fast after that.

Giorgio rushed for David. Maxwell tried to block him, but David twisted around to get Giorgio.

Then, Giorgio tackled David, lifting him fast and slinging him to the floor.

The lit joint flung in the air and fell on the bed right next to me.

Giorgio pummeled David with punches to the face. Skin split. Blood sprayed.

I rushed to put the joint out and screamed, “Guys, please do not!”

Somehow David got away from Giorgio’s attacks and was back on his feet. Maxwell tried to grab them, but they knocked him out the way.

“Yo!” He fell back on my bed.

David seized the opening and kicked Giorgio’s knee caps.

“Ah!” Giorgio fell to the floor.

David pounced on him.

Then, they began wrestling and grappling, their hands grasping at each other’s throats, punching and shoving. Their breathing was hard and unsteady. The scent of sweat and blood rose in the air.

“No! No!” I left the bed and tried to get between them.

Maxwell yanked me back. “Are you crazy? They might kill you.”

“But—”



“What the fuck, Blue?” Maxwell dragged me to the other side of the room.

“I was managing!”

“But, you got to read the room too—”

“I did!”

“You didn’t. These motherfuckers are trying to kill each other!”

Then, the even more unexpected happened.

The Lion and Mouse entered the room, and I cringed in pure embarrassment.

Kazimir roared, “David!”

“Good.” Maxwell left me. “Now I got some help.”

It took several minutes, but Kazimir and Maxwell waded into the middle of the fight, grabbed Giorgio and David who continued to punch at each other, and pulled them apart. Still, they kept hitting as they were being dragged away.

Blood dripped down their faces, chests, and arms. Their clothes were torn. Diamond cufflinks lay on the floor right next to the gold crucifix.

When they were far enough apart that they could no longer reach each other, they kept yelling and shaking their fists.

By then, the Butcher and Louis had entered and began helping with Giorgio. Then, Boris and a few from Harlem Crew came into the room and jumped in the middle.

*Fuck.*

The room was suffocatingly packed.

Kazimir let go of David. “Enough!”

Everyone stood still and went silent.

Kazimir scowled at David, and then Giorgio. “Do I not have enough going on right now?”

I swallowed.

Kazimir pointed at Maxwell. “I already have one idiot causing me trouble tonight.”

Maxwell muttered, “Yo. Come on, man.”

“Now, you two idiots are fighting over *one woman* as if there are no other women in this hotel!” Kazimir shouted.

Emily got to his side. “Baby—”

“I will not let *any* of you keep me in this damned country any longer!” Kazimir rang his fists. “Do you hear me?”

I gulped.

Everyone nodded.

“We leave tomorrow night, even if I have to fucking kill every last one of you!” Kazimir pointed to Giorgio, David, Maxwell, and even Boris. “I will do it. I will fucking put a bullet in all of your hearts!”

Emily rubbed his arm. “Baby.”

Kazimir’s nostrils flared. “You two want to fight over Blue?”

No one responded.

“Then, we will do this Brotherhood style. Yes. That is it.” Kazimir bobbed his head like a mad man. “All the men. Be in the conference room in ten fucking minutes!”

*What?*

Emily followed him. “What are you all about to do?”

Kazimir stopped her from moving forward. “Only the men, *mysh*. No women are allowed—”

“What do you mean no women allowed? We need to—”

“I will see you in a few hours.” Kazimir glared at Giorgio and then David. “Come on, idiots! Let us get this over with!”

They shuffled out of the room.

Kazimir pointed to Maxwell. “You too!”

Maxwell frowned. “What the fuck do I need to come for?”

“You think I am going to deal with those bodies?” Rage dotted Kazimir’s face. “You fucking did it. You hide them!”

Shaking his head, Maxwell grabbed the joint and walked off with them.

When the room emptied, Emily turned my way and gave me a weak smile. “Well...I am glad you are alive.”

I blinked. “Me too.”





# Chapter 55

## The Shit Show

### Kazimir

*Fucking idiots.*

Fury surged through my veins.

I stood in the center of the conference room, waiting for everyone to enter.

Wassily ordered my men to take out the long table and all the chairs.

I avoided gazing at the slain Vizzini men on the side. Their dead bodies had been lying in the room for too long and marinating in expelled bodily juices. The odor of rot wafting from the corpses was so strong that even the oxygen seemed to taste of death. It permeated every nook and cranny of the space.

I gritted my teeth and turned to David.

Knowing the Brotherhood's resolutions well, David took off his shirt, belt, shoes, and socks. Then, he used the shirt to wipe the blood off his face.

*Here we are again?*

I would need to have a conversation with my number one soon. While he executed his duties to perfection, it was always a woman that made him slip.

In fact, had it not been for his ex-fiancé we probably would have already been out of Italy.

*Now Blue?*

I scowled at him.

*If she causes you to slip one more then, I'll fucking slice her head off.*

As if hearing me, David caught my expression and turned his gaze down to the ground.

A minute later, the Pansies strolled into the conference room. Somewhere in between the time of leaving Blue's room and showing up here, Giorgio had seized the opportunity to clean up.

Confused, I checked my watch.

*How did he do that so fast?*

Crisp and sharp from head to toe, Giorgio now wore a new blue suit, freshly pressed with a new pair of diamond cufflinks and black leather gloves.

He sauntered over to my right and held his hands out. "Alright. I am ready. What is the Brotherhood's process to settling this?"

I looked him up and down. "It surely isn't a cocktail party."

Jean-Pierre got to his cousin's side. "And it better not be Russian Roulette."

I spoke through clenched teeth, "It will be whatever *I* want it to be."

Jean-Pierre frowned. "Russian Roulette is too lethal."

"Yet, pissing me off is even more lethal, and that is what your cousin has done." I pointed at the pansy idiot. "Pissed. Me. Off!"

Maxwell entered next with Boris and ten men from Harlem Crew. "Alright, guys. Let's get this shit done quick. I'm tired and I need to check on my baby."

*His baby? Yet, another woman I may kill if these men keep acting up.*

I stifled my groan and gestured for David to get on my left.

He cracked his neck, headed over, and targeted Giorgio with his gaze.

Maxwell lit his joint. “Eh, before you guys begin, I have a question.”

Annoyed, I turned to him. “What?”

“Em called me as I was heading back. She told me the plan about hiding the bodies. I’m wondering if you all have some acid, so I don’t have to spend the whole night cutting up the faces and shit.”

“Maxwell,” I sneered. “You think I have acid hanging around? Just in case some dumb ass kills the wrong person?”

“Damn, man.” Maxwell held out his hands. “I know I fucked up, but I’m just asking a question.”

“Get rid of the bodies!”

David cleared his throat. “Actually, I purchased several corrosive resistant bins full of acid. Just in case.”

I quirked my brows. “Just in case?”

“One never knows if we may need acid.” David shrugged. “Italy seemed like a big deal, so I grabbed a lot of different deadly things.”

*Good job.*

I wanted to smile, but I did my best to keep it off my face. He was still in trouble and I would not let him off so easily.

David gestured to Wassily. “You know where the acid is? Right?”

Nodding, Wassily headed off. “I will get the bins.”

“Thanks, K.D.” Maxwell smirked and returned to Harlem Crew. “Alright. Let’s line these motherfuckers up. Put the masks in one pile. We will get rid of that shit differently. Maybe, burn them outside. Unfortunately, we will have to shed the dead bodies of their clothes and all jewelry.”

*At least this jack ass is skilled with hiding bodies.*

I put my attention back on the other idiots.

More of the Pansies entered and gathered behind Jean-Pierre and Giorgio. For a few seconds, I wondered where



Louis was.

Once my men finished with moving the furniture out, they positioned themselves on King David's side. There was no doubt they would be rooting for him. Surely, my number one had garnered an exorbitant amount of respect since being by my side.

Time and time again, David confirmed that he was the best man to ever hold the number one position. More importantly, my mouse loved him. And if I...would admit it, which I most likely would not...I loved him too.

*If we could only fix this weakness you have with women...*

Jean-Pierre pulled me out of my thoughts. "Are we going to get to this mysterious solution?"

I growled, "Is your schedule busy, Butcher?"

"I have a video chat with a very important woman who happens to be the love of my life. I do not want to miss it."

I smirked. "Your flute player can wait."

"You do that intentionally." Rage filled Jean-Pierre's eyes. "Surely, you know by now what instrument she plays."

I returned to the idiots—David and Giorgio—and made sure that I stood right between them. "Then let us begin. We must not have the flute player waiting."

Jean-Pierre rolled his eyes.

"Women." I let out a long breath. "They trigger us to fight."

I glared at David. "But is it all about good pussy?"

I turned to Giorgio. "Or is it about the honor of knowing that she's yours?"

I put my view on the crowd of men watching.

"Personally," I crossed my arms. "If you touch *my* woman, I will kill you."

Maxwell chuckled in the back of the room. "White boys and sistas."

“What are you laughing about?” I barked at him. “You just sliced a man’s neck over a woman who you just met.”

Maxwell blinked.

“Idiot.” I took several steps back and let empty space run between David and Giorgio. “Men become aggressive toward one another when they are in pursuit of a woman, but is it a biological reason for this constant need to assert our dominance over pussy?”

Both men’s gazes were locked on the other. I doubt they even heard one word I said. Perhaps, I was only speaking to myself anyway, desperately trying to understand the power of the opposite sex and their unyielding grip on us.

“Long ago, men dueled over women.” I unfolded my arms. “Gripping a pistol, the men stood across from each other, and one at a time, each man took turns shooting at his opponent.”

Jean-Pierre let out a long sigh. “I will not allow my cousin to duel with anyone.”

Ignoring him, I kept my gaze on the idiots. “The Brotherhood has had its own history of settling disputes over women.”

David cracked the other side of his neck.

Giorgio raised one eyebrow.

“We brawl it out.” I fisted my hands and raised them to my face. “Bare knuckle. Barefoot. No jewelry or accessories. No weapons. No help.”

Instantly, Giorgio began unbuttoning his jacket as if more than eager to get his fists back on David.

I continued, “Historically, we have done this battle naked —”

“Oh, come on, man!” Maxwell groaned from the corner. “At least let me get out of here before you all start getting naked. I already have to deal with dead bodies and shit.”

Ignoring him, I continued, “However, this evening I will allow you to keep on your pants as long there are no weapons

in your pockets.”

Giorgio spoke, “I must be allowed to keep my gloves on.”

“No gloves.” I glared. “That is the rules.”

Giorgio frowned. “If my gloves go off, then I will kill him, and I assume this is not a fight to the death.”

David winked. “I surely intended to kill you—”

Jean-Pierre stepped forward. “No one dies tonight. We are already in a war. The last thing we need is to ignite another one between the Brotherhood and Corsican.”

“No fucking gloves!” I pointed at Giorgio and then jabbed my finger in David’s direction. “And do not kill the pansy.”

Jean-Pierre didn’t step back. “How do we know who wins?”

I looked at him. “The man who can walk out of this room, is the man that gets Blue.”

Maxwell chuckled. “You know that this fight won’t mean shit. Motherfuckers still going to be hollering at Blue, crippled or not. The loser will be rolling in a wheelchair and shit, spitting game.”

Wassily entered with two men pushing a heavy metal cart with black steel bins on them.

*That must be the acid.*

I gestured at the bin. “Maxwell, you need to focus that genius expertise on getting rid of those bodies and shut up.”

“Okay. I got this.”

I turned to Giorgio and groaned in annoyance. He carefully folded his shirt. Jean-Pierre already held his needly folded jacket.

I leaned my head to the side. “Would you like to join this fight or not?”

“I am coming.” When Giorgio finally finished, he walked back over to David and fisted his leather gloves.

I frowned. “Get rid of the fucking gloves.”

Giorgio raised his hands and fisted them. “I do not want to touch his skin.”

“Excuse me.” Jean-Pierre handed the folded jacket and shirt to another pansy. “I believe my cousin should be allowed to wear them. Or do you think a pair of gloves will be an advantage to beating your number one? Surely, that cannot be correct.”

Before I could speak, David did. “Let the Butler keep the gloves. It does not matter to me.”

Sighing, I walked over to David and lowered my voice. “When he punches, the gloves will reduce the shock to the hands and wrists.”

“Correct.” David nodded. “But, it will also reduce the intensity of his punch’s impact.”

I considered that. “Good point.”

Jean-Pierre spoke behind us. “Perhaps, we should all be privy to your conversation.”

I headed back to my position. “Butcher, when I make you privy to my conversations, we will be stranded in the pits of hell and I will be using your mouth as my toilet.”

Jean-Pierre twisted his face in disgust. “I merely requested a fair fight not a threat drenched in flames and bodily waste.”

“Shut the fuck up!” I roared at him. “It is your cousin that has us in this mess—”

“My cousin?” Jean-Pierre gestured to one of his men. “This is your number one’s fault. Once again, the King has his cock out and in the wrong places. First Bartolo’s fiancé, now —”

“That was fucking different.” David headed toward Giorgio.

Several of my men grabbed him.

The pansy Jean-Pierre was gesturing to, arrived next to the Butcher with his violin case.

“What is this?” I sneered. “You take your bow out and this turns into a Brotherhood verses Corsican blood fest.”

Jean-Pierre grabbed the case, but kept it closed. “You are whispering things to your number one, and setting the rules. I want a fair fight for my cousin.”

David and my men headed back to their side.

I glared. “And what would be a fair fight, Butcher?”

“A proper referee,” Jean-Pierre countered.

I touched my chest. “That is me.”

He shook his head. “That is not fair at all. Your only concern during the fight will be to keep the King safe. I request that Maxwell is put in charge.”

“What?” I looked Maxwell’s way.

He’d been leaning over a dead body and drawing a smiley face on the cheek.

Boris chuckled.

“Eh, guys.” Maxwell rose and wiped the small knife’s blade on his pants. “I’m pretty busy—”

“Get your ass over here!” I yelled.

“Boris, put all the bodies together so we can get stuff in order.” Sighing, Maxwell headed my way, kept the joint to his side, and blew out smoke. “Em is right. You need to calm down.”

“Give me that damned joint.” I held out my hand.

Right as he got to me, Maxwell let out another long breath and gave it to me. “Come on, man. Please don’t spit all over this one.”

I took the joint and inhaled.

Maxwell eyed the joint in my hand. “How many rounds will this fight be?”

“No rounds.” Smoke left my nostrils. “We end when one of them cannot get up.”

“This is stupid.”

“As stupid as you slicing the neck of one of the most important men in the Vizzini family?”

Maxwell frowned. “Fine.”

He stepped forward and clapped. “Alright. Alright. Let’s get this shit over with.”

David and Giorgio stared at each other. Flames of rage blazed in Giorgio’s eyes. David curled his lips back and bared his teeth in a feral snarl.

I took another hit from the joint, needing some source of relaxation.

“We’ll make this shit simple as fuck.” Maxwell got between them. “Soon as I back out of your way, knock the other’s head the fuck off. Any questions?”

Neither responded.

This atmosphere shifted to heavy and intense. Perhaps, it was because testosterone packed the space. Maybe it was the dead bodies still rotting in the room.

A soothing sensation poured over my body, telling me that the weed was doing its job.

“Yo. I want to say this one thing though.” Maxwell held out his hands. “It’s nothing wrong with just the both of you dating Blue.”

Neither turned his way.

“Plus, I like you.” Maxwell looked at King David, and then turned to Giorgio. “I even like you too.”

The men just glared at each other.

Giorgio drew back his fist and seethed with rage.

“Well, then.” Maxwell shrugged and scanned the room. “Perhaps...we should make this interesting with a few bets. I got a couple hundred in my pocket and—”

“Get on with it, Maxwell.” I blew out smoke.

“This motherfucker.” Maxwell shook his head. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

Maxwell backed up. “Begin!”

Fast, David took a swing with his right.

Giorgio bobbed and dodged it.

But, David must have expected that, he threw a left hook and got Giorgio in the nose.

The Butler stumbled back and shook his head.

David charged forward and delivered a crushing punch to Giorgio’s face. Still, the Butler remained standing and just simply shook that away.

*Come on, David. Show me some blood.*

The two began circling one another.

The quiet tension shifted in the space. Everyone became more animated and backed up, creating a wide circle. A couple of my men cheered David on. That triggered the pansies to start speaking in French and rooting for the Butler.

*Okay. Now we have a fight.*

Determined to ruin the manicured pansy, David threw a heavy blow to Giorgio’s midsection, but the Butler’s block was enough to make it only a glancing blow.

I puffed some of the joint.

David threw another punch, but like a bullfighter twirling a cape, Giorgio twisted away in perfect time, causing David’s fist to fly past him.

*Hmmm.*

I yelled out, “Be careful, David! The Butler is learning your moves! Switch it up!”

I didn’t think David heard me because David went for him in the same way.

Giorgio dodged fast and threw a terrifying uppercut to David’s jaw. It was so loud, I touched my own chin as if I could feel the hurt.

*Goddamn it.*

David recovered quickly and threw a swift punch to Giorgio's temple, but missed.

*Shit.*

I groaned.

Then, David threw a jab and Giorgio responded with a quick left.

Maxwell slowly circled around them.

David punched left.

Giorgio was able to slip away from it and land an uppercut to David's chin.

I couldn't tell if he was playing David, or if he was genuinely that good.

Maxwell shook his head. "Damn, this is a good betting fight. I really wish we put money down on this."

I gritted my teeth. "Just focus on the fight!"

David growled and threw a roundhouse that should have taken Giorgio's fucking head off, but the Butler darted to the side.

*Son of a bitch.*

The fierce fight continued.

I hated to admit it, but Giorgio was fast and skilled. Thankfully, my number one was stronger or I might have jumped in.

*Perhaps, we should have done Russian Roulette, and I only fill Giorgio's gun.*

David backed up and spit blood on the carpet.

Giorgio looked at that liquid glob and appeared sick.

*Oh yeah. I almost forgot.*

I smirked. "David, use the germ stuff against him!"

Giorgio widened his eyes in horror and glanced my way.



I tipped an imaginary hat at him.

“Not a bad idea.” David spit blood on his fists.

“Oh no.” Giorgio edged away. “Absolutely not. Maxwell, this is against the rules.”

“Eh, man.” Maxwell shrugged. “Spit on the hands is a fair fight.”

Giorgio got behind Maxwell as if hiding from David. “One milliliter of saliva contains 100 million microbes!”

“Man, I don’t know about all of that.” Maxwell rushed away as David charged in that direction.

Giorgio slipped around Maxwell, still pleading with him. “Stop the fight. There are deadly viruses!”

“What?!” Maxwell held his hands up in the air. “Hold on. Stop the fight. Just chill for a minute, David.”

Grinning, sweat dripped down the sides of David’s face as he staggered back to the Brotherhood side.

“Alright.” Maxwell turned to Giorgio. “What are you saying?”

Giorgio wiped blood and sweat off his forehead. “Viruses responsible for diseases such as hepatitis and others reside in the saliva. I am talking Herpes simplex types 1 and 2, Epstein-Barr virus, Cytomegalovirus, and Kaposi syndrome, and let us not forget papillomaviruses, Ebola, Zika—”

“Eh, man.” Maxwell kept his hands in the air. “You think David has all of that?”

“Of course.” Giorgio bobbed his head. “Think of all the women that have sucked him off. He is drenched in all of them.”

David spat on his fist again. “And I plan to give it all to you.”

Terrified, Giorgio stared back. “Maxwell, make him wash his hands. This is ungodly and—”

“Yo, we’re not washing hands in the middle of a brawl!” Maxwell waved his hands. “Just kick that motherfucker’s ass. You have the gloves on.”

Giorgio pointed at David. “He cannot touch me or I may *actually* kill him, by accident.”

Maxwell glanced over his shoulder. “Thoughts?”

“We do not leave until we have a winner.” I took another hit of the joint. “And no one is washing their hands.”

“By the way, you can keep that joint now. I don’t want any of those viruses.” Maxwell turned back to the men. “Alright, fellas. You heard the Lion. A fight is a fight. Even though David has...turned the shit a bit nasty. Let’s go.”

“What’s next?” Giorgio glared at David. “Will he take his cock out and start pissing on me? Are we not gentlemen? Is there no honor?”

Some of my men barreled over with laughter.

David headed forward. “There is no honor here, Butler.”

“Apparently.” Giorgio gritted his teeth and raised his gloved fists.

Maxwell clapped his hands. “Round two...kind of.”

With a roar David barreled into Giorgio, slamming them both onto the ground.

They rolled around, punching and slapping, kicking and even biting.

Everyone rushed forward for a better view.

Somehow Giorgio got David into a chokehold.

*Fuck!*

David’s face turned red. His body twitched.

Maxwell clapped his hands. “Eh, not to the death, man.”

Giorgio didn’t loosen his grip.

One of the French shouted, “Kill him!”

That caused one of my men to charge for the guy who shouted it, starting another fight in the corner.

The crowd divided into trying to watch both fights at the same time.

*What the hell is going on?*

“Not to the death, man.” Maxwell batted Giorgio’s arm. “Let him go.”

Giorgio released David’s neck.

Gasping, David rolled onto his back and did his best to recover.

*Thank God.*

Giorgio panted and brushed off his chest as if trying to get germs away.

*Maxwell is right. This may get us nowhere.*

David leaped onto Giorgio.

They returned to grappling on the floor.

I could tell both of their strength was depleting.

*I may have to secretly kill Blue. Would my mouse survive it? Would Lunita come out?*

Meanwhile, a third fight broke out in the other corner.

I groaned in annoyance.

Jean-Pierre walked over and stopped at my side. “I believe this is what most would call a shit show.”

Right when I was about to speak, I spied Boris rushing over to Maxwell and whispering in his ear.

*Now what?*

I quirked my brows.

“Yo!” Maxwell broke David and Giorgio up. “Stop for a minute! Now! Eh! Come on!”

Maxwell dragged them apart and then headed off with Boris to the other side of the conference room. “I’ll be right

back, guys.”

I watched them. “What is going on?”

Worry crossed Maxwell’s face. “Boris said something stupid. I’m just going to show him that he’s wrong.”

Boris didn’t look our way.

I frowned. “What did he say?”

Maxwell and Boris assessed the line of dead men on the ground.

Jean-Pierre left and checked on Giorgio.

Others began to break up the scattered fights.

*This was a damned shit show.*

Inhaling more of the joint, I walked over to Maxwell and Boris.

*At least I am calm now.*

When I got to them, I blew out smoke. “What?”

Maxwell scratched his head. “Boris thinks we lost a body.”

“Which one?” I brought the joint to my mouth.

Maxwell frowned. “Rocco’s body.”

I coughed on the smoke and began walking around all the corpses. “What the fuck do you mean you lost his body?”

The line of dead men lay there, rotting and stinking. Yet, not one lifeless face belonged to Rocco.

*No. No. No.*

Maxwell just held his head. “He’s not here. And there’s no way he could have just got up and escaped.”

Soon others gathered around.

Jean-Pierre spoke, “Was Rocco’s dead body in here when we entered?”

“I didn’t check.” Maxwell shook his head. “Usually, when I kill a motherfucker, he remains where I left him.”

Jean-Pierre looked at me. “Did you happen to see if Rocco was here?”

I shook my head. “For once, I actually agree with Maxwell. My dead bodies always stay where they are supposed to.”

David wiped blood from his nose and stumbled forward. “All of the hotel exits are blocked and heavily guarded. Misha’s people are also watching. If someone moved the body, we will get him.”

I calmed.

David continued, “Additionally, I will check this room’s footage to see everything that happened after Rocco was killed.”

I frowned. “My mouse and I had a ...private moment in here after everyone left. Make sure you fast forward past that.”

“*A moment?*” Maxwell widened his eyes. “You both were fucking in here with dead bodies?”

Rage hit me. “*You* are asking me questions, in the middle of your shit show?”

Maxwell sighed. “I’m just saying—”

“Don’t just say. Find Rocco’s corpse.” I pointed at him. “Worst case scenario, we have one of Fela’s spies trying to take the body back to the Vizzini Family—”

“Or...” Jean-Pierre placed his hands in his pockets.

Everyone looked his way.

I glared. “Or what?”

Concern filled Jean-Pierre’s eyes. “Or Rocco survived.”

“Naw, man.” Maxwell waved his hand. “Motherfuckers don’t survive cuts to the neck like that.”

“How deep was the cut?” Jean-Pierre tilted his head to the side. “Deep enough to damage the major vessels in the neck, the jugular vein and carotid artery? If either of those were cut, his chances would be slim...nonexistent, but if not...”

I turned to Maxwell. “Was it deep or not?”

“I did it so fast.” Maxwell rubbed his forehead. “I planned for that shit to be deep, but I don’t know.”

David returned to my side. “The bigger question is, do we want Rocco dead or alive?”

I was too high to truly answer that question. If he was dead, then I had the secret of his corpse hovering over us all. That could make leaving Italy very tricky. If he were alive, then surely he would be returning for revenge, and there would be a new war to deal with in Italy.

A sloshing noise sounded from the back, disrupting my thoughts.

*What the hell is that?*

I checked over my shoulder.

Giorgio held a bottle and poured water on his gloves.

*Idiot.*

Frowning, I returned my view to David. “Dead or alive, we need Rocco as soon as possible. That is everyone’s number one priority.”

“I am on it.” David stumbled off with most of my men.

Jean-Pierre watched me.

I growled, “What?”

“I miss Eden.”

“Butcher, are we now at the self-disclosure stage of this friendship? If so, I would like to go back to the trying-to-kill-each-other phase.”

“Do you truly think we will be leaving Italy tomorrow?” Jean-Pierre pursed his lips as if nervous for my answer.

I put my view on Maxwell and Boris pouring acid on the dead men’s faces. “Butcher, I swear on my dark soul that *this* is our last night in Italy. As for anything else...we will see.”







# Chapter 56

## Problems

### Emily

I wanted to go up to Max's suite and meet this chick, Ufuoma.

But, I stopped myself. Due to Max killing Rocco, I wasn't a fan of her. Plus, she was Fela's daughter. My desire for violence was high tonight. If she said something wrong, I might have killed her. And that wouldn't have been fair to Max who was dead set on making this chick his wife.

*She's safe for now.*

I also considered calling up Boris and taking him to the side to talk. He owed me an explanation on why he snuck a look while Kaz and I made love.

But, that was one problem I did not want to deal with.

Plus, I wasn't sure how to proceed. Certainly, Kaz would want to be informed about it first. Unfortunately, I didn't want to have that conversation with Boris or him. Too bad I knew I couldn't afford that one. Eventually, Boris would have to be dealt with.

Instead of dealing with Ufuoma or Boris, I chatted with Blue for an hour, giving her my thoughts on her unexpected love triangle. I hoped my advice was good.

What did I know about maneuvering relationships with multiple men?

Kaz was my first and last love. In my heart, no one had ever come before him, and no one damn sure would come after. He was my everything.

After visiting Blue, I wandered upstairs to Paolo's room and peered inside. My heart warmed at the sight. Softly snoring, Paolo slept with his little arm flung over Harlem.

He'd clearly made my puppy his. And Kaz's beach day had worn them out.

I remained in the doorway for several minutes, watching them sleep. So much happiness and peace swarmed around me, enclosing my body like a cozy blanket on a cold winter day.

*I'm so glad I kept him. He's all mine.*

I dragged myself away and placed three extra guards at Paolo's room, needing to make sure he was as safe as possible. Nothing else could go wrong.

I headed back to my master bedroom and went out to the balcony.

*Is this our last night here? Will we finally get to say goodbye to Italy?*

The black sky stretched forever. Gleaming stars peppered the darkness. Each glinting point was like a tiny, distant eye, burning holes in the canvas of space and watching me.

Judging me.

Unease crept up my spine.

*Can I do it? Can I really kill Fela?*

Now all alone, I had time to think about the oncoming situation.

Over and over, my mind and heart warred with one another.

My heart thought that killing him would be wrong. Was Fela not a victim of this world fighting the forces and doing what he thought was right?

Meanwhile, my mind was ready to end this, and if it meant taking his life, then so be it. He had to be stopped, once and for all. Was he not a threat to our way life, our peace?

I gripped the cold railing with my hands and took deep breaths.

*This ends tomorrow. No matter what.*

My throat went dry.

The baby fluttered in my womb.

Smiling, I whispered, “Hey, little one.”

He moved again.

“You’re right. I have bigger things to think about. Fuck Fela.” I moved one hand to my stomach—this tiny mound on my body swelling with miraculous life. “Should I have agreed to do it, baby?”

What would have occurred if I had said no? More days in Italy? More back and forth between the Brotherhood and Black Axe?

Since being in Italy, I’d almost lost my friends in this battle.

Not to mention, I damned sure had lost myself. My dark side, Lunita returned twice due to the stress and violence permeating each day. Each time, she had killed with no remorse. No mercy. The last time she had taken innocent lives.

I didn’t know if I made the correct decision on getting rid of Fela, but this had to end, before I lost myself even more.

“Baby, I’m trying...I hope I’m doing the right thing.” I rubbed my stomach. “I’ve made so many mistakes in these last weeks by putting us in danger. I’m sorry if I’ve caused you stress. I love you so much.”

Kaz’s voice sounded behind me. “How is my son doing?”

I turned around. “Fine.”

“Unfortunately, I am not sure he can hear you yet.”

I quirked my brows. “No?”

Kaz walked over. “I read that at around eighteen weeks, the baby can hear sounds in your body. Around six to seven months, the baby can hear sounds outside of the womb.”

I grinned. “I love that you read up on pregnancies.”

He gathered me in his arms, encasing my body in warm muscle. “And I love that you are apologizing for putting the

both of you in harm's way.”

I leaned my head back and frowned.

“*Mysh*, I do not want you to kill Fela tomorrow.”

I blinked. “Not this again.”

“Yes. This again.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“We kill him as soon as he arrives—”

“And you don’t think Plotting-Fela will already have something in place for if we did that?”

“Maybe—”

“Definitely—”

“Yet, Maxwell is correct. Fela should not get to decide how he dies—”

“Maxwell also may have triggered another war here, so I’m not listening to his advice right now.”

Kaz stiffened. “About Maxwell and what he has triggered...”

“What?”

He let me go. “Rocco’s body is missing.”

I twisted my face in confusion. “What the fuck? Did somebody move it?”

Kaz dug his hands into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

“Oh no.” Tension gathered around my shoulders. “Do we have a spy or something?”

“A spy would be better, *mysh*.” He handed me his phone. “Look at this.”

I took the device.

A video had been paused. The screen showed all of the dead bodies in the conference room. In it, Kaz and I stood by

the table. This recording looked like the moment after sex when we had put back on our clothes.

Kaz spoke, “Misha sent this.”

I pressed play.

On the screen, Kaz kissed me. I giggled and walked off. He strolled next to me and slapped my ass.

*O-kay.*

The camera remained on the corpses lying in dried blood. Soon as the door slammed shut, Rocco’s body slowly moved.

Panic surged through me. “No.”

“Yes.”

It took some time, but Rocco pushed himself up. Several moments he groaned and winced in pain. Once he slowly rose to standing position, he touched the front of his neck and then looked at his hand.

*How the hell?*

Rocco shook his head, whispered something in Italian, and drew an invisible cross in front of his face.

*I can’t believe this.*

On the screen, Rocco stumbled away, and the video stopped.

I looked up. “No fucking way this is possible.”

“Apparently, Maxwell did not cut deep enough.”

I gave Kaz back his phone. “Where the hell is Rocco now?”

“There is footage of Rocco stumbling into a maid. She gave him her phone and helped him limp away. Once he got on the phone, someone hacked into the system seconds later. All footage is missing for the next thirty minutes.” Kaz walked over to the railing, placed his hands on it, and gazed at the sky. “Misha’s people had stopped monitoring the cameras in the conference room when we began making love. Later, one person caught Rocco stumbling off with the maid, but did not

connect it to the slain clown. Once this person headed to Misha to show him, someone had already hacked into the system. We assume it was one of Rocco's people."

"What about Ufuoma? Is she still here or did Rocco go after her to finish the escape?"

"Maxwell and I double checked. She is still with us."

"What about the maid that helped Rocco? Do we know who she is?"

"We do, but she is now missing. We have people going to her house, but I am certain her family and her have already moved. This is the Sicilian's area. Rocco has men and contacts everywhere."

"Shit." I held out my hands. "What do you think is going to happen next?"

"Well...if this means war, it will at least be *less of a war* than if Rocco was dead."

"O-kay."

"The bigger question is *who* Rocco wants to war with? Does he blame the Brotherhood or will his revenge only target Maxwell?"

"You know the Vizzini Family. What do you think it will be?"

"I am more surprised the Don has not already called. The family is drenched in traditions. They would initiate some form of dialogue first before any violent challenge."

"So *no call* could be a good sign?"

"Could be." Kaz kept his gaze on the moon. "One advantage of their silence is that they still do not know. Rocco's move to free Ufuoma had nothing to do with their family. He may keep all of this quiet."

*I hope so. Please, God.*

I came closer to Kaz. "If the Vizzini family didn't want to get involved in the war, then they wouldn't be happy with Rocco's choice to come to the hotel tonight. Right?"

“That is what I believe. Add the fact that I am *certain* the Don would not approve of Rocco’s love affair with Ufuoma.”

“He’s a bit racist?”

“I believe the Sicilians treated Black Axe badly because they saw them as subhuman. Once, the Don came close to saying as much, but he would have never spoken those words in my presence.”

I frowned. “So, it didn’t matter if Rocco was expected to marry someone or not. The Don wouldn’t have approved of Ufuoma being his wife?”

“I doubt it very much.”

“This could play well for us. If the Vizzini family did find out...maybe, the Don wouldn’t go to war based off of Rocco trying to save her.”

“Which is why I believe Rocco may be quiet about this... for now.”

“How would he explain the scar on his neck? Surely, he has one.”

“That would be his problem, not ours. I only want to get you and my son out of Italy tomorrow.”

“But, what about Max?” I swallowed.

“We get to Moscow first, *mysh*. All other problems will be discussed later.”

My heart sank. “Nothing can happen to Max.”

“I agree.” Kaz put his view on me. “At times, I believe Max’s presence is directly related to your sanity.”

“I don’t know about all that. I just know that I love Max like my brother and wouldn’t survive if he was gone. I already lost X.”

Kaz reached out and pulled me to him, making me feel safe and secure. We fit so perfectly together it was as if he was born to hold me and I was designed by God to be held by him.

“Do not worry, *mysh*. If there was a problem with the Sicilians, we would have already known.” Kaz placed a soft kiss on my forehead. Those tender lips were a soothing balm to my troubled soul.

“I hope you’re right.” I rested my head against his chest and listened to the sound of his heartbeat, letting the steady rhythm comfort me.

He slipped his hands up my back and ran his fingers through my hair. “How do you feel?”

I wrapped my arms around his thick waist. “Stressed, but better next to you. You’re like my stronghold in this world. A bastion of safety in this horrible existence.”

“I understand that more than you know.” He tightened his hold on me. “One of the main reasons why I love you so much, *mysh* is because no matter who or what is against us—from bombs to psychotic enemies—there is no fear when you are next to me. I always know that we will win.”

I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent. “This craziness will be done soon.”

“Let us hope, *mysh*.”

“Oh.” I looked up and opened my eyes. “What happened with David and Giorgio?”

“It was a shit show.”

I grinned.

“Take that expression off your face.”

“Of course it was a shit show. The Brotherhood, David, and Giorgio don’t get to choose. It’s Blue’s choice.”

He sneered. “Is it now?”

“Yes, Kaz. And she wants to date them both for a while. I support that.”

“Do you now?” He let me go.

I smiled. “Yes, crazy man.”



He placed his hands to the side of me and on the railing, caging me with his arms. “You think it is fine to date two men at the same time?”

I rolled my eyes. “I think it is fine for *Blue* to date two men.”

That sneer deepened. “*Mysh*—”

“Kaz, my understanding of your past love life was that you had tons of women all around the world in condos you purchased, fucking them whenever you wanted to—”

“Blue is not me. I am the lion. She is your number one.”

“Which means?”

“That she is not to cause any fucking trouble with *my* number one and an enemy’s cousin.”

“First of all, the French aren’t our enemies.”

Kaz snorted.

“Second, you need to mind your business—”

“They were fighting in her room—”

“David was off-duty—”

“He is never off-duty. I should have knocked his damned head off when I spotted him tumbling around with the Butler. I will need to talk to him.”

I smiled. “Be nice to David. He had to kill a woman that he was in love with because of his loyalty to you and the Brotherhood.”

Kaz pursed his lips.

“He’s probably mourning and doesn’t know it. If Blue can bring David some peace, then maybe that is fine.” I placed my hands on Kaz’s chest.

“I will accept her and David, but that does not mean she can mess around with Giorgio too.”

“But what if for David, Blue just ends up being a path to healing and nothing more. Then, it would have sucked that she turned away Giorgio—”

“These two will kill each other over her.” Kaz leaned his head toward me and placed the tip of his nose against mine. “Do you have any idea what pussy does to men like us?”

I licked my lips. “Tell me. What does it do, baby?”

“Pussy makes us weak.” His voice dropped to a growl. “It makes our morals fade. Our sanity break. And when that occurs with men like us...the streets fill with blood.”

“I think you are overexaggerating.”

“I put a hole in Paris over your pussy.” He captured my lips, drawing me into a caressing tango of tongues.

I tasted the faint hint of smoke and pulled away. “Did you have one of Max’s joints?”

He swept his hands down my back. “And if I did?”

“You would be in trouble.”

“The good and nasty sort of trouble?”

“No, Kaz. The flip you off the balcony sort of trouble.”

“Hmmm.” He grinned and tried to kiss me again.

I leaned away from his mouth. “So...”

He raised his eyebrows. “So?”

“I’m not sure when to talk to you about...a difficult topic.”

He frowned. “Now is the time.”

“Okay, but it is a smaller problem that will just irritate you. It doesn’t involve any danger or—”

“Tell me.” He moved his hands from the railing.

“Listen. You’ve been stressed tonight and—”

“Tell me now. Did Fela call you?”

“No.” I let out a long breath. “This deals with Boris.”

His face shifted to a neutral expression.

“I plan to handle this myself, but I thought I should let you know what is going on first.”

“You will handle it, if I agree to that—”

“No, Kaz. *I’m* handling the situation. We already established that I solely deal with Harlem Crew—”

“Did we?”

“Yes.” I glared. “Remember the whole argument about your killing my people and us agreeing that you would not to do it again?”

“What did Boris do?”

“Do you remember agreeing not to kill any of my people?”

“Answer *my* question.”

I rolled my eyes.

Kaz crossed those big arms over his chest. “What did Boris do?”

“It’s not a big situation—”

“Let me decide that.”

“When you and I were having sex in the conference area, Boris opened the door and looked at us for a little bit. That’s it.” I held my hands up. “And I am going to talk to him about it. I’ve been thinking about a solution.”

That neutral expression remained on his face, yet dark rage blazed in his eyes.

I swallowed. “His... watching made me uncomfortable, so I’m changing Boris’s position. I am going to place him closer to Max.”

Kaz’s nostrils flared.

I shifted my balance to my other foot. “This could be good in the long run, since...Rocco is alive. Max should have someone as his number one, helping to watch his back.”

Kaz remained silent.

“So...” I shrugged. “I’ve got this under control, but I wanted to let you know—”

“*Mysh*, more must happen. *Changing his position* is not good enough.”

“I think it is.”

“It is not. Boris made a clear violation—”

“He just opened the door and took a quick look. I’m handling this.”

Kaz spoke through clenched teeth, “Boris saw your breasts bouncing. He heard those sexy moans leaving your parted lips. He witnessed how well that pussy took my cock—”

“Kaz, I’m handling this.”

“Boris will be thinking about that sight tonight.”

“That’s enough—”

“I am going to kill him.” Kaz tilted his head to the side. “Can you make peace with that?”

“No.” My heart hammered in my chest. “Which is why you won’t do it.”

“*Mysh*, I just finished explaining to you what pussy does to men like me—”

“Well, I’m not just pussy. I am your future wife, and you will compromise with me when I ask you to.”

“Will I?”

“Yes.” My bottom lip quivered. “Please...”

He curved his mouth into a terrifying smile. “Okay.”

I shivered. “What does that mean?”

“It means that your wish is my command.”

“Kaz, you look like you are thinking of all the fucked up things you’re going to do to Boris, and happen to be very excited about it.”

“You know me well.”

I fisted my hands at my sides.

His gaze went to my hands. He sighed. The smile left his face. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“We are busy right now. You are stressed. I am stressed too. Let us agree that Boris is safe in Italy.”

“And what about in Moscow?”

“*Mysh*, we are not in Moscow.”

“Kaz, will Boris be safe in Moscow?”

“What does a lion know about the future?”

“That lion better fucking know not to kill Boris or harm him.”

“Let us get out of Italy first.” He unfolded his arms and held his hand out to me. “Then, we can talk further about Boris.”

I took his hand. “We just talked about Boris, and the agreement is to let *me* handle it.”

“You are correct.”

“I am?”

“You are.” He guided me away from the balcony. “We should sleep. We have a long day of death tomorrow.”

“Kaz.” I looked at him as we strolled away. “I’m serious, baby. Let me handle it.”

“You have decided to kill Fela, and I am determined to make sure my son and you survive. Then, we have to safely get the fuck out of here without triggering a new war with the Vizzini family. Therefore, Boris is safe in Italy.”

“But—”

“That is all I can promise tonight, *mysh*. Put your mind on Fela.”

I gave in for now. Kaz was correct. My focus needed to be on getting us out of Italy. Compared to Fela and his antics, Boris was a minor distraction.

However, once this was done, I would be back to talking to Kaz and keeping him away from Boris. There could be no more deaths of people I cared about.



# Chapter 57

## A Dream of Destiny

### Kazimir

I dreamed that I was a lion, walking along a beach at night.

Cold wind whipped through my mane. The scents of salt and seaweed filled my nostrils. Waves crashed against the shore, wetting my huge paws.

Then, I noticed another scent riding the wind. This one was enticing to every cell in my body. I raised my snout in the air and inhaled some more, loving the thrilling fragrance. The smell stirred up the most primal part of me.

I tracked this wonderful fragrance, increasing my speed.

Soon I saw the origin of the wonderful scent. Far ahead on the beach, the black lioness lounged, watching me with glowing eyes—one pupil was black and the other was silver.

Moonlight gleamed on her smooth, black fur, shining like polished obsidian.

Blood dripped from her claws as if she'd just finished killing prey.

And I knew without a doubt that I needed her.

She would be mine to dominate.

Mine to keep safe until our deaths.

She was my mate.

She was my queen.

The lioness turned her head in my direction, snarled, and bared her teeth.

Unconcerned by her warning, I growled back and then licked my lips in anticipation.

*Mine.*



I hurried forward.

Hunger rippled through my body.

She jumped up to her paws, getting ready to fight. Her stance radiated confidence.

Her response made my lion's cock grow hard. Thick, veiny, and long, the tip slipped against the soft sand as I continued forward.

I could not wait to wrestle the lioness down to the ground, mount her from behind, and slam my cock inside of her.

Did she know what I intended? Did she even have a clue?

Perhaps, she did because she let out a deep, guttural roar. The loud sound reverberated over the crashing waves.

I matched her roar with one of my own.

It made her take several steps back.

I roared again.

She turned and ran away.

*Mine.*

I raced after her, excited for the chase.

My cock pulsed and bobbed with the leaps. My muscles burned.

She picked up her pace, but she could not outrun me.

I was faster, and she was mine.

When I got close, I gently shoved my shoulder into her hip.

She tripped and tumbled, rolling to a stop on the sand. To my surprise, she didn't get up. Instead, she remained on the ground and arched her body. It said that she had accepted defeat, yet her eyes told me that it was a trap.

I crept forward.

When I was foot away, my lioness tried to get up and charge.

I dove for her and brought her back to the ground, covering her completely.

Roaring, she writhed and twisted under me. Her powerful claws scratched and her fangs bit into me, but I ignored the pain of those injuries, held her down, and placed my paw on her throat.

She struggled to break free, using all her might to throw me off, but I would not budge. I could tell that she was not used to being dominated, but tonight she would learn.

Roaring, I pinned her down and showed her that she was no match for the full force of my power.

Still, she snapped at me.

Aggravated, I unleashed a roar that was surely loud enough to be heard from space. The sound probably shook the ocean and sent any sharks fleeing away. My vocal cords stung from the force of it.

She trembled under me and whimpered. Her struggle weakened, and her chest heaved as she took in air.

Finally, she calmed and submitted to me.

*Mine.*

I wrapped my body around hers and sniffed her neck, relishing in the sweet wild fragrance of her black fur.

Probably not fully ready to accept defeat yet, she lifted a paw to strike.

I licked her furry cheek, letting her know that the fight was over.

She widened those enchanting eyes.

Was it from the affection? Did she realize that she liked it?

I licked again, and she retracted those claws and lowered the paw. A soft purr vibrated through her body.

My cock throbbed.

She nestled close to me, and I nuzzled her.

Soon, I was mounting her from behind and nudging the head of my cock against her wet pussy. The tip entered her easily.

Purring, I pushed forward and my cock slid into her. Her pussy enveloped me in warmth. Her muscles relaxed and she closed her eyes.

I rested my front paws on top of the sand and pounded into her.

I thrust.

She purred.

Then suddenly out of nowhere, a man spoke behind us. "I'm sorry, Kazimir, but I must interrupt this dream."

I ignored the sound and pumped some more, needing her, yearning for the wonderful sensation of her.

I didn't want to let her go.

This could never stop.

"Kazimir."

Growling, I pounded my cock into her.

But, my lioness slowly began to fade. It was so sudden, so shocking, that I continued to thrust my cock into her as her body swirled in the wind, becoming transparent. Evaporating into wisps.

Then, she fully disappeared.

*No!*

I roared.

*Mine!*

My paws shifted to hands.

*What?*

I checked the rest of me.

It was all man. A tailored suit hugged my body. Shoes covered my feet.

“I am...a man?” I rose from the ground. “No...where is she? Where is—”

“We must talk, Kazimir.”

Slowly, memories returned of who and what I truly was. One would think that it all would have calmed me, but I craved what I was and what I had done just moments ago.

“Bring her back!” I spun around to fight the man who took my lioness away.

Pavel greeted my eyes.

“What?” I stepped back. “This is...”

More of my real life rushed back to me.

*I remember.*

I edged back. “No...this...cannot be...”

Pavel wore a simple gray suit that clung to his fit body. Tiny rubies pierced both of his ears. They sparkled in the moonlight. His long, shiny hair hung past his shoulders and rippled in the breeze.

I pointed a trembling finger at him. “Y-you are...dead.”

“That is the beauty of dreams, while dead, I can walk into them.” Pavel winked. “Does that not scare you a little, cousin?”

“You are not real.” I scanned the beach. “This is not real.”

Pavel smiled. “Should I be surprised that you were fucking a lioness? That is so Kazimir.”

“Get out of my fucking dream.” I glared. “Right now!”

Pavel curved his lips into a bittersweet smile. “Thank you for keeping Paolo.”

I tensed in horror and widened my eyes.

“That couple did not have good intentions.” The smile remained on Pavel’s face. He placed his hands behind his back. “While they would not have physically or sexually abused my son, they would not have loved him either. Not like your mouse.”

I raised my hands and held the sides of my head. “I need to wake up. That is it.”

“I will not let you.” Pavel gazed up at the moon. “That is the beauty of death and the dream state. They are cousins just like us.”

“No. No.” Fast, I turned around and walked away. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

Pavel appeared in front of me. “You always were a stubborn beast.”

I stopped.

Two feet ran between us.

Thunder rumbled. Lightning slashed the sky, and the air charged with cold energy.

“Unfortunately for you, we are linked by blood, by love. This is different than your other slain enemies.” Pavel gave me a sad smile. “They cannot haunt you, but I can.”

“You cannot.”

“I have. I will, and I am.” He leaned his head to the side. “Did you enjoy my light show? I did not want to scare you too much.”

“I want you to leave me alone.”

“Trust me when I say this. I have been nice.” He shrugged. “In these past days, there are things I could have brought to your dreams that would have made you slice your eyelids open so that you would never sleep.”

Fear sliced through my body.

“But I saw your days ahead. I knew you would already be stressed.” Pavel frowned. “I saw all the blood. The bombs. The fire. Your pain.”

I shivered.

“Then, I saw your mouse and her love.” Pavel let out a long breath. “I saw Paolo’s smiles—wide and happy, even though war thundered around him.”

I widened my eyes.

“Therefore, I let you sleep.”

I inched back. “What do you want now? Why did you come?”

“Baba is right about the future, cousin.” Pavel’s eyes glowed bright white. “The future is beautiful.”

Thousands of colorful images played along the sky like movies. In one, I was dressed in a tuxedo and kissing Emily. She wore a beautiful white gown. In another, I soothed a crying baby in my arms.

I lifted my view higher. “Is this...my life?”

More images streaked the sky—I handed a huge box of pink cigars to Maxwell, chuckling at some secret joke. Higher up, Misha strolled toward me with his ballerina whose stomach swelled in late pregnancy. Further away, Emily laughed as she playfully wrestled with a tall, lanky Paolo and a huge Harlem barked at them, trying to jump into the brawl.

My heart pumped faster.

I did my best to take it all in.

In another image, Emily was pregnant again, posing for a picture. At her side, she held a young boy’s small hand. He had a light brown complexion. Tiny black curls outlined his face.

“Is . . .” I pointed that way. “Is that my son, Pavel?”

A new image caught me, a young woman with caramel skin held an old man’s hand as he lay in bed. The man looked close to death, yet he wore a huge smile. She kissed his wrinkled forehead and hummed a song.

I gasped, realizing that this man was me.

My eyes watered. “Who...is that holding my hand?”

“Choices shift destiny, Kazimir.”

I put my view on Pavel. “Who was that? My daughter or... granddaughter?”

“Tomorrow, you will try to kill Fela before he even reaches your mouse.”

I gritted my teeth.

“I caution against this.”

In the sky, fire replaced all of the images. Flames painted the sky. Smoke billowed around us, and screams filled the air.

I hugged myself.

Pavel frowned. “Fela will not let you break that promise. If you do not let him peacefully surrender, then he will show you the tricks that he has up his sleeve. They are deadly.”

“But, how could he stop me?”

“It does not matter. Understand that you will not win this war with aggression.”

“Then, how?”

“Your mouse. Let her keep the promise as you let her keep Paolo.”

I sighed. “But, will she be in danger?”

“She will be in danger. I won’t lie to you. But the danger will be her against herself.”

“What?”

“That is another dream for another night—”

“Do not come back to my dreams!” I yelled.

“My feelings are hurt.” Pavel laughed. “You would rather fuck lions than talk to me?”

I scowled. “Tell me how to protect Emily.”

“Let Fela surrender in peace. Give him what he desires—”

“He deserves a violent death.”

“He will definitely get it. Do not worry about that part.” Pavel closed the distance between us.

I tensed.

He placed his hand on my shoulder. “But, you must act with righteousness and peace. Put things in place that assures Fela of the future that he wants to leave behind. Do you understand what he wants?”

“Black Axe in control of Italy.”

Pavel nodded. “And what else?”

“His family and country safe.”

“Do the right thing, and you will keep everyone alive.” Pavel tightened his grip on my shoulder. “Do the wrong thing and all will die, including my son.”

I swallowed.

Those eyes brightened. “I do not want to see Paolo now. I want us to reunite when he is old. I want to tell him how happy I was to watch his life, and how proud he made me.”

“Pavel?”

“Yes.”

“Who was the woman humming to me in that vision in the sky?”

He smirked. “You will see.”

And then, I woke up.

Emily lay in my arms. Light snores left her.

Moonlight seeped through the windows, telling me it was still night.

And on my right, the lamp blinked twice and then shut off completely.

*What the fuck?*

My heart boomed in my ears, as sweat beaded on my forehead.

*How the hell do I go back to sleep after that?*







# Chapter 58

## Wet

## Blue

*What do I do now?*

Warm water streamed down my aching bones and energized my body. Steam rose, fogging the glass.

I stood under the downpour and replayed the day's activities over and over in my head.

It was why I had not gone to sleep yet.

Too much had happened. I'd almost died. Due to that, it felt like the distance between life and death was only a thin sheet of ice, easily breakable and surrounding me in cold hardness.

Meanwhile, two men that I was falling for were trying to kill each other.

What was I supposed to do now? Should I check on each and see how they were? Or should I stay away? Were they pissed with me? Or did they need me?

I yearned for answers to know how to proceed.

Suddenly, noise sounded behind me.

I turned around.

*What?*

I tensed, seeing a blurred image of a large figure looming on the other side of the glass, watching me.

“Hello?” I inched back, fisted my hands, and readied myself to fight whoever it was. “Who is that?”

Without speaking, the person reached for door's gold handle.

“Get the fuck out of my bathroom.” I raised my fists and retreated further. My back pressed against the smooth tile.

The foggy glass door swung open.

David stood there. Steam left the shower and curled around the hard planes of his body.

*Oh.*

My breath caught in my throat.

Slowly, I lowered my fists and covered my breasts.  
“David...”

Silently, he watched me, wearing a new designer black shirt that was the color of the night sky—deep, rich, and dark. His pants clung to his muscular thighs and the growing bulge between them.

His bruises, dark and purple, stood out starkly against his golden skin. Thankfully, there were no swollen eyes or broken nose. In the meantime, the swelling and bruises didn’t detract from his good looks, they only hinted at the true toll the fight had taken on him.

The shower continued to spray. Steam billowed rising through the entire bathroom.

Still silent, David moved his gaze from my face and slipped it down my wet body.

I had both arms shielding my breasts. Part of me wanted to cover my pussy, but it was too late to try. His gaze fell on that spot. A low groan left him.

He widened his eyes, and I knew what he was looking at.

While I had not had sex in a long time, that didn’t mean I couldn’t have fun with myself. Therefore, every month when I dyed the hair on top of my head blue, I did the same to my pubic hair. Once I was done, I would shave most of the pubic hair, but leave a blue heart on the mound of my pussy.

*Will he think I’m crazy for doing it?*

David licked his lips and raised his view back to me.

“A-are...you okay?” I studied David’s face.

Still shielding my breasts, I left the wall and walked over to him. “Talk to me.”

He remained silent. No emotion flickered in his blue eyes.

“I am sorry. What...can I do?” I took a deep breath and willed my hand not to shake as I reached out to touch the bruises on David’s face.

“I never wanted you two to fight.” I ran a finger over the purplish-blue discoloration near his left eye.

He stood still, not batting those long lashes, not flinching.

My fingers shivered. “I did not mean to hurt you...and cause this...conflict.”

My eyes watered. I desperately wanted to hug him. Kiss him. Make it up in any way possible.

My heart sank.

“I understand...if you do not forgive me.” Slowly, I pulled my hand away.

Fast, he grabbed my wrist, moved my hand back, and placed it on his chest. My palm rested on the place over his heart. That muscle beat strong and fast.

“Talk to me.” I pulled my hand away, but he grabbed it again, forced my palm back to his chest, and kept the grip on my wrist. His fingertips warmed against my skin.

Those blue eyes blazed with heat. “When I first met you... I did not know how significant you would be in my life. Had I known, it might have terrified me. I might have said no to the Lion’s job and stayed in Paris.”

I parted my lips.

“Now...there is no turning back. I will not let you go... because...I know I will not find another person like you anywhere else on this planet.” David stepped into the shower, right into the warm spray of water like a mad man desperate to be near me at any cost.

Water spilled down his black shirt, soaking his pants and dousing his shoes. His clothes stuck to him, revealing every groove of muscle on his chest and legs.

I edged back. “David—”

“There are over seven billion people in this world. Two hundred countries. Seven continents.” The steam parted as he stepped further into the shower, forcing me to back up to the wall. His soaked shoes screeched on the tile. Water sprayed on his bruised face, wetting his hair and trickling down those full lips. “We live in such a big world, and still I would not risk letting you go.”

“I do not want to let you go either—”

“And you also do not want to let go of *him*?”

I pressed my back against the wall, feeling caged in the shower’s small space and trapped by his question. “I hate how complicated and violent this is getting. Maybe, I should leave you both alone.”

“You think that is a simple solution?”

I watched water pool around his shoes. “I think it is the only thing that will stop you both from killing each other.”

A dark chuckle left him. “Violence will come between us regardless.”

I still couldn’t look at him. My bottom lip quivered. “I do not want violence to happen.”

“I saw the fire in Giorgio’s eyes tonight. The determination. The need to possess you.” David raised his hand to my chin and lifted my view to his. His skin glistened with drops of water.

“How can I fix this?”

“There will be no simple solution, Blue.” His gaze grew dark and intense. “And I do not care how complicated this gets, I still want you at any cost, no matter how bloody and violent.”

My heart ached.

He closed the small distance between us and kissed me.

When our lips met, the sensation was hot, wet, and electric, setting all my nerves on fire. The power of his presence was so strong I felt intoxicated.

What was it that made me so maddeningly horny around him? Was it pheromones? Testosterone? Dopamine?

Whatever it was, I could taste him.

Taste him on my lips.

Taste him on my tongue.

Taste him on the roof of my mouth.

Taste him on the back of my throat.

Taste him in every cell of my body.

It was all him, and I craved more.

Still kissing me, his hands roamed down my back and gripped my ass. He pulled me close and I felt his erection under his wet clothes, hard and thick.

His lips released mine and he latched his mouth on to my neck, biting and sucking the flesh there. The wetness between my legs grew more intense.

I had to get him naked.

I needed his cock buried deep inside me. Needed to feel him thrust into me, fucking me, burning me with every stroke of his long, hard shaft. I needed to cum on his cock, and I needed his cum inside me too, spilling into my inner being.

*Please.*

A moan left my lips.

He growled and kissed my neck again.

“Fuck me.” I lowered my hands down to his pants and fumbled with his belt.

David left my neck and batted my hands away.

I raised my eyebrows.

“You want me to fuck you against the wall of this shower?”

Boiling hot hunger surged through me. “Yes...please.”

“And then what?”

I blinked. “We cum.”

He smirked. “No, Blue. What happens tomorrow? Is *he* inside of you too?”

My heart hammered in my chest. “I...well...no...”

He undid his belt and unbuttoned the top of his pants. “I do not want him to be an option in your days, your life, your heart.”

I gulped down nervousness.

He leaned his head to the side. “My first thought in the morning is always you.”

I opened my mouth in shock.

“At night, I cannot tell you how many times I have fallen asleep with your face, your smile, those beautiful eyes painting the thoughts of my mind.” David opened his pants and placed his hands to the side. “But are *you* there yet?”

“I want you. I care for you. I think about you too all the time—”

“And you think of *him* too?”

I pursed my lips.

“I am at war with myself.” David frowned. “My cock wants to fuck you so hard, you forget his name and maybe even yours. It wants to be deep inside of you, imprinting my scent all over your body. But, my hearts wants your love, every bit of it, and that takes time. Meanwhile, my soul...it just wants the peace of knowing that you are all mine. Can you give that to me right now?”

“I need time, David. To figure this out.”

“I know you do.”

*So...no sex?*



He watched me. “I need time too. Mainly, to figure out how I will have you all to myself.”

My breath caught in my throat.

“Until then, you should probably see my cock and get used to it.”

*What?*

I quirked my brows.

“I say that because it can be off putting to some women if they are not prepared.” David dug his hand into his pants and pulled out his cock.

And I was not ready for the sight. I expected it to be long and thick with a massive mushroom shaped head that I wanted to lick. That part was true, and wasn't the problem.

I widened my eyes.

David also had piercings on his cock. There was a big silver ball at the mushroomed tip. Next, a long row of silver balls pierced a line down the top of his cock.

The vision was dirty erotic and sensually adventurous, but it also freaked me the fuck out.

*How is that...going to feel?*

“Umm...”

David placed his cock back in his pants. “At first I got it pierced for aesthetic reasons, then I realized how much it enhanced the sexual experience for both me and whoever I moved inside of.”

I was still stunned. “Was it...painful to get?”

“Yes.” Smirking, he zipped up his pants. “But you will find that I like pain.”

I blinked. “What kind of pain?”

“That is not your concern for tonight.” He lowered to his knees, splashing water around him. “Tonight, we will focus on pleasure.”

Shivering, I gazed down at him. “We will?”

“For now.” He studied the blue heart on my pussy. “Next time I see this, there better be a D in the center of the heart.”

I opened my mouth in shock.

Then, he dove his face into my pussy, taking away all ability to speak.

Pushing me more against the wall, he lapped his tongue all around the edges of my pussy, and then paid special attention to my clit.

“Oh!” I clutched his wet hair and grabbed onto his head as his massaging of my clit made my hips buck my pussy against his mouth.

*Holy shit.*

Groaning, he expertly shoved his tongue inside of me, lashing it around my walls, searching out my G-spot.

Swirling.

Licking.

Sucking.

My back arched.

My legs wobbled.

My head felt light like I was going to faint, but I held on.

He brought his hands to my leg and placed my leg over his shoulder. It forced my thighs to spread wider. The soft stubble on his jaw brushed against the sensitive skin on my inner thigh.

Warm water continued to spray on us. Thick clouds of steam rose. And I melted into the molten heat of his skilled mouth against my clit, his tongue snaking in and out of my pussy and his finger probing deep inside me was deliriously exquisite.

I could feel an orgasm building deep inside me.

He was an animal devouring and tearing me apart with blissful pleasure.

“Oh, David.” I trembled and panted. “Holy fuck.”

He growled, sending vibrations that jolted my pussy and drove me further into a crazed frenzy.

Next, he shifted to finger fucking me. Pushing his finger deep into my pussy and then pulling it out, slow and teasing, only to push it in again even deeper.

*My God!*

Still, his tongue lapped at my clit, quick and pulsing.

My head dizzyed from the all-consuming ecstasy of it all.

“Oh!” I gasped.

Waves of pleasure shuddered through me and twisted my soul.

My pussy swelled like a balloon ready to pop with liquid heat.

An intense orgasm rose at my core, stretching me out like a spring ready to be pulled tight, threatening release. It was this sensual, lip-quivering pressure that shot out like lightning through my limbs.

I lost myself. “Oh! Oh!”

He groaned.

“David!” I exploded with an ear-shattering moan. My body quaked and spasmed against his mouth, coming harder than I had ever in my life. It was a mind-numbing orgasm that released and released and released.

I had no idea how long the orgasm went, just that the world spun around me, twirling and twisting.

When I was done, David left my pussy.

*Holy fucking shit!*

Exhausted and breathless, I sagged against the tile.

*I will never look at him the same again.*

He rose and caught me right as I almost slipped down to the ground. “You like that?”

I panted, “Yes.”

He kissed me deeply and passionately.

I shuddered and moaned into his mouth.

When he pulled back, a deranged expression covered his face. “I liked tasting you too, but that was a bad idea.”

“Why?”

He licked his lips. “I love the taste of you, more than I thought I would. Therefore...”

“What?”

“Things will be more violent between Giorgio and me.” David let me go and headed out of the shower, disappearing in the thick steam.

“Wait. Hold up.” I shut off the water and waved away the steam, rushing out to him.

He was already out of the bathroom.

Naked and wet, I hurried forward. “David, we just talked about giving me time—”

“I said I would give *you* time, but I did not say I would not kill him—”

“What?!” I tried to grab him from behind.

Somehow he knew to step to the side and pick up his pace. “Get some rest, Blue. Tomorrow is our last day in Italy and it will be long.”

“Would you stop and talk to me?” I tried to grab him again.

He slipped out of my reach, made it to the door, and opened it.

Right when he was going to step out, he stopped.

“David!” I bumped into his back and tried to walk around him.

He stopped and pushed me back.

That was when I caught the view of the hallway.

*Oh shit!*

I edged back and hid myself on the other side of the door.

The Lion was in the hallway, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest and a look of disapproval on his face.

*What the hell is he doing up this late?*

I got further behind the door and hid myself more.

The Lion's voice boomed in the hallway. "Are you done, David?"

David cleared his throat. "Yes."

"Good. We have something to do before the morning comes."

*What?*

"Okay." David shut the door.

I stared at it.

*But...David...don't kill Giorgio.*





# Chapter 59

## Brothers in Blood

### Kazimir

In the hallway, I studied my number one.

David's clothes were so thoroughly drenched in water that it looked like he had been swimming in the Atlantic Ocean all night, searching for mermaids.

*Fucking idiot. Should I even ask?*

Water dripped from his hair. His wet black shirt clung to his chest like a second skin. His pants were plastered to his legs, and his shoes made small puddles on the floor.

But that wasn't what made me want to hit him. It was the deliriously happy grin spread across his face like he'd just tasted heaven.

*Pussy.*

I let out a long breath.

David watched me. "You are up late. I was not aware of any new updates on the war or the Clown."

"I could not sleep."

"Bad dream?"

A cold shiver ran through me.

I gritted my teeth. "Never mind that. Why are you wet?"

His grin left. He cleared his throat. "Due to Blue's injuries and her near-death experience, I thought she needed help in the shower."

"I bet you did."

He brushed down his wet shirt as if that could help. "Should I change before we do what you need?"



“We do not have time for that.” I headed off. “But, we do have time for a *stern talk*.”

David walked by my side. “Who will need that stern talk?”

“You.”

David quirked his brows. “Me?”

“Yes. You.” I stopped in the middle of the hallway. “Fighting over pussy like an idiot?”

“Giorgio and I have a simple misunderstanding.”

“Is that what this is? Simple?”

“Giorgio thinks he has a chance with Blue. I just need to clear it up.”

“All of this for *one* woman?”

David smirked. “Perhaps, I learned from the best.”

Sneering, I touched my chest. “Is that directed at me?”

“I met you in Paris. I will never forget the passion you had for your mouse, and the chaos that ensued because she was taken from you.” David shrugged. “Am I truly an idiot for craving the same passion? And wanting an amazing woman for myself?”

“Tonight was a shit show.”

“Still, I am in control.”

“You are in control of shit.” I stomped off.

David returned to my side and kept quiet. He was probably waiting for me to speak, but I had nothing to say.

Instead, I seethed with exhaustion, anger, and frustration at his idiocy.

David and his new problem incited me with rage, yet I couldn't truly point to why. Of course I wanted the idiot to find love. And if I was being honest, Blue was not a bad match. Yet, something tugged at me, setting me off balance.

Silent, we headed to the elevator and I dug into my mind, searching for the core of the problem. What was it? Concern?

Worry? Fear? These were new emotions for me when they were directed at another man. In my earlier years, I stressed over my mother, my sister, and niece. Now, it was my mouse. But never did I care this much about my number one?

At least... not since *Pavel*.

We stopped in front of the elevator.

David looked at me. "Where are we going?"

"Maxwell's room."

David pushed the button. "You should not be walking around the hotel without all of your men. Wassily should at least be with you."

"I told him to stay with my mouse."

"He should have ignored your order and come anyway." David glared. "I will be having a *stern talk* with him."

"I like Wassily."

"And Wassily likes you, so much so that he lets you do whatever you want. At the bare minimum he should have called and let me know that you were solo and strolling around."

"No." I frowned at him. "He should not call you. We would not want to interrupt your helping Blue with her shower. After all, there are priorities to consider."

David put his view on the elevator.

"Besides, there's nothing to worry about." I smirked. "You have ramped up security on this hotel so much it is as tight as Moscow's Black Dolphin Prison."

"If I remember correctly, you escaped from Black Dolphin."

"No. Wrong place. Thankfully, I was never sent there. I escaped from Matrosskaya Tishina prison."

The elevator dinged.

The doors slid open.

I stepped on. “No inmate has ever escaped from Black Dolphin. It is one of the most brutal detention centers in Moscow. Some of my uncles were sent there.”

David followed me onto the elevator.

I looked at him. “24-hour video surveillance. The cells are set back between three sets of steel doors.”

David pushed the button for Maxwell’s floor.

I continued, “Two inmates live in a *cell within a cell*, and it is barely fifty square feet.”

“Makes sense. It is supposed to be for Russia’s worst criminals.”

I nodded. “Terrorists, serial killers, cannibals, child molesters.”

The doors closed.

David asked, “But, why do they call it Black Dolphin?”

The elevator rose.

“Some prisoner created a sculpture of a black dolphin. The guards liked the piece, and put in front of the main entrance. It has been there ever since.”

David smiled. “Perhaps, the guards needed a bit of happiness as they dragged themselves to work.”

I turned to him. “Do you want Giorgio dead? You know that it would be one quick order. One phone call. Someone slips into his room while Misha’s people monitor the situation...a pillow to the face, and the Butler would not rise in the morning.”

David did not look my way. “That would bring you more enemies. Jean-Pierre is not an idiot and Louis’s people have hacked into the hotel also. They would be watching too.”

“Damn the French.”

“They are supposed to be our allies.”

I sneered. “But, for you...”

David turned to me.

I looked away and placed my hands into my pockets, needing something to do with them. “For you...I would take on another war.”

David chuckled. “That may be the most romantic thing a man has ever said to me.”

I sneered, yet didn't turn his way.

“Thank you, Kazimir, but as your number one, I will not allow you to enter into another war. Additionally, *I* can kill my enemies on my own time.”

I sighed. “Well...until then, I can have women in your suite. As many as you want. Any race, age, and size. Just give me your descriptions and desires—”

“I do not need the Lion to get me laid either.”

*Fucking idiot.*

The elevator stopped.

The doors opened.

I shook my head and walked off.

He followed me and got back to my side.

Still, I couldn't let this feeling of anxiety go.

“David...in Paris you helped me get my mouse back. Since you have been by my side it has been a comfort. My mouse loves you as well as all of my people.” I stopped us in the hallway and turned to him. “You are worthy of the title *king*.”

A silly smile spread across his face.

I gave him a stern look. “But, how far do you want to go with me?”

The smile left. “I will follow you to hell.”

“Good. We just may be heading that way one day. So...” I gritted my teeth. “Be safe. Pansies or not, when the French become obsessed with a woman, bloodshed and violence proceeds.”

“I served the Brotherhood in Paris. I am more aware of the French’s actions than anyone.”

I reluctantly nodded. “That is true.”

“My mother and father died before I could walk.” David stepped closer to me. “My family thought Baba was an evil witch, so they steered clear of us.”

I frowned.

“I have spent a large part of my life, searching for family, brothers. People to love.”

“I have biological brothers, but they are not that important.” I pointed to him and then me. “It is the Brotherhood that has been formed within blood and violence that has only mattered to me.”

“I agree.”

I pursed my lips together.

“Kazimir, thank you for trying to help me with Giorgio, but I will not let you.”

I glared. “Why not?”

“Because I see you not only as my boss, the Lion, but I see you as *my* brother.” David placed his hand on my shoulder.

I tensed.

“And...I love you, Kazimir.”

I swallowed.

David stared at me.

I frowned. “Love me? How hard did the Butler hit you tonight?”

David gave me a weak smile and moved his hand.

We walked off in silence.

*Fucking idiot.*

Then, Pavel’s face flashed in my head, and this overwhelming pain filled my heart, twisting and turning within

me. I tried to ignore it and did my best to think through the aching sadness.

The lights blinked in the hallway.

*Leave me the fuck alone.*

David looked at them. "I should have someone talk to the hotel."

"There's no need."

We made it to Maxwell's door.

David raised his hand to knock.

I blocked his hand and sighed. "David."

He turned my way. "Yes?"

"I love you too." I gritted my teeth.

"I know."

I blinked.

Smirking, David knocked. "Why are we at Maxwell's suite?"

"I had a...spiritual advisor offer some advice for Fela tonight, and I plan to take it."

"Baba?"

"Pavel."

David widened his eyes. "O-kay."

"Yes, I am now talking to ghosts. That is what Italy has done to me."

"Ghosts are not bad advisors. At times, my mother has come to me in my dreams and given me sound advice."

"Ghost advice or not, I have been getting more and more enemies through my heightened aggression. To get us out of Italy, I am going to consider a peaceful alternative."

"The Lion and peace? Very interesting."

The door opened.

Maxwell rubbed his eyes and yawned in the doorway.  
“Something wrong with Em? Did she shift?”

I leaned my head to the side. “Shift?”

“Did she shift into Lunita.”

“Maxwell, Emily is not a werewolf.”

“You know what I mean.”

“This has nothing to do with Emily.”

“Then, man, you know how late it is?”

“I need to talk to Ufuoma, and I am not asking.”

Maxwell scowled. “I won’t let you in this motherfucker if you got a weapon. You got a gun on you?”

“I do not.”

Maxwell put his view on David. “Yo, K.D., why are you wet?”

I spoke through bared teeth, “Get out of the way, before I break you in half and step over you.”

David chuckled. “Yes. The Lion and peace. I can already see the changes.”







# Chapter 60

## Peaceful Alternatives

### Kazimir

Maxwell let David and me into his suite.

Men from Harlem Crew flanked the door.

I should not have been surprised that jazz music played. The song vibrated with the mellow sound of a saxophone riding a piano's smooth melody.

The bigger shock was that weed smoke didn't lather every inch of the space. Additionally, Maxwell didn't have a joint in his hand which was typical for him.

I smirked.

*Are you trying to be on your best behavior for Ufuoma?*

We walked further into the bedroom suite.

Beyond the king-size bed, the balcony door was open. The night breeze rippled the long sheer curtains.

Next, I spotted the lemon tree standing tall and proud on the table and filling the space with a lemony scent. Lemons dangled from the branches. A soft wind fluttered through the leaves.

Ufuoma sat in a chair near the tree with her hands resting on the table. She wore a black shirt and jeans with no shoes. A towel wrapped around her hair.

When I entered the space, she never looked up.

Instead, she kept her focus on something in front of her.

I walked further in and saw the object. Rocco's black and white clown mask lay on the table. Blood drops covered the top.

*Interesting. Did you tell her what you did, Maxwell?*

I caught two armed men standing on the balcony. “Where’s Fara?”

“In Boris’s room. Several people are guarding her.”

*Boris...I cannot wait to have our conversation in Moscow.*

Maxwell scratched his head and stood close to Ufuoma. “So...what’s this about, Kazimir?”

I folded my hands in front of me. “I thought Ufuoma and I should talk.”

Finally, she looked up.

I leaned my head to the side. “Have you had any rest this evening?”

Silently, she watched me.

Maxwell yawned. “She won’t say shit, so if you came here for a deep heart felt conversation, you won’t get one. She has not spoken a word since we left the yacht.”

Ufuoma placed her view back on the clown mask.

*She will talk to me.*

I headed over to the table, pulled a chair out, and sat down.

David followed and then stood behind me.

Maxwell got closer to Ufuoma, setting himself in a position to stop me from whatever attack he assumed might come.

I placed my hands on the table. “Ufuoma, your father has accepted defeat.”

She put her gaze on me. A skeptical expression covered her face.

I continued, “He plans to surrender to save your mother and your life.”

She widened her eyes.

“Your father knows that his death is the only end to this war. Therefore, he has agreed to dying, but under a few demands—ones that involve you.”

She parted her lips.

“What are your thoughts?”

She frowned. “I don’t believe you. What game is this?”

“What game would *I* need to be playing? Surely, you have heard of my reputation and tactics. Am I the strategic sort of man? Or am I more the kill everyone type?”

“If my father is surrendering, then why come here and talk to me?”

“I plan to honor his demands.”

“The Brotherhood does not know honor.”

“But my mouse does. Unfortunately, she likes to follow dead men’s wishes.”

Her eyes watered. “I will not allow my father to surrender \_\_\_”

“You have no choice, Ufuoma.” I knitted my fingers together. “But, you do have choices after his death.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“He wants Black Axe to control Calabria. I am willing to partially give him that, if you can be trusted to not avenge your father.”

“But...” She trembled. “There is no need to kill my father \_\_\_”

“He terrorized my mouse while pregnant. She lost a baby in the womb from his plotting. My cousin is dead as well as others.” I sneered. “His death is the *only* thing that will finish this. On that, I will not waver.”

“I did not agree with my father’s...plans, but all of this was because we wanted fair payment and control of shipments \_\_\_”

“And you will get it.” I raised a finger. “Once he is dead.”

Her voice came out weak. “Is there...any way I can save him?”

“None.” I frowned. “However, the fact that I am even here talking to you, is a start to a peaceful direction.”

“If my father’s blood is spilled, then how would it be peaceful?”

“It would be up to *us* to leave the games and war alone. It would be *our* choice to work together.” I leaned back in the chair. “Because you must understand this...if your people come for me and mine, I will tear them apart.”

Her face twisted with rage. “It will be almost impossible for my people to maintain calm after my father’s death.”

“You will find a way, or *I* will handle it, and I am sure you do not want me stepping in.” I pulled my mouse’s phone out and dialed the last number. “However, let us see your father’s thoughts.”

“What?” Ufuoma frantically watched me.

Four rings sounded before Fela picked up. “Yes? Emily?”

“That was a lot of rings.” I sighed. “One would think that you would be awake for your last night on this earth.”

“It is true, Kazimir. I have not been able to sleep.”

“No sleep?” I rose from the table. “More plotting?”

“No. Arrangements. There are too many to put in place.”

I left the table and walked out onto the balcony. Cool air brushed against my skin. “I have just had a short conversation with your daughter. I believe she is smart and able to put her emotions to the side to meet your demands.”

“Ufuoma is fierce with her rationality. I have always admired that about my daughter.”

I walked to the railing and placed one hand on it. “However, your daughter also does not want you to surrender.”

His words came out tense. “Ufuoma has no choice, and Kazimir I ask that you do not hurt her or my wife—”

“I have no reason to touch them, if you are *truly* intending on surrendering.”

“I am.”

“You planned to surrender last time I saw you.”

“That was last time. This is now.”

“And what has changed from last time to now, Fela?”

“My allies are dead, as well as many of my children. And you have my wife and daughter—the most important people in my life—right in your grasp.”

I was shocked at his raw honesty. A part of me did not want to believe him. It still could be a trap. There were few times I had a reason to trust anyone in this world, especially my enemy.

I did not know what to think.

Still, I wanted to believe that I truly had him in this horrific tight spot, unable to push back and ready to surrender.

*Can we really win?*

I tapped the balcony’s railing. “If I renege on your agreement with my mouse, I know that you will have tricks up your sleeve.”

“I would not be a smart man, if I did not have back up plans due to you or the Brotherhood ruining my demands.”

“I want to keep my mouse safe.”

“And I want my loved ones safe too and the future of my people bright and peaceful.”

The images from my dream flashed in my head—happy faces and experiences.

Next Pavel’s words trickled into my mind. Some stuck.

I was eager to see if all of that would come true.

I swallowed. “I too want a peaceful future, but can you be trusted? Fela, I do not understand why you would simply surrender.”

“Kazimir...”

I placed my view on the thousands of stars in the sky. They were glistening diamonds sewn into the dark fabric of night. I thought of all the constellations that have come and will come. The map of the universe, frozen in the sky for all eternity.

*God, help me. Please allow this peaceful alternative to work.*

I put my attention back onto Fela. “Yes?”

“You have not had children yet, but when you do...you will understand even more why I am willing to give my life to end this.”

“Yet, you are a great strategist. I hope I can believe that you will simply surrender. Tomorrow will be easier that way.”

“How can I convince you, Kazimir?”

“I am not sure.”

“Then answer this, Lion. If you put a price on your soul, what would be the price?”

“Me?” I formed a sad smile. “I have no soul.”

“None?”

“Not one bit of a soul.” I turned away from the stars. “Which brings us to the present problem.”

I headed away from the balcony railing. “You harm my mouse tomorrow and your daughter, wife, Black Axe, and all of Nigeria will drown in blood.”

“Is that threat necessary?”

“See this call as a friendly reminder of who I am, Fela.” I gripped the phone harder. “I am a monster with sharp teeth. Carnivorous. A cannibal, thriving on flesh. Dark. Lethal. And my mouse is the only thing that keeps the carnage from spilling onto your fucking doorstep.”

“On that I agree.”

“Good.” I walked back into Maxwell’s room and stood next to Ufuoma. “Then, see this gesture as my willingness to

work toward a peaceful future.”

“What gesture?”

I handed the phone to Ufuoma. “You have fifteen minutes to talk to your father. Use them wisely.”

“What?” Her bottom lip quivered. She quickly took the phone and placed it against her ear. “Papa?”

I stepped back, leaned against the wall, and observed her tense whispered conversation with Fela. Tears streamed down her face. Desperation lay in her voice as she begged him to save his life, but I could tell that he was not listening.

Maxwell and David got to my sides.

“Please, Papa.” She wiped her eyes. “Don’t do this for me.”

Maxwell leaned my way. “Are you really going to let Em kill him?”

I nodded.

David sighed. “We will have armed men from all angles as well as snipers. The focus will be to keep Emily safe.”

“I don’t want Em to do it.” Maxwell shook his head. “You should let me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You think Ufuoma will still be your wife, if you kill her father?”

“I just don’t want Em to have more pain on top of the shit that her mind is struggling to handle.” Maxwell looked at me. “Ufuoma wouldn’t have to know that *I* did it.”

I shook my head. “My mouse will not let you. We both know that.”

Maxwell let out a long breath. “I don’t trust, Fela.”

“Me either, but Emily does. That must count for something.” I placed my hands in my pockets. “However, are you ready to deal with Black Axe once Fela is done?”

“How’s that?”



“Harlem Crew will be monitoring them. That means lots of trips to this area and Nigeria. You should know all levels of operations. Just in case we have to get rid of them.”

Maxwell put his view back on Ufuoma. “Harlem Crew got it, but I want the French with us.”

“Why?”

“More men and guns, and I dig their style. Plus, they know Italy and have fucked with Black Axe.”

“Then, we will tell Jean-Pierre. He is already eager to have the French touching those shipments.” A thought sparked in my head. “Perhaps, you can fix another problem for me.”

Maxwell eyed me. “What?”

“Make sure Jean-Pierre understands that Giorgio should be involved with this too. Keep him in Italy or Nigeria, I do not care.”

David scowled. “Kazimir...”

“I know why you’re trying to keep Giorgio busy.” Maxwell grinned. “Man, I’m not getting involved with that shit.”

I glared. “You will get involved—”

“I won’t.” Maxwell leaned forward and gestured at David. “And you know there’s more competition than Giorgio. Right?”

David’s scowl deepened. “What are you talking about?”

“Valentina is trying to holler at Blue too.” Maxwell shook his head. “Fuck Giorgio. I would be watching Valentina’s ass. Chicks be knowing what to do to each other. Be careful. She’s a Pussy Bandit.”

I widened my eyes. “My sister? No.”

“Your sister.”

Ufuoma’s voice rose. “Please, Papa! Don’t do this!”

*Time’s up.*

I left the wall, got to her, and held my hand out. “The conversation is over.”

She closed her eyes. “I love you, Papa.”

I took the phone from her and placed it to my ear, catching Fela’s last words.

Sadness coated his voice. “I am so sorry for everything, Ufuoma, but you have to let me go. I cannot live knowing that I was the cause of your or your mother’s death.”

*He is serious about surrendering.*

I waited for a few seconds and then spoke, “We will see each other later, Fela.”

“We will.”

“Be ready to die.” I hung up and placed the phone in my pocket, and faced Ufuoma. “Your father wanted a fair price and more control of the area. Black Axe will now have it. You set the price for all shipments coming into Europe.”

Ufuoma wiped the tears away.

I raised one finger. “But be careful of what number you bring to any in the Brotherhood. For my people, I expect an exceedingly generous discount for not fully taking over the area myself.”

She shifted her face into a neutral expression, telling me that she was all business. “Black Axe has *full* control of the port?”

“You and I share it. 50/50.”

“And if the Sicilians disagree with our new arrangement?”

I gestured to the clown mask on the table. “You really think you will have a problem with the Vizzini Family?”

She pursed her lips.

“From what I learned, you have someone on the inside of the family that will keep them at bay.”

She glared at Maxwell. “So then, he *is* alive.”

Maxwell shrugged. “I was getting to that part. You should have talked.”

She let out a long breath and placed her view back on me.

“Due to your relationship with Rocco, you may be one of the best people to take control.”

*That’s assuming Rocco does not want to kill everyone due to the new scar on his throat. .*

Ufuoma tilted her head to the side. “What about others trying to grab the port?”

“Come to us, if there are others.”

“How soon will we take over?”

“As soon as your father’s blood spills to the ground.”

Her bottom lip quivered. “I...I will need to take my father’s body back to Nigeria...and have a proper funeral. We have customs that will help all mourn.”

“I will allow it, but some of my people will come with you.”

She blinked. “Why?”

“A bit of multitasking. You will be showing them the ropes. Additionally, I want them to meet your contacts and know every aspect of your shipping, including your boats’ routes.”

“That is...” She swallowed. “A lot of information to simply give to the Brotherhood.”

“Yet, it is logical information to give to your new partner too.”

Skepticism hit her eyes. “Black Axe and the Brotherhood are united? Partners?”

“One must see if this is possible, before answering that.” I frowned. “My advice to you, is to make sure you manage your ambition. If you or Black Axe gets too hungry for more territory, be prepared for me to rip your jaws out.”

She didn't flinch or show any fear. "I only want peace for my people. There's more than enough money for all of us. I was never interested in pursuing my father's...plans."

Honesty lay within those words.

Although she must have been battling pain on the inside, she focused on her survival and family's business. I appreciated that. She would need that focus and an intense toughness to fill her father's shoes. Because, once I left, the monsters would come and see if they could snatch her new throne.

*Can she hold on to it? Or should I simply have the Brotherhood take it all?*

Maxwell watched her from the wall. This fierce possessiveness blazed in his eyes.

*Hmmm. He will guarantee there are no problems. But how much will this keep him from my mouse?*

Their separation made me uneasy. I had learned the hard way that I truly did need his help when it came to Emily.

*We will deal with that part later. What about Rocco possibly coming after him?*

I would need to be adamant to Jean-Pierre about having the French keep him safe.

I pointed to Maxwell. "During this transition, he will be at your side for *some* of the time."

Ufuoma held out her hands. "Is that necessary?"

"I still do not trust you, and will need eyes with you. Ones that I trust."

"I understand that." She blinked. "However, I do not need *his* help."

"I did not ask."

She let out an exasperated breath. "Respectfully, I would like someone else to work next to me...*anyone* else."

Maxwell smirked. “I’m melting her cold heart down. She knows it’s just a matter of time before I got her locked into this love.”

*Fucking idiot.*

Ufuoma shook her head. “This man is insane. I really would like to work with—”

“While Maxwell is indeed insane. You are lucky I am allowing you to live and take over.” I headed off. “Make it work.”





# Chapter 61

## Sexy Lion

### Emily

In my dream, I walked through a never-ending crimson red hallway lined with strange blue doors. I did not know where I was going or why, just that there was a sinister, dark force tugging at my soul and drawing me towards the depths of the unknown, guiding me through the winding tunnels of red and blue.

The more steps forward, the more the crimson walls seemed to close in around me as if to swallow me up. This dizzying sensation filled me with terror and dread. My breathing became labored as my heart pounded viciously against my ribcage. Fear crept up my spine until it engulfed me in a blanket of cold sweat.

My hands trembled violently.

Desperate for escape, I tried one of the blue doors.

But that didn't help.

Each blue door I opened led to another red hallway with blue doors. I tried again and again, opening up other doors only to find that there were more red hallways with blue doors and no end—a terrifying labyrinth, trapping me in an infinite loop of red and blue, red and blue.

So fucking distraught, I unleashed an ear-piercing shriek that shattered the silence of the hallway. It was so loud that my cry triggered a devastating transformation. The red paint on the walls began to flake and peel away until only an eerie, deathly grey remained. The tiles beneath my feet cracked and snapped until the entire hallway was blanketed in grey, and this oppressive dreariness of grey was overwhelming. Not a single hint of color or life, just an abysmal dullness that was heavy and suffocating.

Helpless, I stood there in the gloom.

My heart raced as I stared up at the one thing that wasn't grey. A single black, fluorescent light flickered above me, creating a ghostly aura of foreboding in the hallway.

My skin prickled.

Even crazier, I had the sense that I was being watched. Someone or something was waiting just around the next corner or maybe behind one of the many doors.

A chill ran up my spine as I realized my fate lay in that unknown darkness.

Suddenly, a woman's voice filled the air. "Leave."

I trembled. "What? Who is that?"

"You shouldn't be here."

"I know." I hugged myself.

"It's not good."

"I know that too."

"You'll get lost and not be able to get out."

"Oh no." I frantically looked around. "Where are you?"

"Leave."

"How?! I've been trying!" My voice echoed off the grey walls.

"Use your mind."

"What?"

"Close your eyes and use your mind."

"Okay." I hugged myself tighter, gritted my teeth, and closed my eyes.

A wave of panic surged through me like jolts of electricity. My chest tightened and I hugged myself harder, my muscles shaking from the effort. My teeth bit down on my lips as I forced my eyes shut, desperately wishing for the labyrinth walls to miraculously crumble away.



I clung to a desperate prayer for salvation. Everything turned still and dark. Then something deep inside me commanded me to open my eyes. With a heavy heart, I complied.

The suite surrounded me.

*Oh my God. It was just a dream.*

Sunlight spilled in from the windows. A few birds chirped outside, letting me know that morning had come.

*Damn. That felt so real. Thank God it isn't.*

I lay there, counting my blessings and doing my best to shake that odd nightmare.

*Morning is here. Today is the day I end all of this with one bullet to Fela's head.*

That should have brought fear or dread. Instead, I only experienced an eerie calm.

*I'm ready to end this.*

Slowly, I turned in the bed.

Kaz remained asleep right next to me.

I smiled.

During the night, I must have taken all of the covers. Blankets and sheets twisted around me. Meanwhile, my baby's naked muscular body was sprawled across most of the mattress with not even a little bit of sheet to cover him.

*Poor baby.*

My heart warmed as I ran my gaze over the powerful lines of his body. Sculpted and chiseled. A stunningly erotic work of art. Sunlight danced over his bare skin. His chest gently rose with each breath. His hair was wild and untamed from sleep.

So wicked, I moved my gaze down to his cock as it lay across his thigh.

*Damn. Is this man really all mine?*

I had to admit that Kaz had a beautiful cock, long and well proportioned. The perfect size.

*I would kill Fela and anyone else for you...just for more moments like this.*

Yawning, I unraveled myself out of all the blankets, slowly scooted over, and reached for his cock. I wrapped my fingers around the length, feeling it warmly throb against my palm.

A low groan left him, but he remained asleep.

*Mmmm.*

I let go of his cock and moved my body closer to his. Hot, hard flesh pressed against me. His scent—a mixture of weed, citrus, and musk—wrapped around my senses, making me want every part of his body to touch mine.

My pussy tingled with anticipation.

*Damn, baby. It is most definitely time to wake up.*

I leaned forward and pressed my breasts to his chest.

First, his body tensed.

Then, he stirred a little.

Grinning with satisfaction, I pressed my lips to his, giving him a light kiss.

His eyes fluttered, but did not open.

*Wake up and fuck me.*

Lust, pure and simple, coursed through my body.

*Sexy ass man.*

Slowly, I moved my lips down to his neck, lovingly demanding another response from him. Gently, I kissed and licked. Tenderly, I nibbled and tasted his delicious skin.

A soft groan of pleasure left him. Still, his eyes remained closed, but I could tell he was lost in the sensation of my touch.

I slid my mouth down over his collarbone and relished in the heat of his skin under my tongue.

He stirred and rubbed his hardening cock against me.

*There's my baby.*

I kissed each nipple and slipped my mouth down his body, teasing and tempting.

His eyes were still closed, as he whispered, “*Mysh.*”

*Are you still dreaming? Or are you awake?*

I slipped down to his stomach and licked the hard ridges of his abs.

*Damn, you have a fantastic body.*

Lowering my head, I kissed the grooves of his hip bone and licked a path down to his inner thigh.

This time he loudly groaned.

*Come on, lion.*

Slowly, I took his cock in my hand and squeezed.

“*Mysh.*” His voice came out husky. “Your kisses...your touch...came through to my dream.”

“And what were you dreaming about, baby?”

“I lay on a small rowboat with my hands folded under my head. There, I gazed at the night sky.” He slid his big hand down to my head and ran his fingers through my hair. “Suddenly, all the stars formed into your beautiful lips, and they swooped down, kissing my entire body.”

“Then, I’ll wake you up like that again.” I kissed his cock’s mushroomed tip.

“Mmmm.”

My nipples grazed his hard thigh. “You like that. Don’t you?”

“Fuck yes.” He exhaled a deep breath.

I kissed his cock again. Then, I rubbed it against my cheek.

He moaned.

I looked up at him.

A wild hunger blazed in his eyes.

“You want me to lick it, baby?”

“No.” He gripped my hair hard. “I want you to suck it.”

I hit him with a wicked smile. “That wasn’t an option.”

“Open your mouth, *mysh*.”

I chuckled. “You’re just going to wake up with demands?”

He targeted me with that intense alpha gaze—the one that made his men jump to obey him.

But, I wasn’t one of his men.

And he was all mine.

I lowered my head just above his cock and let my warm breaths stroke his beautiful length.

He writhed under me. “*Mysh*.”

My soft lips brushed his cock’s mushroomed tip.

He groaned. “You like having this power over me?”

I looked back at him. “Whatever could you mean, *liev*?”

He narrowed those lust-crazed eyes. “You want me to beg, *mysh*?”

“Yes.”

“I will not.”

“No?”

“Instead, I will flip you over, shove my cock into you, and spank your ass for teasing me.”

My body throbbed.

He licked his lips. “You want that?”

I sucked his cock into my mouth. His taste hit my tongue—a delicious combination of salt, musk, and man.

My pussy jumped. I rubbed my clit against the bedsheets.

A dark groan left him. “Fuck, *mysh*.”

I rubbed that cock on my tongue and all around my mouth, soaking it with saliva.

He moaned and raised his hips.

I moved my head up and down, sucking him into my mouth as deep as I could.

“Fuck.” His hands flew to the bed, gripping the sheets. “I would kill a whole fucking civilization over you.”

That made me want to devour his cock with a ferocity that left me gasping for air. I took it out my mouth. Saliva dripped down my lips.

Fast, he grabbed my arms with those strong hands and had me up against him in a heartbeat.

“Kaz, I wasn’t done?”

The next thing I knew, I was flipped over, my back was pressed into the mattress, and he loomed over me like a great beast burning with passion.

His words rode a deep groan. “How do you want it?”

“Hard.”

His lids lowered over his eyes. “Hard?”

“I want my pussy aching.”

“Hmmm.”

“I want to feel that ache days later.”

“Those are very dangerous words to a lion.”

Before I could utter a response, his lips crashed into mine as if his life depended on devouring me. Our tongues intertwined with feverish urgency. He was a wildfire consuming me, turning my body into liquid arousal.

Waves of scorching heat shot through my body.

*God, I love this man.*

Groaning, Kaz’s mouth left mine and pushed down my neck, licking, sucking and biting.

Panting, I grabbed his head to pull him back up so I could taste those lips again.

But, he had full control now.

I was at his mercy.

He moved down my body, searing hot kisses on my chin, my neck, my chest. He lingered over my breasts. His tongue circled one nipple, and then he sucked it hard into his mouth.

Tremors of pleasure shot through me. “Oh.”

He slipped down my stomach, placed his mouth near my belly button, and kissed it. “How’s my son?”

“Good.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, baby. It’s just his mother that needs help.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes.”

He licked a trail down to my pussy and then quickly moved his tongue to my thigh.

“You’re torturing me, Kaz.”

“Am I?”

“Fuck me right now. I want to feel you inside of me.”

Chuckling, he moved that huge body back up and hovered over me. Face to face, he licked his lips. “You’re just going to wake up with demands?”

“Yes.”

“I am the one that is in control.”

“Now, that’s a damn lie.”

“Is it now?”

“I want to cum all over your big cock.”

He blinked. Then, his face twisted with lust. Without another word, he slammed my legs apart and yanked my

panties to the side. Next, he thrust his thick cock inside me with one smooth stroke.

“Ah!” I let out a cry of pleasure and arched my back.

He fucked me so hard I lost myself to the frenzy of pleasure, feeling every slap of his balls against my ass. His skin burned against my skin. His grunts and groans enveloped me in a state of blissful euphoria, transporting my soul to heaven.

“Kaz!” I gripped his body, feeling the powerful muscles beneath my fingertips as he moved inside me. His biceps quivered with every powerful thrust, pushing me higher and higher until I shattered in explosive pleasure.

“This tight, wet pussy is mine.”

“God. Yes.” I squeezed my pussy hard around him, trying to make him cum. “All yours.”

“*Mysh!*” He threw his head back and groaned. The base of his cock heated and grew bigger.

Another orgasm built inside of me.

“Oh.” I dug my nails into his back, pulling him down to me.

Our lips smashed together and I loudly groaned against his mouth.

*Holy fuck!*

Tiny fireworks detonated in my pussy. He didn’t stop. His cock swelled inside me and my stomach tightened.

“Oh! Oh!” I moaned so loud over and over and couldn’t have stopped if I tried. I screamed and let the ecstasy wash over me. My pussy tightened around his cock. “Oh!”

He moaned and moved faster inside me, thrusting deeper.

Our bodies rocked against each other, and then I came apart in his arms with a thunderous roar. “Baby!”

I spiraled into exquisite passion. Every cell in my body ignited a million explosions of ecstasy. “Oh, baby.”

“Fuck!” His voice was a feverish growl of pleasure, and his cock pulsed before erupting with hot jets of cum that flooded into me.

And I relished in the warm spray, filling me.

“Oh my God.” I shuddered.

Still cumming, Kaz buried his face in my neck and groaned.

I didn’t know how long it lasted—our shuddering and moaning, our wet bodies slipping against each other. But when both of our climaxes faded, he kissed me. “That was so good. I may never let you leave this bed.”

I panted. “Then, we would never leave Italy.”

Loudly sighing, he dragged himself from my neck, rolled over, and lay next to my side. “Then, fuck that. I guess we must leave.”

I turned and lay on his moist chest.

He wrapped his arms around me. “You are so gorgeous when you surrender to me.”

“Is that what I did?”

“Damn right.”

“Kaz, I did not surrender.”

“You did.”

“I only came—”

“Hard, while submitting to my cock and utter beastly domination.”

I chuckled. “Something is wrong with you.”

He brushed hair from my face. “I like the way you woke me up.”

“I *may* do that more often. If you are a good lion.”

“I do not know how to be good, *mysh*, so do it anyway.”

Smirking, I closed my eyes and lounged within his warmth. “How did *you* sleep?”



“I had an odd dream early in the night.” He kissed my forehead. “I woke up and took care of a few things, before heading back to sleep.”

I opened my eyes and looked at him. “What things?”

“I talked to Ufuoma—”

“What?” I left his arms and sat up. “Without me?”

“I did not want to wake you.”

“Fuck that, Kaz. You know I would have wanted to be there.”

He smirked. “Am I in trouble? And what will be my punishment?”

I frowned.

He let out a long breath. “Okay, *mysh*. I should have woken you before going to her.”

“Did you change the plan for today?”

“I did not.”

“Then, why go talk to her?”

“I wanted guarantees and a sense of confidence that all would work out today.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“I talked to Fela too.”

“What the fuck?” I held my hands out. “While I slept?”

“Yes, *mysh*.” He tried to guide me back down. “Come here.”

I remained where I was. “What was the conversation about?”

“I assured him that if anything happens to you, then his people and him would basically drown in blood.”

I tensed.

“Then, I let him talk to Ufuoma to show that I would in good faith allow you to kill him.”

I swallowed.

“Next, Ufuoma and I worked out the details of Black Axe’s surrender to the Brotherhood.”

“Which is?”

“A partnership. They control the port and slide money monthly to the Brotherhood. Others connected to the Brotherhood get discounts.”

“You think it will work?”

“I do, but unfortunately *you* will need to be more involved than I would like.”

“How?”

“You would maintain our partnership on the Brotherhood side, talk to her, if necessary.”

“Me?”

“Yes.” He frowned. “I think she will deal with you better than me.”

“Even after I kill her father?”

“She’s not ignorant about her father’s diabolical plans as well as his puppeteering of my enemies. If she is smart, she will do what she’s told.”

“Let’s hope she’s smart.” I lay back down and rested my head on his chest. “Maybe, she won’t want revenge, and be happy that we didn’t kill all of Black Axe, including her. But...how do we know for sure that we can trust her?”

“I have some emergency plans in place.”

I put my view on him. “What plans?”

“Maxwell, Harlem Crew, and the French will remain here monitoring things for a while.”

Dread filled me. My throat went dry. “My Max?”

“Yes, *mysh*.”

“Did you tell him?”

“Of course.”

I tensed. “He agrees?”

“He does. Remember. He thinks Ufuoma is his wife. He even tried to kill a stranger over her. Did you really think he was coming back with us?”

“Yes.” I glared. “He could...bring her or something.”

Kaz gave me a sad smile.

I wanted to pout, but I kept it off my face. “I don’t want Max to leave my side again.”

“Maxwell is the best choice. Due to his infatuation, he will be right by Ufuoma’s side, watching everything.”

“If he is in love with her then he might excuse some of her behavior—”

“Which is why the French will be there too.”

“But, what about Rocco? Surely, he will target Max.”

“That is why he will have a whole army down here.”

I shook my head. “Then, I’m staying.”

A sharpened edge laced his next words. “You will be on the plane with me, heading to Moscow this afternoon—”

“Kaz, I—”

“If I have to drag you on there, I am more than prepared to make that happen.” This time the intensity of his gaze made me shiver. “Do you understand?”

I swallowed.

“I am well aware of your bond with Maxwell. Therefore, I will make sure that he comes back to Moscow several times throughout his period of monitoring Black Axe.”

I gritted my teeth.

“Perhaps, he will get his own plane. Whatever will make you feel comfortable.”

Sighing, I closed my eyes and focused on the warmth of Kaz’s body. My heart ached. Already, I missed him and it wasn’t even time to leave yet.

“Talk to me, *mysh*.”

“I don’t like missing Max. I like him by my side, knowing that he is safe.”

Kaz chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Maxwell is more than capable of taking care of himself.”

“Still, I will be worried about him down here, especially with Rocco being alive. At the bare minimum, I want all of Harlem Crew to be down here with him. Everyone except Blue.”

“Everyone in Harlem Crew?”

“Yes.”

Kaz’s chest hardened. “I planned to have Boris come back to Moscow with us too.”

*I bet you did.*

I opened my eyes and scowled at him. “Boris stays with Max.”

“No. He comes with us.”

“Boris stays.” I sat back up and stared at him. “It would make me feel less anxious about Max if Boris is watching his back.”

“Or do you just want to save Boris from my wrath?”

“You decide in the middle of the night to have Max down in Italy for only God knows how long, *and* you think you are going to hurt Boris in Moscow?”

The line of his jaw twitched.

I pointed at him. “Boris stays in Italy with Max, and nothing better happen to him.”

He sneered. “Sometimes accidents occur, *mysh*.”

“Don’t play with me, Kaz.”

“My people and I will not touch Boris while he is in *Italy*. That was our agreement.”

“Thank you.”

“But, think deeply about this.” Kaz lowered his gaze to my breasts. “The longer you protect Boris with these little promises, the more my anger grows.” He placed his view back to my face. “And then my conversation with Boris may be longer than expected and much more lethal.”

“Put your focus on helping me get control of this Lunita situation and our having a healthy baby.”

He frowned.

I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed. “Today is the day.”

“It is.”

“Should we call another meeting with everyone?”

“If I have to see the French again, I may kill them.”

“Kaz—”

“Fucking Pansies.”

I scowled.

He let out a long breath.

“Well...there is another option.”

“What?”

“Baba.”

He nodded. “Of course we must do a reading with Baba. I would feel better with her guidance.”

I lay back down against his chest. “Then, let’s hope that she has good things to say.”





# Chapter 62

## For Now

### Kazimir

For some reason Baba didn't want to do a reading with Emily, until Fela gave us the location. Did alternate visions come to her? Would particular locations decide our fate?

She refused to answer any of my questions.

Therefore, the morning dragged on with an almost unbearable suspense layering the air.

Every few minutes, I glanced at my watch and checked with King David to see if Fela had called.

*Let us get this over with, Fela. Do not drag this out anymore.*

There was also the Sicilians to consider. If Rocco were bold enough to go to his family and tell, the day would be violently difficult. Due to that, I had explosive teams bordering the island.

*If the Sicilians come, I will bomb them.*

By the afternoon, David ran around delegating orders and keeping in touch with Misha's people. My men cleaned guns and re-checked ammo supplies. Harlem Crew and the French packed up everyone's stuff, hurriedly making several trips to our planes and loading them.

There was no doubt in my mind that today we all would be leaving. I just wondered how much bloodshed would come.

So nervous with the waiting, Emily grabbed Paolo to do his hair. Once the boy appeared with Harlem, she turned on her phone and started one of her playlists.

Rap music rose in the air.

She took her phone and Paolo into the bathroom.



Harlem trotted after them.

I lingered near the doorway, completely intrigued with the playlist. I did my best to catch the intense lyrics, wondering what sort of songs my mouse enjoyed. Many rapped about New York's harsh realities. Every word dripped with pain. Choruses painted melodies of street life's relentless struggles and the horrors of tight-knit concrete jungles, where wits were sometimes their only weapons.

*Very good taste, mysh.*

One male rapper kept coming up on her playlist.

I entered the bathroom and bobbed my head. "You have played this guy a lot?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"He's awesome." By the sink, she washed Paolo's long strands in a gentle spray of warm water

"I believe that I also like this rapper."

Emily grinned. "You better, Kaz. We can't be together if you don't."

"It is interesting because his voice sounds familiar to me."

"Well, he's worldwide."

"What is his name?"

"Jay-Z."

"Yes." I walked over to her. "I have heard that name before."

The brash and cocky lyrics of another one of this rapper's songs echoed in the air, riding a blazing guitar. Excitement surged through me. The sound was relentless, pounding away at my eardrums.

"Very good."

Chuckling, Emily worked sudsy shampoo into Paolo's hair with deft movements, rinsed it out, and then ran a creamy lotion through his locks with a tender touch.

I knew Pavel was around us in the room, grinning from ear to ear at her work.

I eyed her. “Will you do our son’s hair this way?”

“Yep.”

“Perhaps, I should let my hair grow, so—”

“Nope.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Why not?”

“I’m not putting cornrows on your head, Kaz.”

Still listening to the lyrics, I went to her phone and cranked up the volume as the song pulsed with authority and pride.

“What’s the name of this one?”

“*Takeover.*”

“Interesting.”

When the song ended, I replayed it again.

She looked up. “What are you doing?”

“I like what this Jay-Z is saying about his enemies. I too feel the same way.”

“No surprise there.” She returned her view to Paolo’s hair and washed the creamy mixture from his strands. “You both have the same egos.”

“We should have this Jay-Z at the reception.”

“No, baby.” She chuckled again.

“Why not?”

“I’m sure he has tons of things to do. His wife and him stay booked and busy.”

I frowned. “He *will* be there or have problems with the Lion.”

“Oh, God.” She grabbed a towel and wrapped it around Paolo’s small head. “Kaz, please don’t kidnap Jay-Z. It is not that serious.”

“It is.”

Maxwell walked in. “I know damn well I didn’t hear this motherfucker threatening to kidnap Brooklyn’s finest.”

“Sure did.” Emily shook her head and scowled at Maxwell. “And how are you and your *wife* doing?”

“None of your business, Em, and stop looking at me like that.”

“I’m just saying.” Em placed her hands on her hips. “Have you killed anybody for her today?”

“Naw.” Maxwell smiled. “Have *you* killed anybody today? Or should I ask Lunita?”

I glared at him, ready to knock his head off.

“Wow.” She flipped her middle finger up. “Low blow, Max.”

“Then, stop fucking with me about how I handle shit dealing with my baby.” Maxwell turned to Paolo. “Oh shit. Look at nephew.”

Grinning, Paolo stomped his feet to the music and swung his arms in the air.

“You like that, nephew? Huh?” Maxwell bobbed his head. “Hold up though, Paolo. You need better rhythm if you’re going to be related to me.”

Emily went to the other side of the sink where she kept her rows upon rows of toiletries. Soon, she began rummaging through items.

*No one ever told me that once I fell in love I would lose counter and closet space.*

Smirking, I put my attention back on Maxwell.

The heavy twang of the guitar emitted a charged energy on the song.

*Yes. This man must be at our reception.*

“See, Paolo.” Maxwell rocked his shoulders left and right with the beat. “You got to do it like this.”

Giggling, Paolo wiggled his shoulders and hips.

“Oh, hell no.” Maxwell grabbed Paolo and guided his movements. “Relax. Do it just like Uncle Max.”

Paolo’s expression turned serious as he followed Maxwell’s rocking.

“Yeah!” Maxwell laughed. “There we go! That’s my boy!”

Paolo matched Maxwell’s rocking as if he was a perfect mirror reflection. In unison, they moved with the beat, riding the rugged wave of the guitar.

Emily laughed by the sink, and I watched them, unable to keep the smile off my face. Baba had been right about both of them. Maxwell and Paolo possessed the sort of healing that Emily needed. Together, we could add light to the darkness.

Soon the song turned off and switched to another one with two different male rappers.

“Fuck, yeah!” Maxwell rocked his whole body in deeper intense movements.

*No. I want to hear the other one again.*

I turned back to the phone and was about to press replay to the Jay-Z song.

Fast, Emily grabbed the phone from me. “You can’t change this, baby.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“Max, might shoot you, if you change it.”

“He will not.”

“I will most definitely shoot you, if you do!” Maxwell rhythmically bobbed around the bathroom with Paolo. “*Shook Ones* is a classic. Have some respect for Mobb Deep.”

*Mobb who?*

Chuckling, Emily went to Paolo and grabbed one of his hands.

He grinned. “*Mysh!*”

I rolled my eyes.

“I didn’t know you liked to dance, Paolo.” She bobbed her head left and right, her body matching the swagger of the beat. “We’ll have to do this more.”

“Don’t forget to invite Uncle Max. This is exactly what I needed before we end this shit.” Maxwell danced around Emily and Paolo. “Hell fucking yes. This shit is getting me hyped.”

*They are all crazy.*

A few of Harlem Crew gathered around and peeked into the bathroom. Many watched in utter shock. Others grinned. A few rocked with them.

Then, I spotted Boris.

*Hmmm.*

Emily was too busy dancing with Maxwell and Paolo.

*This is a perfect time.*

I headed out and left the bathroom.

Boris spotted me and stepped away from the doorway.

I gave him a warm smile. “Come with me.”

Boris quirked his brows. “Me?”

“Yes.” I widened my smile. “You.”

*You are very lucky that my mouse will not let me kill you.*

Eager to have some alone time with Boris, I led him past the bedroom, through the living room, and out of the suite. I had to make sure Emily didn’t interrupt this talk.

When we stepped out into the hallway, I shut the door.

Boris kept four feet from me.

I scanned the space.

Ten of my men stood out there with their guns at their sides.

Boris followed my gaze, looked at me, and gulped.

I watched him. “How are you, Boris?”

He glanced at my men again, and then put his view on me.  
“I am fine, Kazimir.”

“Very good. I just have a question.”

“Yes?”

I leaned my head to the side. “Can you define *obsession*?”

Boris widened his eyes. “Obsession?”

I nodded.

“It is a...persistent...preoccupation with something or someone.”

“Very good again. I agree with this definition.” I raised one finger. “However, I would simply add that at times obsession is unreasonable. Dangerous. Lethal.”

Boris pursed his lips.

“Do you have obsessions, Boris?”

Boris parted his lips. Then, he closed them and shook his head.

“No?”

“No, Kazimir.”

“Well, I have many obsessions.” I slowly rubbed my hands together. “Torture methods is one exciting obsession of mine. Do you know of any good torture methods?”

Boris slowly shook his head.

I grinned. “Kneecapping.”

Boris twisted his face in confusion.

“Have you heard of it?”

“No, Kazimir.”

“It is when you aim at a man’s knee pit and shoot.” I raised my hand and shot an invisible gun at his kneecaps. “Boom!”

Boris jerked back.

I lowered my hand. “The poor bastard ends up in the hospital for several weeks. At times, the damage is too great,

and amputation may be necessary. No more running or walking.”

Boris opened his mouth.

“Then, there is premature burial.” I edged toward him, cutting away two feet between us. “Surely, you heard of that?”

Boris’s bottom lip quivered. “No.”

“One simply places the person into a wooden casket and buries him underground.” I stepped forward taking away another foot between us. “The person is trapped with not much fresh air to breathe. Nothing to eat. Unable to truly move his body. No light, just darkness.”

“Kazimir...have I done something?”

“In Ancient Rome, when vestal virgins violated their oath of celibacy, they would be buried just like that. Can you imagine that?”

“No.”

“I can.” I closed the distance. Now only five inches ran between us. I had to admit. I was impressed that Boris didn’t step away.

Our eyes locked.

Confusion painted his expression.

While I was sure my own face displayed a twisted, manic intensity.

*Oh, Boris. The things that I am going to do to you.*

A minute of unsettling silence passed.

The whole time I just watched him as this frightening mix of chaotic rage and volcanic hot adrenaline spun within my core.

The space grew thick and oppressive.

Slowly, his eyes twitched, and his focus wavered. Then, he broke contact.

Fast, I placed my hand on his shoulder.

He flinched.

I leaned forward and whispered in his ear, “Did you like what you saw?”

His body trembled under my hand. “W-when? W-what?”

I tightened my grip on his shoulder. “You do not know what I am talking about?”

Fear filled his eyes. “N-no.”

I let go of his shoulder, lifted my hand, and cupped his right cheek. “Oh, Boris.”

His skin prickled with a chill, the kind of chill that pierced the body in panic.

I relished in his terror. “You do not remember?”

“N-no.”

“Then, let me remind you.” I patted his cheek and lowered my hand to his neck. “I imagine that you stood in the hallway by yourself last night.”

Some of my men looked our way. Surely, they were all puzzled with what was going on. The Brotherhood was full of a bunch of gossiping men. This moment would be the top conversation for the rest of the week.

“Tell me, Boris.” I leaned in closer. “Was it my mouse’s moans that lured you to the door? Did they echo through the hallway? Did they vibrate down to your bones, stirring your desire? Making you hard?”

“I-I do not—”

“My mouse’s moans were slowly building passionate cries. Seducing. Rising and falling, but never faltering.” I exhaled. “Due to that, I can understand why you opened the door. Why you chose to look.”

Instantly, he became frozen with alarm, unable to move, and petrified to the ground. Sweat beaded along his forehead.

Meanwhile, my body hummed with a blinding fury. I yearned for violence, but knew I had to keep those violent



cravings at bay.

*For now...*

I steadied my voice. “Was it everything you imagined?”

“I...I d-did not mean to—”

“Of course not, Boris.” I flashed him a feral smile and tapped my thumb against his throat. “But, tell me. Did you enjoy hearing my mouse whimper when I came inside of her?”

He tried to edge away.

I tightened my grip on his neck, keeping him there. “What excited you the most? Her face twisting in ecstasy? Those beautiful breasts bouncing to the rhythm of my cock?”

One of my men stirred near us as if scared that he might die just from being in the area.

Sweat dripped down the side of his face, and Boris’s body didn’t shiver or shake. It quaked, spasming in terror.

I glared. “If I have Misha check the footage in your bedroom from last night, what will he see?”

Boris mumbled, “P-please, do not kill me. I am sorry—”

“I bet you are stroking yourself and whispering her name.” I gritted my teeth. “Moaning her name in the darkness. Emily. Oh, Emily.”

“I-I will n-never—”

“If I were you, I would have thought of her all night and rubbed my cock until it erupted all over the bed, all over the room.” I took my hand from his throat and then patted the top of his head. “Thankfully, I am not you.”

Boris blew out a long breath.

I sneered. “Instead, I am the Lion.”

“Kazimir, I am sorry and—”

“No. No.” I waved my hand. “Never apologize for carnal desires. You are only a man.”

Boris’s eyes watered. “But—”

“Emily sees you as a brother.” I studied him. “She has been through a lot in her life, so she walks this earth loving people she should not and desperately forming an unnecessarily big family.”

Boris remained silent.

“Therefore, I have limits to what I can do to you.” I glanced at his knees. “For now...”

He inched back.

I returned my view to his face. “Oh, Boris, but soon a time will come where we will have a *nice* conversation.”

“Kazimir, I will do anything to gain your forgiveness. I did not mean to disrespect—”

“I want you to wonder about when that time will come.” I placed my hands in my pockets. “I want you to sit in bed late at night, frightened. I want you to look over your shoulder, jumping in your skin every time you see my men heading your way.”

Movement sounded behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder.

King David approached.

I looked back at Boris. “We are done talking...for now.”

“K-Kazimir, I swear—”

“Go.”

Boris stumbled as he rushed away.

King David watched him hurry back into the suite.  
“Everything in order, Kazimir?”

I smiled. “For now.”

“Fela called and sent the location.”

I tensed and faced David. “Where?”

“San Nicola Arcella Beach around six in the evening. It is a small seaside town in the southwest of Calabria. Fela said he wanted to see the sunset before he died.”

“I know the beach well. There’s a cove and the sand is roughly pebbled. Not a lot of tourists.”

David nodded. “I already have teams heading that way as well as Misha’s satellites honed onto the area.”

“I want the whole beach surrounded by guns and when Fela steps on that beach, everyone should be aiming at him.”

“I already put that in motion.”

“Good. Additionally, Fela does not want me close to them during their conversation, but Blue should be near my mouse.”

David’s jaw twitched.

“Is there a problem?”

He cleared his throat. “No.”

“Good.” I headed off. “Now, please, get Baba.”





# Chapter 63

## The Last Reading

### Emily

King David guided us into Baba's suite.

The space was as opulent as ours. Heavy crystal chandeliers hung from high ceilings. The fragrance of roses saturated the air. A thick plush carpet cushioned our footsteps. Sky blue painted the walls.

David took us past her office door. "Baba wants to do your reading out on her balcony."

Kaz raised his eyebrows. "And how has her mood been today?"

"We have breakfast together every morning, even on rough days when all I can do is sip a quick coffee with her and leave." David glanced over his shoulder and gave him a sad smile. "This morning, she did not want to eat breakfast nor have a quick coffee. She didn't say anything was wrong, but I know something is bothering her."

Kaz let out a long breath.

My heart thudded. A cold nervousness snaked through my body.

*Does she see something bad happening?*

We made it to the balcony's doors.

David opened them. Sunlight streamed in.

I stepped out first. The heat of the day hit me, warming my skin instantly.

Baba's balcony was twice as big as ours and decorated with a round table and four chairs.

Beyond and below, water sparkled and fluffy white clouds dotted the bright blue sky.

But I couldn't enjoy the view. A deep dread snaked through to my heart as I awaited whatever Baba would have to say.

I directed my attention to her.

At the head of the table, Baba sat in one chair, dressed in a flowing white caftan that seemed to float around her delicate form. Her hair was up in a bun.

The shimmering sun brightened her tan complexion, but the shadows under her eyes and the way she chewed on her bottom lip suggested she hadn't slept well.

*Fuck. This is going to be bad.*

I walked over to the table. "What's wrong?"

Silent, Kaz followed.

Baba watched me sit down. "I went to visit Paolo this morning and sing him a little song. I even planned to read him a book."

*O-kay?*

I rested my hands in my lap and twisted my fingers. "I had him with me. I wanted to do his hair."

"I heard." She curved her lips into a smile. "I saw a quick vision of you all dancing through Maxwell's eyes. So much joy rushed into my heart."

I blinked. "You can do that? See through other people's eyes."

"The visions come when the Universe sees fit, tearing through my conscious like a storm. I have no control over what is revealed." She held out her hands. "Sometimes...the Universe keeps away a disturbing future. It blocks."

She raised her hands and held her palms up. "There's a veil between us and the future. Sometimes the veil is clear like glass and I can see it all."

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

“And sometimes, the Universe hides the visions and the veil thickens, blurring everything and making my head dizzy.”

I didn't like what she was saying. Those words seemed to trigger a haunting darkness to hover in the air above us.

The suspense was unbearable and I felt like my heart was going to stop beating at any second.

David stood by the balcony railing and watched us.

Kaz lowered in his chair. “Where are your cards? I have been waiting all day for some confirmation from you that my mouse will be safe.”

Baba turned her view to him. “For as long as we have known each other, Kazimir, many of your reading requests have been about Emily.”

“And?”

“It is just an interesting fact.”

Kaz frowned. “I want facts about the future, not interesting ones about the past.”

The smile left her face. “And that is why we are outside, instead of in my office today.”

I leaned forward. “Why?”

“Emily, it appears that you have seeped into my heart.” Her bottom lip quivered. “I tried to stop it, but...once Paolo came and you chose to protect and love my little pumpkin... you have taken up residence within my soul.”

My heart warmed.

Kaz sighed. “What does this have to do with the reading?”

I placed my hand on his lap. “Be patient, baby.”

Her eyes watered. “For the past week, I ignored a certain truth that has been slowly coming into existence.”

I tensed.

“Things have occurred and I've...not seen them.” She put her view on David. “This happened with my grandson. Visions



of his future life became blurry and then eventually smothering into darkness.”

*Oh no.*

My stomach tightened as fear and sorrow surged through me like a tsunami, quickly drowning my hope for any calming news about today.

She directed her attention on me. “This has been occurring with my beloved lion and mouse. My visions for you both have been slowly fading.”

Kaz shook his head. “Then, get them back.”

I looked at him. “Baby, she can’t see our future, if she loves us.”

Kaz’s voice dripped with malice. “If that is the case, then I can change that love, and get us right back on track.”

I lowered my voice. “You better not be threatening her.”

He sneered. “I want a reading.”

Baba gave him a sad smile. “Imagine my surprise that a stubborn, spoiled lion could capture my heart. How could that ever be possible? The ego? The constant rage always churning inside of him.”

Kaz snarled, a menacing gleam flickered in his eye. “This will not do. Love or not, I need assurances.”

“This is why I needed the location. I can still see bits of visions through the eyes of your people. Some have held Fela in them.”

For some reason, my skin crawled. “And what did you see?”

“There were two very different visions of Emily with Fela. They both played all night long in my head, switching back and forth.” Baba rubbed the side of her head. “Keeping me up all night—”

“Tell me the visions.” Kaz furrowed his brows. “I need something.”

Baba rubbed her head some more. “In one vision, Fela stands several yards in front of Emily. They are at an abandoned playground. Before Fela can step close to Emily, members of the Brotherhood shoot him down.”

I widened my eyes.

Baba lowered her hand and placed it back on the table. “Then, there is only fire, blood, and screaming.”

By the balcony, David spoke, “Did a bomb go off?”

She nodded at David. “The entire playground explodes. So many die, especially Kaz, Emily, Maxwell, and you.”

I swallowed.

“Then, I see visions of Paolo. He is an orphan again. Alone and vulnerable, his life is full of pain.” She closed her eyes. “Paolo stiffens himself, shuts his heart off from love. In his adulthood, he chooses a life of leadership and gains insurmountable power. History shudders at the atrocities he commits. Civilizations end because of him. Nations drown in rivers of blood.”

“What?” I shook my head. “I don’t ever want that for him or this world.”

Kaz frowned. “And the other location?”

I shake my head. “Really, Kaz? Can we just take a minute to—”

“I want my mouse safe. At no moment will I waver on that.” Kaz pointed to her. “What is the next location? And how does that play out for my mouse and son?”

“The next location is a beach.” Baba’s face returned to that sad smile. “Emily sits with Fela and talks. Although many Russian guns are aimed at his head, no one shoots.”

Kaz narrowed his eyes at her. “And are there bombs?”

“No bombs, lion. No deaths of your people.”

“I do not care about my people.” Kaz gritted his teeth. “I care about my mouse and unborn son.”

She let out a long breath. “They will be safe too, but...”

A chill ran down my spine. “But?”

“Darkness comes.”

“What darkness?” I fisted my hands in my lap.

“That is when the visions get foggy, Emily.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I need to understand what you mean. You saw something.”

“I should not say anymore.”

I eyed her suspiciously. “Then, you *did* see something?”

“What I have said should calm you a little.” She reached her hand out to touch me.

I didn’t take her hand. “I don’t want any darkness coming.”

“But at least you and your son will be safe as well as everyone else.”

Worry laced Kaz’s voice. “What do you mean the darkness comes?”

Baba shook her head. “Already, I am saying too much.”

Kaz hit the table. “Say more!”

David eyed him. “Kazimir, this is a very tricky situation for my grandmother. If she is choosing to hold back, then she wants to maintain a particular timeline for us all.”

Baba nodded. “I do not see any other way around this. The darkness surely is a better option than everyone dying and Paolo becoming some psychotic blood-driven dictator.”

Kaz rose almost knocking the chair over. “Enough about Paolo. What about Emily?”

Baba stared at her hands. “All the visions for Emily fade into darkness at a certain point...yet she is alive.”

I gulped fear. “What about Fela? Does he die?”

Baba nodded. “Italy ends, but...other things begin.”

Those words shoved me on edge.

She exhaled and put her view on Kaz. “And I must make this one thing clear. Boris must remain alive.”

A dark grumble left Kaz.

Baba continued, “He is Emily’s Ace, and will be helpful with protecting her *and* Maxwell.”

I scowled his way. “What? You weren’t going to touch Boris? Right?”

Kaz crossed his arms over his chest. “I was not going to kill him. Not intentionally.”

*Jesus Christ.*

I put my view back on Baba.

She gazed at Kaz like a disapproving child. “I saw otherwise in my visions—”

“Oh. You saw that vision, but cannot see what truly matters?”

Baba pointed at him. “Boris remains alive and untouched, or the darkness thickens to an unerasable black that none of us can hide from.”

I clenched my hands. “What darkness? Where is it coming from? And how can we stop it?”

Baba pursed her lips.

Kaz stepped closer to the table. “Why do I feel like you are holding things from us, Baba?”

I nodded. “I agree with Kaz. You say that you can’t see people’s futures when you love them. Next, you give us insight into Paolo’s future. Don’t you love him too?”

Baba’s gaze remained fixed on her hands. “After Fela’s demise, there will be nothing for me to see for a while.”

Kaz sneered. “Why not? Enough with these bullshit reasons. What are you *not* saying?”

David came close to the table and stood by his grandmother’s side as if trying to shield her from Kazimir.

Still not looking our way, Baba shook her head. “I cannot say too much—”

“Bullshit!” Kaz hit the table again. “We came to you for a reading and all we are getting is half-lies, riddles, and excuses.”

Baba moved her view to me. “Your future is clouded, Emily.”

“How?”

“If I say too much, *you* may change things and everything turns horrible.”

“Baba, I asked for the truth and the truth is that you’re keeping things from me.” I pushed back from the table and got up. “I don’t like this feeling. With all the things we have been through, can you do better than this for me?”

In an instant, she stood. “I am doing what is best for you. Please, trust me, Emily.”

“How is hiding things good for me?”

“So far, you have had a very emotional journey and...you are only stepping onto the truth path. You are a shattered mirror. It is time to mend those cracks.”

My heart pounded as I felt the weight of her words. “What else, Baba? I need more.”

She walked over to me. “This evening, Kazimir and you will be safe and out of Italy.”

“And do I kill Fela?”

Baba shook her head. Her voice trembled with emotion. “You do not.”

Kaz widened his eyes in surprise. “Then, who?”

Ignoring him, she reached for my hand, grabbed it, and softly squeezed. Tears glistened in the corner of her eyes. “I wish I could walk the rest of this journey for you, but I cannot.”

I plead with her, “I need more, Baba.”

Tears left her eye. "I cannot see any more after Fela dies."

"Why not, Baba?" David walked over to her. "Will *you* be safe? Will something happen to you?"

"David, do not worry. Everything will be fine." Baba wiped the tears away. "Your job must be to stay with the Lion."

I shivered. "You're scaring me."

Baba pulled me into a hug. Her strong arms were a vice around my body, holding me fiercely against her as if she never wanted to let me go.

I was paralyzed in shock, all I could do was remain in her loving embrace.

"You are strong and you are loved." She hugged me tighter. "Please, do not ever forget that, Emily."

I trembled. "Baba?"

"Promise, Emily. Never forget that you are loved."

"I won't."

"I wish I could squeeze out all of your pain and suffering." She pulled back. More tears had streamed down her face. "But, I cannot do that either. *You* must do it for yourself."

Bone-chilling fear rushed through my veins. My voice wavered. "W-what do you mean?"

"Never forget the Lion." Baba's bottom lip quivered. "Never forget him. Promise me."

Terror constricted my heart.

"I won't." I turned Kaz's way.

He watched us. His eyes were wide with dread.

My heart raced as if it was going to burst out of my chest. "Then...do I still meet with Fela today?"

"You must." Baba let me go and wiped tears with both hands. "Finish this."

"But...why are you crying?"

“Because I love you so much, and I know that you have a rough journey ahead of you.”

I hugged myself. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“You must go through it all.” Baba let out a long breath. “Your future depends on it. As well as Kazimir’s future and your child’s and even little Paolo. All three depend on you as well as so many others.”

I widened my eyes. “W-what is going to happen, Baba?”

“Remember. *You* are loved, and if you are not with us... then so many perish.”

Kaz came over to us. “I will not let her go to Fela, if—”

“Fela’s death is set, and you have no control of Emily’s journey, Kazimir.” Baba raised her hand and placed it on his shoulder. “In this situation, there is nothing to shoot at, nothing to bomb.”

Kaz bared his teeth. “I am sure I can find someone to kill \_\_\_”

“With this, your weapons must be love and patience as well as the understanding that Emily must do this on her own.” Baba took her hand away from Kaz’s shoulder.

My voice cracked with hopelessness. “And what if I don’t want to do whatever journey this is?”

“Just remember that *you* are loved and needed by us all.” Sniffling, Baba walked around me and left the balcony.

Horror filled my soul as I watched her leave.

*What is going to happen?*

My mind raced in sheer terror as I tried to figure out what fate lay ahead.







# Chapter 64

## Questions and Answers

### Blue

### Hours earlier

First sound filled my ears.

Next, the soft murmur of voices came.

*What is going on?*

I blinked my eyes open. A shocking sight greeted me. Several men and women carried silver platters throughout my room. Others held crystal pitchers of various juices.

*What the hell?*

A mouth-watering, spicy scent saturated the air and made my stomach growl.

*Who ordered me food?*

Another man placed folded cloth napkins on a table covered in a white cloth.

Rubbing my eyes, I slowly sat up. “What is going on?”

Giorgio’s smooth voice came from behind me. It was the sound of honey being poured over crushed rose petals. “Are you hungry?”

Shocked, I turned around in the bed.

Giorgio stood beside a round table covered with a lavish blue cloth. “I wanted to surprise you with something special after yesterday’s events.”

“Oh, Giorgio that is so sweet.” My heart swelled with warmth. “You did not have to—”

“I did.” He walked over to the bed, giving me a better view of his sexy form. His crisp white suit fit his body as if it were

made just for him. A navy blue tie pulled it all together. The blue gloves on his hands matched the tie. “I also brought you a new pair of panties for the day.”

I shook my head. “You really need to give me all my panties back.”

“Why?” He smirked. “I prefer this arrangement.”

More men and women swarmed around the room, decorating the space in blue roses.

Then, I studied his bruised face, and my heart sank. His bottom lip was split and puffy at the corner. Swelling darkened his right cheekbone. A faint blueish tint covered his left eye.

“Damn it.” Sighing, I rose from the bed and hurried to him. “Are you hurt?”

“You think David can hurt me?”

“That is not an answer.” I got in front of him and raised my hands to his face. “Giorgio, how do you feel?”

“Perfectly fine.”

“I do not want you fighting over me anymore—”

“Why not?”

“Because when you get hurt, it breaks my heart.” I pressed my palms over his cheeks. His soft skin warmed against mine.

He closed his eyes and inhaled. “How could I not fight, Blue? It drives me insane that I cannot have you to myself.”

I drowned in guilt and moved my hands from his face. “I am sorry.”

“A wise person said that a man should never give up on something that he cannot go a day without thinking about.” He opened his eyes. Lust blazed through them. “For me...that is you.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Last night...I realized that I am being selfish—”

“That is fine for now.”

“What?”

“Louis told me that this situation could be karma. Payback for all the hearts I have broken. However, I plan to fix it.”  
Giorgio ran his gaze over me.

I wore a long blue shirt and nothing else.

He smirked. “Are you wearing panties?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Some crazy person has taken all of mine.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “What did your cousin mean about this being karma for you?”

“In the past, I have had several women at a time.”

I blinked. A bit of jealousy prickled within me. “How many women?”

“As many as I want.”

I raised my eyebrows. “How did you figure out a way to handle so many women at once?”

“I didn’t. Either they stayed or left. Women’s feelings have never been my concern, until now.”

My throat went dry.

“Come on, Blue.” Giorgio gestured to the table and headed over. “Let us eat. I am sure the Lion and Mouse have a busy day for us.”

“Wait.” I followed him. “What do you mean their feelings were not important?”

“Why would they be?” He pulled out a chair and pointed to it. “Please, sit.”

I settled into the seat. “So, you are a ladies’ man?”

“I would not say that.” Giorgio went over to the next chair and chuckled. “I simply love to fuck.”

I opened my mouth in shock.

*O-kay. It appears Giorgio has no problem with getting dirty at times.*

He signaled the staff to serve us.

One-by-one they came over placing platters of food onto the table—flaky croissants and jams, bowls of fresh fruits and pastries, steaming scrambled eggs and several sizzling sausages. It was a fabulous feast.

Yet, I could not move my attention from Giorgio for too long. He had truly stunned me with that comment. I tried to imagine him with gloves on, hopping around from bed to bed and sleeping with tons of women.

Thousands of questions spun through my head. Did he make them shower first like he did with the men he tortured and killed? Did he take the gloves off during sex or keep them on? Condom or not? And what about his tongue? Did he like to use it? Or would going down on a woman be disgusting?

He looked at one man. “Bring two coffees.”

The man nodded and hurried off.

Giorgio put his attention on me and grinned. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I would think that you would not have a lot of sex with women due to being such a neat freak and needing everything so clean.”

He placed his gloved hands on the table. “Are you a little jealous?”

“Well.” I picked up a warm croissant. “A little.”

“When I return to France, I plan to dismiss all my women.”

“How many do you have in France?”

“Enough.”

“Giorgio, that is not an answer.”

“They do not matter now. I will be getting rid of them as soon as I return.” He threaded his gloved fingers together.

“And of course you would be by my side.”

“No. I will be going back to Russia.”

“Why when you could be working with me?”

“Giorgio, I cannot just leave Harlem Crew and run off to France—”

“To the Russians, you are the Maid.” He touched his chest. “To me, you are a queen, and you would be treated as such.”

“I care about Emily.”

“More than yourself?”

I let out a long breath. “When the Mouse returns to Russia, she will continue her mission of cleaning up my neighborhood.”

Giorgio quirked his brows. “Tell me more.”

“Before her, drug dealers, addicts, rapists, and murderers packed the streets. Children and women were not safe. It was scary to walk the street at night and even during the day.” I picked up my fork to try the eggs. “Then, Emily arrived and became the boogeyman to all of those filthy, evil bastards. Now, they stay far away, too nervous to be in the path of her wrath.”

“I like that she got rid of them. I never knew this about her. She now has more of my respect.”

“Emily is a good person.”

“But, do you feel like you owe her?”

“No.” I forked some of my eggs. “I want to help her continue to change my neighborhood and even the world. I know it must sound stupid, but—”

“It doesn’t.” He didn’t touch his food. “The problem for me is that I am falling in love with you.”

I held my forkful of eggs in mid-air.

“Your being in Russia forces me to be there, and honestly, I hate the country.”

I lowered my fork. “I think...it would be dangerous for you to be in Russia.”

He leaned his head to the side. “Due to *King David*?”

“Yes, and the rest of the Brotherhood.”

“Guns and Russians don’t scare me.” He pointed my way. “It is the possibility of losing you that keeps me up at night.”

My heartbeats picked up.

The man from earlier brought two steaming cups of coffee and placed them on the table next to us.

Giorgio watched me.

My whole body warmed with heat. “My emotions for you keep getting deeper and deeper. I would want to explore what we have building between us but...”

“Once again David and Russia and even the Brotherhood?”

I exhaled a long breath.

“Blue, I don’t care about any of those things, and I will not give up on having you all to myself.”

I widened my eyes. “I do not want David and you fighting and trying to kill each other.”

“Unfortunately, in a situation like this, there is nothing that *you* can do about it.” Giorgio shrugged. “Perhaps, you should have attracted nicer men. I do not know. Maybe teachers, doctors, or florists. Instead, you lured killers into your web.”

I stared down at my plate. “You had several women. I should have the right to date the both of you too until I have figured this out.”

“You do have that right.”

I looked at him. “I do?”

“And we have the right to kill each other in the process.”

I frowned. “Then, maybe I should end it with the both of you.”

His grin deepened. “I do not know about David, but you cannot end what *we* have.”

*This is crazy.*

Giving up, I returned to eating. Perhaps, I sought comfort in the food. At least it was an orchestra of flavors, playing a symphony on my tongue. The croissants had the right amount of butter and melted in my mouth. The eggs were the best I've had in my life. The fruit burst with sweet flavor.

Giorgio never ate. He simply sipped his coffee and watched me.

After several minutes of my feasting, he ended the silence. "Do you have any questions for me? We should get to know each other better."

I swallowed down strawberries and chuckled. "I have *tons* of questions."

He held out his gloved hands. "Really?"

"Yes, Giorgio. Really."

"What is your first question?"

"Why the gloves?"

"I do not want to get my hands dirty."

"Why not?"

"Germs."

I shook my head. "Why are you so afraid of germs?"

"I could go on and on about the consequences of germs, but none of that matters." He shrugged. "My doctor claims that the fear of germs is simply one of many intrusive thoughts that I find difficult to control. Therefore, the gloves help."

"So, you do have a doctor?"

"Jean-Pierre forces me to see someone twice a month."

"Do you like it?"

"I do not like delving into uncomfortable memories."

I leaned back in my chair. "When did these *intrusive thoughts* start coming?"

"When I was young." Giorgio began rubbing his fingers with his thumb. "But...you are not asking the right questions."



“I am not?”

“You want to know why I am so weird.”

I quirked my brows. “I think I like you because you are... different, yet...”

“You still want to know why?”

“I do.”

“Then, let us get this over with.” He moved his hands from my view and placed them under the table. But for some reason, I knew he was still rubbing those fingers over and over. “My father was a holy man.”

“Really?”

Giorgio nodded. “He had a large church, and at times people would pay him to speak about God. Therefore, I grew up very wealthy. We had a massive estate, completely gated, and with many guards. I had a chef, nanny, and several tutors. A chauffeur would take me to school.”

So intrigued, I forgot about the food and put all my attention on him. I tried to imagine a young Giorgio living in such a grand place.

“However, within our home, my father was not so godly.” Giorgio looked at the few remaining waiters moving around the room and spoke to them in French. Fast, all of them left. Giorgio turned back to me. “My father and his brothers were heavily involved in the Corsican. His church laundered money. And he could have kept his role at that, but I believe he chose other darker jobs in the Corsican to feed his appetites.”

“What jobs?”

“One night when I was seven...” Giorgio looked down at his cup of coffee. “I woke up because of a loud truck pulling into the back of our house. Some nights I can still hear the squeaking of those tires. I do not know...why that sounds comes back more than the others.”

I tensed.

“Curious, I grabbed my teddy bear, left my bed, and went to the window.”

“What did you see?”

“My father stood by the back of the truck, smoking a cigarette with another man and talking. I assumed it was the driver of the truck.” Giorgio’s expression hardened. “A second man began pulling chained girls outside of the back of the truck. There were many of them, young, chained, and naked. None could have been older than fourteen.”

I parted my lips in shock.

“I was too young to understand what was going on.”

“Your father was into human trafficking?”

“A supposed man of God.” Giorgio frowned. “One girl began fighting at the man guiding them out. She screamed and screamed. She must have been twelve. She had this short brown hair.”

I shivered in disgust.

“My father stopped talking and walked up to her.”

I leaned forward.

“So young, I saw my father as a hero. I thought he was going to help her.”

“What did he do?”

“He slammed his fists into her face over and over until she collapsed to the ground and passed out in her own blood.” Giorgio let out a long breath. “I vomited on myself and then ran for my mother.”

“Did you tell your mother what you saw?”

“I did, but she was not in control of our household. She had no voice. My father ruled with a fist that he was not afraid to use.” Giorgio sighed again. “Once my mother cleaned me up, she told me to forget what I saw and go to sleep...but I never forgot.”

I pursed my lips together.

“And I saw that little girl again.”

“You did?”

“My father kept her.” Rage filled Giorgio’s eyes. “First, she helped the chef in the kitchen. Later, she cleaned our rooms during the day. But at night...”

I blinked. “What happened at night?”

“At night, she served him.” Giorgio looked away. “Sometimes her cries rose throughout our massive house. I heard them. Surely...my mother did too...and the rest of the staff—”

“No one stopped him?”

“No one.” Giorgio stirred in the chair and began fidgeting with one of his diamond cufflinks. “This went on for years. She grew and I did too. Soon...she became in charge of me, and that was when...”

*What?*

I wanted to hug him, but I wasn’t sure if that would freak him out. Instead, I scooted my chair closer to him and placed my hand on his arm.

He stared at my hand and stopped messing with the cufflink. “By now, she was in her late teens. She had to check my homework and iron my school uniform for the next day. She was also supposed to make sure I took my bath. Then, she had to read me a story and confirm that I said my prayers. This was her job every night...before she went to serve my father.”

I swallowed.

“Bath time...” Giorgio moved his arm away from my hand. “At twelve...”

I lowered my voice. “What did she do?”

“Perhaps...her intent was to bring me pleasure or...maybe it was revenge against my father.” He shook his head. “All I know is that...I never felt clean afterwards. Always dirty. Nasty...”

Sorrow filled me. “I am so sorry, Giorgio.”

My mind was plagued with curiosity as to what she had done to him, yet I knew I had to resist the temptation to ask. How could I expect him to relive all those terrible memories even if it meant getting the answers I wanted?

*I wish I could kill her? Is she alive?*

“I never told anyone because I knew what my father would do to her.” His bottom lip quivered. “And...my doctor says that I probably felt guilt, but...I do not know.”

“You were too young.” I gritted my teeth. “She was abused and then...decided to abuse you.”

“Bath time always lasted far too long. Then, she made me say my prayer and left my room. Next, I would go right back into the bathroom, take off my pajamas, and take a boiling hot shower. And I would clean and clean and scrub and...”

Giorgio closed his eyes. “After weeks of this, my skin began to flake and scab. My mother thought I had an allergic reaction to the soap. She took me to all types of dermatologists. None had any answer for her. And still late at night, I would scrub under the hot water.”

So much sadness rocked my body. Giorgio had opened up so fully I could almost reach into his very soul. I tried to touch him again. He shook his head.

Understanding, I put my hand back. “When did it stop?”

“When I was thirteen, my cousins came over for a sleepover—Rafael, Jean-Pierre, and Louis.” Giorgio touched the top of his tie and began brushing his gloved fingers against it. “You must understand that my cousins had rougher lives than me. My uncles didn’t make the money that my father did from being holy during the day and a gangster at night. Therefore, my cousins always loved staying over.”

In my mind, I saw a vision of the deadly leaders of the Corsican being young and innocent. How crazy that those four boys would fall into a life of crime and be feared by so many in this world.

“My mother had let us put tents in my large room. We each had our own. That night Louis and I stayed up telling each

other ghost stories. Jean-Pierre and Rafael were fast asleep in their tents.” Giorgio moved his hand from his tie. “And for some reason, I told Louis about those... bath time sessions. He was a few years older. Surely, he knew how I could handle it properly.”

“What did Louis say?”

“Louis simply hugged me hard, said it was late, and then told me to go into my tent. I did as he ordered.” Giorgio gave me a sad smile. “The next morning, she was dead. Throat slashed. The chef found her.”

“Louis did it?”

“Terrified, I asked him. He said he did not want to talk about it, but I assume it was him. To this day, he still has not confirmed it.” Giorgio fidgeted with his hands. “If it was he that cut her throat, I doubt that was the first time he killed someone.”

I frowned. “I am glad she is dead. Did you... feel better and get some form of peace?”

“Unfortunately, I felt even dirtier. Perhaps, even more guilty.” Giorgio shrugged. “Still, I have a certain loyalty when it comes to Louis. I could have done other things with my life. My mother expected me to go off to a nice college like Jean-Pierre and learn the classics. Instead, I left our estates and stayed with Louis in his shitty underground den, crowded with smelly hackers. They thought I was a rich spoiled brat. When Louis wasn’t around, they bullied me. That is how I learned to fight.”

I smirked. “You are not too bad of a fighter.”

He grinned. “We both know that you are impressed with my fighting.”

I chuckled. “Maybe.”

Giorgio gestured at my food. “Do you want more? Should I get the staff to—?”

“No. The food was perfect. I am full.”

“Then, it is time to get you ready.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“Go into the bathroom, I have a few things planned.”

“What things?”

“Come.” Giorgio rose from his chair. “You will see.”







# Chapter 65

## Clean

## Blue

When I stepped into the bathroom, a wave of shock surged through my body.

Just when I thought Giorgio couldn't surprise me anymore this morning, he had even more in store.

I was astounded as my eyes drank in an unexpected sight.

My bathroom had morphed into a secret paradise. The lights had been turned off to allow the glow of hundreds of candles in crystal holders to illuminate the space. Their light poetically flowed through the air, keeping the darkness at bay.

And as if that weren't enough, blue roses covered every inch of the walls. The deep-blue petals shimmered.

Candlelight cast long flickering shadows along the petals.

*Oh my!*

The intense aroma of the roses mixed with the relaxing scent of the candles.

*When did his people do all of this?*

I went over to one of the walls and ran my fingers along all of the roses. The soft, velvety petals smoothed against my palms.

"You have outdone yourself, Giorgio." I turned around.

"This is nothing." To my surprise, he already had his jacket and tie off. All were on top of the towel rack, neatly folded and waiting for his return. Additionally, his shoes rested by the rack. His socks were neatly folded and placed on top of them.

Meanwhile, the blue gloves remained on his hands.

Giorgio shut the door behind him and began to unbutton his shirt. “There are a thousand different ways I want to spoil you, Blue. But, this location and the war has been limiting.”

I drank him in. “I want to spoil you too.”

“Then, come back to France with me.”

“Giorgio...”

A devilish smirk spread across his face. Done with unbuttoning, he took off his shirt. I stifled a moan and almost forgot to breathe. His body was a piece of art. Coiled golden muscle wrapped around his chest, abs, and arms like a piece of intricate priceless jewelry. His chest rose and fell in slow, deep breaths. Lust blazed in those wicked blue eyes. “You have been the only reason why I have enjoyed Italy.”

“Yeah?”

Those biceps flexed as he quickly folded his shirt and placed it on the towel rack. “One morning, I remember sipping my coffee and grinning from ear-to-ear, and I realized you were on my mind.”

My heart raced in anticipation.

“When I am stressed and need solace, it is thoughts of you that I turn to.” He prowled over and then loomed over me. “You are my mental sanctuary.”

I widened my eyes.

“And...” He deeply inhaled me and then licked his lips. “I want you to know, I am not a man who gives his heart easily. There is no other woman’s face tattooed on my body.”

I blinked, knowing he was throwing a shot at David and the tattoo of Francesca’s face on the left side of his stomach.

*How did Giorgio know about that tattoo?*

“Blue, you have made me care for you deeply and that is something I have not done ever.” With a wicked smirk, Giorgio gently grabbed the bottom of my shirt and slowly slipped the pajama shirt over my body. “It is hard for me to admit this, but I do not want to continue my life without you.”

Warm air brushed against my nude body.

Giorgio neatly folded my shirt, left me, and placed the shirt next to his stuff on the rack.

“Of course, there is a hot attraction for your body.” He prowled back over and circled around me with a predatory grace. “And an intense mind-numbing desire to fuck you.”

*Holy fuck.*

I shivered with need.

“But what is attraction? What is lust? I’ve felt that for many women. This specific feeling for you is completely different.” Then, he stopped two inches in front of me, barely a breath away. This electrical charge seemed to arc between us.

“And when I started feeling this way, I still didn’t know you at all, but I knew I wanted you to be *mine*, and now, I can’t imagine you with anyone else.” His voice was an erotic rumble, swirling through the rose scented air. “You have that allure that makes me want to love and protect you, and make this world a better place just to see you smile.”

“Giorgio...I have tried to...deny my feelings for you,” I confessed, unable to keep my emotions bottled up any longer. “But, I cannot anymore. I don’t just want you in my life. I need you...I crave you...inside of me... not just moving with my body, but...deep within my heart...my soul.”

A low groan left him. His gaze burned with unquenchable passion. He cupped my face with those gloved hands and leaned in.

Our mouths crashed together in a desperate embrace. His tongue explored.

It was a kiss of longing.

A kiss of need.

A kiss of love.

So intense.

So addicting.

Trembling in pleasure, I wrapped my arms around his hard body and I returned the kiss with all the emotion I felt.

A light, dizzying heat stirred within and spread through my veins.

I was falling into his warmth and floating at the same time.

Moaning, I melted into him. Was it odd that with this kiss...I could taste the next fifty years of my life? I could see our future together—marriage, a house, kids?

Groaning, Giorgio ran those gloved hands hotly along my body, ravenously squeezing my breasts and pinching my nipples. His hard cock pulsed against my thigh, throbbing like a hungry beast and probably demanding release.

My pussy throbbed at the thought.

Giorgio broke the kiss for a few seconds. “I will love you forever, Blue.”

Before I could respond, Giorgio’s tongue speared back into my mouth with wild hunger.

Moaning, I sucked hard on it, savoring the promise of what was to come.

Giorgio released my breasts and explored the rest of my torso with his gloved hands.

Meanwhile, our tongues continued to tangle and dance in each other’s mouths.

Groaning, he grabbed a fistful of my ass with one hand, his gloved fingers digging into my flesh. His other hand crept down my thigh and then brushed against my pussy. It was so wet, so ready.

*Fuck me.*

As if hearing my thoughts, Giorgio stopped kissing me and pulled back, staring into my eyes. His voice dripped with a dominant command. “Get in the shower.”

How could I not obey?

My heart pounded with every step to the shower. Noise sounded behind me. Unable to resist, I slowly twisted my head around and I glanced over my shoulder.

*Holy shit.*

A gasp escaped me at the sight.

His pants hung loosely from his hips, revealing a powerful silhouette and the hard ridge of his arousal pushing against the silky fabric of his blue boxer briefs.

Watching me, he lowered his pants further.

They fell to his ankles.

I paused within the shower's opening. I couldn't walk in, and I damn sure could not look away.

A wicked smirk spread across his face as he yanked down those briefs.

*Oh...my...*

I swallowed at the size of him. His cock was on full display. Large, thick, and exquisitely beautiful. The sort of cock that could make the gods weep.

In fact, the sight of him made my eyes water. Surprisingly, I was fearful yet electrified and even mesmerized.

Completely nude, Giorgio was too beautiful to believe. He had definitely taken care of himself on every level. He was a perfect harmony of toned and chiseled lines all glistening under the light and shaped into an epic poem of lust.

Was it possible for someone to be so divinely beautiful and utterly sexy at the same time?

I was almost scared to touch him. He might as well have been a naked angel in the center of my bathroom, radiating an aura of holiness and pure carnal desire.

*Jesus.*

He could have stepped right out of an ancient myth, representing a divine creature of temptation and desire and I would have praised him.

Panting, I turned back to the shower.

I had to.

I couldn't look at him anymore.

I felt like I might spontaneously combust.

*Holy shit. I want to fuck him. I need to. I must.*

Finally, I stepped into the shower and that was the moment I spotted another shocking surprise.

*Umm...*

Plastic rope dangled from the ceiling and held handcuffs.

*What the hell?*

My body stiffened.

A small glass shelf was on the right near the faucet handles. It looked like some sort of portable contraption.

But that wasn't what set fear inside of me.

The glass shelf was littered with a bizarre array of objects—amber bottles of oil, strange metallic instruments with blinking buttons, curving silicone wands, a razor along with a can of shaving cream, intricate oval objects, sinuous strings of gemstones of varying sizes. A strange, otherworldly beauty cloaked the objects in a mesmerizing spell.

“Oh no.” My voice grew shaky. “W-what is all of this, Giorgio?”

He appeared behind me, pushing me deeper into the shower. “Tools for a very necessary discussion.”

“W-what...sort of...conversation?”

“Are you nervous?” He shut the glass door behind him.

“Yes.” I pointed at the stuff. “I do not know what any of those things are. You are not putting those things inside or on me.”

Giorgio turned the knobs.

Warm water sprayed against us.

In that instant, I noticed that his gloves were gone. That sight distracted me. His fingers and hands seemed so intensely exposed and vulnerable, like a second layer of skin was stripped away. The sight was erotically sinister, as if I were witnessing a deeper forbidden level of intimacy that no one else in this world could ever uncover.

It was in that moment where Giorgio seized the opportunity of my being caught off guard, rushed my way and grabbed my wrists fast.

“What?” I struggled out of his hold as he raised my hands above my head.

In seconds, he had my wrists cuffed.

I looked up at them. “Are you insane?”

Giorgio stood in front of me with a foggy mist swirling around him. Steam rose.

His calm expression cracked. Rage twisted along his eyes.

I shivered. “Giorgio?”

He leaned his head to the side. “Did you think I would not find out about David and your shower session last night?”

My bottom lip quivered. “I am a single woman. Take these cuffs off my wrists—”

“After.”

“After what?”

He left and walked over to that glass shelf. “I could never harm you, so do not fear this moment.”

I shivered. “Giorgio, what the hell are you about to do?”

Giorgio picked up one of the long wands and studied it. “What am *I* going to do?”

“Yes?”

“Make you forget *his* name.”

I widened my eyes.

He set the wand down and picked up the bottle. Returning back to me, he twisted the top off with a sensual smirk.

My pulse raced. “What’s this?”

His gaze never wavered from mine as he poured the liquid down my breasts. Hot and sensual, shockwaves of pleasure flickered along my skin.

A moan left me.

With his other hand, he rubbed the oil all over my breasts with those soft hands. It was so mind-blowing to finally feel his skin against mine. His fingers were velvet and smooth.

I rode the passionate flames igniting all around me, forgetting about any fear I had and craving more.

Then, he suddenly left me.

I panted. “Come back.”

Giorgio returned to the shelf and set the bottle down. “Louis wouldn’t show me the tape.”

I tensed.

*Fuck. I forgot Louis hacked into the hotel’s security system.*

Giorgio picked up the string of jeweled beads and assessed them. Next, he grabbed a different bottle, took off the top, and poured it on the beads. When Giorgio turned around, he gripped that string of beads hard and headed back to me. “However, Louis played the audio for me.”

I shivered in horror. “That...was...a private moment.”

“Was it now?” He gripped my waist and slowly turned me around.

I could no longer see him. The shower wall served as my only view. “Giorgio, what the hell are you going to do?!”

Soon, I realized it as he gently began pushing the beads into my ass. It should have shoved me over the edge or made me frantic. Instead, I relished in the pressure of them filling me.

*Oh...my...*



With each gentle thrust, they entered deeper, inciting an inescapable hunger.

My chest rose and fell fast. “W-what is this?”

When they must have been all in, Giorgio pressed his hard cock against my ass and his wet muscular chest along my back. Brushing my ear with his moist lips, he whispered, “David may give you what you *want*, sweet Blue, but I will always give you what you *need*.”

He licked the outline of my ear. Heat swirled between my thighs.

Then, he left me again.

I gasped. “G-giorgio!”

“That was not the name you screamed last night.”

“Damn it.” I used my feet to twist me around. With each movement, those beads caressed the inside of my ass, making me want to fuck.

*Ignore that feeling.*

I finally faced him. “We are not going to do this—”

“Do what?” Giorgio was back at the glass shelf, rummaging through items, and it was absolutely fucking hard to not get lost in the drops of water streaming down his perfectly chiseled ass.

I cleared my throat. “I am not going to be questioned or... interrogated or even punished when I have a moment with David—”

“Correct.” Giorgio turned around, holding a small can of shaving cream and a tiny razor in one hand.

I blinked. “What the fuck?!”

He prowled back over. “You think I will let the blue heart remain after that dirty king had his tongue all over it?”

“No. No. No.” I tried to edge back, but could barely move. “You are not shaving me—”

“No?” He stopped an inch in front of me. His wet cock pressed against my thigh.

More steam rose between us, thickly fogging up the space.

I shivered. “No.”

He slipped his free hand along my pussy, traced the outline of the blue heart, and then lingered down to my aching clit, circling and teasing the sensitive bud.

My body betrayed me and vibrated in need. I wanted to close my eyes so bad and get lost in those skillful fingers. “G-giorgio...you are...not...oh...oh...”

Giorgio’s skilled fingers glided along my folds, sending electrifying currents through my body. His knuckles rubbed circles around my clit, building up an unbearable intensity of pleasure.

My breaths came in shallow gasps.

“Fuck.” I bit my lip and arched my hips up to meet the gentle prodding of his hand.

His voice was a passionate growl, rippling through the air. “This is my pussy.”

He flicked his thumb gently against my clit, sending me into blissful ecstasy. “I will shave it if I want.”

His motions were so hypnotic, I barely noticed the cream being smeared onto the heart.

My lids drooped over my eyes. “You are fucking... crazy...”

“Be sure to remember that.” He dropped the can on the floor. “Do not move too much.”

I panted. “What?”

The sharp blade glided along my skin.

Gasping, I lowered my view and watched in near terror as the sharp blade continued to glide over the cream-topped heart.

“I must admit. The heart was gorgeous.” Giorgio tenderly shaved more of it away. “Yet, there will be other shapes to taunt me in the future.”

I shivered. “That’s assuming you will get to see it again.”

Smirking, he shaved off the last of the heart. “I already told you that this pussy was mine.”

“No. It is mine and I...”

He walked off as if the conversation was over. Quickly, he picked up the can and stopped in front of the glass shelf.

“What are you doing now?”

His wet back was to me. “How do the beads feel?”

I blinked.

“Blue?”

I frowned. “They feel good.”

“Did you know that they would?”

“No.”

“Even better.” He turned around and held the oval silicone object in his hand.

I focused on it. “What is that?”

Giorgio got right in front of me and pressed his body against mine. “I was told that only *his* tongue violated you.”

“We are not talking about that.”

He squeezed the oval. The center of it opened a little like tiny lips.

I tilted my head to the side. “What does this do?”

Giorgio lowered it down to my clit and fastened the object onto it.

“Oh!” I looked around the shower as if thoroughly confused and needing someone to explain this all to me. “Oh my God.”

“After that audio, I did not sleep last night.”

I gazed down at the oval object suctioned to my clit. I had no idea which was causing me so much electric stimulation—the beads in my ass or the oval on my clit.

He placed both hands on my oil smeared breasts and began rubbing them over and over.

“Oh!”

“So many thoughts filled my mind.” Giorgio played with my nipples.

I writhed and cried in pleasure.

“Of course I played out my revenge on the king.” He squeezed my nipples hard.

“Oh!”

“And then there was the lesson that *you* needed to learn.” He brushed his lips against my mouth, but didn’t kiss me.

“C-come closer.” I tried to move to his mouth.

He leaned away. Menace gleamed in his eyes. “Would I fuck you this morning? Or would I torture you with pleasure?”

My voice trembled as I begged, “Fuck me. That’s what you should do.”

“But then how would you learn?”

“I-I would learn so much...please.”

He moved his hands from my breasts, stepped all the way back, and grabbed his raging hard-on.

I hungrily licked my lips as he began stroking it. “Oh, Giorgio.”

I looked at his cock and saw the head jerking with each stroke, the veins pumping there on display, and the shiny pearls of pre-cum beading at the top.

My pussy flooded with juices, my arousal so great that my outer lips opened like a flower. “Please...”

He stroked himself slowly, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Oh, Giorgio.” I licked my lips again. “Please.”

“Please what?”

“Fuck me, Giorgio. Please.”

He stroked himself harder, faster.

My entire body spasmed in hunger, and the oval on my clit and the beads in my ass weren't helping at all.

I wiggled from side to side trying to get some form of release. “Damn it...Giorgio...”

He stroked the head of his cock with long, firm strokes. The veins along the shaft stood out with each pull.

And I got lost in the captivating sight—the massive head, the shiny, slippery pre-cum, the unbelievable length and girth.

Like a mad man, he gazed at me and fucked his hand, driving me delirious in the process.

All I could do was watch with an aching pussy as he teased me with his grunting and pumping.

I shuddered, unable to turn away. “This...is not fair, Giorgio.”

I wanted him to fuck me until I couldn't think.

I wanted him to fuck me until my mind went blank.

I wanted him to fuck me until I was nothing but his.

I didn't know how much more of this I could take.

“Damn, Blue.” He pumped faster.

I loudly whimpered. “Oh, God... Giorgio...fuck me... please!”

Still stroking himself, he came closer.

“Yes.” I shivered in anticipation. “Please.”

Groaning, he directed his cock toward my stomach.

I widened my eyes.

“Blue!” His cock twitched and then he came hard, spraying cum my way. Jets of it cascaded all over me. It

dripped down my stomach, sliding down to my pussy and thighs.

I blinked several times and put my view back on him.

His face twisted in rage as he leaned closer to me. “Do you think I saved you, for *him*?”

I shivered, but this time it was in fear.

Then, he left the shower.

I called after him. “Giorgio, where the fuck are you going?!”

He didn’t respond. Still, I heard movement in the bathroom. The shower glass was too fogged to see what he was doing.

“Giorgio!” I stood in the shower, handcuffed, helpless, and covered in his cum. “Do not leave me in here, you crazy man!”

Minutes later, he ducked back into the shower and shut off the water.

I widened my eyes.

He had all of his clothes back on—jacket, shirt, pants, shoes, and even those damned blue gloves.

Next, he stepped into the shower, stopped in front of me, and pressed a button on the handcuffs. They released my hands.

I rubbed my wrists as he headed out of the shower and then took off the oval. “Giorgio, wait! We need to talk about this!”

He opened the bathroom door and left. “We had our conversation. There will be more to come later when I have calmed down.”

Wobbling with those beads in my ass, I grabbed a bathrobe from the door hook, hurried with putting it on, and rushed after him. “Giorgio, first of all—”

“Go clean up, Blue.” He continued to the door. “This will be a long day—”

“But—”

“There’s no buts.” He opened the door and stopped in the doorway as if someone blocked his way.

*Oh no. Who is on the other side?! David?*

“Shit.” Shivering, I pushed him to the side and spotted the Lion gazing at us with those hard judging eyes.

Several men from the French were on the ground and injured. Meanwhile, tons of the Brotherhood had their guns out and looked like they had been in quite a tussle.

Giorgio’s men must have blocked out the hallway and the Lion did not take it kindly.

Kazimir glared at me. “It appears you needed more help with showering.”

I drowned in embarrassment.







# Chapter 66

## Godparents

### Emily

On one massive canvas, Paolo and I painted a lime green sky flecked with glittering mint green stars. A dark green town lay below with forest green people living in it.

I didn't know why Paolo loved green so much. I just knew that I now loved it too, just like I was completely enamored with this little boy.

Baba's message on her alternate visions of Paolo entered my head.

*"Then, I see visions of Paolo. He is an orphan again. Alone and vulnerable, his life is full of pain." Baba had closed her eyes. "Paolo stiffens himself, shuts his heart off from love. In his adulthood, he chooses a life of leadership and gains insurmountable power. History shudders at the atrocities he commits. Civilizations end because of him. Nations drown in rivers of blood."*

I shuddered.

*Thank God that will not be his future anymore.*

I looked down and realized Paolo was painting a large emerald mouse in the center of the town. The creature stood on its hind legs with two stubby front arms sticking out. It reminded me of a scene from Godzilla; however, this mouse smiled over the town's tiny people.

Paolo stepped back and studied the creature.

I smiled.

To my surprise, Paolo sighed in frustration, dipped his brush in more emerald paint, and began making the mouse even bigger.

I widened my eyes.

*A true artist and perfectionist.*

His brush strokes were bold and skilled as he added thick streaks to the mouse's body and put in a long curvy tail.

Paolo stepped back, blinked at the canvas, and then looked at me. "*Mysh.*"

I walked over to the mouse and spoke in Russian. "*So amazing. A beautiful Mouse.*"

"*Power.*"

I raised my eyebrows. "*Wow the mouse is powerful also. Very good.*"

Bobbing his head, he went to a moss green color on the palette, dipped his brush in there, and returned to the canvas. "*Now Baba.*"

"*Yes.*" I nodded. "*We must paint Baba on there too.*"

Paolo chuckled and pointed at a man on top of a roof with smoke coming from his hand. "*Max.*"

"*Oh.*" Shock hit me. "*You got Max in there. We will have to show him.*"

His bright expression softened to a stern one and then he pointed to a tiny kitten in the corner of the painting sitting near a house by himself. "*Lion.*"

"*Aww.*" I smirked. "*Well...at least he made it to the painting.*"

Paolo began drawing a huge woman next to the mouse. They were the same size, looking like giants in the center of town.

A knock sounded.

I turned around.

The door opened.

Boris ducked his head in, but wouldn't look me in the eye. "Jean-Pierre would like to talk to you, but Kazimir ordered me to not let anyone—"

“Let him in.” I placed the paintbrush down. “It will be fine, Boris. I’ll let Kaz know I had him come in.”

Boris nodded and rushed away.

I swallowed.

*Kaz clearly said something to him. Boris is being weird.*

I thought back to Baba telling Kaz to not kill Boris.

*But what did he say to Boris and when did that happen?*

I shook my head, knowing I would deal with my lion later.

For now, my only focus was to keep my mind clear and rational before dealing with Fela. Surely, my nerves were frazzled enough. Baba’s message had brought me chills. It appeared that Fela and Italy would be finished today, but the darkness...

I thought back to earlier.

*Baba moved her view to me. “Your future is clouded, Emily.”*

*“How?”*

*“If I say too much, you may change things and everything turns horrible.”*

I didn’t even want to explore what she meant. To do so was to trigger my stomach to twist into knots.

Due to my stressing, Kaz had told me to spend time with Paolo while he gathered everyone together. Once all were prepared and everyone had their orders, then he would get me and we would head to Fela.

*And then I would kill him.*

Baba’s words hit my mind again.

*Tears had left her eyes. “I cannot see any more after Fela dies.”*

Dread slithered up my spine.

A soft click heralded the door opening.

Jean-Pierre entered, dressed in a black designer suit. He even wore a black shirt. The usual diamond cufflinks were gone.

I quirked my brows. “Are you going to a funeral?”

“I believe so.” Jean-Pierre shut the door behind him, headed over, passed me, and walked over to the canvas. There, he stood for a silent minute, watching Paolo paint the large figure of Baba.

Paolo had done a great job. Her moss green gown flowed out by her hips. She held a jade heart in her hand and wore a huge smile on her face.

Nodding, Jean-Pierre turned around and put his gaze on me. “I am still surprised you kept the boy.”

“Why?”

“One would think that the Lion would have overruled your desire to save this child.”

“Apparently...” I shivered. “Lunita had a vote too.”

“Lunita.” Jean-Pierre let out a long breath and then gestured at the opened balcony doors. “Shall we go outside and talk? One would not want to disturb this great artist as he creates his masterpiece.”

I curved my lips into a smile and headed off. “Come on, J.P.”

Following me, Jean-Pierre groaned in annoyance. “Perhaps, your nickname for me could be *Jean*. Still close to my name, yet possessing more style.”

I stepped onto the balcony. “Naw. J.P. rings out better.”

“Does it though?”

“Most definitely.” I stepped close to the railing and gazed out at the view.

Sun sparkled on the water, making everything appear like a living painting. For a few seconds, I was mesmerized by this natural beauty.

Yet, I knew the tranquility of the moment was just an illusion in my reality. Everything appeared calm as if this were a regular day, but it wasn't. This day would change everything.

And although I didn't know what the future held, I desperately grasped onto the faithful thought that brighter days would come for us soon.

Jean-Pierre got to my side. Instead of looking at the view, he put his gaze on me. "When you first asked to be my child's godmother, I did not take you seriously."

I glared at him. "What? You better take it seriously. Three months after she's born, I am showing up to your house, dressed to the nines, and carrying presents. And from that point on, I will show up on birthdays and other special events."

He widened his eyes. "You are truly going to take this role seriously?"

"Of course, J.P."

"Then, I will take *my* godfather duties for your child seriously."

"Did we ever agree to your being my son's godfather?"

"I believe so."

"I don't remember that—"

"It is only fair."

"But, you do know Kaz will lose his mind."

Jean-Pierre smirked. "Which makes me even more excited to take on my duties."

"Things are finally...somewhat okay between you two. Let's keep it that way."

"If you are the godmother to my child, then I am the godfather to yours."

"No one said that."

"It is only fair. Plus, your son may need the Corsican one day. Why deny him more power in this world?"

I considered that.

*Harlem Crew, the Brotherhood, and the Corsican protecting my son? Shit. Who's fucking with him?*

I smiled.

*Absolutely no one.*

“Okay. Let’s do that, J.P.”

He extended his hand. “We should shake on this.”

I gave him my hand. “I will just have to tell Kaz.”

He let go of my hand. “And I will have to tell Eden.”

“What?” I frowned. “You haven’t told her yet?”

“You said you would only be the godmother if I was having a daughter. I figured this would be a 50/50 chance of even needing to think about it.”

“What changed?”

Jean-Pierre smiled and turned his gaze to the view. “Eden sent me the ultrasound. We are having a girl.”

“My baby.” My heart ached. “The Queen of Diamonds.”

He looked at me. “What?”

“Nothing.” My eyes watered. “Are you excited to have a girl?”

“I am. A son may mean that he takes over the empire. Whereas a daughter.” Jean-Pierre exhaled. “She would not want my empire. And that...calms me for some reason. I do not want this life for my children.”

“Who says your daughter wouldn’t want your empire?”

“I plan to spoil her so much with diamonds and pretty things that she would never want to pick up a gun or learn how to fight.”

“Her godmother is the Mouse. She most definitely will know how to handle a gun and shoot a motherfucker that tries to harm her.”

He frowned. “It appears we must discuss the ground rules for being a proper godparent.”

“Women are the top targets for violence, and don’t get me started on how much you must protect a little girl.”

Jean-Pierre looked away. “You are scaring me, Emily.”

“Shit is real.” I shrugged. “Just wrap her in all of your love and protect her as much as you can and...everything will be okay.”

He didn’t turn his view back to me. “And will *you* be okay, after we leave Italy?”

Baba’s words filled my head.

*“Remember. You are loved, and if you are not with us... then so many perish.”*

I trembled. “I don’t know.”

“You should. You have a baby on the way.”

I swallowed. “I’m trying to be...better. Shit with Black Axe and everything else has gotten in the way—”

“Perhaps, you need help?”

“In what way, J.P.?”

“Kazimir was unsure about my...contact in New Orleans. I also know that Maxwell may not be too excited about this person either.”

I looked at him. “Tell me more.”

“Mrs. Delphine is a practitioner of spiritual magic—”

“A voodoo witch?” I knew skepticism covered my face.

Jean-Pierre smirked. “Maxwell had the same reaction.”

“Because he has a lot of common sense.”

“Mrs. Delphine is a small woman with long gray braids, barely 4’10 feet tall—”

“That doesn’t mean she isn’t harmless.” I leaned my head to the side. “Is she?”



“I would not say she is harmless.” He held out his hands.  
“But, do you want help with Lunita or not?”

Sighing, I turned away from him. “Of course I want help, but could the voodoo witch really do anything?”

“She fixed my father-in-law, Timur.”

I looked back at him. “Really?”

He nodded.

“What was wrong with him?”

“That would take several days to truly explain. What I can say is that his mind had shattered into something violent and grotesque. One night with Mrs. Delphine, and Timur was clear-minded and calm again.”

I tapped the edge of the railing. “And she’s in New Orleans?”

“She is.”

I pursed my lips.

“Take your time deciding if you want me to take you there. I would need to introduce you...or Maxwell could do so also.”

“Why Max?”

“That is for him to explain.”

I tapped the railing again. “Speaking of fathers-in-law, are you cool with my killing Fela?”

“Why would I not be?”

“Supposedly that’s Eden’s father.”

“Which is more the reason why he must die.”

I quirked my brows. “Have you told her?”

“Timur begged me not to.”

“I don’t know, J.P. You don’t want secrets in your relationship.”

“Eden went through a lot during that kidnapping by the Devil.”

I shook my head, hating that she experienced it.

“Eden is still struggling with a lot. You must remember that her Aunt Celina had a role in her getting kidnapped. Which was enough of a betrayal. Now, her aunt is dead. I will not tell Eden that this woman was also her mother who abandoned her as a baby.” Jean-Pierre wore a grim expression. “Some of Eden’s fondest memories are of her childhood where two people that truly loved her with all their hearts raised her. I do not plan to shatter those memories.”

I nodded. “Don’t.”

“Timur may not be her biological father, but he loves her. It will be Timur that walks her down the aisle for our wedding. It will be Timur holding our daughter in his arms when Eden gives birth. Those are future memories that will only bring warmth and happiness to my queen.”

I smiled. “You are smooth as fuck, J.P.”

“I do my best.” He winked. “How about your thoughts on killing Fela? Can you do it?”

“I can...I’m just...nervous about it.”

“If you weren’t nervous about killing someone so intelligent and villainous, I would think you were an idiot.” He gently touched my arm. “However, do you understand that *you* do not have to point the gun at Fela’s head and pull the trigger?”

“And *who* would do it?”

“I would.”

“That isn’t the deal that Fela and I have going—”

“But, that is not *your* concern.” He moved his hand. “Just remember that the Butcher is at your service.”

I shook my head. “I made a deal. I will stand by it. I believe that if I don’t, more death and destruction could come.”

He placed his hands in his pocket. “The Cat and Mouse.”

I smirked. “What?”

“Have you ever heard of that composition?”

“Of course not.”

“*The Cat and the Mouse* is a composition by an American classical music composer named Aaron Copland.”

I eyed him. “O-kay.”

“He went to school in Paris, France in 1921.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“The song is genius because you can hear so vividly the story in the notes. The music starts with a slow single melody as the mouse hides. The cat gets flustered trying to find the mouse. Then, the cat disappears.” Jean-Pierre raised his arms and positioned them in a way as if he were holding an invisible violin. “The mouse thinks the cat is really gone. And a sudden loud and dissonant chord shows how the mouse is scared by something. Who could it be?”

I watched those hands as he began to play the invisible violin. “The cat.”

“Yes. The cat suddenly appears! And the quick and light notes sound as if the mouse quickly runs away.” Jean-Pierre moved the invisible bow fast. “The chase begins again.”

I chuckled. “O-kay.”

Jean-Pierre continued to play. “The composition is quite a treat. Clear pacing, rhythm, dynamics, dissonance, and consonance. All successful musical storytelling.”

Sorrow filled his eyes. He lowered his arms and placed them by his side. Then, he gave me a sad smile. “I will teach your son the violin.”

“Okay.” I blinked. “And...I can show your daughter how to paint—”

“But, do not forget to show her the importance of protecting herself.” To my surprise, his eyes watered. “I believe you...and Lunita. I will be a good father.”

I parted my lips.

“A little girl must be safe and protected.”

I gulped down despair.

“You have become very important to me, Emily.” He placed his hands in his pockets. “Before you were only an important chess piece to tame the Lion and rid myself of the Brotherhood.”

“And now?”

“You are the sister that I always needed—a sibling in blood and death. I care for you very deeply. If you ever need something, call anytime. I will come with an army and my bow. And if you just...need someone to talk to...my ear will always be yours.”

I touched my chest. “Damn, J.P. You might make me cry.”

“Save your tears for the plane ride home.” Jean-Pierre walked off. “This afternoon, we all must remain dry-eyed and focused.”

I called after him. “J.P.!”

He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“Did the cat ever catch the mouse?”

“You know the answer to that question.” He chuckled and headed off.





# Chapter 67

## The Awkward Goodbye

### Kazimir

Next to the Mercedes-Benz V-class, I stood in the middle of King David and Blue, waiting for my mouse to arrive and dealing with my sister on the phone.

Valentina's whiny voice rode the line. "Why cannot I come?"

"I told you why."

"Am I not here in Italy to protect my brother?"

"You were injured and have barely allowed yourself to heal—"

"Our parents' blood is mighty. We do not need too much time to heal like these other pitiful humans."

I smirked. "Just make sure your men have packed your things and you are ready to go—"

"You do not order me around—"

"I do because I love you very much."

"Love does not mean that you are in charge of me."

"Valentina." I blew out a long breath. "I will already be worried about Emily so close to Fela on that beach. I do not need to be worried about you too."

"And what if everything goes wrong, Kazimir?"

A lump appeared in my throat. "Then, I will need you more than ever."

She sighed. "And I will be there for you."

"Thank you, sister." I hung up and placed my phone in my pocket.

Now for my mouse.

I gazed around the area. Everyone was either getting into vans or loading crates of weapons into them. Helicopters flew over us, taking more people away.

On my left, King David spoke on the phone to Misha, confirming all his people were available and monitoring.

While on my right, Blue barked out orders to several Harlem Crew members that were near her. Half of the men and women nodded and rushed off to vans that would take them to the location.

She turned and gave other instructions to the next group that would be leaving with Boris and Maxwell to Nigeria this evening.

*Will this work?*

I stiffened.

“Perfect, Misha. Let us finish this today.” David hung up, placed his phone in his pocket, and faced me. “All satellites are focused on the beach. More of our armed men are hidden in the surrounding area.”

“There is a cove next to the beach.” Tension thickened along my shoulders. “What has been done about that?”

“Jean-Pierre and his cousins arrived an hour ago and checked the cove for Black Axe and any explosives.”

“And what did the pansies find?”

“Louis reported back that nothing was there. The French are now hiding within the cove and will be aiming at Black Axe once Fela steps on the beach.”

“And Fela?”

“Currently, Misha’s people actually have eyes on Fela and several guards. They are on their way to the beach. He said they are wearing somber faces.”

Hmmm.

I looked at David. “And the nuke?”



“One of Misha’s own operatives are waiting by a computer in the reactor station to move the target away from Nigeria as soon as you order it.”

I put my view back on the hotel’s entrance. “And the yacht?”

“We have it ready with supplies at the port. Harlem Crew and some French are already on board, waiting for Maxwell, Boris, Ufuoma, and Fara to arrive with Fela’s body.”

*Please, God.*

I did my best to maintain a confident stance, but on the inside my nerves flared. “Do you think it is a good idea to have Maxwell escort Ufuoma and Fara back to Nigeria to bury Fela’s corpse?”

“I believe it is brilliant. The gesture appears friendly and starts the partnership off in a good direction. Meanwhile, Maxwell and Harlem Crew will clearly be our spies.”

“If Maxwell does not spend the entire voyage, trying to put his dick into her.”

“Well, some spy techniques do involve sex.” David shrugged. “By the way, if Maxwell can convince Ufuoma to fall in love with him, then Black Axe and the Brotherhood will have a much more peaceful future.”

If not, I will kill Black Axe and end this for good.

There could be no more wars until after my son was born. Even then, I did not feel like dealing with any enemies. I dreamed of long lazy days in my bed, holding my baby boy in my arms while my mouse cuddled next to me.

*God, please give me those moments of peace.*

I let out a long breath. “Any word from Rocco or the Vizzini Family?”

“Not one peep. Our men have been secretly watching them all day. Misha’s people have also been monitoring their phones.”

“And?”

“Nothing. They do not even know about the deal between the Brotherhood and Black Axe.”

Hmmm.

The tension in my shoulders relaxed a little. “And Baba?”

“She still would not open the door for me.”

“What was her excuse?”

“Apparently, Paolo, Harlem, and her are having a very important tea party and must not be interrupted.”

“So, she is avoiding us?”

“To not reveal any more visions.”

I gritted my teeth.

Blue finished with her instructions. The rest of Harlem Crew hurried back to the hotel. She got next to me, standing in some sort of military stance. She was clearly trying to be on her best behavior after I had caught her romancing the enemy.

What is it about you and wet men?

I scowled at her. “Are you focused on keeping my mouse safe today, Blue?”

“Yes, sir.”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “You better be.”

She blinked and looked away.

King David raised his eyebrows, but remained silent.

Hopefully, he would not probe too deeply. Had this not been such a massive day of importance, I would have told him about Giorgio and his wet hair leaving her room. In that moment, guilt had covered her face. I told her to get dressed fast, and she walked back into the room really weird. It was an awkward wobble and limp as if she had had a massive pipe stuck up her ass.

Giorgio definitely fucked her.

I sneered.

*And I am telling.*

But there was no luxury of time for revenge now. There would only be one purpose for today—keep my mouse and son safe. I would help David deal with the Butler later.

Blue's phone buzzed. She checked it and looked at me. "Emily is on her way down."

It is almost time.

My blood ran hot with worry. My chest tightened with stress as I twisted in anxious anticipation.

*Come on, my love. Let us finish this.*

Minutes later, my men held the doors open, and my mouse strolled out with guards flanking her.

I groaned. What does a woman put on to kill someone? Apparently, the sexiest thing she could find in her closet.

*Mysh.*

I narrowed my eyes with disdain as my mouse strolled my way, looking expensive and enticing. Her form-fitting suit was a deadly midnight black, shimmering in the sunlight. The fabric clung to her body like a second skin, an obsidian armor that accentuated her shapely figure. Her blazer was splayed open in a provocative V-neck, spotlighting the swell of her breasts.

*Goddamn it.*

She dripped with female confidence as an aura of lethal feminine sexuality radiated from her.

I grunted and moved my gaze lower.

Her pants were cut in a way that hugged her hips and defined her powerful thighs.

Mesmerizing.

With each step she exuded a captivating, powerful grace. And her swinging of those hips demanded attention.

*Absolutely not, mysh.*

I swore that body called out to me, begging for my cock.

*You think I will let you go to him this way?*

I raised my view to her face.

Those fierce seducing eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark shades. Today, no wig graced her head. Instead, meticulously twisted cornrows were intricately patterned all over her scalp, while the ends cascaded down her shoulders and curled at the tips.

Before she could get to me, Maxwell yelled from the hotel's entrance. "Yo, Em!"

Barely ten feet away, she stopped and turned around. Those tight pants put her voluptuous ass on a full taunting display.

I clenched my teeth and fisted my hands to the side.

*You will be changing, mysh.*

Maxwell jogged her way. When he got to her, he let out a sharp whistle.

*See. Even Maxwell knows you're dressed too sexy.*

Together, they walked forward and approached us. Her sweet perfume reached my nose. I stifled a groan and yearned to pull her close to me.

She must have known because she left a gap of three feet between us.

*How are you, mysh?*

I desperately wished I could see what was going on behind those shades.

"Damn, Em." Maxwell whistled again. "Are you trying to seduce dude or kill him?"

She smirked. "Whatever."

"For once I agree with Maxwell. The outfit is too sexy." I checked my watch. "We have time for you to change."

Emily leaned her head to the side. "*Who* has time to do *what*?"

Maxwell shook his head. "Don't answer, man. It's a trap."

Everyone turned my way and remained silent.

She stared back at me. Even with the shades on, I sensed that she was shooting poison-tipped daggers with those eyes. I knew one wrong word could set off a storm, but lions were never afraid of rain.

*You heard me, mysh.*

I folded my hands in front of me. “*You* have time to change into something more appropriate for this—”

“I’m ready now.” She puckered those candy red-painted lips as if holding back a few curse words. “And that’s that, Kazimir.”

I quirked my brows.

*Kazimir? Not Kaz?*

Maxwell chuckled. “If you know what I know, then you better leave that shit alone.”

Frowning, I put my attention on Maxwell. “Shouldn’t you be watching over Ufuoma?”

“Yeah, but I had to check on my first lady before shit went down.” Maxwell faced Emily. “Are you sure about this, sis?”

Emily sucked her teeth at me.

I blinked.

*Oh, really?*

Then, she put her view on Maxwell. “I’m sure about it. This is the deal, and it must get done.”

“Yeah, but remember the White Plains job.” Maxwell held out his hands. “We made a deal there too, yet X slipped in for the renege. He did that shot to the temple. Boom. We aimed at Gerard’s people—”

“Gerard is not Fela, and White Plains is no Italy.” Emily slowly shook her head. “This is on another level, Max. And...I have the baby to think about.”

“Facts.” Maxwell bobbed his head. “So, then my next idea is that we do the Brooklyn Con, I could change really quick and—”

“We can’t, Max.” Her voice lowered. “But, thanks for offering to dress up as a woman again.”

David and I exchanged odd looks.

She let out a long sigh. “So...are you ready to head to Nigeria? All packed?”

“Yeah.”

Her next word was laced with sorrow. “Good...”

Maxwell shrugged. “I always wanted to visit Africa. Now I get to see some of the continent.”

She remained silent.

He cleared his throat. “But, I will be back and by your side soon.”

To my surprise, she pouted. “You better be.”

The emotion between them was so thick it seemed to have an aching physical form. Even more, an ominous fog of unspoken words enveloped them in this suffocating stillness.

Surely, David and Blue felt the same way, I did—powerless and uncomfortable with watching them stumble through a heartfelt goodbye. It was obvious that Emily and Maxwell should hug, yet that awkward unbearable void between them was palpable, remaining an invisible roadblock to their healing.

This will need to be fixed. If Baba is right, then Maxwell can help Emily and Lunita too.

Still, David, Blue, and I watched and said nothing.

“Em...” Maxwell’s cheerful façade suddenly cracked. Worry registered all over his face. “It’s not that I don’t think you can kill him.” His voice trailed off in a whisper. “I’m more worried about...the other shit.”

She moved her view to the ground. “Me too.”

Maxwell shifted his weight to his other foot. “You know what though?”

Emily looked up. “What?”

“I asked Baba to do a reading for me, due to the trip and... leaving you and shit. You know?” Maxwell gave her a sad smile. “Even though I don’t fuck with all that voodoo card mumbo jumbo and visions. I just...had to know...about us and if I was doing the right thing by leaving you.”

“W-what did she say?”

“Baba wouldn’t tell me about the trip or the shit with you and Fela, but she did describe this vision of our future.”

With shaking hands, Emily took off her glasses as if to do so would help her see Baba’s vision clearer. Her eyes had already clouded with tears that threatened to overflow, but I knew she would hold them in as much as possible.

My heart ached to see her this way.

*Goddamn it.*

Her voice grew shaky. “What did Baba say about our future?”

“She talked about how one day you and I would be in the kitchen of my huge house, stirring a big ass pitcher of pink lemonade for our kids and that...” His voice cracked. “And that you would be yelling at me for putting six cups of sugar in it.”

One tear left her eye. “Too much sugar is bad for kids.”

I wanted to hold my mouse and protect her from any pain and anguish this moment brought her. But I wouldn’t intervene. They needed this.

“And Baba said the lemons came from Lemonisha.” Maxwell reached out his hand and held his fingers close to her face as if waiting for permission to touch her.

The fragility of the moment suspended me in silence.

But, then Emily leaned forward.

Sighing, Maxwell wiped the tear away and then quickly lowered his hand.

And I released the breath that I didn’t know I was holding.

*Perhaps, they are on a path to healing.*

Maxwell gazed at the finger that touched her. “I was glad that Lemonisha was in the vision too. I wasn’t sure if the Nigerian climate would be bad for her or not.”

Sniffing, Emily placed the shades back on her face. “I can take Lemonisha with me if you want. I swear on everything I would protect her.”

“I know you would, Em.” Maxwell turned my way and frowned. “But, I don’t trust the Lion to not gorge on all my baby’s fruit.”

I scowled at him. “No one wants to taste fruit off of that stupid tree.”

“Then, why do you always sound crazy jealous every time I bring Lemonisha up.”

“It is not jealousy, Maxwell. It is pure and utter annoyance.” I straightened my expression into a stern one. “By the way, I expect you to go with Ufuoma, help her bury Fela, and then safely hurry back to Moscow for the birth of our child.”

“Hells yes.” Maxwell nodded. “I got to be the first motherfucker that Max Jr sees when he pops out of Em.”

I twisted my face in annoyance. “Did you say Max Junior?”

“Yeah, man. Maxwell Xavier Solonik Junior. And get this.” Maxwell raised his hands. “For my nephew’s nickname, I’m thinking Bubba Kush or Sour Diesel. Those are my two favorite strands of weed so, of course they would rep my little man.”

“Perhaps, it is a translation error happening. I cannot tell if you are joking with me.” I glared at him. “Or if you are actually trying to get me to be violent with you?”

Maxwell stepped back. “What?”

Smiling, Emily cleared her throat. “Unfortunately, we should go.”



“Yeah. True that.” Maxwell bobbed his head and stepped back again. “Time to kill the big bad villain, and get Italy over with.”

“Yeah.” Em headed my way. “Bye, Max.”

“No.” I held out my hand.

She stopped. “What? Don’t tell me you are back on my outfit.”

“I should be, but no that’s not why I’m stopping you.”

“Then, what?”

I pointed to Maxwell. “Go. Hug him. Now.”

She trembled.

“You will be pouting and thinking about him the entire time he is gone, and your sadness will make me crazy.” I lowered my hand to my side. “Perhaps, a hug will lower some of your suffering.”

Emily froze.

“Fuck that.” Maxwell looked terrified. “You don’t have to hug me if you don’t want to, Em.”

“No...Kaz is right.” She set her jaw in determination and clenched her fist. Next, Emily turned around, stormed over to Maxwell, grabbed his shirt in both hands, yanked him towards her, and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Not holding Emily back, Maxwell stared down at her in disbelief.

It was by far the most uncomfortable hug I had ever seen, but I would take anything at this point.

*There we go.*

A second later, she released him and stomped back our way.

David rushed with opening the door.

Saying nothing else, she slipped into the Benz.

Blue followed after her.

I locked eyes with Maxwell who was still frozen with his hands out by his sides. Fear laced his words. “Yo.”

“Yo?”

He slowly lowered his hands. “Don’t let Fela win today.”

“He will lose.”

“Keep Em safe.”

“On that, I guarantee.”

“While I’m gone, I want weekly updates on Em. If Lunita comes out while you both are in Moscow or anything, then I will be on the next plane.”

“I know you will be.”

“I’m serious.” He pointed my way. “I don’t trust you to do Em’s hair right.”

“I do not trust me either in that department.” I curved my lips into a sad smile. “Now go be with your future wife and that damned lemon tree.”

Maxwell glanced at the Benz for a few seconds, swallowed, looked back at me, did a dramatic salute, and headed away.

And a sadness washed over my body as I watched him leave. Somehow that damned idiot had seeped into my hardened exterior. Had he not been here in Italy each time Lunita came out, I might have made things worse and been even more lost in despair.

I owed a lot to him.

I turned to David. “I want extra men on Maxwell as he heads to Nigeria. And more people watching Rocco.”

David nodded. “Misha also is flying a small army down.”

I quirked my brows. “He is?”

“I updated him on what was going on.” David chuckled. “According to Misha, no one messes with his homey.”

“Fucking idiots.” I groaned in annoyance and climbed into the Benz.





# Chapter 68

## The Meet

### Emily

The helicopter blades whirred as we soared higher, heading toward the meet up spot.

One of my fondest memories in a helicopter was when Kaz and I fucked over the carnage.

*What memory will today bring?*

The tremor of the engine reverberated inside the cabin while Kaz held me close to him. His arms were a cocoon of warmth.

His breath tickled my neck. “How do you feel?”

“Fine,” I replied, although my heart raced with anticipation and trepidation.

*Could he sense my distress, my dread of what was to come?*

He pressed his cheek against mine. “Now we are lying to each other?”

I sighed. “I’m nervous.”

“*Mysh*, would I be wrong if I changed it all and turned us around?” His voice wavered with emotion. “To protect you and keep Fela away?”

I melted into his embrace. “Not wrong, baby. Just...”

He moved from my neck and gazed at me. “Just what?”

“It is time to let *me* finish this.”

“What type of man would I be to let you?”

“You’re not a man. You’re a lion.”

He frowned. “And what are *you* to me?”

I clasped my hand around his and tightly interlocked our fingers. “I am your mouse.”

“And my most precious treasure. My life. My soul. My heart. My future wife. The mother of *all* of my children.”

“*Children, Kaz?*”

“Many of them.”

I leaned against him and closed my eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Baba’s future visions talked about good things.”

“It did, *mysh* but there was also darkness.”

I tilted away and opened my eyes. “I can walk into the darkness—”

“But, not alone. Not without my hand holding yours. Therefore, I have a few things up my sleeve—”

“Kaz.”

He scowled. “You carry my son in your womb and are walking into a dangerous situation with an intellectual psychopath. You do not think I would not have a few things up my sleeve?”

“What things?”

“If you knew you would be upset. Therefore I have another plan.”

I tensed. “What plan?”

“You give me a signal and I will come.”

“Okay.” I swallowed. “What would the signal be?”

“Touch your ear.”

“Kaz, what if I accidentally scratch my ear or something and you go nuclear for no reason?”

“Then, tug your ear hard twice.”

“Fine.” I shrugged. “But, I would only do it if I lost control. Right now...even though I am nervous, I believe

we've finally got Fela."

"I agree, yet I will not be overconfident when it comes to the possibility of losing the love of my life."

I tightened my grip on his hand, attempting to offer reassurance to the both of us. "You won't lose me, baby."

David's voice rose as he handed his phone over to Kaz. "You both should see this."

Kaz grabbed the phone.

A video showed on the screen.

Kaz pressed play.

Fela's face greeted us as he began speaking in a language that I couldn't understand. Thankfully, subtitles ran at the bottom.

I read them out, "Hello, family. I wish I had more time for words, but I do not. Russia has made you a target, and I believe *I* am the only man to move it away."

*What is he doing?*

Tears left his eyes. He began to speak again.

I read the rest of the lines. "For you my family, I will go to face the enemy. Unfortunately, I will not return. Please, do not shed a tear for this is a sacrifice that I am willing to take for my people. I love you, Nigeria."

The video ended.

"Fela plans to go down in history as some martyr or great hero." Kaz gave the phone back to David. "What he did not say is that the nuke was targeting Nigeria because of his antics."

David and Kaz went back in forth in conversation.

But, all I could think of was how Fela had at least chosen the day of his death and the reason he would die. Although a narcissistic puppet master, that had to count for something.

I couldn't help but feel a mixture of admiration and resentment. He had made a decision that could have been

selfish, yet it was also brave.

*Could I ever do the same?*

I wasn't sure if I could openly volunteer for death.

My life had taught me to protect myself and take lives, not to give up my own, and yet the thought of leaving this world on my own terms felt strangely appealing.

*What has been going through Fela's head all day? Is he wondering about what happens after death?*

The rest of the helicopter ride continued in silence.

Kaz kept me close to him. His body remained against mine, not allowing one inch of space between us. I feared he would not let me go when we arrived.

The closer we got to the beach, the more scenarios began to spin in my mind, emerging from the darkness one after the other like a projector from hell—a nightmarish slideshow. There were so many unspeakable thoughts and awful possibilities, and they crashed in waves of fear and dread like a tsunami of terror.

*No. Stop it. Fela dies today and we get out of Italy. That's what Baba said. I will hold on to that and think of nothing else.*

Soon I could see that the helicopter was lowering, preparing to land.

Trembling, I gazed out of the window.

*Not a bad place...to pick to die.*

San Nicola Arcella Beach was a mesmerizing sight with its brilliant blue waves and gray sand. Every flash of sunlight on the water seemed to sparkle like a billion diamonds.

The sky was alive with birds, diving low over the sea.

As we descended closer to the beach, it felt like time had stopped and we were in an otherworldly paradise.

My stomach knotted with fear as I spotted Fela alone and off by the shore. He wore a yellow suit highlighted by a stark



black shirt and jet-black shoes. His hands were folded behind him while his gaze fell on the crashing waves.

A small wooden table was on his right. A closed silver briefcase lay on top.

Kaz leaned forward. “Was the briefcase checked?”

“Yes.” David nodded. “There was only one file inside of it with tons of papers. The interior lining was ripped out just in case he had something hidden in it, but nothing was found.”

“What was on the papers?” I asked.

“The men could not read the words because they were in English.”

*What do you have planned, Fela?*

Sighing, I continued to scan the area.

Several feet behind Fela, over sixty armed Brotherhood monitored him.

I saw the cove on the right, nestled within brown cliffs and thick clusters of green bushes. Kaz had told me that Jean-Pierre and his men hid in there, waiting to protect me.

Further out in the beach’s parking lot, Harlem Crew stood in a long line, gripping Ak-47s.

*This is going to work.*

The helicopter landed and the roar of the engine quieted, but panic rushed through my veins.

*It will be okay. He’s without his men. I have an army with me. It will be fine.*

The sound of my heart throbbed in my ears.

Kaz let go of me and rose to his feet.

I stood on shaky knees and felt them quiver.

King David rushed and slid the door open.

Kaz had my hand in his as he guided us out of the helicopter. “You can still back out of the deal and—”

“No, Kaz. This ends today.”

We left the helicopter.

Blue followed us out.

I tried to let go of Kaz's hand.

He maintained a firm grip and gazed at me. "*Mysh...*"

"We outnumber him."

"It only takes one stray bullet."

I blinked. "Kaz, I can do this."

He looked me over. "Where is your gun?"

"I'm going to use one of Blue's pieces."

Blue got to my side and handed me a solid blue gun that sparkled in the sunlight.

I took it and showed him. "See."

He still didn't release my hand.

I tugged at it. "Kaz, let me go."

Fast, he pulled my body against him, crushing me into a fierce embrace. "Do not forget about our signal."

"I won't."

His gaze burrowed into mine until I was sure he could see deep into my soul. "Do not let yourself get into further harm."

"I won't, baby."

Finally, Kaz let me go and kept his gaze on me.

David stepped to my other side. "I will walk you both up to Fela. Our men have already checked him from head to toe, but I will check him again before leaving."

I nodded.

Worry etched deep into Kaz's features. "Perhaps, I should walk up with them too and check him myself."

I frowned. "I see you strangling his neck."

The line of his jaw twitched. "Would that truly be a bad thing?"

“I bet Fela has something prepared if we renege on the deal.”

With another twitch of his jaw, he pursed his lips together and narrowed his eyes.

I looked down at the sand and used my free hand to slip off one heel.

Kaz narrowed his eyes. “Lunita?”

“What?” I blinked.

“Why are you taking off your shoes?”

“I can’t walk in the sand with these heels.”

Kaz studied me as if unsure about my honesty.

“Seriously.” I handed him one heel and then gave him the other. Warm sand smoothed against the bottoms of my feet.

Still, Kaz watched me.

“Relax, baby. It’s me.” I looked in the direction of Fela. He remained gazing at the shoreline. I turned back to Kaz. “Okay, baby. Time to get this over with.”

It was damned near impossible to drag myself away from him, yet somehow I did.

In the gray sand, Blue, David, and I trudged forward, passing the intimidating crowd of our heavily armed men.

Blue spoke, “If you cannot pull the trigger, I will.”

“I can pull it. I just don’t want Fela coming through with any surprises.”

David shook his head. “We are ready for any surprise he brings out.”

*Are we?*

I blew out a long breath. “Thank you, David.”

It didn’t take long for us to get to Fela.

As if sensing our approach, he turned around and stood before us, arms outstretched. A diamond ring adorned each finger.

To be a man close to death, his eyes were electric and alive. Meanwhile, for some reason, his voice sent shivers down my spine. “Emily, you came.”

I studied him.

Last time I met with Fela on the beach, he had a youthful look. Today he appeared to be a different person entirely. He had more gray hair on his head, and a wild grey beard covered most of his face.

*He must have done that video weeks before?*

He didn’t have a beard in the video. Was the video edited? Or had he guessed Kaz would target Nigeria with the nuke?

An unsettling fear poured over me.

I spotted the long scar going from his chin down to his neck.

“Emily.” He lowered his arms. “Our deal included conversation before I die.”

Keeping a neutral expression, I moved my gaze to the table. “What’s in the briefcase?”

“No hello?”

“No hello, Fela.” I put my view back on his face and gripped the gun at my side. “Only goodbye.”

He moved his gaze to the gun. “Nice weapon. However, I would have preferred you to shoot me with a yellow gun.”

“Then, you should have put that in the deal.”

“Speaking of the deal.” Fela placed his hand in his pocket.

That was when David rushed to him. “Not so fast.”

Fela chuckled. “I am merely reaching for my phone.”

“Hold your hands up.” David stood in front of him.

Fela eyed David. “Checking me for weapons again? This will be the fifth time since my walking on the beach.”

David patted him down in the front and dove his hands in Fela’s pockets.

Keeping his hands up, Fela smirked. “What am I? A magician able to make guns appear out of thin air.”

Silent, David walked around him and patted down his thighs and legs.

“Russians always worry about nukes, guns, and bullets.” Fela placed his view on me. “When there are more simpler ways to bring greater harm.”

Terror sliced through my body. My hand holding the gun shivered a little.

David finished checking him.

Fela stared back at him like he was a little kid. “Shall I take off my shoes for you to see if I am carrying a missile inside of it?”

“Yes.” David frowned. “Go ahead and give me your shoes.”

I waved my hand. “That’s unnecessary, David. We’re good.”

King David and Fela squared off, their gazes locked in a silent battle of wills. I swore the air between them crackled with palpable tension.

Fela twisted his mouth into a sly smirk. “You heard her, little one. Go on now.”

David’s words dripped with menace. “Take off your shoes. Now.”

I gritted my teeth.

Chuckling, Fela began taking those polished shoes off one by one and handing them to David with a mocking grin. “What next, *King*? Do you think I have weapons in the toe or perhaps under my arms?.”

David analyzed each shoe.

“Do I have people in the sky, ready to parachute down and destroy the lion’s mouse?” Fela raised his view up to the clouds and then put it on the ocean. “Or maybe there are

armed assassins hiding among the waves, deep within the sand, breathing with oxygen tanks.”

David faced me. “He is clear, but I can stay.”

Fela scowled. “That was not the deal. Only the mouse and me, but I will allow this one with the blue hair to remain.”

David’s frown deepened.

Fela laughed. “What more can any man ask for when he dies, but two beautiful women witnessing his life withering away?”

“Thank you, David.” I nodded. “We’re good.”

Still holding Fela’s shoes, David walked off.

“Such a petty king.” Fela shook his head. “*They* always take from us.”

I raised my eyebrows. “*They?*”

Fela put his view back on me. “The Russians.”

His phone rang.

“There we go.” Fela grinned. “I was expecting a call and now it is here.”

“Call from who?”

“I will put it on speaker since you all are so much on edge.” Fela shook his head and pressed the screen. “One would think that more than me will be dying on this beach today, yet *I* am the only one who volunteered for death.”

I tensed.

A male’s voice sounded from Fela’s phone. “Papa, the nuke’s coordinates were changed. All international news outlets have reported. They are dancing in Abuja’s streets.”

Fela smiled, and this time his cheeks curved upward. It was as if I was finally seeing a genuine smile from him.

Fela’s voice went thick with anticipation. “And whose name are they singing about?”

“Yours papa. They chant, ‘Fela! Fela! Fela!’”

He closed his eyes. “Make sure someone is recording their chanting and then put that footage at the beginning of my resting ceremony.”

The man’s voice cracked at the end. “Yes...papa.”

“I will miss you...very much.” Fela hung up, but didn’t open his eyes. “It appears your lion is *truly* going to obey the deal.”

“He is.”

Fela opened his eyes. “He could have killed me before landing.”

I nodded.

“And you could have just shot me right now without changing the nuke’s coordinates.”

“That wasn’t the deal.”

He bobbed his head. “I was told that a yacht appeared in my daughter’s port. They said her name was written on it. Does this mean that my wife and daughter will be free of the Brotherhood?”

“My brother, Max waits with them for this to end.”

“I know a lot about Max from Darryl. My understanding is that he is an upstanding man.”

“He is. Harlem Crew and Max will escort them back home to bury your body.”

“It will be a grand celebration.”

“Probably.”

Fela sighed. “Something is going to happen, but I want you to signal to the Brotherhood to stand down.”

“What are you saying?”

“I had an emergency plan in place just in case you or the lion prematurely killed me.”

“What was it?”

“Can I show you? No one will harm you or anyone else, but it is time to release them from their service to me and finally give them permission to go home.”

I pointed to Blue. “Get on the phone with Kaz and keep him on the line.”

She obeyed, taking her phone out, dialing him, and placing the device next to her ear. “Fela will be releasing some people who were on standby to attack if anyone reneged. Yes. I understand. No. I do not know.”

Fela studied Blue. “Poor Kazimir. How is his heart these days?”

I gritted my teeth.

Blue kept the phone against her ear. “Kazimir said to release them, but make sure no one lifts a weapon in his mouse’s direction.”

“Understood.” Then, Fela unleashed a piercing whistle that cut through the air like a sharp blade.

Off in the distance, an echoing chime came, vibrating around us.

Sweat began to bead on my forehead.

I quirked my brows and scanned the space wondering what was going to happen.

The waves suddenly began to violently crash, whipping into an angry frenzy and pummeling against the shoreline.

Fela pointed at the water. “Do not be alarmed. They will not hurt you. I gave them the signal to leave.”

“What?” I squinted through the salty foamed waves and noticed movement in the sand beneath the surface. My heart raced as I spotted silhouettes stirring in the water.

“Shit.” With her free hand, Blue raised her gun, pointing with a steady aim at the waves. “There are people in there.”

I slowly raised my hand, knowing full well that any wrong move by me would be answered with immediate fire from the Brotherhood.



Seconds later, over a hundred men pushed themselves up through the waves, looking like a beach military unit of assassin deep sea divers. They wore greyish-beige wetsuits that matched the sand. Full face scuba masks covered their faces. Long oxygen tanks rode their backs. Each one had a gun in their hand.

I stayed still with my arm up in the air, as fear churned in my stomach.

*Motherfucker really had people in the water.*

Keeping my hand up, I slowly glanced behind me.

All of the Brotherhood stood there, guns drawn and pointed straight at them.

*Okay. Steady, everyone. No one shoot.*

Blue's voice was steady. "Yes. They are leaving. He signaled them to go. Yes. Emergency plan. Okay. Okay."

Fela looked at her. "Can they freely leave?"

Blue spoke, "The Lion wants you to tell them to put their guns on the beach, and then they can go."

Fela nodded at her, looked at the men, and yelled out in that language from the video.

The figures trudged through the water, rivulets streaming off their wet suits and skin. Their eyes remained trained on us as they advanced, their hands gripping the guns tightly.

Once they reached the shoreline, one by one they discarded their guns in a pile and removed the scuba masks.

Frowning, I lowered my hand. "Could their guns have even worked?"

"Revolvers function more reliably than any other firearm underwater." Fela returned to gazing at the sun. "Their simple design makes them work better than automatic pistols or semi-auto rifles."

Several of the Brotherhood rushed over, swarming along the shoreline and pointing guns at Fela's men.

Other Brotherhood grabbed the pile of wet guns.

Meanwhile Fela's men wobbled away in one line, not glancing back at us.

I glanced in the direction where Fela was looking.

The sun was beginning to set behind the horizon. The sky was orange, pink, red and purple. Waves crashed, soaking the shore.

A cold chill surged through me.

I gulped down fear. "Now it is time for the rest of the deal."

*Your death.*

Fela didn't turn my way. "You do not want to know what is in the briefcase?"

"I could look inside there *after* I kill you."

"But, then you would not understand why those documents and pictures are in there in the first place."

I placed my gaze on the briefcase.

It was bullshit. I knew it deep down in my heart and could feel it within the depths of my soul. This was a ploy, some method for him to get at me—to somehow win while he lost. Some strategy of manipulation. A chunk of cheese to lure the Mouse into a trap.

There was no need to push forward.

I looked away from the briefcase and thought about my son lying safely within my womb. I even thought of my daughter who had gone off with Jean-Pierre and Eden, and how I would see her one day.

*Fuck this. Finish it.*

Clenching my teeth, I raised the gun and pointed at him.

"Okay. Yes, sir." Blue got next to me, hung up the phone, and put it in her pocket. Next, she took out her own gun and kept it ready by her side.

Fela twisted his lips into an unnerving grin. “In that briefcase are answers to the question of why you are you.”

My hand holding the gun trembled.

*Answers?*

Slowly, he turned my way. “You see, Emily. I researched and studied you for a long time before ever putting my plan in place.”

*Fuck him. Don't listen.*

“I knew about your *darkness* before you did. All the personalities.” Fela targeted his gaze to the point of my gun. “And I know the origin of all of them. The why. The how.”

My heart pounded in my chest.

I placed my finger on the trigger.

“Do you want to know those answers to your questions?” He tilted his head to the side. “Or do you simply want to take the cowards way out, shoot me, and still drown in all of those mind-shattering questions?”





# Chapter 69

## The Host

### Emily

*Kill him? Or listen to him?*

A haunting stillness settled over the beach. No longer could I hear the waves of the ocean crashing onto the shore or the squawking of seagulls.

My lips went dry like someone had left me out in the dunes for weeks without water.

*What does he know?*

My finger twitched. I could feel the trigger underneath it, earnestly waiting for me to make a decision.

“Emily, I can feel that need radiating off you.” Fela watched me. “That desperate need to understand it all.”

I didn’t move. His words were fire and smoke, stinging my skin with the intensity of a branding iron.

My heart pounded like a jackhammer, and my gut seemed to clench harder with every word, squeezing tighter and tighter until I thought I could feel my insides being crushed.

*Fuck Fela. He’s trying to trick me.*

The gun shook in my hands. Still, I did my best to stay rooted in my spot.

*Breathe.*

My face heated.

“Emily?” Blue stepped closer to me and whispered, “Don’t listen to him.”

“But, she should.” Fela grinned. “Who else knows her better than me?”

The urge to slap the smugness off his face was strong, but somehow I resisted. “Many people know me better than you.”

Fela raised one finger and wagged it at me. “I doubt that very much.”

“You think that your answers are going to save your life today, but they’re not.”

“On that you are correct, Emily, but that doesn’t change the fact that you want to know those answers. Don’t you, little mouse?” Fela’s voice pierced my skin and gripped my heart. “You want to know how you ended up like this. What made you like this? You want to know who you are. And, you want me to tell you *what* you are.”

*Was this it? The moment of reckoning.*

My heart raced, and my mind whirred.

Two clear paths lay before me—I could either succumb to Fela’s words and allow myself to be consumed by the darkness that lurked within me, or muster my courage and fight against it.

I was no coward, but the fear was real because I knew that one of those paths could affect me for the rest of my life.

*What do I do?*

Then, movement fluttered within my womb. My son. My baby playing or swimming. That fluttering was just what I needed to remind me of why I held the gun in the first place.

*Stay safe and get out of Italy.*

I also thought back to what Baba had told me.

*Remember that I am loved and don’t forget about the Lion.*

Shivering, I lowered the gun and stepped back.

*Kaz.*

Blue remained silent, yet flicked the safety off her gun as if readying herself to shoot him if necessary.

Fela let out a breath of relief. “Always a smart mouse.”

*Remember the Lion.*

With my free hand, I tugged my ear twice.

Not noticing the signal, Fela pointed to me. “Learning about you required me to talk to many doctors that spent their lives on this topic. However, I must say that you are unique among your kind.”

I frowned. “Am I?”

A boat’s engine sounded off in the distance.

“Do you know what the term, *host* means?” Fela grinned like he had just tasted the sweetest secret.

I swallowed. “No.”

“In psychology, the *host* is the most prominent personality in someone who has dissociative identity disorder. That is what you have.” Fela tried to step closer.

Blue whipped her gun up and pointed at him. “Stay right there.”

Chuckling, Fela raised his hands and stepped back. “Did you know that about yourself, Emily?”

“Say what you have to say, Fela.”

“Brain scans can be used to distinguish between host and alter personalities.” Fela lowered his hands and held them out. “The entire concept of all of this is highly mind-blowing and fascinating. The host often shows higher EEG coherence than alter personalities.”

None of these facts made me comfortable. Every inch of my body pulsed with nervous anticipation, I could almost taste the explosive energy coming in his message.

Clinging desperately to the shreds of my composure, I shifted my weight to my other foot, knowing he was preparing me for the moment where he would detonate the calm in my reality.

*Have your fun, Fela. Whether you fuck my head up or not, my lion will roar.*

“In addition to my information on you, I have studies that discuss the different neuronal activity between host and other



personalities.” Fela pointed to the briefcase. “There has been brain scan evidence to show that stressful or traumatic memories are often much more present in the other personalities than the host.”

“This is something I can find in a book.” I scowled. “Get on with it.”

“The other personalities, besides the host, are known as alter personalities, or just *alters*. What do you think about all of that, Emily?”

“I think you don’t have much time to worry about what I think about.”

The rumbling of rushing water and a loud boat motor sounded closer.

“Even more interesting, the *host* may or may not be the *original personality*. One of the supposed alters could be who was truly born.”

I shivered in fear.

“How far do your memories go back, Emily?”

I gritted my teeth.

Another dark chuckle left him. “In some forms of DID, the host can be present for extended years without ever allowing an alter to take the forefront. Again...that never means that the *host* is the *original*.”

Anxiety wrapped around me like a heavy cloak. My skin prickled with a fierceness that threatened to rip me apart. My vision blurred and I felt as if I could no longer recognize the world before me. Either anxiety was trying to swallow me up or perhaps Lunita was trying to rise up and protect me.

*No. No. Stay right there.*

A ferocious fury rippled through my body, and I swore to God that none of it was mine. She was rising inside of me, stirring within my flesh. I could feel her on the edge of my mind, hungry to rip his throat apart.

*Stay back, Lunita. I’ve got it.*

Despite every instinct screaming for me to sink within darkness and escape, I clenched my jaw, determined not to surrender to the darkness without a fight.

Whatever lay ahead of me, I would stay and face it.

“I didn’t know all of this before, you see. Alters and host. At first, I thought you were a simple case of DID. Later, I discovered that you truly are a puzzle.” Fela shook his head. “I was not intending on Kazimir surviving you because Darryl was adamant about who the true host was. We planned for Kazimir to be dead within days of you both meeting. Never did I plan on you both falling in love. Then, Daryl realized that...”

*What?*

Fela moved his view to the ocean. “What...is this? N-no...”

I glanced in the direction he was looking at.

A sleek speed boat rushed toward us, slicing through the water like a white-hot knife. A fisherman pulled hard on the wheel, maneuvering the boat with expert precision.

Meanwhile, Wassily stood at the speed boat’s stern with his hands clenched around Fara’s neck. He had a gun pressed against her temple, and his eyes were filled with a cruel, menacing glint. Never had I seen Wassily look so deadly and dangerous.

*Fuck. I forgot all about the signal.*

I widened my eyes.

*Damn, Kaz. This was the trick up your sleeve?*

My body relaxed a little.

“W-what is this?” Fela’s bottom lip quivered. “T-this was not the deal.”

Then, Kaz’s deep voice sounded behind me. “I do not play when it comes to my mouse.”

I shivered.

Kaz got to my side and slipped his arm around my waist. That simple contact sent huge waves of comfort to wash over me. Next to him, I would not perish. Power radiated off of him.

Together, we would survive everything and more, no matter the challenge, the enemy, or even the magnitude of the war.

Our son fluttered within my womb again, letting me know that I had done the right thing by having Kaz step in to help me.

*God, I love this man.*

Fela glared at us. “If you both renege on this deal, you will find—”

“Not so quick, Fela.” Kaz chuckled. “I am still not done with my surprises. While you have brought a briefcase, I have invited friends.”

“What?” Fela pursed his lips together.

Kaz chuckled. “Look around.”

*Oh shit.*

Fela scanned the space behind, and then his voice quaked with horror. “Dear God. What is wrong with you?”

*What?*

I glanced behind me.

Jean-Pierre and the rest of the French marched out of the cove. Their guns were drawn and pointed at captives.

*What the fuck?*

Each pansy escorted a man or woman with dark brown complexion. Meanwhile, Giorgio carried a young boy with long braids falling past his shoulders.

*Who are they?*

My heart sank as I turned back to Fela.

“W-when did you get them? How? I don’t understand. They were hidden and protected.” Fela’s eyes watered as he

edged back. “No. No. Do not hurt my children. Please, Kazimir.”

“Shh, Fela.” Leaning my way, Kaz gripped my waist tighter, brushed his lips against my ear, and kept his voice low. “How do *you* feel, *mysh*?”

“Loved and protected.” Swallowing, I raised my gun at Fela. “Finish what you were saying?”

Fela scanned all of the faces of his loved ones. “T-they can’t see...my demise...Please...”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What’s in the briefcase?”

“Oh no!” Fela held his hands up. “Do not open that briefcase around them.”

“Oh, really?” I quirked my brows. “Why not?”

Kaz hardened against me. “The briefcase is rigged?”

Fela put his view on Fara and raised his voice. “I’m sorry, *my love*. I never intended...for you to see this.”

“You’re not answering our questions, Fela.” I sneered. “Perhaps, I should have Fara open the briefcase next to your kids or maybe I could ask one of my *alters* to come through and slice her up in front of you. *Alters*. That is the correct terminology. Right?”

Fela gazed back at me in horror. Sweat dripped down his face. “There is...a bomb rigged to the side of the briefcase.”

Kaz shook his head. “But, my men checked it.”

“The whistle signaling my people in the water to come out, also triggered the bomb to turn on. I planned for the Mouse and me to...go together.”

Rage boiled through me. “So, that was your final fuck you to me? Get in my head, have me open up the briefcase, and blow myself up along with you?”

Dread filled Fela’s eyes as he directed his view to his children. “They are innocent, Kazimir. Do not—”

“Meanwhile, you tried to kill *my* son.” The gun shook in my hand. “You hoped to destroy my lion with our death.”

“It...was a mistake.” Fela shook his head. “Let us call it a wrong judgement based on my shattered ego—”

“I am going to cut you in front of your children so that they can always remember this moment and they will grow up knowing that they better not ever think about fucking with my family.”

Fela widened his eyes in horror.

Kaz placed a kiss on my cheek and then he brushed his lips against my ear again. “Give me the gun, *mysh*.”

*Why would I do that?*

With a vicious rage deeply burning inside of me, I could barely contain myself.

I wanted to kill Fela, and I didn't care if I did it in front of his children. In fact, maybe I would shoot them up too. The son of a bitch's bloodline didn't need to continue.

I grew dizzy, imagining all of their blood spilling over my hands, warming my palms. I yearned to smell their deaths. Taste it.

*“Mysh.”*

I blinked. “Yes?”

“Give me the gun.”

I gritted my teeth. Every cell in my body wanted to take his life.

*Remember the Lion.*

Blowing out a long breath, I gave the gun to Kaz.

To my surprise, he took the gun and handed it to Blue. “Deal with him after we leave.”

I blinked. “What? I can do it. I *want* to do it.”

Kaz took my hand and guided me away. “We have a plane to catch.”

I kept his pace. “But...”

“It occurred to me that Baba knew Lunita would come today.”

“Me too. I just didn’t want to say anything, but I think I have control of her, so I can go back there and cut Fela just a little—”

“Absolutely not, *mysh*.” He continued to guide me along.

I spotted the pilots climbing back into the helicopter that we had rode in. “Hold up, Kaz. Maybe, I won’t cut Fela here, but—”

“You were supposed to shoot Fela, not cut him—”

“Okay. Shoot him, but maybe we can take him back—”

“I am not falling for that again.”

“What?”

“Whatever taste is slipping along your tongue for his blood, swallow it down.” Kaz increased our pace. “While Lunita is growing on me, I do not want to see her today.”

*Fuck. Maybe...he is right...Is that Lunita inside of me, yearning for torture?*

Walking with him, I tightened my grip on his hand. “Okay, baby.”

“When Baba told me her visions, it scared me, so, I considered alternatives to changing Baba’s visions.”

“Like?”

“Like working with the French.” Kaz sighed. “Louis had a few ideas. It appears that after some conversation that Jean-Pierre had with you, he decided to give up a few secret cards he had up his sleeve too.”

“What cards?”

“His cousin, Louis knew the exact location of Fela’s children.”

I frowned.

“While they were not willing to give the Brotherhood the locations, citing my possibility of bombing everyone, Jean-Pierre did agree to have his people get Fela’s children and bring them to the location before everyone else arrived.”

*Sneaky Butcher.*

I checked over my shoulder.

The French walked away from the beach with their captives. Some of Fela’s children glanced back at him. Tears streamed many of their faces. While others glared our way.

I gulped.

Kaz continued, “Today, I was willing to do anything to keep your darkness away.”

I trembled and walked closer to him. “Then, I’m glad I gave the signal.”

“Me too. I did not think you ever would.”

“Why not?”

“Since knowing you, *mysh*, you have actively been stubborn and determined to always do things *your* way.”

“*I’m* the stubborn one?” I rolled my eyes. “Really, Kaz? I feel like you are the most stubborn one in our relationship.”

“No, *mysh*. It is you.”

Suddenly, the sharp staccato of gunfire filled the air behind us, echoing a sickening rhythm of death.

I stopped walking, unable to take another step.

Kaz paused with me.

A woman let out desperate screams, sending chills down my spine. It must have been Fara.

I looked over my shoulder and confirmed that fact.

In the speed boat, she kneeled and loudly sobbed.

I moved my gaze to the beach.

Fela’s dead body lay on the sand in front of Blue. To my surprise, King David stood on her right like some mighty

sentinel there to protect her.

Giorgio was on her left, no longer holding the kid and watching her.

“It’s done.” I shivered. “Fela is dead. Italy is over.”

Blue placed the gun in her holster, looked my way, and nodded at me.

My eyes watered. Still, a smile curved over my face.

*Thanks, Blue.*

“Let us go, *mysh*.” Kaz tugged at my hand. “I am sick and tired of Italy.”

“Me too.” Sighing, I faced forward and walked off. “Me too.”

As we headed to the helicopter, everything felt right and perfect on the outside.

But deep inside there was one thing tugging at my soul.

*Who is the original—Lunita or me? Did Fela know? Or was it just a ploy to get me to open the briefcase?*







# Epilogue

## Fast Forward

### Kazimir

Once Fela's death was confirmed, Valentina flew off to St. Petersburg with all of her men.

At the airport, Jean-Pierre and Emily said their goodbyes near his plane.

Annoyed, I waited by our plane and watched them, making sure he kept his greedy hands to himself.

*Hurry this up, Butcher.*

The Butcher remained respectful, although he did hand her a shimmering gold violin case. Even from here, I could see the elegant scroll pattern decorating the edges.

*Be careful, Butcher.*

She took the case and opened it.

I leaned forward, trying to see what was inside.

A shriek left her as she snapped it close and hugged him.

I groaned in annoyance.

Then, she headed away with Giorgio flanking her.

Jean-Pierre tipped an invisible hat and climbed up the stairs to his plane.

Emily and Giorgio headed over. When they approached, she gestured to the violin case. "J.P. gave me my own bladed-bows. Granted, he said they were for Lunita, but I'm going to play with them for sure."

"Why is the Butler over here?" I kept a stern expression. "Please say that it is only to escort you to the plane?"

"Not exactly." She cleared her throat. "With Boris being gone, J.P. and I decided that I needed a proper *number two* and

we both figured that Giorgio would be a phenomenal placement.”

I scowled. “Absolutely not.”

“Kaz, why not?”

“He annoys the hell out of me with his obscene need for cleanliness.”

“Really?” Giorgio gave me a mocking pout. “I thought I was growing on you.”

“I am finally free of Jean-Pierre and his stalking tendencies. I do not need his cousin around.”

Giorgio shook his head. “I am not Jean-Pierre.”

“No?” I glared at him. “You do not want to kiss me too?”

Giorgio sighed.

Emily stepped forward. “That’s enough, Kaz.”

“It is not enough, *mysh*. And I do not believe Giorgio will truly be focused on keeping *you* safe.”

Giorgio ignored me and glanced at the airplane. I checked where he was looking at. Blue wore a shocked face as she gazed out of the window and stared at him.

*All I need is more wet men trudging along my mansion.*

“He is coming with us, Kaz.”

I raised my voice. “This is just a ploy for him to encroach on King David’s territory—”

“*Territory?*” Emily quirked her brows. “You better not be talking about Blue like she is some space or property—”

“I am Team David!”

Emily let out a long breath. “Oh my God.”

Giorgio placed his view on me and smirked.

Emily rolled her eyes. “Again, Kaz, when you pick a team, you just chill and let it play out. You don’t keep yelling out your team over and over, and you are definitely not supposed to get in the middle of it—”

“If Giorgio comes to Moscow, I will make sure he never returns to France.”

Giorgio leaned his head to the side. “Because you would want me to stay in Russia forever?”

“Because you would be dead.”

A dark chuckle left Giorgio as if he dared me to try to kill him.

“Everyone, relax.” Emily pointed her finger at me. “Especially, you. Giorgio is my number two now. This is *my* decision. Get over it.”

I glared at him and spoke through clenched teeth, “While in Moscow, Giorgio, you better keep your cock in your pants.”

Giorgio frowned.

“Fucking Pansy!”

“Get your ass on this plane, Kaz.” Emily grabbed my hand and tugged me forward.

I grumbled and headed up the stairs. Lucky for her, I already wanted to go on the plane and get the hell out of Italy.

But, that was the only reason.

Giorgio followed us on.

Wassily and King David met us at the top.

Rage covered David’s face. “We have a new passenger coming with us to Moscow?”

“Apparently, the Butler is now my mouse’s number two.”

“Hmmm.” David sized him up. “Very interesting.”

Emily looked at King David and Giorgio. “That means that everyone must get along and keep their hands to themselves.”

Emily scowled at Giorgio. “In other words, no one is allowed to touch my lion’s number one or I am going to kick their ass.”

Giorgio’s frown deepened.

King David snickered.

Then, she looked at David. “And you know *my* number two should *never* be bothered and fucked with either. It would be a disrespectful violation that I would handle *personally*.”

Emily lifted her case. “And now that I have new sharp toys. Do not test me.”

David straightened his expression.

Emily lowered the violin case and scanned the seats. “Now where are my little babies?”

David gestured at the back of the plane. “Baba is with Paolo in the kitchen. They are getting milk and cookies from the stewardess. Further back, Harlem is on the lap of his personal guard, munching on a new bone Maxwell bought him.”

“Thanks, David. I should check on Paolo. This is probably his first flight.” Emily let go of my hand and walked off. “Be good, everybody.”

I remained there and watched Giorgio sit in the seat across from Blue.

David watched Blue and Giorgio’s tense exchange.

I dove my hands in my pockets.

*Do not worry, David. I will figure out a way to get rid of the Butler.*

I headed off, knowing that problem wouldn’t be solved anytime soon.

It took entirely too long for the pilots to get the plane started. The entire wait I tensed, fearful that the Sicilians would surprise us with some vengeful attack for Rocco’s almost death.

But, none came.

The plane’s engine roared and soon we were in the air.

The moon was thin in the sky, just half a sliver in the darkness.

Paolo and Baba slept in the extra suite.

In our suite, I removed Emily's clothes like a wild animal, nibbling her skin with each tearing of fabric. Once we were both naked, my kisses turned ravenous and insatiable. The bed vibrated from the plane's engine and we tangled our bodies together, grinding and writhing in pleasure. Over and over, I drove my cock deep within her, making her moan and scream the whole flight.

\* \* \*

We returned to a cold snowy Moscow with no delay. The snow was a heavy blanket cloaking the entire city in icy white and making most of the roads empty.

As we headed to the vehicles waiting for us, snow crunched under our feet.

Snowflakes fell from the air, and Paolo squealed in delight. Perhaps, he had never seen it before.

While back home, it was clear that one of the first priorities was to get a new mansion to make new memories.

A week later, we found a new property to fit all of our needs.

Our new place.

The new mansion sat on top of a hill overlooking the city. It was a palace worthy of a king and queen with a huge courtyard and garden.

On the inside, marble floors shone beautifully. Each step felt smooth as silk under my feet. Rich and opulent, it had a numerous amount of rooms. Our main people found their place in the guest quarters, spread out on the first floor. Each suite had its own entrance, allowing for proper privacy for Baba, King David, Giorgio, Wassily, and Blue.

Paolo's and our suites were on the second floor.

Next, Emily worked on hiring a private tutor for Paolo, not wanting him to go to school yet. Already, many of the Brotherhood in Moscow peered at him with odd looks. Paolo was the spitting image of Pavel. There would be no hiding whose son he was.

Due to that, I gave him extra guards and was adamant to everyone that the boy must not be harmed.

Emily took forever to find the right teacher. Once Emily did, she remained fiercely protective as usual and never left Paolo alone with the teacher. When Emily wasn't monitoring his reading and math lessons, they painted in her new art studio behind the mansion and surrounded by the garden.

\* \* \*

By the end of the month, I brought up the topic of Lunita and our need to solve the situation of her darkness.

To my surprise, Emily did not want to head to New Orleans while pregnant, believing that she should *finally* take the doctor's advice and stay in one place.

How could I not support that decision?

\* \* \*

When it came to Brotherhood business, things were surprisingly peaceful. Somehow Maxwell and Boris gained Black Axe's trust in Nigeria, although David did report a few dead bodies coming up in the process.

The newfound trust between Harlem Crew and Black Axe guaranteed that Maxwell had a tight grip on Black Axe's activities in Italy which meant a stronghold on the drug port to Europe.

There still had been no popping up of Rocco yet, but maybe Maxwell was keeping any news on the Vizzini Family secret from me.

I figured that due to Maxwell sneaking off to Japan the following month on some secret mission to help Misha. He told me less when he thought I was going to get angry.

Whatever shenanigans they had gotten into worried me, but all appeared to work out in the end.

And still, Lunita never appeared. But, I could not pretend that the possibility of her emergence didn't worry me.

\* \* \*



At the end of Emily's second trimester, I decided to have this New Orleans witch doctor come to us. Jean-Pierre had sworn on her great power to fix my mouse.

First, I called Mrs. Delphine up personally and respectfully requested her services.

"Hello, my name is—"

"I know who you are." Her voice rode the line. "You are the great lion."

"Good." I leaned back in my chair. "I prefer it when there is no need for an introduction—"

"I know why you are calling, and you must understand that now is not the time."

I frowned. "I believe now is the time."

"The answer is no for now."

I sat up in the chair. "If you know who I am then you understand that I do not accept no."

"Alright, boy. Don't let me have to learn you something." She hung up.

Speechless, I stared at the phone.

Next, I sent thirty men to New Orleans to grab and bring Mrs. Delphine to me.

Maxwell and Jean-Pierre both begged me on several video conference calls to not try this method.

I did it anyway.

A week after my men left to go to New Orleans, a massive solid oak box—four feet high and five feet wide—arrived at our mansion with no postage. Even our most advanced security cameras failed to capture a trace of who left the huge box there.

On top of the box, a black envelope was stuck to it.

Curious, I opened the envelope and pulled out a black card.

On the inside, the message read:

*Dear Lion,*

*I have seen your beautiful future ahead of you.*

*But if you challenge me again, your bright future will be consumed by darkness.*

*Consider this box as not just a warning, but a gift of my immense patience.*

*I hope to see you soon, after the baby is born and the first set of ripe oranges dangle from my trees.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Mrs. Delphine.*

I frowned. "Open it."

Wassily and several men went to the box with tools. It took them several minutes, until they finally pulled back the side of the box.

Twenty decapitated heads lay inside, stacked high in a sinister pyramid. The coppery stench of blood hung thick in the air.

Even Wassily had to repress a shudder at the gruesome sight.

After that box, I decided to not bother Mrs. Delphine anymore.

\* \* \*

Emily's third trimester arrived and my focus shifted to us getting married before our son's birth.

Once again, Emily was adamant about the ceremony happening after our son's birth. She had some gown that she was destined to wear, and kept talking about how she wanted to look perfect for that day.

By now my mouse's stomach had grown to be the size of a beach ball. It made me smile every time I saw her, but she seemed uncomfortable with her new weight.

I couldn't understand why. I enjoyed every new curve and relished in nibbling on her softer layers. To me, she looked

ravishing. Her breasts were fuller. Her ass was bigger and even softer than a pillow. And nothing could compare to the breathtaking glow on her face.

Plus, there was nothing like pregnant pussy. Emily got wet faster, and those hormones made her want my cock all the time.

Back and forth, we argued about the wedding date.

Eventually, I gave in to her delaying the wedding, especially since she let me have my lions at the reception.

\* \* \*

Then one morning arrived and changed everything.

Sunlight spilled through the drapes, casting a golden glow onto the bed and our naked bodies.

Sex and her sweet perfume drenched our master bedroom.

“Oh, Kaz!” Moaning, Emily lay on her side while I slowly pumped my cock into her from behind.

With my other hand, I caressed her swollen clit. “You like that, *mysh*?”

“Yes, baby.”

“Are you going to take this cock all day?”

“Fuck yes.”

Groaning, I drove my cock deeper into her.

Then, suddenly, her phone rang. This time it wasn't the usual tone. Instead, it was a loud shrilling chime.

“Oh wait.” Emily reached back and touched my hip, trying to stop my strokes. “That's Misha.”

“That is the last thing I want to hear while I am deep inside of you.” I thrust hard into her pussy.

“Kaz.” She tried to scoot away. “I need to answer that.”

I gripped her hips. “Are you trying to have me kill my cousin?”

“Move.” Emily shoved my hands away and struggled with getting up.

We were toward of the end of her pregnancy and moving around proved to be more and more of a challenge for her each day.

I pulled my cock out of her. “Why the hell are you stopping sex to talk to Misha?”

“His people are watching J.P. and Eden.” She slid off the bed and grabbed her phone. “He told me he would call when Eden was having her baby.”

“Surely, that could still wait.” I sat up in bed.

“Kaz, it cannot wait—”

“I have needs, *mysh!*”

“You need to shut your spoiled ass up.” She turned on the phone and placed it next to her ear. “Hello. Yeah. Really? Are you sure?”

I gazed down at my wet cock. “Is she serious?”

“Yay! I’m so excited.” She put Misha on speaker.

To my annoyance, Misha’s voice filled the room, completely erasing my erection. “Eden has her midwife team with her. Jean-Pierre’s property is crowded with family and friends.”

“Yeah, but what about the baby?” Emily slowly headed over to her robe that was draped on the chaise lounge near the window.

“There is no baby yet.” Misha cleared his throat. “Emily, she just went into labor and our belief is that she will have a water birth.”

“Okay. What does that mean for me?” Emily picked up her robe. “Can you still get some footage?”

Something spilled from her thigh.

I squinted my eyes.

*What is that?*

It was an odd fluid streaming down her thighs and legs.

*What the hell?*

Misha continued, “Unfortunately, we will not be able to get footage of the birth, but we should be able to get some pictures of the baby once born.”

“Aww.” Emily began putting the robe on as more fluid streamed down her leg. “Can’t we at least put a camera in the ocean or on a tree branch?”

“Ocean or tree branch?” Misha sighed. “Here we are a team of highly intellectual technicians, yet *you* have solved it all for us. Sure, we will just put a camera in the ocean.”

“*Mysh?*” I got out of the bed and headed toward her.

“No need to be an asshole, Misha. I was just saying.” Emily rolled her eyes. “Thanks for doing this for me.”

“You’re welcome, Emily.”

“By any chance will you be allowing Max to come home or are you going to just continue to keep him from me?”

“I am sorry, Emily. I believe our connection is breaking up.”

“Sure it is.” She hung up and rolled her eyes again.

I stood in front of her, grabbed her robe, and snatched it open.

“What are you doing, Kaz?”

My nerves flared. “Your water broke.”

“What?” She gazed down at her legs. “Oh my God!”

“It is happening.”

“Fuck.”

I hurried to my pajama pants and roared, “David! Blue! Giorgio!”

\* \* \*

Nerve-shattering minutes passed. I was a wreck, worried that we might forget something or the baby would come too soon.

Wassily phoned Valentina and Maxwell.

Baba promised to sit in with Paolo's lessons and take care of him until we returned.

It must have taken us twenty minutes to leave the mansion.

David made sure that streets were blocked to keep all traffic away.

Next, he had a team of police cars escort us to the hospital.

Once there, two doctors and five nurses waited for us with a wheelchair.

In a matter of minutes, we rushed to her private hospital suite on the top floor.

When we got Emily comfortable, Blue gathered Harlem Crew and began instructing them on securing the hospital.

It had been so quiet for the rest of this pregnancy that I constantly wondered if my enemies lurked within the shadows waiting to strike at my weakest moment like during my mouse's delivery.

Thank God, King David had more of the Brotherhood surrounding the hospital.

Meanwhile, Giorgio and Wassily remained by the door with their guns out.

Soon, Blue and David returned and relieved them.

Probably not interested in all the fluids and the sight of labor, Giorgio rushed out of there.

David nodded at me. "Everything is secure. Misha's people are monitoring anything that we can't see."

"Good." I turned to my mouse and held her hand. "How are you feeling, *mysh*?"

She squeezed my fingers. "Not bad. I thought my contractions would hurt, but they just feel like intense menstrual cramps."

I exhaled. "Thank God."

\* \* \*

Hours later, Emily released bloodcurdling screams. When she wasn't screaming, she cursed me for getting her pregnant and yelled at the doctors to give her some pain relievers. At times she made primal noises that I didn't know she could and began threatening people with violence.

I felt helpless. The most I could do was massage her back and shoulders. When she was thirsty, I wiped the beads of sweat off her face and held a glass to her lips to give her sips of water. But I knew all of that wasn't enough.

For hours and hours, my mouse endured, coated in sweat and grabbing hold to my arms.

It wasn't until the middle of the night when her cervix was fully dilated.

Many times, she dug her fingers deep into my arms, gripping and clawing at me.

It hurt, but I could take it. She was the one in true anguish. And I was so fucking amazed by her strength. "You're doing great, *mysh*."

"Fuck you, Kaz!"

"Yes, baby."

Dr. Stovall raised his mask over his face and placed gloves on. "It appears that you are ready, Emily."

"Then, get it started!" Tears streamed down her face as she squeezed my arm. "Jesus Christ!"

Dr. Stovall placed his gloved hands along her opening. "You are fully dilated, Emily."

"Give me more of those drugs!" She yanked at my arm. "Tell him, Kaz! Make him do it now! It hurts!"

Dr. Stovall signaled for the nurses to come over. "I can see the head. Everyone get ready."

Another powerless hour went by as I watched God and Emily show their power to me.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Emilio slipped out, coated in muck and wagging his arms and legs. An umbilical cord was attached to his belly and coming out of my mouse.

“Fuck!” Emily let her head fall back against the pillows. “Oh my God! I’m never doing that again. Never.”

Stunned, I held on to Emily with my eyes wide and my mouth parted, looking at our son.

Dr. Stovall suctioned his mouth and nose. “Grab the umbilical cord clamps.”

A nurse hurried over with two plastic clamps and placed them both inches apart from each other on the umbilical cord.

Dr. Stovall held my little Emilio and looked to me. “Are you ready to cut the cord?”

Terrified, I slowly let go of Emily and hurried over. “What do I do?”

A nurse handed me small scissors. “Cut in the center. Right between the clamps.”

“That will not hurt him?”

Dr. Stovall smiled. “We practiced, Kazimir. Go ahead.”

I went over and followed the nurse’s directions. Once I cut the cord, Dr. Stovall wrapped Emilio in a blanket and carried him away.

*Oh my God.*

I quickly returned to Emily.

Exhaustion showed all over her face as she just stared at the ceiling. Panting, she whispered, “How...is...he?”

“Beautiful. Perfect. Just like you.” My eyes watered as I held her. “You were amazing.”

Emilio cried out on the other side of the room.

I snapped my view his away. “Dear God. We have a baby, *mysh.*”

“We do.” Emily’s chest rose and fell. “Don’t let me fall asleep, Kaz. I want to hold him.”



“But, you are tired.”

“Don’t...let me...”

“I will do my best.” I wiped sweat off her forehead, leaned over, and placed several kisses on her forehead. “I love you so fucking much, *mysh*.”

“I’m sorry for screaming and cursing at you.”

I shrugged and held her. “I do not remember that at all.”

“Liar.” She slowly closed her eyes. “I’m just resting...a little. Don’t let me...fall...asleep...”

I ran my fingers through her hair. “But one would say you should get some rest.”

Emilio cried as the nurses cleaned and assessed him.

I looked up at the door.

David grinned. “Congratulations to the both of you.”

Meanwhile, a red tint covered Blue’s face as she watched everything.

David gestured at the door. “Several people are in the lobby—Valentina, Maxwell, Misha—”

“They can all wait.” I kept my voice low. “But, get all those surprises for my mouse that I bought last week. I want her to see everything when she wakes up.”

They both nodded and hurried away.

I gazed back down at Emily while she slept. “All this time I thought I possessed everything that was important in this world. But, you showed me that I had nothing at all. Not one important thing.”

Tears left my eyes.

I wiped them away.

David opened the door and let two of our men in. “Stay out of the staff’s way and keep quiet.”

The men carried vases and baskets full of flowers into the room. I had no idea which flower would be perfect so I had

made sure every type would arrive on the day my son was born.

Next, other men brought in tons of packages. They were a plethora of gifts that I knew Emily would enjoy—boxes of furs and diamond jewelry, exotic chocolates and expensive perfumes.

I even bought a few wigs that I hoped she would wear one day.

Once the men placed them near the bed, they rushed back out and Dr. Stovall carried my son over to me. “Poor Emily is asleep?”

“Yes.” I got ready to wake her.

“No, Kazimir.” He shook his head. “Let her sleep.”

“But, I promised.”

“She will have plenty of time to hold him. For now, she should get her rest.” Dr. Stovall brought Emilio over to me. “However, for you, there will be no sleep.”

“I am fine with that.” I held out my hands.

Dr. Stovall handed Emilio over to me.

I got my son and cradled him in my arms. “So tiny.”

He had a golden tan complexion. Short black curls outlined his small face. Already, I knew that he had my chin and Emily’s nose. He gazed back at me with little hazel eyes.

“Thank you, doctor.” I looked up and realized that Dr. Stovall and the nurses were already gone. “I will have to thank them later.”

Emilio formed his fingers into little fists and shifted in my arms.

“Emilio Kazimirovich Solonik. My lion cub. That’s what you are.” I wanted to run my fingers down his face, but was scared to hurt him. “Hello.”

He opened his tiny mouth and yawned.

“Are you just as tired as your mother?”

He watched me.

Shivering, I studied those eyes, seeing the presence of a divine God deep within them. “You’re mine. All mine. And I promise to protect you for the rest of my life.”

My eyes watered again, but I would not let my son’s first vision of his world be his father crying.

I walked away and held Emilio closer to me. “There are so many things I will show you. This world...is magical.”

I got to the window and held his head up a little bit to place his view on the outside world. “Can you see that?”

Emilio looked around at the window, but I wasn’t sure if he could truly see what I was trying to show him.

“That circle in the sky is the moon. Bright and glowing.” I lowered him back and cradled his little body close to my chest.

*Please, God...let me be...a good father.*

Nervous energy surged through me, but I did my best to push it back down.

I studied Emilio some more. It was unfair how helpless and vulnerable he was.

*You are safe with me. No one will ever harm you.*

My heart ached.

Slowly rocking him, I gazed up at the dark sky and focused on the bright moon. “Long ago, I walked this planet looking up at this same moon and being so captivated with it.”

I looked back down.

Emilio puckered his lips as if trying to figure out how they worked.

“Never did I think anything else could capture my heart as much as the moon, but I would find out one day that I was very wrong.” I glanced back at the bed, gazing at Emily—my mouse, his mother.

I swallowed and turned back to him. “I forgot to introduce myself, little one.”

He puckered those lips again.

“I am the Lion.” I pushed through my fear and gently touched his ear. The soft flesh smoothed against my fingertip.

Emilio blinked at me.

“I used to spend my days like a real ferocious lion. Roaring. Killing. Destroying all my enemies.”

Emilio snuggled closer to me and slowly closed his eyes.

“You see, son. I thought that my destiny was to embark on a violent, bloody rampage of the earth. I was sure that death and war were the only things that made life worth living.” I shivered in pure amazement, watching him sleep. “And then, the Lion met the Mouse.”

[Jump on my NEWSLETTER to get Lion and Mouse Bonus Chapters starting in February.](#)

By the way, I asked KW patrons what Lion and Mouse bonus chapters I should write. These were some of their ideas:

- Emily holding the baby
- Maxwell and Ufuoma heading back to Nigeria.
- Giorgio moving into the Lion and Mouse’s house...down the hall from Blue and David’s room.

- The crazy women in New Orleans getting the Lion's invitation and what she does to the guys.
- Out of nowhere many people mentioned a Rolan and Mrs. Jones scene

[Join my Patreon community to help guide my books and be part of the fun.](#)

The image shows a screenshot of a Patreon page with three membership tiers. The tiers are: Bronze Babes (\$10/month), Silver Swans (\$15/month), and Gold Goddesses (\$25/month). The Gold Goddesses tier is marked as 'MOST POPULAR' and 'Limited (40 of 100 remaining)'. Each tier includes a 'Join' button and a list of benefits.

Tier	Price	Benefits
Bronze Babes	\$10 / month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Marvelous Monday's Weekly exclusive episodes of new or completely revamped KW stories: <b>Behind-the-Scenes Access</b></li> <li>Blog updated weekly discussing what I am writing.</li> <li>Creative sketches</li> <li>Behind-the-scenes: Book covers, characters images, teasers</li> </ul>
Silver Swans	\$15 / month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>ALL THINGS Bronze Babes in addition to:</b></li> <li><b>1) Access to Specialty Posts:</b> One example of a specialty post is <b>Inside of You</b> which are episodes that feature <b>KW Alphas</b> trying to be books of <b>YK&amp;K</b>. The story is in second person.</li> <li>Weekly in-progress chapters (unedited)</li> <li>Specialty Posts (i.e. Inside of You)</li> </ul>
Gold Goddesses	\$25 / month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>ALL THINGS Bronze Babes &amp; Silver Swans in addition to:</b></li> <li><b>1) Fuck, Marry, Kill Monthly Drawing:</b> Winner will be made into a character in one of my upcoming stories.</li> <li>1 full size draw for your table</li> <li>E-Book copy of KW (St Taylor Rose) New</li> </ul>