

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CARI SILVERWOOD



CNC
FRATERNITY

HIS

T

TALISMAN

A DARK ROMANCE

HIS TALISMAN

CNC FRATERNITY

BOOK TWO

CARI SILVERWOOD

ABOUT HIS TALISMAN

CHARITY

Kidnapped and locked away forever.

I'm too dangerous to be released, for my testimony could destroy the CNC Fraternity.

Until the doctor gives me another choice—to live on his private island, as his toy. Despite my fears, I say yes.

When Cassius, an ex-soldier, arrives, the doctor invites him into the relationship. Although Cassius hints at terrible secrets, I am soon enraptured.

They make me whimper and beg...and more, much more.

I can accept my craving for pain and brutality, but am I falling for bad men?

I have begun to explore the island to discover the truth.

Dark unearthly secrets will be brought into the light.

There are more triggers in this dark romance than stars in the sky. Contains flashbacks to sexual assault.

[More detailed content warnings can be found on my website](#)

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[About Cari Silverwood](#)

[Also by Cari Silverwood](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

C HARITY

Blood could be shocking when it was your own.

By his scent I knew him—even when I was blindfolded.

I grew to learn when the doctor entered the room, my cell, or the swaying, wave-rolled cabin of that unknown ship. The scent changed day by day, but never seemed right for a man. Lavender, rosemary, and the perfume of roses accompanied him, from his first step in the room, on that first occasion.

Some might think that would make him less a man but his eyes, if not his manners, gave him away. I could be left breathless simply by a casual connection, by the sweep of his gaze down my body. For that to happen with a man who was present to help me, even if he did have to lay hands on me, or instruments inside me...it was fucked up.

That first time, the first time I saw him, I was barely a person. I was shaken, bloodied, bruised, and sure that I was torn below.

The blood around my fingernails held me in horrified thrall.

When illuminated by the dusty light coming in through the smudged glass of the porthole, my hands were sad things. Every nail was shredded, torn, and bloodied. My wrists were bruised. Between my legs ached with deep pains, and now and then more urgent pains twinged at me. Yet it was my hands that bothered me the most. As I moved them, they shook. My chest was tight with shock and a need to breathe. Each moment seemed likely to erupt into fear and danger.

I'd felt my face, and it was swollen and almost as painful as below. One eye still wept liquid after I stopped crying.

These fingernails, though, they were stark evidence of the fight, and I could not avoid seeing them.

My throat hurt from the screaming or from their hands around it, but I could not *see* that.

These I could see. I frowned at them. Finally, anger stirred.

I was alive. I would stay alive and not succumb to misery. I wouldn't lie here moaning and rocking. *Fuck the men who raped me.* Fuck them to hell and back.

Anger was good. Anger was empowering.

The cabin door clicked, and the handle rotated. I snatched myself into a sitting position, wincing and stiff. The twist of the handcuffs abraded the wounds on my wrists. The harsh blanket slid from my upper body to my lap then to the floor. I was sitting up and glaring by the time the door swung open. His brown sneakers *thunked* as they landed on the metal floor. I shivered and covered my chest, as best as I could. Minus the blanket, my nakedness reminded me of the cold on the ship.

The handcuffs had scraped my thighs. Even there I was bruised and already purple in broad lines and in places where their hands had grabbed. *Fuck them,* I reminded myself as a broad-shouldered man approached, slowly.

A shiver ran through me. He couldn't be worse than them.

I'd stabbed one of them with a dropped knife. That incident flung itself into my memory, turned my stomach with newly fresh nausea. Maybe that was why they'd hurt me

badly. My screams, from that night, echoed anew. More tears flooded my eyes.

Shit. Get a fucking grip. Survive this. It's all I can do.

I swallowed and braced myself. If he meant to assault me, I would endure, I would live.

Best if I didn't stab anyone again. Last time it had not worked out well.

Unless I can make them really, really dead, and then escape.

He'd paused a moment, studying my face, while I took in his neat cream T-shirt, with the kraken illustration on the front, and his dark jeans. He looked as if he'd just returned from a holiday at the beach. He came closer and placed a gray metal case on the floor, a few feet away.

What was in that case? The unknown was frightening, as was he.

"Hello. I'm a doctor." He spoke quietly, with a burr running through it. Maybe that was his bedside manner but there was no politeness in the way his gaze catalogued every inch of my nakedness in a languid, dragging assessment.

I blinked and cleared my throat, running through the possibilities. Although I was handcuffed, what doctor would be here if this was...bad. Had the police been involved? The men had fled from me, leaving me lying on the deck with my hands bound. Gunshots and male screams had echoed as I wobbled in and out of consciousness. Someone must have injected me with something, soon after that. I remembered a cold sting. I'd lapsed into unconsciousness.

"I'm here on behalf of the CNC Fraternity, which I'm informed you know of. They want you well, but you won't be freed."

Disturbed by his announcement, I swallowed. They wanted me well—that was something to cling to.

Except... What did they mean to do with me?

Did I detect a hint of pity in those stark gray eyes? Of sorrow even?

This doctor was working outside the law.

With a toss of my head, I flicked aside the tendrils of damp hair cloaking my face. I tried to make that casual, but it hurt my neck, and the hair came back to fall over my eyes. I decided not to use my cuffed hands to push at it. I was on top of this. Messy hair was nothing.

“Hi, doc.” I smirked. Now I did raise my hands, to gesture at my battered face. “Understand me, please.” I twisted my lips at my stupidly polite *please*. “*This* does not define me.”

DR. H ROMANUS aka HULK

This does not define me. Brave words.

Her words traveled into my chest and reached my heart. An ache settled and deepened, and I mulled over why I had hardened myself. The seconds, minutes, days, of watching humans at play, work, and war had encased my heart in fatigue. It wasn't bitterness. I was jaded. I'd seen it all. My wall was made of centuries of the seriously nasty things people liked to do to each other, piled up brick by brick.

How fucked up was I then to see past her brutalized face and body and feel not just compassion and sorrow and a need to comfort, but the stirrings of desire. I could see her beauty, and I admired her statement, no matter how useless it would be.

Being a physician did not eradicate lusts, and my lusts leaned into the dark side. I held out for the argument that it was not my thoughts that counted but my actions.

If I wished to, I could control myself, even when the women were healthy and spread before me naked and begging for it.

And this one? This woman? Jesus himself would probably weep if I dared to touch her with any fucked-up fucking in mind.

“Stand up, please, if you can?”

She nodded and after a small hesitation, stood for me.

“Turn. I want to see the bruising before I palpate for deeper injuries.”

Apart from wincing, she did that too.

I unlocked the case and removed the stethoscope and ophthalmoscope. These were simple but adequate devices. If she needed X-rays or anything more complex than ultrasound, I would have to finesse something. The CNC Fraternity had a wide reach and a pool of exceptionally rich professionals to call upon. If she needed it, I would get it done.

“Your chest sounds clear. Still...” I began to palpate the ribs, noting when she drew away that it was only a mild reaction. “Thank you for being cooperative. This is good. Nothing is fractured. Up here though, I’m not sure. You can sit for this.” I moved my focus to her face and checked her jaw and her left eye carefully. Her reflexes and sight were normal, so was the interior of the eye, though the peri-orbital trauma was extensive. “You’ve been lucky. Not even a dislodged tooth. You will have a scar here.” I gently touched above her eyebrow. The bone had caught a blow, and the skin had split. A staple would fix that.

“Lucky?” she said quietly, letting out a short laugh.

“*Ahhh*. The bitterness comes. I can hear it in your voice. The anger surfaces. You should be angry.”

“You mock me, pretend you empathize, and yet if I ask you to free me, you’ll say no?”

“I cannot. Forget that idea. You know too much.”

“And, umm.” Hesitant, she raised her pretty brown eyes to mine. I waited for what she needed to say and noted the movement of her throat. Very nervous and worried, at a guess—no surprise there. “My friend? Emme? Is she okay?”

“I know her name. Yes, she lives. She is with her...what should I call them?”

“Fucktard Doms?” Her mouth firmed, writhed. Her sniff was dismissive and defiant.

This woman had balls.

I chuckled. “Those fucktard Doms have her, yes. She is okay.”

“Good. And thank you.”

“Not a problem. It isn’t a secret. Not to me. Not to you. It’s good to make fun of things sometimes.”

“Laughing hurts too.”

“It will pass. Now, I need you to lie down, so I can examine you more intimately.”

“Oh.” A frown flitted across her forehead. “Can you make it not hurt?”

“As much as I can, I will. I have to use a speculum.”

I helped her lower herself onto her back on the bunk. The curious etiquette of shielding patients from what you did to them with a cloth was absurd, especially with her. I let her see what I did.

From the bruising, she was lucky the damage wasn’t far worse. They’d strangled her, beaten her, raped her anally and vaginally.

“You have some internal vaginal injuries. Nothing has been perforated, which is encouraging. There are some shallow tears in the rectal tissue but also nothing serious. That’s almost normal for anal sex.”

She shrugged, but some of the tension left her.

They’d probably put something foreign inside her. A knife hilt pushed in past the guard was my best guess—knowing what had happened and having seen what they left.

“I can see you’re cold. I’ll have them bring more blankets. You’ll have antibiotics to take, and a pill to ensure you don’t

get pregnant.” From her grimace, she hadn’t thought of that. I rummaged in the case and found syringes, needles, vials, and began to draw up painkiller and antibiotic injections. “This ship is due in port soon. You will be discreetly moved ashore.”

“My name is Charity.”

“I know.” Now it was I who hesitated. Names had power. Witches and demons loved them. I was not giving her mine. “I’ll make sure they let me check on you as needed in the coming days, Charity.”

“Help me get away? Please?” She raised her hands to cover her mouth and peered up at me, from her good right eye. Her voice had dropped from the soft noises it had made before into a strained rasp. My mouth twitched in sympathy. Her throat was purple in places.

I shook my head.

“How can you call yourself a doctor?” Her expression crumpled for a second before she sniffled and reassembled her armor. She stared at me, grimly.

“It’s still no.”

After stapling the wound, drawing a blood sample, and giving her the injections and pills, I packed up the case. “I’ll take off the handcuffs.” She wasn’t going out through the porthole. I removed them using the key in my pocket, then tucked the cuffs into the pocket with the key.

“I’m appealing to your morals. Free me. I won’t talk.”

Gently, I drifted my fingers across her temple, pushing back her hair so I could see those bruised, pretty eyes. I had an urge to touch her more than this but pulled away my hand. “We can’t free you.” I’d spilled a little truth by saying we.

She dared to whisper bitter words I could barely hear, then said, “How can you live with yourself?”

“Practice.”

She was one among many, down the years. Trying to rescue this particular girl was like taking a cup of water from the ocean.

As I walked away down the ship's passageway, I found myself looking forward to seeing her again. Fifty-fifty she'd throw something at me.

Or maybe she wouldn't. She seemed smart.

I would have ordered the men who raped her tested for transmissible diseases, but they'd been disposed of—ditched at sea and dismembered, their bodies sunken deep. I'd arrange testing for her at intervals.

Lost girls like Charity were everywhere. Maybe, when I saw her next, I would give her some advice on how to survive from now on. Such as, be less ballsy and confrontational? She was a troublemaker, a defiant brat. What could be done with a lost girl like her?

I ran through a few of the grubbier choices in my head: sex trafficking, the organ trade, cheap labor, and snuff films. The fraternity didn't normally deal with criminal acts, especially not murder, and most of the board were dithering. Some of the members would be thoroughly, hands-deep in illegal activities but they didn't reveal it.

Making her disappear was the general aim they had agreed on.

"I don't need another lost girl," I muttered to myself. I'd sworn off them. I'd sworn off being a savior, a peacemaker, a man who tried to influence the way the world spun in the void.

CHARITY

The door was sealed, the handle locked, and I sat on the bed like a statue, staring at nothing for a while. Tears ran down my face. The emptiness of this room sank in, drowning me with an overwhelming sense of hopelessness.

The doctor was the only person who had helped me since my arrival on this ship and since the assault. I felt bereft and

hollow, my stomach roiling with nausea, and he'd not really done anything more than he had to, had he?

No. Except for that touch. *My skin remembered him.* The tactile shock from his hand moving my hair aside in that last moment, before he denied my plea and left—that had been a small earthquake. Gentleness and compassion had been wrapped in his touch. A man's hand.

My tortured insides had quivered. Not with desire, not that, just recognition.

I inhaled. My nostrils dilated, my eyes closing. I'd registered the solidness of the doctor from that miniscule brush of skin on skin.

"How can you live with yourself?"

"Practice," he said.

He'd drawled out that word, deep voice caressing the syllables. How could I like a man who was so fucking immoral?

I breathed slower, imagining my palm on him, pushing on his chest and him not moving.

My memory of what good men felt like was doing this to me. Or it was concussion?

I snorted. Leaning over my lap, I absentmindedly combed my fingers through either side of my hair. *Ouch* again. Lumps were there.

His gray eyes had been...quiet, unreadable. He'd told me I would see him again. I must try to reach inside him next time, to find his better self. I had to try.

The doctor was a heavy man, with an imprint like a building. I'd seen muscles moving beneath his cream shirt and his scent lingered. I raised my head and shut my eyes to smell the air without the interference of sight. Rosemary? How odd.

The floor before me was rolling more. We were heading for that port, where they would unload me. I clenched my hands into fists and swore as my fingers complained. More

hurts. Guess I was lucky nothing was broken. My ankle was aching too, and I hadn't even noticed it before.

C *HARITY*

I tried to keep track of how many days I'd been their prisoner—whichever the people at the top of this organization really were—but whenever they moved me from boat to shore or truck to house, they drugged me. A reversal agent popped me back to clarity, fast, but I was never sure if it'd been days or hours.

The doctor was less talkative the next time he came to me, in the darkened, shuttered room with the luxurious furnishings and the anchor bolts on the bed corners. I couldn't even get him to state the day and month.

Blood samples were drawn, eyes and chest were examined, and then there were those uncomfortable yet brisk internal checks. I couldn't help but feel sensations I knew I should not. He watched me silently as he probed down there.

My thoughts roved into lurid fantasies, no matter how I tried to shut them down.

With everything checked off, inspections accomplished, he gave me a nod and made to leave, having ignored my questions. He had only said a few words that were instructions: stand, sit, turn, does this hurt. I had almost lied, just to get a response.

At the last moment, while facing the reinforced door, he promised to get me a TV to watch.

That night, in the dark, I masturbated to my memories of the doctor, imagining him doing things to me, bending me over my bed and spanking me, then shoving himself inside while I pleaded with him not to...endlessly pleading while he fucked me hard and told me I was bad for tempting him. I came, curled over my hand, gasping into the pillow, trying to conceal what I'd done from any peeping tom cameras as I wound down from the orgasm.

Like magic, the TV arrived the next day. The flatscreen was screwed to the wall—so I couldn't play with the insides, I guess. As if I could use the wiry innards to kill a guard?

Killing myself would be the best I could imagine myself doing, but I wasn't built like that. Suicide was not in my deck of cards. Not today, Hellboy.

It was a morbid thought.

This place might be a more permanent accommodation, judging by the clothes and toiletries they'd left in the room. I had a proper bathroom but no window at eye level. Thankfully, just below the high ceiling, a line of squares of un-openable glass let in sunlight. The mattress was so luxurious and body hugging I'd felt sleep pulling at me the instant I lay down. I'd sunk myself there, watching yellow light twist and wave on that faraway ceiling.

What house had no window you could reach to see out of? Wind sighing through trees and the lack of traffic noises made me suspect this place was built away from roads and towns, somewhere in a forest. I dwelled on this house at night, while staring up at the swaying shadows and half-asleep. It was, in essence, a creepy place. They could bury me out there, and no one would know they had done so. No one would find me for years.

A lonely, forgotten grave where I would rot to bones, and a hundred years from now, they would dig me up and wonder.

Assuming I was right about the land surrounding the house.

Of course, they *had* made me well again. Which meant killing me would be silly.

The steel wall-mirror showed a pink line through my eyebrow and the swelling and bruising was gone. It almost seemed too fast for those bruises to vanish. The memories were both fading and an ever-present nightmare.

I wanted them gone. I wanted them to stay to remind myself to kill someone in revenge.

I had a limp, though.

They might have fucked with my sense of time more than I knew.

And what of Emme? Asking too many questions of the cleaners or guards resulted in punishment: no food or being blindfolded and gagged the next time they entered. They never answered me, anyway. I took to annoying them when I was bored, which was almost always. I asked for books, for their names, for more books, for the latest news, for lessons in martial arts.

The latter made one of the guards snort, laugh, then shake his head. Score one to me.

I asked and asked, and subsequently dieted more than I should, and wore a ball gag a few times. They soon learned that I could mumble around those.

Even if this were better than being assaulted, this treatment was unnatural.

If they kept me silent, speechless, and in the shadows for too long, would I peter out and soak into the floor? People needed the company of others. It was how we worked.

Watching TV was never going to be like breathing the same air as someone else, as exchanging kisses, words, and skin-on-skin contact.

The third time the doctor visited, when he left, he told me I no longer needed his attention. I was healed physically.

“And am I healed mentally?” I asked him, too angry to hold back my scowl. That brought me a flicker of his mouth,

then a grunt.

“Answer me!”

He still left.

The door clicked shut.

Fuming, I threw a shoe at the door, then every object I could find in reach.

I began scratching marks on the wall with a sharpened toothbrush end, to mark the passing of time. I had a notepad, but damaging the wall was more satisfying. They took away my toothbrush, for a while.

The hours, the weeks, dragged by. I nagged the helpers and guards, just to get a response. Punishment said I was real, and they didn't do much to me, not really.

How long had it been since I felt the sun on my body? That question was niggling me the day I heard his voice again, outside in the hallway. On one arm, I propped myself off the bed, swung up to sit on the edge. I'd only ever glimpsed the hallway, because an anonymous voice on a speaker ordered me to lie face down on the bed whenever a cleaner or guard was about to visit. The speakers were well hidden, as were those cameras I was sure existed.

His footsteps approached, then the lock and the handle were manipulated.

He entered with the familiar gray case in hand and held open the door with his foot. I remained seated, wondering what to say and what that open door meant. I crushed my piddling dream of freedom. It would not be that.

What to say? Nothing had worked before.

Obi-wan, you're my only hope, skittered across my thoughts, and I half-smiled to myself. If only I had a jedi to call on.

He wore a weary yet impenetrable expression. I'd come to expect a certain ignorance of my existence except for those rare times when a frisson swept him. Had I said something, or had I winced at an injection, or moved in a way that drew his

attention? Whatever I did that triggered him, the universe swam whenever he pinned me with a dissecting, heart-stopping stare. *What have I here*, I imagined was his thought.

A shimmy of matching awareness would consume me. I loved those brooding moments, for they meant I was a woman again, a person who was not just a victim.

Was it shallow to need someone's attention to see myself as real?

Totally, Charity, you idiot. And talking to myself was a sign of insanity.

"Come with me." The doctor beckoned, crooking his fingers.

Stupidly, I hesitated. The room had become my safe place. "Where am I going?"

"Wherever I choose to take you." He sighed. "To a garden, outside, so we can talk."

Talking? Awesome. But...to a garden!

I followed him, curious that I was going somewhere without being drugged or handcuffed. I was silent. If I said the wrong thing, I might wreck this opportunity.

He led me down a wide hallway, and although most of the doors to other rooms were closed, I dared to glimpsed inside one door that lay to the left. Within was a daylight-washed room with large white tiles laid out in a geometric design picked out in black. Sofas squatted in an arc.

We walked onward.

He brought us to a white-painted door, with a chunky brushed steel handle, and swung it open. From beyond, brightness cascaded in.

Cautiously, I padded outward, into the sky-capped realm of the outdoors. A breeze caressed me, soothing my skin with zephyr hints of coolness, and I inhaled. *Glorious.*

A meandering path of terracotta paving stones led to a pale-timbered gray bench. Trees and a high stone wall

encapsulated this little world of green lawn and red and mauve flowering shrubs. The wall kept the garden area small, but birds twittered and rustled somewhere above.

A man kneeled on the grass, with his brown hair caught back in a rough tie, dirt-smearred clothes, and with a small shovel in hand. He was clearly the gardener. His bare muscled arms gleamed with sweat. He checked us out for a few seconds before returning to weeding.

We had an audience, and if I yelled, he would do nothing. I knew that by now.

When the doctor patted the bench, I sat clumsily. I was stunned by the change in scenery after all those monotonous days in my room. I had to shift along when he sat beside me. The scent of lavender strengthened. A lavender day, today. Today was also a gray-shirt and dark brown pants day.

The lines on his face seemed too close. Ditto, the faint stubble, the shaven sides of his peppery dark hair, and the strong sculpting of his mouth, jaw, and neck. I remembered the shock of his hands touching me.

To let myself breathe, I looked elsewhere—at sky and edge of wall, at the blues and the mellow, watercolor clouds. It felt as though I were inside a painting.

Tears welled. Was it wrong to sit beside this stranger and be grateful for being allowed to see sky?

“Here.” He offered me a white handkerchief.

I took it, gingerly. “I didn’t know these still existed.”

“Handkerchiefs? I’m old-fashioned. It’s clean. Blow your nose.”

I chanced a look at him as I shoved the cloth to my nose and blew. Old fashioned? He seemed the wrong age. Maybe doctors were allowed to pretend to be ancient. Maybe it was just him, but he was too young.

On the other hand, how old was he?

“How...um, old are you?” I cocked an eyebrow his way. Was he early to late thirties? Or older than that? Older, I

thought.

“*Hmmm.*”

This was talking, of course it was, and joy gently blossomed inside me. It was stupid to react like this to something as simple as conversation.

“Names and ages.” He studied the wall or the trees, as he thought, and the man had rusted cogwheels in there, turning slow as creation. “I don’t think I trust you enough, yet, to give those.”

I choked back a laugh. Him? He did not trust me? I guess it made some sense.

“Yet?” I ventured.

He shifted his butt on the seat but didn’t slouch. He never relaxed in my presence. Low-slanting sunlight, peeking over the wall, sifted gold into the tips of his short, dark hair. It must be late afternoon.

“I’ve read the research on you, Charity. You write for a living but have never told anyone who knows you.”

“Oh. That. You’ve been researching me. Of course you have.” I eyerolled. “I write erotic stories, and yes, I make... made a good income. Yes, it was a secret.” And all that was another life away, another me. “How did you find out?”

“Everything you own was cleared out by the CNC Fraternity. Your lease was paid up and terminated. Laptop, phone, shoes, mementos, everything down to your underwear has been taken from your flat.”

And kept somewhere. I prayed it was so. Those things were still mine.

“How kind of them. Not.” I swallowed the sad lump in my throat. I didn’t bother saying, *how dare they*.

“Yes.” He glanced sideways and let his gaze drift down my body all the way to the leaf litter under my bare feet. My short yellow dress suddenly seemed too short. I tugged at the hem, as if I had anything worth concealing from this doctor. “You asked for books to read. Like the ones in your bookshelf?”

“Why are we talking? Are you going to help me? Please?” The *please* was dredged from somewhere deep, unwillingly. It was wise to say that word but, *ugh*, it made me feel dirty. Dirtier than my smutty writing ever did. “You can’t keep me here forever. You just can’t.” I imagined myself at one hundred and two still wistfully looking at this wall, while hanging onto a walking frame.

They had done terrible things to me, or their business associates had, and they were still doing them. I held the pulse of anger and resentment inside, balled in my chest, vicelike in determination.

Don’t fuck this up.

“They can. I have an offer. If I were to free you...”

Finally, I let myself hope.

“If I do, it will be on my terms, and you will never be allowed to leave where I place you without my consent. I’m still considering if this is worthwhile.”

My hope burned.

“Worthwhile? Fuck you,” I blurted.

I cringed as soon as I said it.

He gave a harsh sigh, bordering on exasperation.

I was a fool. Still, this was impossible. The tears had started again, my nose was running, and I had a bizarre wish to blow my nose on his shirt. To hell with kissing ass.

I glared at him.

“Be patient, Charity.”

My jaw muscles tensed as I clamped my teeth.

“Okay.” I exhaled. “I’m being patient. Go on.” Even going to wherever it was he took me had to be better than here? It had to be. I *needed* it to be.

Plus I would try to escape. Here was tightly controlled.

“Trust me.”

“Huh?” I frowned, as he held out his hand to me.

He uncurled his fingers, showing his palm. “Put your hand here.” His much larger hand waited above where mine rested on my leg.

“I don’t know you well enough,” I whispered. He’d stuck a speculum inside me. It wasn’t the same, somehow. “You’re a stranger.”

“Considering you’ve spread your legs for me—”

“That is your profession.”

“True. I’ll tell you some facts.” He withdrew and instead rested his arm along the back of the bench, turning to face me fully. “I am a member of the CNC Fraternity and not just the doctor for them. I have unusual kinks, and I know you know what happens there, from Emme.”

I gulped and wished he hadn’t seen the movement of my throat. I dropped my focus to the slats of the bench. His hand had seemed scary and powerful, weighted with unknowns. Maybe where he would take me to wasn’t safer than here? Maybe I should stay and wait to turn gray?

“When I asked you to free me, this was not what I meant.” I stared at my knees, as if they knew the answer. The dumb-ass things gave me nothing back.

“It’s what you get.”

“You’re trying to discourage me?”

He grunted and shrugged, making his crisp shirt fold and slip across his chest, reminding me he had a male body under there.

“Well, you are.”

“You like spanking and light domination.”

The heat of a blush rushed over my face. Him knowing about my smutty books was somehow less embarrassing than this, and I’d been to BDSM clubs. “So what? I’m not sure I’m sane to be thinking about doing...this.” Did he want a sex slave?

“I’m probably insane to be offering.”

So we were both crazy.

My head was in chaos trying to maneuver between what was wise, my libido, my need to be free, and who knew what else.

“You begged me. That part I liked.” I watched and didn’t edge away as he pushed his bench-leaning arm nearer and raised his hand to gently run his fingers along my jaw. Then his thumb found the corner of my lips and stayed there.

Fuck.

Squirming or closing my eyes would be a dead giveaway, as would fucking licking him, and I desperately wanted to do that. I made myself be still. The warmth running up my spine...it was nice. Panty-melting nice.

His voice was steady. “You are used to my examinations.” His thumb revolved on that small but sensitive part of my mouth. “So this is my test for you. Lie back, pull off your panties, and open your legs to me here, and you can come home with me, today.”

I flinched away. “What? No! The gardener is here!” My horrified tone was obvious.

I sneaked a look, and the man had clearly heard something. He was standing, leaning on a rake, watching us. Or watching me. Amusement broadened his smile to a grin.

I shook my head and mouthed *no*, while also pleading with my eyebrows. “I can’t.” I should have said, *not ever*. Never ever in a million years.

“No? Okay.” Businesslike, he stood and dusted off his pants. “In a month, I’ll return. I’ll get them to allow you out here, under supervision. I prefer not to blackmail you into this. You have to go back to your room now.”

“Oh?” What the fuck was this if not blackmail? “Wait...”

“Yes?”

I was mortified at myself, at what I was going to say. “What about if I do it in there. Inside the building.”

His eyes narrowed. “Is that a *yes*, no matter what else I do?”

I blinked wildly. “What does that mean?”

“Trust me.” He smiled, and I sensed the devil in him—there was a sinister, if mischievous, aim to whatever he was doing here. Preparing me for his needs?

“You want an explicit yes?”

The doctor nodded. “Unequivocal consent.”

“Five weeks ago...” Saying a number might be telling him I’d lost track of time, but that was the least mindfuck in this situation. “...or thereabouts, I was raped.” I wasn’t sure what else to add.

“Yes, and you are safe here, if bored. And I need consent for my game, but...and this is a very large *but*, my game is twisted and dark. I need assent. Even if you come with me, if you find it too much, I will return you to this place.”

Blackmail? I frowned. Or was it a version of consensual non-consent?

I opened my mouth and found my next word stuck in my throat.

Saying either yes or no was like nailing shut a coffin, like leaping off a high diving board into unknown waters. Choose one. Choose wisely. I heaved out a breath and thought.

“I will say, yes.”

“You’re certain?”

I nodded, stiffly. My heart was thumping away at me as if I were running a race with a monster chasing me.

He leaned in and took my hand then kissed the back. “Good. Follow me.” He waved to the gardener. “You, too, Javier.”

There was the twist. Javier was coming with us.

My eyes swiveled independently of my thoughts, to the gardener then I fastened my gaze to the back of the doctor, as

he turned the door handle and pushed. “Wait!”

He faced me. “Yes?”

“I’m...” I looked around at the garden and the sky, at this man who dwarfed me, whose shoulders were twice mine in width. The doctor warranted a *fee-fi-fo-fum* when he walked. He might do anything to me once he had me where he wanted me. “Am I just to be some sort of sex slave? How can I tell what the truth is here?”

“The truth is that this is my house, and I can buy a woman easily. A hooker for a day is easier than this. The truth is they were going to dispose of you, from the beginning. Instead, I used what influence I have to bring you here.”

That truth was so very evil, but I had expected nothing else when I sat on the bunk on that ship...when I was sprawled on the deck with those animals abusing me.

“If this is your house...” A bunch of light bulbs came on in my mind. The servants, the guards, the cameras were all his. I fumbled through the logic. “Maybe this was your aim all along. You could still kill me and bury me after you’re done.”

“And? Yes, you are going to be a sexual amusement for me. I require something in exchange for this. I waited to see if you were suited.”

“Oh. Suited?” I muttered a curse. “You’re a cruel man.”

“Only to women who like my cruelty.” He held up his hand to stop Javier, who had come nearer, as if to guard the doctor. “It’s okay. Charity, I am a man of my word. I don’t expect only sex. I want conversation and companionship. If you fail at that, if you bore me, then, yes, you’ll be returned here. Is it a deal?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I have to not bore you? I don’t know how to juggle or tell jokes.”

“I’m not looking for a circus performer. I like complex people. Surprise me, sometimes.”

How was I supposed to know what complex meant? “You drive a hard bargain.”

He tilted his head slightly, then made a slow deliberate X on his chest. “And I promise I won’t cut out your heart and eat it, or not unless I absolutely, positively have to.”

Was that a sense of humor?

“Ha.” I did like my heart to stay inside me.

He leaned a shoulder on the door, which had been trying to shut. “Still unsure? I saw your interest when I examined you. You asked for truth. Think on your own truth. You like me.”

“And you’re fucking arrogant.”

“Also guilty.” He released the door and stalked toward me until I had to decide whether to retreat or have him loom over me, breathe on me. Slowly, he slipped his hands about my throat to either side, holding me in place.

These weren’t the hands that last bruised me. These felt awesome.

I shuddered and felt myself clench below. My toes curled.

His thumb tips dug into my jaw, pushing up, hurting me, and making me tilt my head and look at him. “Give me no fucking lies. You like me touching you, and it gets you all hot. Am I right?”

My swallow moved my throat against his hands. I blinked at him.

His thumbs dug in harder.

I tried to be serene, but my face contorted as I considered this agonizing question. The heat of his body and his firm grip on my neck were so distracting.

“You’ve put me on the spot. I guess that’s true?” I shut my eyes. “Yes, you do make me *ummm* curious, about you.”

“Curious?” He chuckled. “That’s good enough, for now. Is it a deal, little girl?”

Little girl. A shiver ran through me. When a Dom called me that, I melted, just a fucking tad. I rallied and managed a whisper. “Yes?”

“Good. Then follow. You swear too much, Miss Charity. We’ll be correcting that problem if you come to my island.”

Correcting? *That was hot.* My fantasies about him cranked up to inferno level.

That was the first mention of any island.

He released me and turned away, strolling to the entrance as if nothing much had happened.

Aroused and stunned, it took me a few confused seconds to recover from his interrogation. I followed him into the house.

Was this how it would be from now on? Somewhere deep down in my heart and soul, I was hoping it would be.

I heard Javier moving behind me, smelled the earth on his body and the sweat. If I didn’t look at him, he wasn’t there, right?

This was perverted as fuck.

The doctor had warned me.

C *HARITY*

The doctor stopped at the room I'd glimpsed before, pushing the door fully open to reveal cherry-red sofas and the white-and-black tiles. My panties were already slick with wetness. When I took my next step and entered the room, the cloth stuck here and there.

If I carried through with this, those would be removed, and he would see my arousal and so would Javier. That was scary and intriguing all at once.

I could say *no*. I had a safeword, of sorts, one that blew apart this strangely tempting offer of his. I carried that piece of knowledge like a shield. The doctor was cruelty, kindness, and mystery. None of this was legal, and he could ignore everything, *everything that I said*, at his own discretion. But he wanted consent. Legal or not, that was reassuring.

Nevertheless, my legs trembled as I paused just past the entrance to survey the room.

A heavy timber table with iron rods bracing it stood in the center, framed to either side by several curved sofas. The table looked sprung from medieval times. The downlights above were modern, but pretty colors were splashed on the floor and furnishings by the afternoon light shafting through a bank of stained-glass windows. That translucent scene of angels and demons at war occupied most of the wall to the right.

The doctor was not poor.

“Climb up and lie on your back on the table, Charity.”
Such dry instructions.

My hands clenched into fists. I heard the gardener, Javier, drop himself onto a sofa to the right. He was going to watch us, watch me, in here. I’d never exposed myself like this at the clubs or at any of the private parties.

A thrill pulsed between my legs, heavy, warm, and electric. If the doctor was twisted, maybe I was too.

“What is this?” I asked, delaying what he’d asked of me.

“It’s one of my special rooms.”

“This is your house...”

“It is.”

“You’re super rich then. You set me up.” I was jumpy, shifting my feet. I’d said yes to him twice, but would it be wise to turn and run...after saying no? Except there was nowhere to go.

“With Javier? Yes, I did.” He walked over, shoes going *tap-tap-tap* like a metronome. He went behind me and held my shoulders. His body nestled into mine as he leaned me backward into him. I went with the flow, mostly because this was so very seductive.

His mouth moved at the side in my hair, as he spoke quietly, words sifting down. “This is what I enjoy, Charity. Is Javier watching you a problem?”

I shrugged.

His fingers grasped the back of my hair, and he turned my head to look at Javier where he sprawled on a sofa. “His voyeurism makes you uncomfortable? It turns me on to share you this way. He won’t be touching you.”

“Okay.” I inhaled and unclenched my fists.

“Is my test unfair?”

“If I fail, I stay. It’s still blackmail.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t create the situation you find yourself in.”

I closed my eyes to think. “What if I say no? If every *no* I might say, in the future, only brings me back here—”

“I’ll allow discussion, sometimes. You won’t get more than that—none of my girls do.” He let me go, and I faced him, folding my arms to feel less unsettled.

“You’ve other women?”

“No. Not as of today.” If eyes could be both dark and twinkle, his were doing that.

“Fuck,” I whispered, “and doing *that* is part of this agreement too.”

Fucking him. Being fucked, being told to do this or that and him liking to push me way past my kinky limits. Was that so bad? Emme had wanted it and look where it got her—with two dickhead Doms.

He said nothing. One eyebrow may have twitched a minute amount. If he wasn’t getting tired of me stalling, he soon would be. I could, maybe, escape from his island.

I buried my face in my hands, for a moment. “Sorry.”

“Take your time.” The sarcasm in that—he definitely had a dry sense of humor.

I was going to do this. It was more than a need for freedom. I would go crazy if I stayed here. I could handle Doms...couldn’t I? Maybe I could take a page out of Emme’s book and knee him, accidentally, in the balls?

I walked to the table and climbed up and sat, then swung my legs onto the top. I lay down. *Breathe.*

If I stared at that pale ceiling—

“Good girl.” He placed his palm on my belly.

I closed my eyes to better feel the weight of him there and to let his praise sink in.

“You’re going to let me pull up your dress, and after I take off your panties, you will spread your legs, wide.”

It was best to meet his eyes. I licked my lips. “Okay.”

His smile was measured, tight, unyielding. “You’re not to move unless I say so. Moving means you fail. Though on another day I might choose to bind you.”

I nodded. The world was ringing in my ears.

He brought the front of my dress up to my waist then wriggled up the rest that I lay on. I was only peripherally aware of where he touched because I wasn’t looking down there. Not yet anyway. He found the edge of my panties and with fingertips drew a line along my skin, below my hips. His other hand encompassed my hip, his thumb pressing near my mons as he kept me in place.

His touch was too close to my pussy for me to ignore, and I was imagining where else those fingers would travel. Smoothly, he pulled on my panties, dragging them out from under my ass then down my legs.

“Bend your legs up higher. This table has no stirrups, but I do have a speculum to examine your cunt.” At *cunt* my eyes opened wide. At the edges of my vision, I glimpsed him between the *V* of my legs. Not doctor language, at all. “And what a pretty cunt this is.”

Something lightly glanced over the very apex of my clit... and was gone. I let out a gasp and knew I’d clenched.

“You’re going to come so easily.” Again he touched the same spot.

“Ah!” Shuddering, I caught my breath. My heartbeat was pounding at my temples from that blossoming thread of pleasure, from a dab of his finger, or maybe his tongue. Had he licked me? I craned my neck to stare then flopped my head to the table.

He placed his hands on my knees. “Wider, Miss Charity. It makes your cunt open.”

I opened my knees wider and felt myself part below, as my pussy also obeyed. My filthy, smutty instincts... Just because he was male and dominant. *Gah*.

Teasing Doms, a little, was in my DNA. I rallied and cleared my throat.

“Miss Charity? Is this Victorian times?” The rasp betrayed me.

“Indubitably.” He began to roll his long sleeves up his arm, methodically. The letters *SPQR* were revealed, tattooed in dark ink on the back of one forearm. Beyond him, I caught sight of Javier. He’d leaned forward, and I was sure his hand was cradling his cock through his pants.

“Your legs are closing. Wide! Now.”

I jerked then pushed them further outward, and the coolness of air was followed by a finger drawing a line between my folds, then sinking in shallowly but definitely *there*. I met his gaze as his thumb pressed and pressed on my nub, rhythmically precise.

Mouth opening, I sighed as pleasure surged, snaking up to my throat. I rocked my head back, overcome. *That* would take me to oblivion so very quickly.

I groaned quietly then heard a drawer being pulled out.

He raised a plastic packet to his mouth, the metal inside shining through the wrapper, and tore it open with his teeth.

“Not very hygienic but you’re no ordinary patient, are you?” His thumb kept pressing, and his fingers—at least two of them had plunged into me and were sharing slow beats with his thumb. “Hear that? Listen.”

Roughly, he thrust those fingers in deeper, twice, making an obvious wet sound, then he left them inside, a shocking invasion of my pussy.

My strangled moan was long and low. I shut my eyes to feel those fingers, only opening them to watch him remove the speculum from the packet.

“It’s all you. She’s so fucking wet, Javier!” The gardener gave a few unsubtle grunts and swore out a *yes*. That thumb kept working at me, squashing, toggling, slipping back and forth.

“Is he? Is... *Oh. Mmm. Don’t stop.*” Dazed, I arched. My pussy clamped onto his fingers, hard.

The doctor’s thumb ceased to move, then his fingers were extracted. “Charity.” His eyes connected, challenging me. “Ask me to make you come.”

“Yes? Please?”

He laughed. I’d been too quick.

I heard sounds that said Javier was jacking off. It was weird, then hot to think he saw this and was doing that, then weird again.

Only the doctor matters.

A moment later he slid the speculum inside me—a cold, rigid device—and I whined. It was such a clinical sensation that normally did little for me. *This* was different. I’d been penetrated but with deviant intentions. Mouth parting, panting, my feet pressed to the timber and my spine bowed, lifting my butt off the table.

“Such a good girl you are for me.”

He placed his thumb to my swollen clit, and I spluttered out a *fuck* and groaned.

The rhythm restarted.

His thumb slipped over and around, teasing me, massaging, making me whimper and stare greedily past my stomach to see what his hands were doing. My gasps became jerky and uncontrolled. The metal of the speculum reminded me of its presence. My feet shifted. The doctor put his palm on my belly and pushed me downward.

My butt met the table. My breasts were heaving, and my erect nipples were poking into the bra and shifting as I panted. I licked my lips.

Javier had stood and taken a step forward. I looked at him, at the rapid abuse of his cock, and the hungry stare he fed back to me.

My pussy was on display for this strange man, and the doctor had implied this was the least he might do to me. I needed something to anchor myself, and I groped for and found the edges of the table. My grip tightened. I was beginning to shake as my body strained for release.

The doctor shoved something else into me that pushed past the speculum, something large that went as deep as cock. The roiling, building tension hit peak, the pressure begging for release. He pushed the object deeper, held it there. His thumb teased and tortured. I writhed, pinned in place while he fucked me with that unknown thing. I cried out then *broke*. Thrown into climax, I stiffened, blinded, the spasms shattering me into endless pieces of nothing...

When I slumped to the table, boneless and undone, I heard his chuckle then his words to the gardener. "You can go, Javier."

The man grunted. His belt tinkled and he zipped up. "Thank you, sir."

Still panting, still washed in pleasure, I drew my mortification inside me, to that hidden cave of my filthiest fantasies, reserving the memory for future self-pleasure. I lay there listening to my breathing.

The speculum, and what must be a dildo, were pulled from my pussy.

"You are my perfectly dirty girl."

Then his lips pressed to my mouth.

The doctor was kissing me. I fumbled upward with my hands and found his neck, played them through his hair as he deepened the kiss. The intimate sounds and sensations of kissing mingled with my languor. The climax had wrung all energy from me.

"Now, you can come with me. I think you'll like my island. Here, lick these clean before we go pack your things."

He straightened and traced the underside of my mouth with slick fingers. Those two fingers were pushed between my lips while he studied me. They met my teeth.

I frowned and pouted. I wanted to show some backbone.

“Open up. I already have punishment lined up for that filthy mouth. You don’t want to add to it.”

If only he knew. Spanking was my forte, or rather being spanked was. I opened and began to run my tongue over his fingers, licking and sucking them inside when he pushed, and all the while his eyes locked to mine.

“My name is Doctor H. Romanus, though the fraternity knows me as Hulk.”

I paused; mouth stuffed with fingers. Hulk? I had a name. He made those fingers go deeper and I choked, and still he watched me, as if I were an experiment he’d barely started to understand.

*C*ASSIUS

My phone rumbled with a new text.

***FALKOR:** You're okay to go in. Hulk has been called away and will give you twenty minutes with her, tops. Do your thing. Be firm, courteous, and gnarly.*

Gnarly. Falkor thought he was funny. I wasn't so sure.

This job was better than guarding some rich playboy out clubbing in London, Berlin, or Ibiza. There'd be fewer drunken idiots and more sex to watch, if I knew the doctor. I strolled through the side door in the wall, nodded to his bulky guard with the Rolex and the underarm-holstered Glock, was escorted through the house door, then I kept going into the house, alone.

This place's blueprint was complex. I had it memorized, but it quickly became unnecessary.

A housekeeper slash security supervisor found me before I'd gone far down the central hallway. The woman had the nondescript ensemble—black suit and her hair dragged into a severe bun. From the bulge beneath the jacket, she too was armed. I smiled at her anyway.

“Thanks,” I drawled, when we reached the girl’s room, and she unlocked it. The girl seemed startled it was me. A suitcase sat on the bed. Her confusion was expected.

“You can leave the door unlocked. I’ll find my way out.”

Miss Tight Bun shook her head. “Sorry, sir. I can’t do that. The doctor would fire me for being so lax.”

“Okay. Uh-huh. I assume you’ll be outside the door, waiting?”

“Yes.”

“Gotcha. Begone then. Shoo.”

With a frown, she exited, and the door was secured.

“Who are you?” the girl asked.

I had an encrypted file on her, sent a few minutes earlier through the app that also encrypted the messages. It was so like Jacob to be super fussy. I didn’t blame him, considering what this case concerned. This was a girl we had kidnapped to stop some nefarious conduct being exposed. She was a block of *C4* waiting for ignition.

I hadn’t pulled the file yet, but I knew her name.

“I’m a representative of someone concerned about your safety. We want to monitor what happens from here on. Do you agree?”

“My safety? With the doctor, you must mean?”

“Yes.” I nodded and looked about for somewhere to sit. On the bed, or on a chair?

As I was trained to do, I observed her and her mannerisms.

She’d sucked in her bottom lip and was nibbling it, clearly worried. Her eyes were shadowed and looked to be those of someone who had been through a recent hell. Her black hair was glossy and reached almost to her waist. Beside her on the bed lay a yellow sundress, though she wore a cream long-sleeved shirt, and olive-green leggings. They made her ankles look small, sweet, and feminine.

I braked. Time to stop observing.

I liked small, sweet girls, as did my cock, but this one was trouble and so off limits she might as well be on Mars.

She had shut her eyes but opened them to stare straight at me. “Another agreement? What exactly am I agreeing to?”

“To report back to me when I ask you to. It would be wise to want a second guarantee of your safety. You’d also profit from this.” I couldn’t say much here. I assumed there were listening devices in the room, if not spy cameras. The doctor had a rep for being thoroughly kinky and that alone said cameras.

She covered her mouth with her clasped hands then exhaled and slowly spread her hands to the sides. I could see her question coming from a mile away.

“Why should I? What have you done for me? You’re more of a stranger than the doctor is. And I don’t exactly trust him. Okay.” She shook her head, which shook that gorgeous mane of hers too. “I guess I trust him *a lot more* than you, a man who only just walked in that door. Are you from the CNC Frat Boy Academy?”

I couldn’t help a momentary grin. Frat Boys was about right.

“I am. I’m representing one of the men who helps organize it. He’s worried.” For his own private reasons, I’d bet. Jacob was efficient, rich, arrogant as fuck. Everything he did was to further his own aims.

This was probably just concern over the law charging a Frat member with criminal offences, because that would reflect on everyone. It’d be a cat among the pigeons fiasco.

“Do you agree to report to me when I ask you to? The doctor knows about this. He agreed.”

“I...” She frowned as if she’d found a turd in her coffee. “I am tired of doing what you all want. I’m exhausted. Haunted even, some nights.” Her voice had dropped to a whisper, and fuck me if I didn’t feel a twinge of concern. What had we done to her? “Tell me something more. I am not a moron, sir.”

“Well, Charity. I like that sir, but...”

She went *pfft*. I was beginning to wonder about her stupid defiance.

I gave up on the idea of sitting. I had to get her outside somewhere where we could talk freely. I had to actually read that file. I went to the door and rapped.

Bun Lady opened it.

“I need to talk to her in that garden I saw. I’ll stop her flying away over the wall. Deal?”

Five minutes later, after a small amount of wrangling with Bun Lady, and her phoning the doctor, I exited into a garden with Charity ahead of me. This was not the garden I had entered through. *Note to self: be wary.*

Flower beds, shrubs, small trees, a gazebo with a trellis. No other humans in the garden itself. This was good.

A seat seemed the safest place as it was off to the side, away from the white gazebo. I ushered Charity to it and went to one knee to look beneath. Improper thoughts were still running through my head, of her walking ahead of me in those leggings. Her shirt ended on her butt, and everything had been *moving* the way the curvy female ass and hips did.

I needed to get my mind off her body and into the game.

The garden bench was clear of devices. There were no trees nearby.

“Okay. Let’s sit. I have to read something before I can answer you fully.”

“Right. Do your stuff, mister spy.”

“Bodyguard or security personnel is my descriptor,” I murmured, as I opened the file on my phone. “Give me a second, sweetheart. Though...” I was scrolling and speed reading, and as I read, thinking, *what the fuck?* “I cannot tell you everything.”

“Call me sweetheart again, and the deal is off.”

Startled, I glanced at her. I had a real smartass here. I finished reading the document and at the ending I found a zinger. Two zingers, if I counted everything in there.

“No sweetheart? I’ve made a note of that. Don’t expect me to obey you, though.” I rested my phone on my leg and waited to see what came from her next. “You know I’m trying to help you?”

“I know nothing.”

“Let’s try this again.” I turned off the phone screen and tucked the device into my coat pocket.

I would let my shaky morals set the tone. My sister would not approve of me going hard on her. Neither would I. Charity’s recent past was disturbing. That was zinger number one. Number two was probably not for me to divulge.

I had decided long ago to go with the flow, to be the man who gets things done for my superiors, to be unshakeable in the face of life’s fucked-up messes. And I did not get diverted from my path by tragedy.

This woman had recently suffered an appalling gang rape. I had no idea who among the CNC had done that, but they had, and I gathered they were probably dead by now. But that was not the whole picture.

How much could I, should I, tell her?

“You wanted more information. I didn’t know why you were here. Now I do. For that I am sorry.” I maintained eye contact. “I am sorry beyond what words can say.”

She nodded and pinched her mouth tight. “Accepted. Now tell me you’re helping me. Really helping me and reporting this to the cops and then letting me go!”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not? Why the hell, not?” That was said bitterly but her volume had returned to normal. Resigned, was how I read it.

I crushed the pangs of guilt that arose.

“That is not what I do.”

“Right. You’re such a good security person.”

“Of course.”

“Jesus H.”

“Do you want me to continue or are you happy to go with the doctor?”

“Continue.” She swallowed. “Keep going.”

Was this going to help her? I needed to get Jacob to cough up more info...me, the employee asking his powerful boss to do something more than he’d said for me to volunteer? Be buggered if I thought I had a chance at that.

I looked around at the trees and prayed no one had wired a recording device into a branch.

“Charity, my boss thinks the doctor may have been involved in doing something to other women he’s kept...ones he’s kept alive and captive. They’ve vanished, apparently. We need some evidence, if possible.”

“Oh.” She sat back. “Fuck. I’m bait then? I’m a victim you hope won’t vanish like the others.”

“Get us evidence either way, and we will set you free, back out into the world, to live your life.”

If Jacob was lying over that promise, I did not know.

“Free. After everything I saw?”

I nodded.

“How do I know you aren’t saying this just to get me to spy for you? What makes you think I can find anything to prove this? This is confusing and feels like gaslighting, which is laughable, considering why I’m here. Why should I have to prove anything to anyone?”

“You don’t.” I was beginning to wish I could upend her, spank her, and get her to see reason. For her, this was prudent. “We’re relying on you to be resourceful.”

“How would I even tell you?”

“The doctor sees this as just the CNC Frat being careful. I’m going to visit you at least once a week. Twice a week if I’m allowed.”

“On his island.”

“Yes.”

“Once a week. So that’s going to help me a lot if I’m already dead. Ugh!” She shook her head so fast it whipped her hair about and probably rattled her brain. I almost...almost put my hand to her back. “I was starting to trust him.”

I bit back saying another *I’m sorry*. Charity was seeing the ramifications of this way too fast. If she knew all the reasons we wanted this done, she’d be even more traumatized. Still, we owed it to her. I would get in touch with Jacob and tell him so.

“Where is it? The island.”

“Not at liberty to say. Sorry.” And there was that sorry.

“And you haven’t said how you guarantee this is true.”

It was my turn to spread my hands and look sheepish. “How can I? What proof could we show you that you would accept? We cannot sign anything.”

She lowered her head and stared at the grass. I leaned into the back of the seat and waited.

Finally, she inhaled and spoke. “I’ll do it. I don’t suppose I have any great choice in this. Yes. I’ll try.”

“Good.”

“Do I get a phone to take photos? Something to record with?”

“No. I can’t do that. Not yet, anyway.”

“If you’re right, being with the doctor could be extremely dangerous. What if he finds out I’m spying for you? You’re treating me as if I am this object that has *uses*...” She’d spat out that word. “...until I suppose you decide I’m disposable. You are a dick, just like everyone I’ve met since...that day.”

I stood and beckoned to the male guard who'd taken up a post by the door leading into the house.

She dabbed at her nose with the back of her hand and rose to go with the guard.

I watched her walk away and felt both helpless and, yes, a total dick.

Before I read the report, her surliness had made me wish I could kiss that petty and dangerous insolence out of her. The facts in the doc made me wish I hadn't been given this job, but if not me, someone else would've descended on her to make these demands.

This was another of life's little tragedies. For once, unlike the other jobs I'd been given by Jacob, she seemed an innocent. Did anyone ever deserve to be killed or raped? Was rape worse than death? Me, I liked being alive. It was one of those questions I preferred to leave in the too-hard basket. If I were ever sodomized and raped, I'd make sure to kill them afterward. It wouldn't reverse history, but I'd feel a lot better.

C HARITY

The *thwop-thwop* of the helicopter blades and the engine noise had been muted by the headphones. Until those were placed over my ears, the blades had seemed an ominous repetitive noise, drumbeats counting down my captivity. When they stopped, I'd be on his island. The house had become my cocoon of safety while this could turn into a horror story. Knowing that and pushing it aside to keep myself sane no longer worked.

I sat mostly still. They'd taped covers over both my eyes then dressed me with heavily tinted enclosing sunglasses and a long coat. In the limousine, as we drove to some small private airport I'd seen the sunglasses, the tape, and the eye covers, tucked inside a briefcase.

Shouting will get you nothing except pain and punishment, the doctor had said, once I was blinded and dressed. Then we had exited the car. It was a chilling announcement, and all the more so, now that the visitor had told me the doctor might be a murderer.

Murderers, rapists, and thieves, was that a quote from somewhere? Wherever I'd seen that, that was who I was dealing with. Wait, no. *Lawyers, guns, and money by Warren Zevon*. I was going a long way back for that one and, look ma, nothing has changed. The CNC Frat boys would have lawyers as members, for sure.

Was the doctor a murderer? The visitor's words had made me doubt *everything* from that moment onward. The doctor's promises, the reason my visitor had asked me to help them, and that prize of freedom too—I doubted that most of all.

If they were this particular about hiding me away, would they ever let me go? No, surely.

In a strange loop of logic, if that was so, then part of what Dr. Romanus had said was true. He said he was going to keep me, forever.

I had no fucking way to judge this stew of soggy facts.

My braver self was chastising me for not screaming at the airport, for not yelling I was being kidnapped or something. My less brave but more sensible self knew he'd never have done this if it was to be that simple for me to escape him.

My fingers felt cold. My chest tight.

I was afraid to move in the helicopter. I might touch something I shouldn't. I might make someone hurt me. I'd said yes to him and had consented to this. If not for my visitor, I'd have imagined the words—*nothing except pain and punishment*—as being some kinky punishment.

What if he eventually meant to kill me?

An hour to half an hour later, the glasses were removed and then the headphones. The helicopter was making a sharper *thwack-thwack* noise. Someone picked at the edges of the tape sticking the covers to my eyes, then carefully peeled off the tape, before they removed the eye covers.

Dr. Romanus peered down at me from the adjacent seat. Behind him, the bright sky in the side windows blinded me, and I squinted. The helicopter seemed to be descending, judging by my stomach and the blurred, flamed-out horizon where sea met sky.

I reached up to cover my face, despite my need to see where we were.

In those few seconds, I'd glimpsed where we were heading. An island shaped like a ragged crescent floated in the

middle of the ocean, with a square tower thrusting skyward at one end. Stretching beyond the island, long shadows hinted at deep ocean and ponderous waves. A strip of sand carved the edges of a beach. On this side, golden sunlight burnished the crests advancing toward a cliff-lined, rocky shore, before playing across the fringes of the pine trees above.

All I needed was a phone connected to the internet to identify the island. *Haha.*

I squeezed my eyes open again, straining against the instinct to shut them. The helicopter landed, rocking only slightly as the blades spun slower.

The engine noise ran down to nothing except distant ticking.

“There.” The doctor patted my thigh. “You were very good.”

I felt thoroughly patronized but kept my mouth shut.

He helped me from my seat, after unbuckling the belt. Maybe the doctor thought this was gentlemanly. If so, it was an enormous contrast to his kinky inclinations.

The side door was slid open by the co-pilot, and he saluted us. Shocked, I recognized my suave, British, blond-haired visitor. The lick of hair caressing his forehead looked to be exactly where it had been at the house. Perhaps he was a porcelain imitation of a human.

I had no name for him. Had I even asked?

“You look unhappy,” the doctor said. “Is it because of our guest?”

He was now a guest? What had happened to the once-a-week visitor doing, what had seemed, an imposed appraisal of the doctor?

Wind blasted through the doorway, and I swayed and grabbed the back of the seat nearest. Papers rustled. A loose belt flicked on the upholstery.

“This is Cassius,” the doctor added. “I know you’ve met. I invited him along for a day.”

“Yes. We’ve met.”

“Good. Then we all know each other. Come. We have to walk to the cars since the road washed away recently. It’ll be brisk and chilly, this late. Night is falling. I have a flashlight, and some of the help will be here, but we should hurry.”

Numb. I was numb—my fingers, my lips, my toes in my sneakers, and not because of the weather. Did the doctor know what my visitor had said to me?

Fearing the presence of this conspirator who was taking this secret stuff far too casually, I joined the doctor on the tarmac, ducking to clear the blades with my clothes and dust whipping about. The engine or fuel smell was strong until we put distance between us and the chopper.

Cassius strolled up last, his hands in the pockets of his navy-colored jeans. His black coat flared in the wind, and his black shirt was a little crinkled, but I’d smelled the freshness of his linen shirt back at the house. The two men could compete for being precise and well laundered, like they’d been cut from a box with molds of perfectly elegant and controlled males.

Were they pretending and playing me off against each other?

I didn’t know. How could I? The only person whose mind I knew was my own. My thoughts braked. And that was who I should rely on, from today—myself and nobody else. I’d been using the doctor as a crutch of sorts, and then Cassius, seeing them, weirdly, as my rescuers.

The helicopter had landed on a pad not far from a beach. The pine trees surrounding the clearing allowed the last flickers of dying sunlight to reach us, along with the gentle roar of surf rolling across sand. Nestled in those trees was a concrete shack that must be a modern addition, with one door and window at the front.

The tower I’d seen from the air wasn’t visible, but it hinted at a solid history of human occupation. I clasped my arms about myself, gathering the coat in closer, and followed after

the doctor...Dr. Romanus. I wondered if or when I would get to know his full name, and I wondered what was to become of me.

Brave as I often told myself I was, I feared. I feared death and torture, and things I couldn't bear to imagine. This was even more of a nowhere place for a woman to go missing without a trace than the house.

To my right, the mysterious and possibly lying Cassius caught up, easily matching my shorter strides.

"You," I muttered.

"Yes. I was invited by the doctor. It was too good a chance to pass up. You didn't expect me?"

"No." I shot him a miffed glare. "How truthful were you?" As if his answer would be credible.

He shrugged. "As truthful as any of us three might appear to an innocent observer. How truthful were you?"

"You think *I* was lying?"

He tapped a shushing finger on his mouth then nodded at the doctor's back.

Seconds ago, I had decided to only trust myself. Three people were lined up where the tarmac ended. Those must be the doctor's help—waiting for their master like some collection of servants at an old-time manor.

Memories of the scent and throb of the helicopter lurched into me and churned my stomach.

Nausea welled into my mouth, and I stopped, groaning, bent over, hands on my knees. This too? The chopper ride had been smooth. I recognized the effects of my anxiety—that mild headache and the skittering of my thoughts as I looped from one worry to the next and back.

"What is it?"

Vaguely, I glimpsed Cassius leaning in to check as I kneeled, splaying my hands on the cool grass to steady myself.

“I’m feeling a little sick in the stomach. Come closer so I can barf on you. Oh...god.” I gulped.

Boots crunched closer, from ahead. I recognized the doctor’s shoes. How appalling that I knew him by his shoes, already. Cassius had laughed at my barf joke. I gave him back one point of trust. Any man with a sense of humor...

“Sit down for a minute, Charity.” Dr. Romanus put out a hand, and I grasped it, let him help me seat myself. “Do you know what made you ill? Motion sickness?”

He crouched beside me, and Cassius lowered himself on the other side.

“No. Just, believe it or not, a touch of anxiety.”

“*Ahhh.*” His large hand rubbed my back below my shoulders, gently, as if he cared. It was a relief. It felt *good*, and after a minute of this warm and friendly massage, my stomach settled. “You know I promised you several things about this island. I promised not to irreversibly harm you.”

I grunted. “Which only leaves—”

“Reversible harming? Of course,” he added in that slightly menacing drawl of his. “And we both know you like that, don’t we?”

I peeked at him from one eye, suspicious. He did know it, though. My spanking kinks. It wasn’t news.

“Are you feeling well enough to walk to the car?”

“Yes.” Talking had quietened my insides—both stomach and thoughts. The man was nice when he chose to be. I could not picture him murdering girls, but murderers could be devious. Being deceptive was a part of their psychotic makeup, or so the shows about the criminal mind had told me.

“Good. Then answer me.” The unfastened bottom of the coat had fallen aside, and he pushed his hand over my thigh, sliding it between my legs. To my bemusement, he pinched a chunk of the leggings between his fingers and thumb, grabbing a small part of my flesh, then he twisted it. The pain flared and travelled to where it always did when I was spanked, like

clockwork, it sped arrowlike to my clit and core. I gasped and stared, unready for this. The last of my nausea ran away to be replaced by fucking arousal.

“Don’t we like a little reversible”—he twisted harder—“harm.”

“Yes!” *Fuck yes, really.*

“Good. Then let’s go do the meet-the-help part.”

Cassius watched me rise, with mild distaste in the curve of his mouth. A moment later he was stony-eyed expressionless. Had I imagined it?

I wished the interaction between the doctor and I had been hidden by the oncoming darkness. *I am such a slut.* Why had I reacted like that? If I’d been feeling sicker, I would’ve barfed on him or slapped him.

Slapping the doctor...

What response would get me? It would be stupid to try.

But I was not a slut, I thought, backtracking. I was annoyed at how I’d condemned myself. Kinks were normal. How dare this stranger judge me.

We negotiated the washed-out rocky part of the road and stood before the help as the doctor shook their hands and greeted them, then introduced us. In my flustered state, I barely heard his words.

There were two men and one woman. The woman was the chef for the doctor’s house. It seemed very patriarchal until the doctor went on: “They are all qualified bodyguards and Margaux is ex-intelligence agency. Roland doubles up as the librarian. Treat them well, and they won’t throw you over their shoulder and karate chop you. That includes you, Cassius.”

Cassius remained silent. Did he feel insulted? Probably not. The man seemed a professional at keeping his cool.

The two cars waiting for us were open-sided and a better class of golf cart. Their headlights illuminated a rough but sealed road that weaved along the coast of the island, until a squat, square tower revealed itself above the pines, dominant

and ominous, and perfect for the next chapter in my horror story. All I needed was an Igor, and a guy with a hockey mask and an ice pick.

The house we arrived at was large, and the two doors were propped open. Eroded and barely readable letters curved above the arched sandstone lintel. The floors were irregular stone or new terracotta-hued tiles. The doctor and Cassius vanished elsewhere.

In a whirl of ancient stairs, muted lighting, and my groaning and panting due to the exercise, I was led to a bedroom on the third floor by one of the casually dressed male helpers. This one was not the librarian or the cook, but a cross between a guard and a man who did whatever needed doing. His name was Inigo and he seemed of Spanish heritage—from his name, accent, and his thick, black hair.

I decided a sword at his belt would have satisfied my inner Princess Bride. Humor is the first resort of the what...an intrepid girl? Yes. That sounded good. Intrepid was better than foolhardy.

On the trek up the stairs, I had learned the five staff currently here rotated, once a week, to the mainland. At which time they swapped with another five people, by boat. The boat part piqued my interest. So did the limited staff.

This island looked huge. Escape must surely be possible with some planning?

Hand on the outside door handle of the bedroom, and ready to close it, Inigo smoothly rattled off more facts.

“We use a mix of solar and fuel-generated electricity, miss. Please be sparing of the power using. You are to shower, dress, and then knock on the door when ready for the meal.”

He eyed me, uncertain if I’d comprehended, I guess.

“Sure. What was your name again? Igor?”

He rolled his eyes and shut the door.

Mission accomplished, annoy the help.

I showered and dressed.

On the bed, above where the gown was laid out, was a perfect circlet in silver links. I knew what that was and ignored it.

The white gown was light, gorgeously fluted, and figure-worshipping. The back was cut-away down to my waist. The hem reached to the floor where my toes dabbled on the cool timber. The lacy bra beneath was transparent enough to show my nipples through the lace and probably through the fitted bodice. The strap was pretty enough to look a part of the dress, where it ran across my bare back. I had tiny bows on the bodice. I frowned at my toes. I had no shoes except my sneakers. How did the doctor know my dress size?

His research, no doubt.

“To hell with shoes. They can suck my toes or find me some diamond-encrusted high heels.”

Not that I’d want to walk those stairs in heels. Making jokes was my only way to lower my fidgeting ways. I put a finger in my mouth and chewed the nail. They were expecting me downstairs, dressed in this seductive thing, and nothing seemed safe anymore.

A glass of wine waited for me on a small table, in a huge fat goblet. Should I? I lifted it and sniffed the contents. A white wine? No, it was sweeter, more of a golden color, and thicker. Why not? I had need of this.

“Down the hatch.” I upended it and skolloped the lot, then waited for a few minutes, breathing in fumes thick enough to sear my lungs. Not wine. It was a potent liqueur. The rapid buzz that funneled into my veins and swamped my brain, agreed with my verdict.

The chain circlet taunted me. *To abandon it or to wrap it around my neck, that is the question.*

I dangled it off my fingers.

The silver links were heavy, but the catch was a simple one I could undo with a press of my fingers. This was a slave collar, or a submissive collar, and if I left it here, I had zero

doubt that it would be retrieved, brought to me, and placed on me anyway.

I picked it up and fastened it around my neck.

Better it be of my own volition than his.

I knocked on the inside of the door, and Inigo arrived. We descended and found the dining room. Luckily, the floor in here was warm.

“Good evening, Charity. Please, take a seat beside me.” The doctor stood, his tall-backed chair scraping the floor. He indicated a seat to his right. His spot would be the head of the table. The table was a long, skinny rectangle, a ten-seater at least. Brass-like metal ran along the sides, just beneath the top. At the opposite end, Cassius sat, stoically frowning at me then at my bodice, as if he were a banished toad. The cool, suave security man looked rather uncool. For some ungodly reason that pleased me.

Tall glasses of white wine perched before both men, as well as before my own table setting.

This moment was giddy with possibilities—of BDSM and blood, of dismemberment and death. Were the doctor or Cassius monsters, murderers, or men with unspeakable desires? All of those would have made for fab alliterated news headlines.

Was I exaggerating by calling them unspeakable? The room swayed a tad. And...was I drunk? To that question, it was a probable yes.

I walked onward, aware of my bare feet, the slight wobble of my breasts, and the ache in my nipples. It was one of those occasions where being female was excruciating. Feeling desirable was a given. I couldn't avoid that, not with these two men staring. Wearing a hessian sack and being ignored would be less hazardous, and less likely to make me want to chew all my nails to the quick.

Cassius had noticed my lack of shoes. The doctor negotiated the corner of the table and pulled out my chair, a carved timber one like theirs.

Before I sat, I looked around, at the walls covered with paintings, the antique sideboards loaded with silverware, the amber-filled decanters, and the golden cutlery. The windows showed the thickness of the walls of the tower and this adjoining house. My Inigo stood beside the entry.

“I feel like a princess at her first ball,” I dared to say, aware that I was the most vulnerable in the room. “Do I get a pair of glass slippers or a beast with a library?”

Cassius merely took a slug of wine. The doctor inhaled loudly then chuckled. “The shoes, no. No, dear girl, I want to see your bare feet. Unless you go outside, then you will wear shoes. The only ogre here is me, and perhaps Cassius?” He looked down the table. “Cassius, you have yet to show your colors, and Jacob never employs sweet, innocent men or women.”

Inigo set a plate before the doctor, then me, then went to fetch a plate for Cassius. It wasn't until his was before him that Cassius replied. Cool and collected, definitely. I sensed a challenge in the air. Not a pissing contest but similar.

“I'm not innocent, no. I'll also call a no on the ogre.” He smiled thinly at me. “In general.”

“Have I seen you before?”

“At the CNC Fraternity party last August, yes. I remember you also, doctor.”

Cassius too? It should not surprise me, though he might have been security and not a participant.

“You were fucking that girl with the nipple decorations?”

“I was.” Cassius offered his usual dead smile. “You were sewing up a girl's eyes.”

He what? That was him? Emme had told me about seeing her, but I'd never thought it could be this man. Maybe it wasn't the same woman?

“I was. That was an unusual request. Such a fun night.” He raised his arm, clicked his fingers. “Let's begin, Inigo.”

“Sir.” He nodded and left.

Before this, his island had been iffy and perilous and other bad stuff I could not put into words. But this...this was beyond your average sadistic kink. I'd seen similar on *Fetlife* but had never been attracted to doing it. What might he decide to do to me? Putting stitches in humans was a doctor thing, and so was a whole branch of surgery.

Fuck. Monster alert.

I shuddered. I'd given him *carte blanche*, or close to it.

"You wore my collar, Charity. Good girl."

I blinked. *Good girl* only worked when I trusted the man saying it. "I did."

"I can see something has changed."

Fear trickled in, a spider with its long, creepy legs on tiptoe. His words were too knowing. He'd picked up on my tone. I stonewalled and shrugged.

The doctor leaned away, perching his arm on the back of his chair, and studying me. "Here are the rules on this island. I expect you to obey them."

Inigo had returned with a bottle of wine, and he poured some for Cassius.

"What are they?" I was sure I'd not like these rules.

"One. You don't board or touch the boats or the helicopter. Two. You ask permission to enter the library's Inner Sanctum."

"What is—"

"I'll show you tomorrow, Charity. It's clearly signposted. Three. You don't interfere with the work of my staff. Four. Do not try to communicate with anyone outside this island. Five. You do not risk yourself, in any stupid way."

I frowned at the last part. "If I were stupid, how would I know?"

"You'll know when I tell you."

"That's not fair."

Inigo poured the doctor some wine and eyed my glass. I took a gulp then placed it down and nodded. For this dinner to be a success, I need a higher blood alcohol.

“It will make you think before you leap. This island can be hazardous.”

Was that him foreshadowing something horrid? He’d said he wouldn’t cut out my heart, but I cherished all the other bits of my body too. Besides, what if he were lying? I moved to grab my glass again. He frowned. I thought for a long, scary second then placed the wine glass back on the tablecloth.

He inclined his head to watch me, making me stare at him, at the stubble on his jaw, and the shaven side of his hair. The sculpted edges of his mouth were as tempting as the chocolate chunks on a gorgeous cake. I’d never been one to kiss men before they kissed me, but I could feel the thud of my heart as I contemplated leaning over and licking him.

Reverse my earlier decision. I am quite possibly a slut to be imagining licking a potential murderer. Make that a sexy villain—it sounded better.

The doctor took my left hand and held it flat to the table, and I protested about the difficulty in eating.

“And my right hand is holding yours. We can manage. The food is in small enough pieces.” He raised his voice. “Tell me about yourself, Cassius. You work for Jacob?”

“Yes.” He forked at something, as if trying to spear it dead. “I think you know all about me.”

“Fill me in. Maybe I don’t, and Charity might like to know,” he drawled.

“Perhaps she would. My father was in the British army. He saw some action in Iran. I was brought up as an army kid, stayed at some NATO bases, travelled around, and saw my dad suicide from the stress when I was sixteen.” He rattled on, despite the punch in that.

Wow. I kept listening but began to eat.

Cassius was in the army, like his dad, for a while, and now he worked for a man called Jacob at the CNC Fraternity, a man higher up in the hierarchy than the doctor, obviously.

“Do you like what you have to do?” The doctor was tracing his fingertips over the curve of each of my fingernails, a surprisingly erotic move. I paused, mid-chew, to look. He smiled brusquely.

“It pays well. I do what I’m asked to do. I decided long ago to obey and do whatever a job requires of me, without unnecessary complications.”

“Or emotional investment?” the doctor queried.

“Yes. My father’s reactions to death made me toughen up. Such things do. Or else they break you.” His next forkful was shoveled in his mouth, and he exchanged a hard stare with the doctor. “Do you agree?”

“I think so, but nothing is ever simple. Some can shrug off traumas, but most take time to accommodate them. Rarely do people break. They bend.” Why did I feel he was talking to me about this? “And as for future toughness after overcoming or surviving traumas? Perhaps I see it more as people insulating themselves. They pretend to toughness but inside they still feel.”

“Huh. Maybe so, doctor. I never said I was dead inside.” Cassius eyed me. “And her? Ask her about who she is.”

“You both know everything you need to know.” My fingers cramped on the fork in my right hand, as I looked from the doctor to Cassius, who had become hostile since the helicopter flight. Before that he had been a dick; now he seemed ready to use his steak knife on me, or the doctor.

“I did say I expect you to amuse me and converse. It’s part of the game.” The doctor fished in a pocket of his jacket and brought out a handful I instantly recognized as two white leather wrist cuffs that matched my collar. With my left hand already trapped, he easily tucked one cuff around my wrist then fastened the buckle. A miniature padlock was clicked shut.

I hadn't struggled. It would be pointless. Chilly goosebumps raised the hairs on my arms and neck.

"The other one." He waited, palm up.

"I thought you wanted my story?" Offering both my wrists to him to be cuffed would be a mistake, my primeval brain was screaming, even though giving in was inevitable.

"I do." He clicked his fingers. "Now please. Or else."

Or else was rife with that danger the doctor had mentioned. Worried, I looked around. No one here would help me. Inigo was implacable and his employee. Cassius seemed conflicted and maybe annoyed that I was letting the doctor handle me.

I lifted my right hand, but I couldn't bring myself to surrender the last of my independence and place it on his palm. He reached up and took my wrist anyway, easily bringing it to the table and holding it there, reminding of how strong a man can be. He snaked the cuff over me and locked it.

"Are you having second thoughts?" He assessed me then stood, sliding back his chair. "Time for your first adjustment, miss." Threat lurked in the depths of his eyes.

*C*HARITY

Mouth parting, I looked up at the doctor, jolted to the next level on my patented *scariness scale*, while below hummed with faint pleasure. Why was I so turned on by his intimidation?

“What did I do?”

“Swore at me.”

While I was trying to remember which time he meant, he seized my wrists and hoisted me forward onto the table. My chair tottered, rattling on its legs, and almost fell. Dishes slid aside, and my wine glass was barely caught by a hurrying Inigo before it toppled. The doctor pulled the back of my dress up to my waist, gathering it there.

Startled, I had only squeaked. Inigo backed away and retreated to the doorway. Cassius was rendered still. He folded his arms and said nothing. He was possibly enjoying this.

I glowered at the doctor. “Hey! What are you—”

Taking a firm grasp of the hair at my nape, he sat on the table next to me. I was sprawled across the width, bent at the hips with my legs dangling and my toes touching the floor. I pushed off the table with both hands, grunting in effort. I winced as he jerked on my hair.

The doctor lowered his face until close to mine. “Will you be still, or should I use a worse implement than I intended to?”

I heaved in ragged breaths. My chest was squashed against the table, and I tried one last time to do a push-up and get away. I was feeling stupidly rebellious.

“Define worse?” I slumped and crooked one eyebrow, made my arms go limp.

“A cane, a paddle, a barbed wire flogger, my hand...it’ll be one of those. Choose.” He twisted his handful of my hair then moved in and kissed the corner of my mouth then slowly withdrew. “I do like it when you wriggle.”

I inhaled, shakily. My panties were damp and growing damper by the second. The rosemary scent was still his favorite. Of its own volition, my tongue sneaked out and licked near where he’d kissed me.

“*Ummm.*” I wrinkled my brow, as if still thinking, but fuck, that was some list.

“Your choice. Your...fucking...choice, miss, and the clock is ticking. Five, four, three—”

“Hand!”

“We shall see. Also rule five or six? One of those. Thou shalt not swear at your Dominant.”

“It’s six?” I ventured, whispering.

He barked out a laugh and shook his head, as he rose to sit upright again. “Six. Hand, it is.”

Still smirking, he brought my wrists together then dragged me further until my hands reached the opposite edge of the table. There, he clicked them to something else. Something that was a part of the table. The metal decorations were not simply decorations.

Was this island a refuge for a medieval inquisition?

Huffing, having used some muscle in my attempts to break free, I rolled my head sideways and glared. The doctor stripped off my underwear, slipping them from my legs. He

dropped them to the table, stepped back to where I could only see him from the corner of one eye, and kicked apart my feet.

“Open. You know I like the view of your cunt.” Desire simmered in that statement.

I tiptoed apart my feet. Inigo was to my front and right and, thank god, he would only see some of my bared ass above the gathered dress.

The doctor’s hard hand came down. The smack jiggled my rear, sparking pain. He kept going, alternating sides, jarring my thighs into the table’s edge. My abused butt cheeks stung, and every new smack blasted flagrantly hot signals directly to my clit. I tugged at whatever was fastened onto my hands. The wrist cuffs slid and held. The table held.

Another strike jolted my rear, and I groaned into the shelter of my arm.

He slipped a finger down the length of my slit as if checking me for arousal. I tensed then relaxed my thighs, wanting that hand to tease me again.

Do not pass go. Collect an orgasm...

I’d often gone to the BDSM club just for a spanking. Except this, here and now, tied in place and at the mercy of a man who could do whatever he wanted to, it was a thousand times better.

I squirmed, subtly squeezing my clit onto that hard timber.

The doctor stopped. I heard him step nearer. The side of his hand nestled between my legs, then he slid and wriggled it in until it nestled between my labia. His thumb nudged at my other hole.

Instinctively, I arched despite my aversion to anal.

“You like this almost too much, Miss Charity. You’re all wet here—messy and slippery.”

“Fff—” I caught myself before the *fuck you* came out and went quiet, heard his gentle laugh.

“Cassius! She likes this too much! I’m sure you’re interested. How is that hard-on coming along? Want to lend a hand?”

A chair moved on the floor and footsteps approached, tapping on the floor, steady as a metronome.

Aroused, pinned down, overcome by the tides of pain and pleasure, I turned my half-lidded eyes on Cassius.

“Do I want to lend a hand.” He looked at me dispassionately, with a face like a sculpture, stonelike and unmoved for centuries. I considered poking out my tongue but did not. He walked on and spoke to the doctor, casually cruel. “What about that cane you mentioned. I’d volunteer to use it. Her ass is red but she’s going to come, if you keep spanking her then stimulating her.”

“This?” The tip of the doctor’s thumb slipped further into my asshole, and he revolved it, nudging gently.

I gasped and wriggled.

“That.” Cassius sounded amused.

Anal was not something I had ever asked for or wanted. That thumb sank deeper. I whined and kicked, a little.

“Be still! You do need the cane. It’s there, Cassius. I like men who volunteer.”

“A pleasure, doctor. It’s a nice hefty one.” I heard the swish as the cane cut at the air. Then he stepped in; floor crunched under his shoes. I tensed my toes.

The cane swished again, and I was keening before it landed across both ass cheeks. I yelped, swore, and hissed through my teeth.

Relax. Do not tense.

Another eight strokes of the cane were delivered, leaving blatant stripes of sharper heat.

I’d ceased doing anything except to wince or whimper by the end. Protesting would not help me.

“There.” The cane clattered to the table. Cassius came to me and leaned over. His arms were to either side of my torso, his body heat radiating down, his hip bumping mine. “And I thought you were a sad, lonely, good girl.” His voice was burred, soft. He bit my ear lightly, and I froze. “You should never have volunteered.”

“I never,” I rasped, yet knowing I had.

“Liar.” He moved away.

“I see I’ve caught your interest. She’s delicious all stretched out with that wet cunt waiting for me, but I’m not fucking her. Not yet.”

“Yeah, she is a tempting morsel, doctor.”

The doctor grunted.

“Thanks for the loan of the cane.” Cassius seated himself on the table next to me, sliding over. “You’ve dribbled on yourself, Charity, and I thought you hated the doctor.” His eyes were pitiless. I glared for a moment, before I thought better of it and turned away my head.

“Did she say that? Not nice, my girl. Not nice.” Fingers were shoved into my cunt, and those had to belong to the doctor. They were thrust in then out, invading rudely.

I tried to not react, but the feelings arced violently, exploding, and I squirmed, gasping weird noises, spreading my legs, craving more.

He plucked out his fingers and loudly sucked on them.

“Dirty girl. Look what you did.”

I panted into the table. This was so wrong.

Blearily, through a haze of the miasma of hurts and pleasure, I stumbled through my thoughts and reached a conclusion. The doctor and Cassius were together. Trusting Cassius had been stupid.

“What else?” the doctor mused as he walked around to reach the other side of the table where my hands were still anchored. He unzipped and studied me as he gave his erection

several strokes. I swallowed, imagining where that could go—ashamed to admit to myself how much I wanted him to fuck me.

Cassius leaned over me. “A reminder of her place here would be good.”

“You bastard,” I said softly.

“Rule six.” Cassius grabbed me beneath both shoulders and pushed me toward the doctor. My hands were still tied but I could rise on my elbows, and I did so, almost planting face-down past the table’s edge, past the doctor and his cock. Hands wrapped about my throat and halted my dive. I swayed on my forearms.

Cassius had caught me. His lips brushed my skin. I shivered and felt myself clench below. His breath warmed my ear. “Thank you for the invitation, doctor, to join you on the chopper. *This* has made it worth my while, to see how this little whore has the hots for anything...and everything.”

How I wished I could incinerate him.

“Open up, Charity.” The doctor tapped my cheek.

I stared at his cock and frowned, upset by Cassius’s words, no matter the truth in them.

“Or you could suture her mouth open?” Cassius suggested.

The doctor laughed.

Me, I opened my mouth.

The doctor caressed beneath my chin, then traced his fingers around my parted lips and in the groove between my teeth and lips. He pulled out my lip, released it. “Now you’re good? I wouldn’t suture your mouth. Not yet.” Alarmed, I zeroed in on his face. “You’re too fresh, too naïve, little Charity.” Then he pushed his cock into my mouth and left it there, still. He could have facefucked me but merely watched.

“Lick me.”

I played my tongue over the head of it.

“Are you imagining me putting that inside your cunt? Be truthful.”

What a question. I teetered between truth and lying but finally, I nodded, rocking his cock.

“Hmmm.” He pushed in another inch and stilled, apart from one initial twitch.

Cassius still held my throat. Drool slipped past my stretched lips and dribbled to my jaw. The doctor’s cock slid deeper until it reached the back, and I choked, where he paused and studied me again, then slowly pulled out.

I spat drool then met his gaze, before closing my eyes. Those hands on my throat, this compromising sexual situation, and two men manhandling me. It had merged into something both shameful and amazingly hot.

Fuck...maybe it was the shame that made it hot?

“Let’s have our meal now.” He wiped his cock with a serviette, then tucked himself away and zipped up

My wrists were unlocked and undone from whatever had attached them to the table. My dress was pulled down and Cassius helped me off the table. While I was standing there, wobbling, he stalked away and sat in his chair.

The doctor waited by his chair and indicated I should sit.

I obeyed and stared at my crumpled underwear for a moment, before pulling them off the table and letting them fall.

“You didn’t come?” the doctor asked casually.

I shook my head. My body was still buzzing with a muted excitement and wanting more than I’d been given. With no panties, the back of the dress would be soaked. I shifted position.

“Good. Now we will eat, and in between bites, you will tell me a story of yourself.”

This was surreal.

“This is how it will be from now on, Charity. If I want to, I’ll do whatever I want to whenever the mood strikes me. Tomorrow night you can wear a plug in your sweet little ass. We need to condition you.”

I opened my mouth, and the words had gone missing. A story about me?

“No hurry. I can see we confused you. Are you staying the night, Cassius?”

“No. I’ll be leaving after dinner, after I have a final talk with Charity. I’ll be back in three days and will need the chopper to pick me up.”

“Sure.” The doctor swallowed a piece of lobster. “Give the pilot the details. Or relay them through Jacob’s channels, if you have to.”

The meal was several courses, but I spooned, forked, and shoveled it in, without seeing much. Something with oranges and cream and chocolate. A lobster dish with orange caviar, speckled rice, and sauce. Another dish was crunchy pastries with centers that melted in the mouth. I was too distracted.

As I ate, I told a summarized story of my life, a censored one for these men. They were never going to hear much about my dysfunctional family from me. I made sure to leap to Emme and her kinky misadventures early on. My side of those events should intrigue them.

I mentioned the sewing up of the woman’s eyes at the CNC party she went to. The doctor had already said it was his work, but he would surely have boasted and told me it was him anyway, if I’d asked. He wasn’t shy about the details of his sadistic kinks. I told them about the kidnapping and my assault in as few words as possible, then I launched into another completely fictional story.

By then we had dessert before us, and I was less flustered about the spanking and caning and all, but more distraught over how Cassius had joined in.

I poked the sliver of chocolate cake with the swirly mound of liquor-laced cream.

“Scheherazade told one thousand and one stories to her Arabian prince,” I said softly. “I thought a fairytale would be appropriate for my finale.”

“And are you going to be my queen, after a thousand nights of stories? That was the aim of Scheherazade.” Doctor Romanus settled back in his chair, waving his dessert fork.

As I considered that idea, I licked the rich cream off my upside-down fork, curving it over my tongue to get the last of the dessert.

“Perhaps?”

Cassius barked out a laugh and I was sure I caught him sneering. I still wasn't certain these two were a team, no matter what they had done to me. But I knew one thing...

“And so, my tale of how treachery was done to a poor country mouse, the day she met a wolf.”

It was a parable based on a mouse being fucked over by an ugly, mean, and no-good wolf who was really a coward, after he promised to protect her and save her from a hunter. By the time I said the last word, I could tell Cassius had got the gist, the big picture. He was not happy. He was also leaving tonight, on that chopper.

I'd thrown aside my common sense in telling that story, but oh boy, was it satisfying, and he'd be away for half a week.

His lip had lifted in a minor snarl, in that restrained, British way. I was the mouse upsetting the wolf.

The thrill in this was almost as good as sex. I smiled and blew him a kiss.

*C*HARITY

Perversely, I was looking forward to this little chat with Cassius before he left. I could try to find out what game he was playing, away from any kinky scenario. Although I was surprised when the doctor okayed Cassius walking with me on the beach. This beach was beside this chateau with its creepy tower yet, still, a walk outside?

“I thought it would be in here?” I indicated the house interior. With Inigo in tow, the three of us had stopped in the hallway beside the stairs. Now that I realized the proximity of the beach, the telltale ebb and flow of the ocean meeting a shore was obvious, somewhere beyond these walls.

“The rules do not prohibit you exploring the island, even alone, as long as you stay safe.” Dr. Romanus waved away Inigo. “We won’t need you. Cassius will return her to the house.”

My insides sank. Not even Inigo would be with us? I had been taunting Cassius.

On the other hand, the doctor would let me explore this island. “Tomorrow? Can I wander about then?”

“Tomorrow, I have plans for you and me. Go have this talk with our guest. There will be a pair of shoes at the rear door in your size, as well as your coat, Charity. Enjoy.”

“Wait. Umm.” Tentatively, I held up my hand, as if I were a school student asking a favor of a teacher. “My underwear?” They were somewhere beneath the table.

“I am sure those aren’t necessary.” He nodded at Cassius then started up the stairs.

My excitement over being a free agent on some occasions had subsided. I had to get past this confrontation with Cassius. “This’ll be a short walk?”

“Maybe.” He took my hand and set off for the rear of the house, making me wonder how he knew the layout of the place.

Outside the rear door were a few stone steps and pavers. From there we took a gravel-and-sand pathway that led into a thin forest. Moonlight might have been enough, but solar-powered lights at ankle height lit up as we neared them. Small creatures rustled in the undergrowth.

I looked at where the noises came from, and thought I spied some swaying leaves. “There’s nothing dangerous here I imagine?”

His grip on my hand squeezed in. “Oh there’s plenty of dangerous animals out there tonight.”

I laughed. “You?”

He only grunted something I couldn’t make out.

We had passed the last of the small shrubs and soft sand mixed with pebbles crunched and sank underfoot. It leaked into my sandals, as I pivoted to look down the moon-drenched length of this narrow beach. I took them off and dropped them there, to be retrieved when we returned. A full moon floated above the horizon, early but bright.

“Come, dearest Charity, tell me why I misread you so much.”

I swung to observe Cassius and took a small, precautionary step backward.

“Wait. First things first. Here is a cellphone for you. It’s to be used to send us vital data only. If you find any dead girls,

caches of bloodied axes, etcetera. Hmm?” He peered from beneath his brow.

Clearly, he was skeptical of his own mission. I took the phone and dropped it into a coat pocket. “He won’t know if I use it?”

“Hide it as best you can. It depends on you, really. Use it out of earshot. It’s set to be silent. It won’t even vibrate if it rings because we won’t be contacting you with it.”

I debated my next words. He wouldn’t harm me. The doctor would have him for breakfast. I was no longer sure who wanted to kill who, or if anyone did at all. The doctor was a sadistic, kinky bastard but a killer? No. It was becoming less and less likely.

Should I lay it all out? It was risky but not that risky.

“Sure. I’ll do that. Now,” I began, “You think you misread me? After what you did in there? You are a lying ...” I withheld the insult. “You and the doctor are together in some sort of kinky twosome shit. You dreamed up that other stuff to get me off guard or to scare me.” I folded my arms. It was a defensive posture I fell into, but I couldn’t really stop myself from doing it. “This phone is some sort of trap. Convince me otherwise.” I pursed my mouth.

He caned me, was the thought I couldn’t fend off. Minutes ago he had, and punishment fed into my kinks like nothing else ever did. The ache in my ass was happily reminding me of this.

Shut up, brain. I held my breath.

“Okay.” He stared off to the side, past the beach and out to sea, perhaps. “Okay. You want the truth little sad, abused Charity? I called you a slut, didn’t I?”

I nodded.

“You, the no-panties girl with girl come still sticky on her thighs, is trying to tell me you hated what he did to you?”

“Oh! I never said... For a man who joined in and caned me —”

He grabbed my throat with one hand and squeezed. “Shush. You enjoyed it. You like this. And I don’t care if your past is real. I thought you needed protecting! You liked him spanking you and sticking his cock in you.”

At the distant, pushed-away corners of my mind, something terrible stirred and awakened.

He shook me then brought his other hand up to touch my mouth.

“You were so wet for him, and here, like some fucking jerk-off doll fantasy, with your cute mouth opening wide, and your tongue licking him.” He’d ground the last syllables out like he planned to turn them to bloody dust.

Shocked, I’d barely done anything. I plucked at his hands. He batted mine away, but when I coughed, he eased up and lessened the pressure.

My snakelike mind terrors wormed about, waiting. I dreaded what this would do to me. Cassius was supposed to be the safe one.

“The truth? You agreed to this CNC with him, and I can see the signs of a sub who is begging to be fucked with cock or whatever, every which way.” He adjusted his hand again, fingers tiptoeing about.

I swallowed. He wasn’t quite choking me. He was angry at me, and the reasons were stupid and illogical, and what else did he think I would do?

“What choice do I have? You *know* that. You knew it already, that I agreed to this island, to CNC here.”

“I did. I still hate it. I hate that you let him...” He let his head flop back and gazed skyward. “Fuck. God. Fuck me, I’m ___”

“Oh.” Cassius was supposed to be the man with even more control than the doctor, and I was so *wrong*.

But the more he talked the less afraid I was, in spite of his hold on my throat. My terror had gone back into hiding, leaving only the twitch of its tail to remind me it existed.

I rallied, and my ornery streak pushed me forward.

“I can’t *not* do this...” Trailing off in my reply, I figured out why he was so annoyed, why this irrational outburst and it was ridiculous. “Let me go?”

He scowled, pulled me nearer, and kissed my forehead then slowly maneuvered me until my back was against the trunk of a dead tree, an outlier from the forest. “Why?” He pushed his leg between mine. The dress was thin. The muscle in his leg was obvious as he pressed in.

I swallowed a lustful whimper and gasped a sigh so soft it was nothing. He couldn’t have heard it—it was lost in the backdrop of his harsh breathing, in the wind ruffling the leaves, and in that fucking incandescent fire in his gaze.

Crap. Doms had a possessive streak, but I didn’t know him. I didn’t *like* him.

“I can’t defy the doctor.” I frowned and thought some more. “I never thought this would turn me on—struggling against what he wants from me. But it does.” Gently, I touched his hand where it lay at my neck. My fingertips grazed his knuckles one by one. “Let me go, please?”

“Get on your knees. Open that mouth.” He fumbled at his belt while he pushed me down. I dropped to the beach, and my knees buried in cold sand.

I was still aware of my desires, those leftovers from the spanking—wanting and wishing for more.

But not this. Not like this.

“No. This isn’t you. Did I see you so badly? Are you the sort of man who forces? I haven’t agreed to this.” I resisted, maintaining full eye contact until he gave way. He begrudged every inch I took back, but he gave way. Slowly, I rose to my feet. “Is this who you are?”

He was still seething, but he had let me rise.

“You have some balls, Charity.” He raised his hands to shoulder height. “You’re right. This island, this fucked-up setting, it got to me.”

We should have returned to the house, then and there. When he tentatively reached for me again, I put up my hand as if to stop him, I swayed backward, but I stayed.

I had a feeling my curiosity was about to bite me.

His hand found my face and cradled my jaw; his thumb pushed inside my mouth then pulled out to paint my lips with my own saliva. I swear I heard a rumble, a growl from him. He dragged me closer and lowered his head as if to kiss me. I placed my hand on his chest.

He paused a breath away from meeting my mouth. “You’re not struggling.”

I blinked. “I don’t trust you enough for that.” Should I tell him I kind of hated him for what he’d just done?

The gears were turning in his head. “Trust. I get it. The doctor touching you made me a little crazy.”

“A little?”

“I’m only human. Whenever I’m here, I could give you what you need. We can do it away from him.” With his thumb, he rolled out my bottom lip. “I love watching women struggle to get away. Why else do you think I was at a CNC party?”

“You forgot the consent part.” I poked him with my forefinger, and he grabbed it and kept it.

“You think?”

Had he not just despised me for having a kink that he shared? He was the opposite side of the coin, of course. Heads you get to be the victim. Tails you’re the scary predator, the hunter, the man-monster who makes girls cry then suck their dick.

“I can give you what you need,” he repeated.

“I’m not deaf.” He wanted me, but I wanted to leave the island and return to the real world. “Get me out of this, and we can be together?” Was I lying? I would do and say anything in that moment, for freedom.

“Tempting. Fuck. I can’t. I’m sorry. I’m not screwing over my life for what’s between your legs.”

“Really?” I shrugged, reining in my annoyance, make that my anger. Then I added, quietly, “It’s okay. You’re not the sort of man I’d go for. If I said *make me*, you’d wimp out.”

Why had I said that? Because I wanted to tease the monster. Because I wanted...more.

Emme had been so right. A thrill had blossomed deep inside when he took my poking forefinger and held onto it. That simple act had shaken me and left me aching, waiting for the moment. *This moment. Say it.*

“I see... Is that it, Charity? Was that a challenge? We’re heading for take two on what I just tried.”

“Make me,” I said, even quieter, my voice shaking. Then I ducked and made to run.

“You bitch.” He laughed and grabbed my shoulder in a bruising hold, then hauled me back to him quickly. I tripped on sand, and he caught me and spun me to face him.

That thrill roared in like a peaking tidal wave, and I embraced it. I showed my teeth to him and wriggled as he tried to twist my arm around to my back. *Make me.*

“Fuck you, little miss. You’re insane, but I like it.”

With my arm locked behind me in a hold that was inescapable and painful, he crushed me to his chest. My straining achieved nothing, and then...then he kissed me, with softness there, for only a frozen whirling second.

He wrenched back my hair and angled in for a more brutal possession. Teeth, tongue, his callused, roving fingers, even the stubble on his jaw assaulted my face and my mouth.

I melted into him, and his leg was again shoved onto my clit. As he abused my mouth, his fist-grip on my hair was screwed, tighter, tighter. My scalp felt caught in a vice.

The pain was a fire I was already addicted to.

Then he ceased to kiss me, took the bridge of my nose in his teeth, and growled before licking his way to my ear. When he released my arm and my hair, I dropped my head to his shoulder, my rough breathing pushing my breasts against his chest.

“You’re too easy to catch. I should make you suck on me anyway...to punish you for being useless at running.”

I bucked again, or tried to and then...

Someone else spoke. “Well, well.” It was a male voice and close by, and so unexpected it took me a few seconds to nail down the speaker.

Dr. Romanus.

Cassius released me, and I stood beside him, wondering what the doctor had heard or seen. Had he seen the phone? The man was leaning on a tree in the shadows.

“It seems you enjoy fucking about with Charity too?”

“Yeah. I had some time on my hands.” He shrugged, as if that were nothing to quibble over.

“And she let you. *Hmmm.*” The doctor walked out of the thin, beachside forest, taking the path we had. “I heard some of that. I have security cameras that point this way. Inigo noticed a scuffle. Are you okay, Charity?”

This was the most bizarre moment of an entirely bizarre night—him, asking me that.

How much could the camera have shown in such poor lighting?

“Yes.” I was still panting. I gulped and made myself calmer, if not serene. I couldn’t do the impossible.

“I could ask you to leave and not come back, Cassius. Your employer would replace you.” He strode closer and halted. “Beautiful evening. I have a proposal for you, Cassius. I like your style. Would you like a share, to stay here whenever I’m staying, and make use of her as you wish to?”

“A share?”

Both turned to look at me, and I had already taken a step away from them, due to anticipating something like this. The doctor liked to mindfuck, and so, did he actually mean that?

He wanted to share me?

I opened my mouth and left it like that. My mind was a mite scrambled.

If he wanted this to happen, it would. He could offer me the same deal he had before. Say no and return to the house. Say yes and stay.

“Do you understand what I said, Charity?”

I nodded then addressed Cassius. “You said you hated him touching me!”

“I did.” He twisted his mouth then made a rueful shrug. “This isn’t the same. I get you too. I get to watch you run away and call me a dick, then fuck with you.” His smile hardened.

Fuckitty fuck.

“Your answer?” the doctor repeated.

“I don’t know. Let me think!”

Emme was right about me and the allure of CNC, and now I didn’t know if I was walking into something plain perilous just because my clit, and various other lady parts, wanted to see what happened when two dudes were both making me do what I should not want done to me.

“No, ummm suturing,” I ventured.

The doctor seemed to smile. It was difficult to be sure since his face was in shadow. “You will get absolutely no such guarantee from me.”

“You mean you might?” I hugged myself and trapped my palms under my arms to reassure myself.

“It’s a maybe.”

Just the thought of him doing something that sadistic had me wondering if I could take it, and even like it. I was too

curious, too hyped up, too unsure of my sanity.

I swallowed and drew a zigzaggy shape in the sand with my toe, then peeked at them both. Cassius had one eyebrow rising.

C *HARITY*

“Yes.” My swallow was hard to do, as if a rock was in my throat.

That word echoed. This felt even more final than before—saying yes to the two men.

“Good.” The doctor came forward and offered me his hand. It was warm in mine, comforting even, though I felt I’d made yet another deal with the devil. “After your bath, I will give you a safeword for use in extreme occasions. Let’s go home and get cleaned up.”

Home was not a word I would have used, but a safeword would be welcome.

I let him lead me back to the house. Cassius followed behind. At the back door, Inigo waited, and I remembered how he had been the one to tell the doctor of our scuffle. As I looked to him, he raised his chin then his eyebrows in silent query.

Unsure it was genuine concern, I nodded and smiled, weak though that smile was. He nodded back then disappeared into the house.

“Inigo can be a bit of a mother hen with my lost girls,” the doctor murmured. “But now, what is this? Sandy feet or shoes do not come in the house. Wash and wipe them please.”

A footbath sat beside the door—a small rectangular tub filled with water. I dipped one foot in and was about to bend and wash using my hand when he tsked.

“Where are your shoes?”

“Umm. Oh. I left them at the beach. I can fetch them.”

“Rule something, something, Squirt.” Cassius chuckled. “Wear shoes outside the house.”

Squirt? I pulled a face. “I don’t need shoes on the beach, surely?” I protested.

The doctor went to one knee before me and lifted my foot and began to use his hand to tip water, wash, and lightly scrub off the sand. A Dom going to his knees for me was a startling shift. I swayed then hopped for balance. With some caution, I placed my hand on his shoulder.

Exhaustion was making a play for supremacy over my body. It wasn’t the drinks. My head was heavy, and I craved a bed to fall into, a very soft bed. Would I get to use the one my gown had lain on? I needed some alone time.

The doctor had kept on carefully washing my foot.

It was odd but nice.

“Now, as for the shoes being needed on the beach. That’s a good point, Charity, but the rule was made, and you broke it. We’ll deal with this another time.” He looked up. “Other foot, please.”

“Oh. Good?” I muttered, exchanging feet. Why was he cleansing my feet?

The doctor stood, gave me a towel, and watched as I dried my feet. “The staff will get your sandals in the morning. And yes, after this, shoes are not required on the sandy beaches.”

“How many of those beach—”

“There are two on the island, this one is mostly gravel and rocks at the shoreline. I have a new rule also, for everyone. We do not speak ill of each other when outside of our...” He made the air quote sign with his fingers. “Our scenes.” I opened my

mouth, but he was too fast. “When is a scene a scene? When Cassius or I say it is.”

“Right. I get it.” So I couldn’t decide. That was expected. Cassius stepped up to drop his shoes by the entry with the doctor’s.

I waited and ended up following their backs, a little muddled at how they assumed I would be there, tagging along behind them. If anything cemented that this island was inescapable, it was not the long, mountainous waves I’d glimpsed in the deeper sea beyond the island, it was this blasé attitude to my whereabouts.

“That means no calling her a slut or a bitch,” the doctor explained.

“Wow.” I said that silently. He meant that?

“Okay. Interesting. It’s your call, doctor.”

Cassius was being accommodating, and I was walking along with my mouth agape. This made it seem as if they had not planned to share me. The doctor had mentioned Lost Girls, as if it were a label he used often. He seemed entirely too kind and stable for a psychopathic murderer, but how many Lost Girls could one man have fall into his hands by accident? Where were they now?

Grabbing a handful of the dress to make it easier to jog, I trotted a little closer as we neared the stairs. “Um, doctor?”

“Yes.” He spoke over his shoulder but kept going.

“I’m to go back to that bedroom, yes?” I was in total subservient mode and cringed at myself. I may as well do a curtsy.

“No. My bedroom has a large enough bed for all of us. The bathroom is also big.” Finally, he halted and faced me. “Did you think I’d let you sleep alone, after everything today?”

Yes, I absolutely had.

Heart pitter-pattering at his measured stare, I said, “No?”

“She lies badly, doesn’t she?” Cassius was grinning at my discomfort.

I didn’t dare curse either of them for being smug. They turned away but the doctor’s words were clear. “We’ll both help you shower before bed.”

Fuck.

“And there will be no underwear for you tonight, maybe not ever again while on the island.”

“I’m liking this more and more every minute, doc,” Cassius winked back at me then stuck his hands in his pockets. “I will have to phone my boss tomorrow to clear staying here. And do you have clothes I can borrow, or will I get them sent over?”

“That’s all fine. I should have some casual pants and shirts for you. I will clear it with Jacob, if necessary. He and I know each other well. Be aware, I leave for the mainland for two to three days every week.”

“I can take care of her then.”

“No. You will not be here when I am not.”

Cassius shrugged. “It’s your island.”

That sounded promising. I’d be alone for all those days. I prayed the island was truly idyllic instead of some creepy horror movie vibe, like in the *Lost* series. The men had reached the stairs and were already half a flight ahead. I sighed and began to climb. My legs had somehow been filled with sand from the beach.

Somewhere between the first and the second floor I had a small revelation. They both had said they like seeing me struggle, and as their prey, I could see the attraction of being chased and wanted. It was the nitty gritty of what they might do, with open slather on my body, that was my problem.

I paused at the next landing, watched them continue onward, talking as if they were long-lost friends. They expected me to just follow like a baby duck.

“Hell to the no,” I said softly and set my mouth. I looked down the darkened corridor of the second floor and took a few steps along it. My eyes would adjust quickly. The stair lights were dim and few. After a few wrenching moments, while I listened for sounds of them returning, I tiptoed another step. How many rooms were there? What if I doubled back and went down a floor?

Why was I doing this?

I didn't want to hole up somewhere until I somehow miraculously found a convenient seat on a nonexistent plane or hitched a ride under that chopper. That wasn't the 'why' to this escapade. The whole CNC thing was a new dance on the kink spectrum I'd never tried before, and it lured me like...like a carrot to a donkey? Yep, that was probably me.

I stopped then returned to the landing and headed down. Had this place been a hotel in another life, or maybe it was a resort that closed last century? I counted six doors on the first floor, then came to a cupboard door that opened onto a tiny storage room. The walls were shelves, and all were stacked with linen. The bedsheets and towels smelled musty enough to be from the time of Alexander Dumas. I suppressed a sneeze.

I pushed the door shut with the speed of a snail on valium, praying for zero squeaks.

I could maybe fit in one of these? The coat would make it difficult, so I shucked it and balled it up at one end of a knee-height shelf. I crouched and crawled into that shelf, squashed my way to the very back, then I wormed into a position to face outward. Yes, I fitted.

I could sleep here, emerge in the morning, and exclaim a need for a pee, to have that bath, and that I was famished and in need of breakfast, while I nonchalantly yawned at the men. That would make them growl. A shiver ran down my spine, teasing my clit to life. I pressed my palms to my breasts and squeezed myself there with my eyes closed, thinking of this, of my dirty expectations.

While they searched for me, playing with myself and coming was an option, a very nice option. What had happened

earlier was enough to make me want to return to that burning high. I could see if sleep or desire won out.

I was still exhausted.

Would I get punished? My imagination swept ahead, displaying scenes of a stern spanking, but probably not too stern—not with my ass already mildly purple. I could see them tsking at me.

This was risky and exciting, this game of predator and prey. I curled up my knees and closed my eyes, brought some linen to my front to disguise my hide-out. I wasn't going to sleep, not yet. I was wondering when they would notice I was missing.

When would they walk past, and would they look in here? The hotel was not endless—I hoped. I held my breath, thinking that through, and the shadows in the cupboard grew heavier and spread, spawning creepy creatures and portals into Hell, and long-fingered things that tapped on the wrong side of mirrors filled with cobwebs.

I shook away the nightmares.

This house held nothing worse than two dominants with predispositions for violent perversions.

The low height of the shelf meant I was squashed, but I opened my thighs and wriggled my hand between them, squeezing it along until my crumpled fingers were poised at my slit. The first touch near my entrance was electric, and I clenched and sighed. I could do this, I could come, ever so easily.

Not making noises when I reached the peak was a problem.

The amount of moisture on my thighs and pussy was a potent reminder of what they'd done to me earlier, and I easily slipped one finger inside, but not too far—my thumb had to reach my clit, and my wrist was at an angle. Pleasuring myself, without them, the men, must be the ultimate comeback. I suppressed a giggle at the unintended pun.

This cupboard would not shield me forever, but running and hiding made me a real, live, ass-kicking girl, and not some doormat. God, I hated the idea of being a doormat submissive. I was never going to write *I BELONG TO SIR* on myself after one scene. I was done with being a sweet, pushover submissive.

I smiled into the darkness. I was getting the hang of CNC. *Struggles R Us* as patented by Charity Smythe.

My awkward, wrist-twisted, hand-squashed fingering was unsatisfactory. I only had room to press my thumb on my clit due to the squeezy spacing. Having nothing to insert in myself for extra fun, I resorted to applying thumb and finger to my clit.

While I worked at myself, I drifted into my most appealing, spank-bank fantasies. The usual one where the boss's girlfriend was bent over a desk and fucked by his henchman, as punishment because she'd done him wrong, it kept fading away, instead...

Instead, that hard hold on my throat at the beach, with his hand threatening to crush away my air, took front and center. Cassius had seemed ready to erupt. His eyes had been fire and brimstone. I grew wetter remembering.

Or when they bent me over, yet didn't fuck me, damn them. The doctor's cock had been halfway down my throat while he skewered me with his sternest look. That one, yes. If only one man had taken me while the other was in my mouth, and god, I was clearly sick, and who cared.

Who the fuck cared.

Not me. My thumb and finger moved faster.

This was between me, my hand, and my clit. My gasps became more frequent, my finger and thumb moved ever faster, lubed on my own arousal, grasping and massaging. I bit a corner of folded sheet to stifle my gasps and—

Thump.

I heard another thump, then more noises, the thud of shoes. I stilled my hand. The doctor was above, calling my name. But

those nearer footsteps and the creak and click and slam of doors? That was here, on my level.

I was so fucking *close* to coming. I whimpered and stayed frozen, my pussy spasming inward now and then as I thought of who was out there, in the corridor. If I just had a few... more...seconds.

Was it Cassius? It must be.

Light showed. It leaked under the door, spreading. The handle rattled and there came a delicate, but alarming *thud*, as the door was cast open, then the glare of a flashlight.

Crap. Expecting this was not the same as it happening.

“*Fee fi fo fum*,” Cassius intoned quietly, in his sultry, deep voice, as he advanced further into the cupboard. He shut the door behind him, and instantly he seemed to occupy all of the space with his male presence, radiating confidence, strength, and his sexuality. My throat closed down. It conspired to make me a rabbit, cowering in the sights of a hunter.

I felt sure my eyes had dilated past redemption. It was pheromones; it had to be them. I needed nose plugs and a therapist.

I had experienced this guy’s anger when he was triggered.

His legs were silhouetted, and a large circle of light reflected off the floor and his shoes, making me squint. “What have we found. *Hmmm*. Come out, Squirt. I know you’re in here.”

He couldn’t know. He was bluffing.

I did not move.

My pulse had already been thundering but it became louder. My blood pressure must have risen and was possibly shooting for the stars. My hand remained wedged between my thighs. Moving would be a good way to get found out. I stayed frozen.

“You left dust prints, girl. Bare-feet, naked girl prints. I can see them.”

I cast my gaze at the floor, and there they were around his shoes. I was horrified to see he was right.

“Come out now, and it won’t go *too* badly for you.”

As if that were a great incentive.

It would be better than him hauling me out with my fingers stuffed near my pussy.

I grimaced, then began to wriggle from the shelf. I found myself a little stuck, until my knee popped out then I could get my head and shoulders out. I spilled from the shelf, rolling onto the floor.

Cassius chuckled, but it was a dry, mean chuckle. “How fucking cheeky of you. Stand up. Tell me what you think you were doing.” The upward lighting bounced off his face, created harsh shadows, making him look demonic.

As I straightened, I tugged the wayward dress from my butt crack and into place. “I was cataloging the sheets, of course, sir.” I threw in the *sir* to perplex him.

“Were you now. I don’t believe you. Were you running away? Or pretending to?”

“Pretending.”

“Huh.” He’d used the flashlight to catch the gown as it unfurled and fell. Now he dragged both up my body and pinned the cloth below my breasts with his other hand.

I held my breath as the circle of light drifted down, the flashlight skimming close to my skin and revolving around my navel before he went lower. His intentions were obviously sexual.

“The doctor?” I ventured. Maybe, I needed someone else here, to hold Cassius in check.

“Hulk? He’s busy. Besides, we’re sharing, and I need a bite, a taste of you, of your cunt, and...I have news.”

News? What was this? I shifted backward, despite knowing there was nowhere to go.

He paused to illuminate my mons, where a thin triangle of pubic hair remained.

“The trail grows warmer.” He palmed my breast, and some of the fabric from the skirt, keeping the dress high, stirring my nipple with his thumb. He ducked his head toward my bodice, angling in, his target obvious as his tongue stuck out and pointed at where the darkness of my areola showed. “Don’t run, little girl.”

“Oh. Fuck. God.” Entranced, I squeaked a millisecond before he engulfed me as if to eat me—a whole wide, mouthful of my right breast. The suction and heat rippled at contact in a wet, runaway sensation, with the fabric barely there and molding to my breast while he continued to suck, and his tongue moved.

“Fuck.” Stunned, I shuddered into a mini orgasm. I banged the back of my head into the shelving and groaned. It felt so good. My toes curled.

Blindly, I reached for his hair and missed, just as he stopped. His mouth had left me. A few moments passed before I rustled up the energy to look at him.

He was standing, and his gaze wandered all the way down my panting body, to where the flashlight was aimed.

“I had things to say,” he murmured. “Discoveries made while looking for you. Bad things. Those can wait, until after I fuck you. And you’ll be quiet for me, won’t you? Unless you want something to happen to your nipples, or your tongue. It is a part of the bargain you made. I can do what I want. CNC has so many pluses.”

CNC was never this wide-ranging. Or was it? “My tongue? You are a fucking—”

“Monster? Hell, yes. I am.”

I stared at the flashlight as he zeroed it closer to my clit then slowly jammed it onto that nub of flesh. My mouth hung open. Was I imagining the warmth there? The room had gone very dark except for that obscene glow over my pussy.

“What did you discover?” I croaked, thick of tongue, for he was using the device to rhythmically press while his hand kept its unyielding grip on my breast.

“*Shhh.*” He towered over me, and my lack of shoes only made the height difference worse. My breast was freed, and he hooked my collar, rotating it as he softly caressed my neck with his mouth. He kissed around the petite collar, bestowing kisses until he reached my lips.

I toyed with his biceps, hardly touching him with my fingertips, reluctant to show my eagerness.

He kissed me once on my parted lips and once on my forehead. “Just know, I’m never leaving you with the doctor, even if Jacob refuses to free you.”

“What?” Confused and turned on, with the circle of the flashlight intermittently grinding on me below, I muddled through the meaning of his words. *He was never—*

“Give me your hands.”

I stared. “No. Why?” I snatched them behind me. If he bound them... I could not stop him doing anything. *And I don't trust either of them completely.*

“Really?” On that word, he dropped the light, letting it bounce and illuminate the cupboard grotesquely. He grabbed my shoulders and spun me, and though I tried to evade him and duck beneath his arm to get the door open, he trapped my wrists and dragged them to the small of my back. The force of that left my wrists stinging. He fastened the cuffs together. “That was pointless. You need to wriggle faster to get away from me.”

“Bastard,” I gasped. My face was buried in linen, and I had to catch my breath. The thrill struggling had evoked was devastating. I wanted it, all of it, all the things, no matter how dirty or dark or fucking sadistic he was. He could do anything with me now.

I might regret this.

“You were a bad girl.” He twisted a chunk of my ass in his fingers until I yelped, then released it.

His laugh was derisive, and I knew then he would backhand my insult with something nastier—something I would like, and hate, and hurt for.

“Let’s turn you around.”

I thought about dropping lower, to my knees, but that wouldn’t help me. I shuffled around and used that shelving for support. Cassius drew the front of the gown into one hand and pulled it high to bare most of me.

“Tear that and the doctor will take that out of—”

His hand covered my mouth. “Do I need a gag?”

I pursed my mouth then shook my head.

“Look at these gorgeous tits. See, you can do this. Be silent.” After propping the light on a higher shelf, he latched on and bit the side of my neck. Judging by the sting, that would leave a mark. “A prissy little collar this is.” He flicked at the doctor’s white collar, then stepped away and eyed me.

I glared at him, even though I had a bad case of raging horniness due to the throb from that bite and the brutally efficient handling of my body.

He raised the bunched material of the gown even higher. The fabric was light, and it stretched as he pulled it up and around the back of my neck, dragging the bodice above my breasts.

“Fuck. Yes.” His sadistic grin was carved in deep shadow. He knotted the gown around itself at the front. I wasn’t choking but it pressed against my throat. “Perfectly exposed.”

Then he pressed my head to the side and deliberately bit me again on the slope of my breast, sucking hard before going lower again, leaving a trail of bites that had me wincing. He reached a spot below my nipple and gnawed on me. I shrieked and twisted my wrists, trying to stop him. Pinning me to the shelving, he continued downward, leaving hickeys all down my belly, to halt just above my clit.

I sucked in my stomach to get away.

His teeth hovered, his breath warmed my clit, made it feel *alive*. I was sick for wanting this.

Yet I feared what he might do. “No! Please.” I writhed, knowing that would entice him, and I wanted it. I wanted the touch of his mouth and the threat of those teeth.

“Please, *sir*.” He nibbled at my clit, licked it a few times, leaving that pulsing, whispering heat.

How could I...yet the pleasure rose, and his nibbles became a bite with teeth to either side, warning me.

“Please?” My whimper was pitiful. “Please sir, don’t.” I tried to squirm away. “Don’t bite.”

His teeth left me. “Be still or I’ll do it.”

I froze, ashamed of my masochistic wishes.

“Those bruises will remind you not to run and hide.”

His tongue moved over me, a warm softness that teased my clit, stirring, slowly licking, and evoking an exquisite *throb, throb, throb*. Unable to stop myself, I writhed at his face, and he laughed.

“Whoa now. What was that for? Tell me you want my cock.” He dabbed again, and again. His tongue was an instrument of torture, and my thighs flexed and tensed. I made a plaintive sound. “Say it.” He swiped his finger along my slit then tasted it. “Dripping. Say you want my cock in you. Now, Charity.” He eyed me then bit my thigh but gently, leaving those teeth on me, denting my skin.

By then I was shaking and powerless to do anything but beg. “Please. I want you. I want your cock inside me?” I whispered that, and saying it made me feel him fucking me, feel it sliding in. “Please?”

His tongue began to stroke, brushing over that nub as if it were a precious jewel.

Enthralled, I watched as he buried his mouth on me, lapping and teasing, with his fingers cruising along my slit. I whined and spread my legs—shaking, as I clutched at the shelf with my bound hands. I opened my legs further, my feet

twisting across the floor as I rested my head against the cupboard behind me.

“Fuck. More?” I gave a half grunt, a half gasp.

“Now you’re being a good girl. Come for me then I’ll fuck you.” I glanced down, mouth open, breathing in shudders, and wondering if he was talking to me or to my clit.

As if in answer, his mouth was applied to said clit and he hummed over it then speared a finger inside me. He began to perform the perfect thrust and lick duet. I strained forward, aiming to get more of that tongue.

The man was making wet noises with that finger and his adorable mouth. I needed to preserve him in a bottle.

I think I squealed, for he thrust two fingers into me at the perfect moment, and sucked a little harder, flicked that tongue. I definitely screamed, deep inside, keening as I bucked and tried to wrap my thighs over him, grip him, hold him close.

While I was still being wracked by the last throes of the orgasm, he drew away, but left those fingers inside me. I heaved in air and tried to focus, mind-blown and with my legs trembling, then he rose and turned me. He pushed my head low then took a painful grip on my hips as his cock slipped and searched for the right spot between my legs.

I felt the warning sink of his cock between my lips, just an inch, that beautiful moment before full penetration. My body was singing, needing this, needing to be filled. Then he rammed in deep. It slammed in hard enough to hurt. The shock of the hammering he delivered only fed my desire for more. *This* was what I’d been fantasizing about—being fucked without mercy.

My mouth became a permanent *O* as he took me. The thrusts forced me lower, until my face was on the floor and sideways. Our grunts and my appreciative moans blended into a sexual frenzy in the mostly dark cupboard. His hands kept me from crumpling, and his last thrusts filled me and ended with a blisteringly hard ram of his cock that ground in and

stayed there. I felt the twitch and enlargement as he came then the pressure of his come as it pumped out.

Replete, satisfied, I was left with nowhere to go except my mind and the floor as I replayed the moment. He let me collapse into a heap, my hands still bound. After a long while, counted by a hundred urgent heartbeats, he zipped up and came to kneel beside me.

His fingers were searching for the clip holding my wrist cuffs when the door swung open and let in the blaze of a corridor light.

“I see you prepared her for me. Nicely wet, Dr. Watson?”

From my squashed position on the floor, I watched Cassius lean his forearm on his leg, and his hand on my hip. “Indubitably, Holmes.” He’d riffed off the Sherlockian intro from the doctor.

I twisted to scowl at them. The lazy fog of my climax and the trepidation I always felt when seeing the two men together, blended into...something I had no words for.

Anticipation?

“I suspect she was in here handling her cunt without permission.”

“Ahh. Obviously, she is a girl who wants to be fucked in a cupboard then. You did the right thing, Cassius. Let me examine her.” The doctor replaced Cassius by my side and brought me into a head-down position again but propped on my knees. I tried to gain my feet, but doing that with my hands tied was impossible, especially with both of them watching and amused.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Need this?” Cassius offered the flashlight and ignored my question. “I almost put a gag on her, before.”

“I might do that.”

“I don’t,” I began, then wound down to nothing as it was obvious, they wanted an excuse.

“She’s very wet down here. Excess lubrication?”

“Half is mine. I’d apologize but...” Cassius shrugged.

While I stared back at them, the doctor flipped the flashlight, cleaned it with spit and his handkerchief. Then he switched it off and introduced it to my rear. Shocked, I was wondering if any of that thing was really clean, even as he probed at me then pushed it between my clamped-together thighs.

“Hey,” I whispered harshly, wriggling to lose him. “Umm that’s not go—”

“Gag?” the doctor inquired.

Bastards.

I scowled at the floor then found myself whimpering as the doctor forced the flashlight partly into my pussy entrance, then out again.

“A pity this isn’t sterilized. I really shouldn’t fuck you with it.”

Cassius laughed. “I would, just to hear her squeal and squeak.”

Unwilling to risk a gag, I stayed silent.

He ran it along the groove of my pussy then pulled it away.

“Excess wetness...and a very swollen cunt. I do suspect Charity of...” His fingers dug into one ass cheek. “Masturbating.”

“Stating the obvious,” Cassius said. “What are you going to do to her?”

Carefully, the doctor held the flashlight upside-down and before my eyes. A long thread of mucous or come stretched and twirled. “Doing filthy things in the dark and running away from us, *and* I didn’t get my shower.”

I eyerolled to myself. My forehead was going to have dust on it, and while I was exhausted before, now I was so far beyond that. I could fall asleep in here if not for them.

He sighed and leaned in to shine the light at my face. I shut my eyes.

“You are going to walk out of here and be very good for me. You can walk back naked. It was going to be a warm bath in my luxurious ensuite, but you’ve been too disobedient.” He hauled me to my feet. The gown unraveled and trailed on the floor.

“Let’s cut that off her. Have you got a knife, Cassius?”

I opened my mouth, shut it. Knives? I didn’t like where this was going, no matter why he wanted one.

“Yes. I already left a line of teeth marks on her running down to her cunt, as punishment.” He touched my neck then glided his fingers downward, past my breasts, and swirling across my curves as if this were a rollercoaster ride that ended at my thigh. “All the way.”

“Beautifully done. My turn.”

“I want to put a more meaningful collar on her later. That white thing is too nice. Something dark and spiky would be good.”

“Perhaps. I have a few. She does need more firmness.” Was that cruel amusement in his eyes?

Fuck. Fuckitty. What had I achieved?

As the doctor cut away the gown, I tottered on my feet, and Cassius held me against the wall of the corridor. I was dripping *his* come on the floor. Someone would be cleaning this up. Not me, I prayed.

“Walk,” the doctor indicated. “Go have a shower, Cassius. I’ll be hosing her down outside. Leave me a hot bath up there for when I return.”

Damn. At least it wasn’t freezing here. Anything to get to bed. If I had to endure this, I would.

Cassius grinned and waved goodbye. That grin left me bewildered. Had he not mentioned monstrous discoveries? He should be worried about leaving me with the doctor. I checked for the doctor, who’d gone behind me, and found my wrists

were being unlocked. While I was bringing them to my front, he clipped a chain leash to the collar.

He jiggled it. “Come. He’s right. That collar is wrong for you. Spikes would be good.”

CHARITY

I was going to welcome this hosing, just to get it over with. The front door was open, spilling light into the gloom. I kneeled on a towel beside the tap, where the doctor had washed my feet. He'd gone off to find a hose and I was staying put, though trembling. *This is not fear.* I just needed rest.

I was naked apart from the collar and cuffs, but the breeze was warmer than where I'd come from...from my home. I brushed aside the pang of sadness and the few tears that welled. That was gone now. I needed a future, not a past.

The walk through the house and down the stairs had been uneventful, apart from my mild embarrassment and a wish for the staff to be elsewhere. Coming here had always been fraught with the possibility of that sort of kinky punishment. I had walked about naked at private parties, been spanked and flogged naked, just never allowed anything too intimate. Being alarmingly intimate was the doctor's specialty.

There was, however, a freedom in being naked...and I guessed, an opening up to a world of simply being a female who was nothing more than the object of male desire. I shut my eyes, aware of the heaviness of my breasts, the stinging trail of teeth marks, and of the stir below, where everything felt well used and a little sore. If this were a monster's house, I

had yet to see it demonstrated. I felt content, stable, and ready for whatever came my way.

Strange that I felt that here—content—after all the violence and abuse on the ship.

I had never really explored my sexuality, or not as far as a person could, not to the ends of the Earth, not even to the ends of London. Most people didn't. The problem was, I wanted more than that from life.

I yawned wide, only shivered once, and wrapped my arms about my breasts. The line of the leash ran to where he'd loosely wrapped it about a column supporting the entryway roof. I chewed the inside of my cheek. To run or not to run? Not today.

The doctor rounded the line of potted trees dragging a hose that he connected to a faucet above the footbath. To my surprise, he went to his knee before me, lifted my chin, and kissed me softly, as if it was with love. He drew away.

“This is my punishment for you hiding, Charity.”

I nodded, unable to cease studying the doctor. I almost knew the brutal squareness of his face by heart now. The shaved sides were dramatic and an enigmatic kind of sexy. He had no scars, not like me with my eyebrow scar, and I'd almost forgotten I had that. I swayed and was reminded of my fatigue.

“Punishment,” he continued, “is not the same with this arrangement, is it? It doesn't quite *fit*. It may not quite give a submissive the same sense of rightness as it would if we had the usual rules and structure.”

Again, I nodded, but he had made me think. I'd only once tried a true 24/7 relationship and it hadn't worked for me. I'd thought him too soft. I raised one eyebrow—that man was not like these two.

“Thinking?” he asked. “To be truthful, punishment like this is as much for me. I enjoy taking you through your paces.” He took a small piece of my lower lip and curled it out. He ran

the tip of his finger along my teeth, as if examining them, before he went to my ear and brushed back some straying hair.

That statement of his had rung bells. It was a little unsettling how well he was reading this. The thought that he enjoyed this, always flipped the script. I loved seeing a dominant do things to me that *he* loved doing, even when they hurt. It was something I was used to and one of my kinks.

“So. Are we good? Are you happy here?” Clearly, he saw my shock, and he smiled. “It’s not a trick question.” He rearranged himself and sat with his back mostly to the house, leg outstretched and a hand clasping his knee—as if this were a tête-à-tête at a picnic and not the prelude to whatever punishment was coming. “Well? Your answer, Charity? I didn’t bring you here to terrify you, or not always.” He let his gaze drop to my breasts, as if he’d suddenly thought of stitching them.

“Am I happy?” I swallowed, caught by an impulse to ask him why Jacob thought he was doing something to his lost girls, something like murder. I wouldn’t. I wasn’t stupid. The doctor was too nice not to like and too sadistic not to fear. That contentment I’d felt, it was probably a glitch in my system. “I don’t know? I’ve been here half a day.”

Happy was a word I reserved for going on holidays to the Bahamas, and not for being trapped and ravished on the Island of Dr. Hulk.

“And we haven’t really let up, have we? Or let you get your bearings.” He stared into the surrounding forest. “I offered you a safeword with limits. Tell me what you choose in the morning. Is Cassius terrifying you? I sensed some unease, more than seems right.”

Again with the slightly wrong word. *Unease*? They’d caned me and throat fucked me at the dining table. Anyone else would be screaming. And I wasn’t, was I? At the other house, he’d said that he had to wait to see if I suited him. If I was the type to scream in terror at BDSM at the dining table, I would not be here.

Maybe I should give him some questions. “You’re a good judge of character? You think he’s terrifying?”

“Not to me. Even if he was, say, a danger to me. I have my resources.” He angled his head. “It’s you I’m concerned about.”

“I’m okay.”

“Truth. Never lie to me, Charity. And no more hiding in cupboards and giving yourself orgasms. Your cunt is ours to play with. Lying or self-pleasure gets a girl stitched in interesting places.” He reached over, pulled one knee to the side, and spread my legs. “Like there.”

I knew how that would look. I’d seen images of labias sutured together on *Fetlife*. A chill ran up my body, but like always, his threats did a somersault in my stomach and turned me on, especially with him studying my pussy.

He pushed my knee back into place, and I swallowed.

“I am okay. Truth,” I spoke slowly, carefully. His pants showed an obvious bulge. *And I’m imagining you fucking me. Gah.* I was not saying that.

“Good. If you ever want to run or struggle or hide, however, please do. Rule Seven? Never try to cause me or Cassius, or my staff, damage. Everything else is on the table. Except also Rule Eight. No fucking yourself, no masturbating, unless on command.”

“I need a print-out of this list.”

“No, you don’t. You’ll learn. Now I’m going to hose you down, with extreme prejudice, and watch you squirm like a little worm on my hook, then I’m going to fuck you, like I should have earlier. Then we both get to go upstairs. Okay?”

I swallowed. “Yes?”

“And you get a safeword in the morning. Ready?”

I nodded. This was *almost* too nice, too gentle.

He began to stand and took a handful of my hair as he did so. The pain and the pull was instant. I shrieked and followed

him up to mitigate the pressure on my scalp. As I rose on my knees, I grabbed at his wrists. The transition had been unexpectedly cruel.

What did I expect?

“Do I have to cuff you? Hands away.”

I’d been clawing at him. I drew them to my back and waited and, thank god, the pull was less. I was very aware of where he’d raked his fingers into the top of my hair. He twisted it, and I gritted my teeth to stop myself yelping.

“I get half my fun from reading people and finding out who they are,” he said, in a detached tone, “what turns them on, and how they react to stimuli. Both you and Cassius are... interesting. It’s why I used to take on lost girls.”

He picked up the hose which had a spray gun attached to the end, aimed it at me, and pulled the trigger. The cold spray hit me, pouring over my chest, and he walked around me, thoroughly drenching me and running it over my back.

“Spread your legs, Charity.”

I opened them, opened my eyes, too, and shook water out of my face. My nipples had instantly scrunched in and were aching. I was still on my knees and swept away by his contradictions. Kind then sadist, then kind again. I was in the middle of a hurricane.

The water poured between my legs, and this was the least efficient bath ever. When he tossed away the hose and walked behind me, I wiped water from my face with both hands.

“How many lost girls?” I said, thinking to sidetrack him even as he pushed me forward onto my hands and pried apart my cheeks.

“Some. I don’t trust you enough to say. This may feel odd but seeing you recently climaxed...” I heard a rustle.

Something metal and smooth was pushed at my ass and revolved. I gasped. Fuck. Where had that come from?

“You’ve had a plug in here before? It’s pre-lubed. I almost used it at dinner.”

I gritted my teeth and tried to relax because it was for the best. I didn't want this particular sort of hurt. "Once."

"Only once. *Tsk*. Open wide, girl." I could hear his fucking amusement.

After a moment, where I was sure I could never stretch that far, it popped into my ass. I gave a strangled gasp. Water was dripping from my hair and nipples to the paving, and now I had a butt plug in me.

"That's big enough to stay in for a while. I hope. If it falls out tell me, or I'll replace it with an elephant-sized one. Say yes."

"Yes. I will." This was said in my best resigned voice.

His palm landed on my back. "Stay there." Then he sighed. "Sadly, for you, this isn't working for me." There was a tinkle and a scraping sound.

I was wet, getting colder, and what was he doing?

Then came the distinctive *whisk* of a belt pulled through the loops. Now I knew what was coming.

The first slash of the belt made me hiss, but he only gave me five more across my butt, and the broader smacks were nothing compared to the cane. They only turned me on even more. I was such a slutty masochist, and I was sure he knew.

Without words or further warning, he pressed his cock to my pussy and speared inside, with all the force of a freight train churning up the tracks. It was efficient fucking with little regard to my excitement, and luckily this whole night had wrenched my head into Fuckville time. I couldn't help my response. I stretched out my arms, kept my knees on the towel so as not to get shredded, and enjoyed the ride.

At the last, his hand pressed on the back of my neck, making me bow onto my arms, and he lifted my ass higher and plowed me even harder—jarring onto the plug as he did so.

I was gasping out *fuck* every few thrusts as he thudded in his cock, bruising me and squelching in, lubricated by a mix of come, my wetness, and water. My knees would shift, I'd creep

them back as much as possible, and he'd fuck himself into me, shoving me forward again. My groans came out as splutters that bubbled on the paving near my mouth, and the night turned blacker, as my world focused inward on the animalistic connection between our rocking bodies.

His last ragged grunt ended with his cock planted, seemingly, in my guts, and I groaned and spread myself and arched more. I clawed at the ground as he jetted. God, the feeling of that, of a man coming, it was something to be nailed to the back of my mind, forever.

The doctor pulled out and walked to my front. He levered my head back from where I'd flopped.

“Upstairs, now.”

Raggedly I stood, and now my legs really were jelly. New come was leaving a meandering path on the inside of my thighs. I looked to him.

“That can stay.” He retrieved the leash, tucked himself away and proceeded to walk toward the door.

I had no choice but to obey.

C *HARITY*

The bed in this huge, elegant room was the size of a small European country. Bronze flamingos were set to the left and right of the entry to the adjoining bathroom, but there were precisely zero doors that could be closed to separate it from the bedroom.

I was prepared to go to sleep all messed up, since that was where the doctor had been heading with this punishment routine, but we passed through the bedroom and into the bathroom. This was beautiful if antiquated in style, with gold accents and glossy, enamel tiles with blue flourishes. It smelled of sunshine and lemons, and here and there the floor held grains of sand left behind by other feet on other days. Sand still clung to my legs despite the hosing and washing.

I looked about while rubbing my ankle clean.

Pots with thick-leaved greenery perched on narrow stands, to either side of the two washbasins. The fittings, faucets, and mirror were art deco, from my vague recollection of that art form. The sky-blue and beach-yellow towels looked soft enough to swim in. I ran my hand over one to check and found I was right. Curved, green-tinted glass screens enclosed the shower end of the circular, shower-cross-bathtub.

A steaming, hot bath was waiting for the doctor, and Cassius was in here drying off and naked. Any other time his

bare ass and muscled body would have had me drooling, at least a little. Not tonight. Faceplanting in bed was my goal.

The doctor was undressing, and Cassius...as he dried his neck, he paused to eye me from over the top of his towel.

I could tell where he was looking. Everywhere. Until he reached my legs. There, he braked and fixated.

After checking out my come-smearred legs, I shrugged. That? It was their doing. It was the disconcerting smolder in his eyes that made me click into a realization. He hated seeing the doctor's come on me? The doctor smirked as if he'd noticed that reaction.

Was I being staked out like territory in this sharing arrangement? Their rivalry was showing, and it was fascinating. I felt like a prized object, but this wasn't all bad. This might be something I could use as leverage?

"Really?" I used a wash basin to keep myself upright. "Next thing you'll both be peeing on me." They brightened. "Hey. No. That's it. Just no. Hard limit."

"If she says no..." Cassius was almost purring, having switched gears on the spot.

"We should do it?"

"*Eww*. I'll barf if either of you do. You said no bath for me? I'm off to snuggle into those sheets."

"Come here." The doctor beckoned.

If this was peeing... I would rewrite the book and...what? Hit them? Protest loudly? It would do nothing to stop them. Tentatively I walked forward.

"Get in." He nodded at the bath.

"I thought—"

"I was fucking with you. In."

I hesitated.

"Now."

“Fine.” I flopped a hand. I was too tired, too fed up, and too dirty, to complain much about being allowed to bathe properly. The walk upstairs had chilled my skin.

Then I tripped and barely stopped myself headbutting the rim of the bathtub.

The doctor grabbed my shoulder and made that *tsk-tsk* sound, then he bent me over the edge and deftly removed the butt plug. Another of his teasing mind-fucks? I was glad of the respite. There’d be no anal, tonight, surely, unless he wanted zombie sex.

I thought one, or both of them, might try something sexual, but I sank into the heated water and sighed as I nestled into the side of the tub, and the only thing that happened after that was the doctor joining me and pulling me into him and beneath his arm. I almost fell asleep in there.

Going to bed was a blur of drying myself, being told not to worry about clothes, and stumbling to the bed. Of course, I ended up in the middle, but...I was fine with that. If they snored, I knew nothing of it.

The bed was soft as summer rain.

I woke to a man pushing my legs apart and leaning his weight on my butt as he did so, pressing my lower body into the mattress. I was sleeping on my stomach with my head to the side, smooshed into a pillow. By the time I recalled where I was—in bed, on the island of Dr. Hulk—the man had shallowly introduced his dick to my pussy a few times and I was getting turned on enough to lie still and consider whether I should protest.

The holding down, the impromptu forcing, it fed my darker side, but I should do that protesting. I needed practice, and I liked the results from defying them.

“Heyyy.” My sleepy question was muffled by the pillow.

Heavy male shoulders and arms arrived to either side of my face, and he kissed the back of my neck. “Good morning, Charity. Hulk is away talking to Inigo, so we have some private time before he gets back.”

“Oh.”

That was Cassius, murmuring warmth on my neck, licking it, and biting me. He wriggled deeper between my legs, spreading me more, and inserted his cock a little further into my entrance, making me close my eyes to feel it going in.

Was there any better way to wake than with an insistent man fucking you?

I sucked in a breath, and decided to try to close my legs, just because I could, and because of the seven rules that never said I couldn't, and because it excited me to try. He only chuckled intimately and kept going, as if I had no chance of succeeding. I rocked my ass from side to side then tried to twist my body, levering up on one elbow.

“Uh-uh. I have things to say and you to fuck.” His hands swallowed mine—our fingers, wrists, and palms intertwined as I strived to get mine loose. I lost and he pressed me into the sheets, my wrists sliding higher under his control and being trapped under the pillow, where my head also ended up.

He ducked his head under the big soft pillow and joined me, then began to talk while continuing his small, teasing thrusts. “You wanted to know...”

I squirmed and wished I had a gag for him.

“...what I saw yesterday while...” He drove in, and when I gasped, he kissed my open mouth. My soft breathing and moans seemed to echo in this under the pillow space. I could see his eyes flicker, his feral smile. He met each of my small cries with a new kiss, and it was such a fucking turn-on to be held down, half smothered, with him dedicated to studying me.

But then he was still, and with his cock pulsing inside me. I wiggled my ass then whined, pitiful though that was, and nothing happened. If I said more, would that help? Words had

made him move. He'd punctuated sentences with thrusts, and I needed more grammar lessons like this.

"While?" I asked, prompting.

"Curious, are you?" He shifted higher into the *V* made by my legs and speared in full depth. I choked and splayed myself, tried to arch. The pillow had flipped away, and morning light flooded my closed eyelids. From how he was rotating his hips and grinding his cock in circles, he planned to paint my insides with come.

"Yes!" I groaned and flexed my wrists within his hold, wanting to grab his hip and pull him into me. When I couldn't move, I sank into the bed and waited, lost in the high of submission.

"While looking for you, last night"—he flexed his fingers on my ass, then traced what might be a bruise—"I found a room where the walls were decorated with knives and stuff. There were shelves with bottles with floating lumps, and in the middle was a steel table with a drain hole, maybe for blood. Ground floor. Fucking suspicious."

Was it? For a doctor? I was alarmed but too rapt in the current state of our fucking to worry about fucking suspicious rooms.

That first true and glorious penetration had halted. Again I whined.

"More?" he asked.

I ached, desired, was drowned in need, and I nodded, vigorously.

A series of vicious thrusts followed, driving me into the bed and making me bounce. I suffered it willingly, needing to be stuffed this morning, simply needing this because, because...because I did. Horniness had no rulebook. Except, he then withdrew and sat on me, releasing my wrists. When I heard him jacking off, I tried to climb onto all fours. A hand, planted between my shoulder blades, flattened me again. I scowled as warm spurts of come drenched my back, first, and then my ass when he knee-walked lower.

“*Heh*. Marked. That’s to teach you not to come back with his come on you.”

My editor-writer brain whispered, *that’s too much come in one sentence*.

“I couldn’t—” I began.

“I made her.” The sound of the doctor’s voice then the bedroom door shutting infiltrated my grumbling thoughts. “A contest so early?”

“Why not. You want her?”

“Keep her there.”

“Hmmm.” Cassius sounded callously interested.

The doctor climbed onto the bed. “Drag her a little lower.”

“Wait! No! For a contest you’re co-operating too much.” I gripped the sheets but was whooshed lower down the bed by Cassius and kept fastened down by his large hand on my back.

“Want my spot?” Cassius was flippant, and I craned my neck to glare at him.

“No. This will do.” Having retrieved the pillow, the doctor stuffed it beneath my breasts, then another one, before grabbing my hair. He pulled my head higher, aiming for a convenient place for his cock from the way it wobbled near my face. His fist-hold wrenched at the roots of my hair.

I winced and squeaked, then he lightly tapped the side of my jaw.

“Now, you will open that slutty mouth.”

My scowl was getting a workout. I angled my eyes upward. “No. Finish inside me.”

Cassius snorted. “Demanding bitch.” He was pinning my legs with his weight, and now he bent and bit my ass cheek, growling and hanging on while I squealed.

The doctor slapped a little harder on my cheek. The grim look he shot me, along with another squeeze on my face, pressing the inside of my mouth onto my teeth...it made me

decide to open. A forced BJ was enough to send a tingle up and down my spine, and my nipples tightened. *Make me.* That'd been my motto for years, and I'd never connected it to wanting anything this extreme. Now I had, and it was a whole new level of wonderful.

“Tongue. Show me that cute pink tongue you're going to wrap around my cock, little girl.”

I stuck out my tongue and watched him study it as I curled it and wetly licked my top lip. I waited, mouth wide, and he stared.

Which was when Cassius inserted two fingers inside me, slipping in on my arousal, pushing hard.

“Wet girl, wet,” he muttered. “Look what you made for me.” As he commenced a slow, pussy-thudding, knuckle-deep fingerfucking, I closed my eyes.

My mouth remained open, and my mind was switching from below, to the doctor before me, and his cock...then, at the squelch of his fingers, I switched back to Cassius. His knuckles hit and wedged into my swollen lips.

“Oh. Fuck. God.” My eyelids fluttered, and I groaned.

“That's a good girl. Your reward.” With one hand controlling me with my hair, the doctor pushed his erection into my mouth, slowly introducing it until I gagged. “You are going to learn to take me deeper. Was she feisty for you?”

“A little.”

“The new collar is there on the bed, along with some clamps, a large dildo, the plug. Stuff the last two in her before we go on.”

I gagged again, overcome, and the doctor chuckled, low and menacing.

He held me and gagged me with his cock, while Cassius changed over the collars. The bump of metal on my skin said this new one did have spikes. When I tried to look and struggled at the prod of the butt plug, my wrists were cuffed at my back.

I should get those off and fling them, was the last decent thought I had before something was shoved between my clit and the bed and then...switched on. The vibe had me climbing to the heavens and overwrought in seconds, and when a plug was wormed into my ass, and a dildo was inserted, a huge one from the stretch, I began to shake.

I craved shoving my clit onto that vibe.

Hold back, hold back, passed through my head, then I choked at the shove of the doctor's cock, going deeper, and I began to, shamefully, ride the vibrator. The hum wormed in, trembling my legs to mush, making me make awful sounds as the doctor fucked my mouth. I bubbled around him, sucking and licking when instructed to. I would hit that almost peak and stiffen and something would shift, or Cassius would move the vibe away, and the moment was gone. Tens of close-to-climax moments left me gurgling words in unknown languages while the doctor thrust in faster, deeper, in spite of my retching.

He came, my mouth filled, and the vibe was abruptly switched higher, and I...I was left drooling come, my back bending into a taut arch, while I sought release. My spine felt ready to break, as I wrenched into a body-wrecking, nuclear-level orgasm. I was still shaking and twitching when they released me to slump onto the bed. I swallowed the come, just because it was easier. Things were removed and unclipped.

With my eyes still shut, I curled up and clutched at sheet, then at whoever snuggled into my front. The other man nestled in behind me.

"I didn't even get to put the clamps on you." The doctor kissed my forehead and stroked my hair.

"Mmmm." One-eyed, I sent him a dubious look.

"That worked." Cassius's cock at the cleft of my butt my back felt semi-hard already. His skin slipped over mine.

Oh yes, I had mountains of come on my back.

Gradually I became more aware of that, and of sticky hair, of how my thighs were equally filthy, and that my face was

sticking to the sheet, with patented, get-you-pregnant come glue. My eyes opened wider. I needed to address that last thing soon, as in ASAP.

“I need another bath,” I said, griping.

“Was that a bratty, backhanded remark?” Cassius laughed over my shoulder.

“It was, but we’re going swimming now. I suppose you can shower, miss, along with us. Then put on the summer dress that I left on the quilt. No panties, no swimsuit.”

Getting used to showering with two men who desired me was not yet old, I soon realized. Having them soap me up and grab me wherever they wanted to, it warranted a ten out of ten. All tourist hotels should provide this shower-and-bed service.

Only...when was I ever going to visit another tourist trap? Never, the doctor would tell me.

I must think about that room full of knives, later. Much later. Cassius might be wrong, somehow. A knife was a knife, but those jars of floating lumps? Normal or not?

And how did I remind a sadistic doctor that he’d forgotten about sex causing pregnancy? With care, was how. I should choose my time wisely.

While drying myself, I spotted the hickeys running down my front then caught sight of my ass in a long wall mirror. I was red and bruised, in nasty stripes with dashes of purple, all across my butt.

When I twisted and poked at my ass, in awe at the colors, and unable to resist, the doctor groaned.

“I wasn’t going to touch her at the beach, but that...”

“I did well,” Cassius observed. “Technically a very nice caning.”

Tongue poking time? God no, it was too early in the day to be a brat.

The ease with which these men talked to each other about handling me was at odds with them being strangers before this.

If they weren't lying to me, one or both of them was exceptionally good at pretending. Cassius didn't strike me as being that smart or that able to control himself.

Could a dumb guy get a job in security?

Ugh. I still wasn't sure which way was up.

Were they playing me?

"What safeword did you choose?" the doctor asked me.

Wrongfooted, I gaped and thought fast. "Ummm." All kinds of silly or long words trundled by. *Wombat. Albatross. Abracadabra.* "Distress?"

"Okay." He cocked his head. "Not red?"

"No."

"You're wise to not choose red. That color only makes me go harder." His grin was scary.

Sadists could be such bastards.

I wanted to see what he would say when pressed. I might not be a sadist, but determination was imprinted on my bones. Later, I'd ask again, and see if he would say more about those lost girls, not because Cassius wanted me to, because if there was something bad happening here, I was going to find out who, where, and why.

CASSIUS

CASSIUS: I'm allowed to stay on the island whenever the doc is here. Okay?

I stared at the phone screen. My query had been simple, but his reply was slow. He should still be there. I had almost tucked the cellphone away and headed back to the bedroom when he answered.

JACOB: Sure. The closer the better. Any other news?

CASSIUS: Only a room I found with a bunch of doctor equipment? Bottles with organs inside? Scalpels, knives, a steel table, most looked old

I'd thought some of that was antique. Maybe Charity would know more about antiques. From her file, the woman seemed to have had more dead-end career paths than a magician who made balloon animals.

JACOB: Send pics of the room and contents

CASSIUS: Yes. Will do

The phone I'd given Charity was likely going to be unnecessary, since I was here.

CHARITY

As instructed, I wore the yellow sun dress with the collar but not the cuffs, with no underwear except for a yellow bra with little yellow daisies decorating the translucent lace. The doctor must have bought clothes for me while I was locked up

at the first house. One of the island cars was waiting out front, a white one painted with red flowers, but before we left for the beach, the doctor took us on a tour of the tower that adjoined the house.

“A small tour, since looking in every room is tedious,” he told us.

Cassius leaned in and brought his mouth to my ear. “I found your phone in your coat pocket and brought them both to the bedroom. The coat’s in a closet there.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Keep it secure from now on. Don’t fucking lose the phone again.”

I huffed and gritted my teeth. It was his fault I’d lost the coat and the phone.

I was betting the room full of knives and a dissection table would not be one of the ones shown. It was suspicious as fuck, now that I’d had time to think about it. I’d have to get Cassius to show me some other time when the doctor was otherwise occupied. What he’d described had to be a dissection table, what with it being steel and having a drain hole. I’d seen those before, having done a year of university with the aim of becoming a veterinarian. I’d found out my stomach and mind disqualified me from watching anything still alive bleed. Suturing and cutting animals was therefore a *no* from me, and dead people blood was only a tad less horrifying.

Injections into my own flesh had never worried me much, even if I bled. My mind was a labyrinth of weirdness. Which only begged the question: what if the doctor’s mind was a maze, too? No normal doctor would get a thrill from cutting up people. He had a dissection table! Make that, he probably had one of those tables.

He might just be a kinky sadist who kept his kinks confined to hurting living girls for consensual fun. *Might* was the key word.

“You’ve seen the dining room and most of the interesting rooms in the main house, so I’ll show you the tower. The

library is there.”

“Was this a hotel or something?” I was curious. History had a way of sinking its claws into me, and this place reeked of it.

“Before World War Two it was a holiday place for the British and the rich from Europe. So yes, it was a hotel.”

That was why the tens of rooms.

“The island was bombed in WW2, and another tower was hit and collapsed. You’ll see the remains at the beach.” He turned away, and I barely caught the next few sentences. “Quite a few people were inside, and they died. I’ve never had the heart to excavate and reconstruct.”

I caught sight of his face, and he looked saddened, yet that wartime disaster had happened decades ago. “Was it your family who owned the island, back then?”

“Yes.” He grimaced. “I inherited the island.” Then he walked us into a wide square area scattered with low tables and comfy upholstered armchairs, though most were stacked to one side. A carved column was a central feature, and a stone staircase spiraled up beside the outer wall. “The library is above.”

As we climbed, at each new floor we emerged onto a small landing, with an arched door before us, and a new section of the stairs to the side and climbing higher. Narrow embrasure windows let in light. The electric-powered lights were off, and at night this place would be dark as hell—assuming Hell turned off the flames, that is.

The stone walls seemed thick enough to withstand a few centuries of abuse.

Had anyone ever had to defend this place and fire arrows through those?

It was cool in here and smelled of dust and ancient things.

“How old is this tower?” I asked the doctor, on the way up to floor three. He was ahead of me, while Cassius followed.

My dress was short, and I was sure the view of my panties-less ass would be revealing.

“Sixteenth century. The house is an addition. The architecture borrows from everywhere...I’m told.”

The outside of the house had arched stonework reminiscent of Cyprus or Egypt, but the ironwork balustrades on upper balconies had seemed Greek in origin, and then there were those columns at the rear entryway—one of which he’d tied me to. Were those Roman? Greek? The house was a pastiche too.

I’d been imagining a classic English castle tower, with modern bits. The arched timber door on floor three had a ceramic sign hanging on a hook: *LIBRARY*. The door itself was braced with metal and embellished with artwork swirls and shapes. It opened with a minor creak, despite the timber being as thick as the height of my hand, from wrist to fingertips.

Inside was a lovely small library with reading area featuring a sofa and three blue-upholstered chairs. The room was shaped by the form of the tower and had three of those tall windows with stained glass inserts. On the inner walls paintings were hung in baroque, glass-protected frames, along with framed fragments of pages, with words in a language I couldn’t recognize.

“You can come here and read any of these books, Charity, or write?”

Writing? It seemed a strange occupation on this island. There’d be no purpose with no audience.

A V-shaped flock of birds wheeled in the distance. This tower rendered a view of the sea and whatever might lie near the island. No other land had showed from the helicopter, but the white sail of a yacht sat, deceptively still, near the horizon. It gave me hope that others would land here. An island like this would make for an idyllic impromptu stay.

“Charity?” the doctor reminded me.

“Sorry? Oh! The books? Or do you mean my writing?” I nodded. “Perhaps.” I couldn’t see the point of writing stories no one could ever read. I also couldn’t see any monster smut section among the books. A pity. I could stomach only so much mystery and detective, or wartime stories, and those seemed the commonest from the titles on the spines.

“Ebooks?” I inquired. “And an eReader?”

“Hush. That’s blasphemy. There will be no eBooks.” He turned away, pretending to admire a painting he must have seen a hundred times before.

Huh. Had I struck a nerve? The doctor hated digital books.

Hands in the pockets of his shorts, Cassius stood staring out the next window, uninterested in the library. I toyed with the idea that he, too, liked monster smut, but graphic novels or spy stories were my bet.

“Do you read, Cassius?”

He turned to me, “If I have time and something is good.”

“Such as?”

“*The Lord of the Rings* was my last one. *The Sandman* too.”

“I see.” I should stop underestimating his tastes.

As we made to leave, I noticed another heavy timber door blocked the stairs leading upward to the fourth floor. “Doctor? Is that the Inner Sanctum of the library?”

He squeezed my ass. “Move, Princess.”

The landing was small, and I’d halted in the doorway, preventing it from closing.

Without looking, I put my hand up to my shoulder, to quiet him, and he took it and bit. The zing from that bite, unexpected and arousing, almost made me miss the reply.

“Yes, that goes to the Inner Sanctum, and it’s off limits, for now. On pain of losing your soul, Miss Charity.” The doctor’s token smile added to the sting in his words. “I store my

antiquities up there—books, specimens, my family history, and so on.” He set his back to the wall of the landing.

“My soul? As in my soul biting the dust?”

“Yes.”

Was that a dare or a promise? I wasn’t even sure I had a soul.

“What about those framed pages and the paintings, are they not antiquities?”

“Those are copies. Good morning, Roland.”

“Morning, sir.” The voice came from behind Cassius, and I swung, though my mind was still rambling through what had just been said.

Cassius was also looking at Roland, who stood framed by the library door. I recognized a staff member from the helicopter landing area.

Tall, with his long hair tied back and bushy eyebrows, the man wore dark pants and shirt, and looked grim as he scanned us. Was that a weapon in a shoulder holster? Yes, it was. He was as rigid as a board.

Where had he been hiding, and why was this place staffed by so many ex-military people?

The doctor clapped his hands. “We’re off to the beach, Roland. You’re rostered off in two days?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be leaving on the boat and going to my sister’s wedding. Inigo will be here while I’m away.”

I barely listened. Death, he’d promised that but, somehow, I didn’t believe him, or maybe I just didn’t care anymore. I was so out of fucks my alphabet had probably lost its *F*.

I needed to find out more about the doctor, and the place to do that was upstairs in the Inner Sanctum. As for the key...

The lock on that Sanctum door was an antique, too, with a bold, brass keyplate and curlicue engraving.

As we reversed our course down the stairs, I remembered a framed assortment of ancient objects in the library. It had hung on the wall beside a framed page. A pearl-sewn purse, a derringer, and several unknown things were featured, as well as four gold or silver keys. Even better, the hinges on that frame were a very different color to the clip that held the frame—that clip was burnished by frequent use. Could it be that simple?

And if it was that simple, and one of those keys fitted that special door, why was it so?

Curiosity, engaged.

This beach was the only good one on the island, and the only one with a toppled tower slowly crumbling into the sea. The wind riffled off the sea and through the grove of open trees to tussle my hair as I fastened it into a ponytail. At the other end of the wide strip of sand was a small headland where the tower had been built. A bomb had done this, long ago. Blown-apart stone blocks lay half sunken into sand or were in the sea being washed by small waves.

The doctor had driven the car, and he parked beside a beach hut that, in times long past, was probably built as shelter for a goatherd or similar. Like most of the structures on the island it looked as if it had existed for a century or more, with brick walls, a terracotta roof, and a cobblestone patio out the front facing the beach. There was nothing inside the shelter except a weathered table, chairs, a few shelves, and a faucet that connected to a rainwater tank. The door and windows were gone, leaving holes.

None of the staff had come, so I was alone with the two men, two slightly crazy men, considering why I was even on this island, a picnic basket and two bottles of white wine the doctor had brought in a cooler with a slab of ice.

“Let’s have a swim before the sun is too high. Leave your clothes here. Bring a towel.”

The doctor seemed to be addressing us both as he stripped. Cassius had gone off wandering around the back of the hut, but he'd returned and was already dragging off his shorts. I must have looked hesitant. So much nakedness outside a bedroom.

"No sex for a while. Get naked, Charity. You're safe." The doctor dropped his clothes in a neat pile on a rickety chair on the patio. "Are you sore?"

God knew why that made me blush, but the heat washed over my face. "I'm...okay. You have to remember, I'm British, and this much nakedness outside a bedroom or a club seems odd."

Especially this much nekkid in front of two well-formed men with great asses.

Quickly, I whipped the dress off over my head and cast it over a modern rattan sun lounge. Two others were stacked near the hut. "I claim this one. Who gets to lie on the paving stones? One of you gentlemen?"

"Can I spank her later for thinking she wouldn't be on her knees serving me?" I pursed my lips but said nothing more, since Cassius had a devilish look that said *try me*.

"We'll see. No sex this morning, though, children. If you need the bathroom, it's in the trees." The doctor strolled away toward a sandy path leading through the palm trees and shrubs.

"No fun until this afternoon then, princess."

"If you're lucky." My mouth was moving before I could shush myself—a sign I was more comfortable with these men than was wise.

The doctor yelled over his shoulder. "Shovel and toilet paper is in the hut!"

Ha. Outdoor amenities were so not fun.

I put my hands on my hips, refusing to back down from Cassius. Of course, he took several seconds to peruse my nude figure before grabbing his own towel. He sauntered closer and

put his hands on my hips. He turned me, clearly checking my ass as he smoothed his hand over it.

“Dayum.” He gave it a light smack. “You’re bloody lucky sex is banned right now or I’d pin you against the wall and do things to you. Check out behind the hut before you follow me. Twenty meters behind it or thereabouts.”

I had whiplash from his sexy threat in my ear and this next part. “Have you been peeing back there?”

He laughed. “Maybe, but it won’t kill you. Just watch your step. Go look.”

Men and their pissing activities. They were almost as bad as dogs at marking territory.

I watched them go and was struck by the freedom implied in this—in them leaving me to follow and expecting it, and not worrying about me doing something entirely off the wall.

I had an island to wander about in, on days when nobody wanted me for anything else. I looked through the trees at the pure blue sky. Meek waves tumbled in and the water was glasslike with a greenish-blue color where rocks formed a perfect breakwater. The early summer heat warmed my arms, and I smelled the first blossoms in the air as a butterfly went wafting by.

I took a deep breath, then another.

This was paradise.

Even paradise could have snakes.

I headed behind the little run-down house with the eroded plasterwork and leaf-shrouded roof and kept wandering until I spied something that looked out of place—dark lumps in the ground beyond a screen of vines and branches. I pushed through and found a track heading that way.

And I needed to be more than the submissive girl they could ravish. I wanted to know what the fuck was happening, why the doctor seemed half Ted Bundy and half a saint, and I wanted to know whether Cassius was telling the truth about anything. Asking face to face was never going to satisfy me as

they could lie through their teeth. I needed to find some incontrovertible facts, like maybe this...

A small cemetery lay before me. Fifty headstones, at least. Some were terribly damaged and eroded, mold-shrouded and weather-worn. A few looked newer and well-cared for.

*C*HARITY

Lacking pen and paper, I memorized the names on the headstones as well as I could. On another day, I hoped to return with the phone and record them all. *Patricia Romanus* was the name that stood out. *August 19th, 1942* was inscribed on the stone. If that was the day she died, she could be a relative of the doctor, who'd died in the bombing of the tower. The two most recent graves were twenty years apart, and the last had died in 2001. Both of those appeared to be male names, and so they were unlikely to be other Lost Girls, as the doctor had called me.

The earliest graves were from the nineteenth century. Those must have been renewed, for the inscriptions were metal plaques on simple crosses, with peeling white paint. A name and a date was the only information recorded on those earlier graves.

I was almost disappointed. Yet... Did I want him to be a killer? I guess I wanted closure, a reason for everything. Humans liked reasons.

If *I* were a serial killer, I would never put their real name on their grave. In fact...I'd be unlikely to bury them so neatly.

A pale, gray-white object protruded from the soil beside my sandal, and I stooped, squatting to see it closer. *A bone. Holy crap. A fucking bone.* My eyes stayed wide and fixated.

Possibly a finger bone. I recalled the shape of those from my studies.

My train of thought had been blown to the four winds.

The earth near the bone was of a level with the rest of the site. The headstone indicated a woman was buried here, who died in 1821. The grave was too ancient to be evidence of serial killing unless the inscription was fake. Mouth twisting, I eyed the bone. Should I?

I should.

I tucked it into my palm and went to the hut for a place to hide this, praying the doctor wouldn't come to see what I was doing. I had no pocket, no private bag, so I poked it into the ground at the back right corner of the foundations.

My heart was thudding too fast for a casual stroll, and in this state, I wasn't going to meet anyone's eyes without looking worried. I paused for a few minutes to calm myself before heading down the trail to the beach.

I do not believe in omens.

This find was food for thought. I mulled it over as I trudged down the sand. The men watched me from where they idly swam in the quiet water created by the rocky breakwater. The beach was well sheltered from winds due to the headland and its shape, so the lack of holidaying yacht owners sailing in was curious.

Why was there no coffin? A human hand did not accidentally break through a coffin, unless I'd fallen into an old vampire movie with a restless corpse. Was the bone an omen? I didn't believe in omens, but I did believe in DNA and science. Rock-solid science trumped any Ouija board crap. If that person died centuries ago, nothing was likely to be in public records, but what if they hadn't? What were the chances of the DNA being registered somewhere?

And who the fuck buried people in a cemetery without a coffin?

During plague times, there'd been hurried burials.

I dropped my towel beside theirs, yards up from the damp sand, and kept going, wading into the water. At ankle depth, I paused to appreciate the temperature—it was colder than I liked but survivable. The scent filled my awareness, a mishmash of molecules that always permeated beach air. Salt, sunshine, fish, crabs crawling in holes, and maybe dead men that tell no tales.

“In!” the doctor bellowed as Cassius waded toward me, hand outstretched.

The water swirled about my toes and withdrew, revealing wet sand that had swallowed a portion of my feet. I squidged my feet about, worming them deeper into the sand. It felt good, as squishing sand always did, and it brought back memories of my holiday in Australia when I was twenty-one and had a girlfriend with wanderlust. The beaches there were bigger and the sun hotter. They were strewn with hot surfer dudes and surfer chicks too. I’d tried to learn surfing and had drowned a little. We’d both tried free diving on a boat tour to a reef, with an expert showing us how to learn. Free diving was scary stuff...

I remembered lazy days of recreational drugs and fun, and friends screaming random insults at each other, and drinking cheap wine around a campfire late at night with the surf roaring in as background music.

The sea washed in again. A gull cried, plaintive and wild. I watched it wheel across the sky with wings unfurled, gliding on the heated air.

Cassius splashed nearer, snatched my hand, and towed me outward.

“Hey! I was getting used to the water.”

“You can’t stand there like that, all naked, and not expect me to drag you into the depths.”

I smirked and twisted my hand, but he kept the hold. “So you can drown me, I suppose?”

“Drown you, fuck you underwater, where the doc can’t see. One of those. Maybe you’re a siren with sharp teeth?”

“Hmmm. I wish.” Then I could swim away into the cold dark depths and never see Dr. Romanus or Cassius again.

Would I miss them?

It was a question I lost as Cassius moved in and began to kiss me, with his hands wandering over my hips and breasts. The lure was irresistible, and I molded myself to him, feeling his hardness press on my belly; his body was warmer than the sea, and probably more alluring than a kraken probing me with eight fat tentacles.

“No sex,” I reminded him, coming up for air from that prolonged kiss.

“If only kissing was sex.” His thumb traced the edge of my jaw, but his other hand was pushing between my thighs. “Did you see the cemetery?”

“Yes.” I left my mouth open, let my eyelids flutter down as his fingers probed and slid. “I did. Later, talk about it later.” His laugh was mocking, and he teased me and never quite put those fingers inside me, just circled my throbbing clit and pushed along my slit. After a moment or ten, where I sighed and kissed his shoulder and slipped my hand to his waist, near his cock, tempted to touch him, he stepped away.

“Swim, little mermaid.” He dove in and with a few lazy strokes surged past the doc in perfect freestyle. Smiling, I followed, diving then kicking to the surface.

At the dash of the coldness, thoughts reawakened.

Was I essential to this information gathering his boss wanted when Cassius could see it all? I kept swimming and went past where the doctor and Cassius stood, heading along the shoreline, toward the end of the beach where the blocks from the tower rested. The sea was deeper here but still clear. When I trod water, fish cruised by my legs. I ducked my head under to watch them, though I was out of practice with keeping my eyes open underwater.

As a dare to myself, I followed a school as they swam into the debris from the tower, casually flicking their tails, only to discover the bottom of the sea dropping off into an alarming

depth beside the piled blocks. This depth seemed well beyond my feet and at least half again my height. Seaweed and mollusks had made a home on the stone blocks, and the fronds waved at me as the tides and currents sucked and surged past. As it retreated, the sea delivered cooler water to my lower legs.

I popped my head into the air and found the men were saying something, but the gurgle of water lapping at my ears muffled them. I dove again, flipping ass-up then kicking and pushing with my arms to slide even deeper, determined to touch the bottom.

I'd nearly died recently. *Seize the day*. Life was too short not to have adventures.

I touched the rock-strewn sand and pushed off to the surface, and on the way up I glimpsed a hole between tumble-stacked blocks where a section of tower lay—a hole that flickered with impossible light. A reflection? A trick of the eye?

The block above the hole had looked to be part of a carving.

When I surfaced, I realized the doctor was warning me not to dive where I was. I couldn't see why. The water was quiet, the surf barely there, compared to other shores I'd once tried. I wanted to touch that deeper block. After a few breaths, I up-ended and kicked for the bottom.

There, there it was. My fingertips scraped over the granite block, and I saw a glint, a flash of wavering light beneath the headland shore. *Light. Light in the depths.*

That could only be from sunlight?

What else could there be where the tower had risen? No matter how deep in the earth its chambers, it could not have been built beneath sea level. Perhaps the land had shifted. The bomb might have opened a chasm in the land that reached deep into rock. Although, after sixty years of neglect, the devastated tower would have settled, and the spaces would be filled with weathered-in sand and soil.

This was a puzzle, and I loved puzzles.

I dove one last time to look and found nothing when I surfaced, except...the two men on short surfboards glaring at me.

“There’s been a stonefish spotted on these rocks,” said the doctor. “Don’t go down there again.” As if to add emphasis, the water slapped against the underside of the board.

“I know of those.”

“If you get stung, Charity, you’ll might die before I can fly you to somewhere for medical care.”

“Then...” I looked from one to the other, treading water, and grabbing the side of Cassius’s board to steady myself, “why didn’t you say?”

“He did! We both were yelling at you.”

“Oh. Sorry.” I frowned. “The water is so beautiful here, and I got carried away. Show me what they look like. Later, doctor. Please,” I hurriedly added due to his scowl intensifying.

“It’s a deal. For now, stay away from these rocks.”

We swam back to the lagoon-like area, but I had to wonder if there really was a stonefish or some other reason they didn’t want me looking. From memory, stonefish venom could kill you, and it was terribly painful. I’d look it up later, but the other fact was that stonefish could swim, so theoretically it could end up on any of these rocks.

I had pointed that out as we took turns throwing a ball to each other across the water. This could’ve been me with a normal bunch of friends celebrating something with an impromptu day at the beach. The ball had bounced off the doctor’s head more than once. Cassius was overly competitive and liked launching it at us fast.

“Of course!” The doctor threw it to Cassius, and it dropped halfway and landed between me and him. He went to rescue it. That lazy freestyle stroke was admirable, in more ways than one—such as watching the sunshine melt across his arm

muscles or the toss of his wet blond hair as he pushed closer to me. He sent the ball skipping to bob before my nose. I grabbed it and tossed it high, to the doctor.

Only Cassius had waded in behind me. He wrapped me in his arms, one around my throat and pinning me, the other below my breasts, then squeezed me until I coughed. “Did you know your tits jiggle when you throw the ball, and it’s tempting me to do criminal things?”

I half-grinned at him, turning sideways and sticking out my tongue. I was a brat at heart and no centuries-old bone was going to spoil this day. The doctor swam closer.

“No sex.” With my teeth, I delicately picked up a fold of skin from his arm, mock growled, then let it go.

“Yet.”

“Can I use the internet here?” I asked the doctor, who approached me from the front, just as close as Cassius.

His broad shoulders were awe-inspiring hills of muscle as water sluiced from him, as he rose to full height. Who woulda think that was under his more formal clothes?

“Not fair.” I mock-whispered, for I had Cassius behind me, lodging his dick between my ass cheeks, and the doctor crowding in at the front.

“You can use it. I have it locked so you can’t send messages out, but something like stonefish details, yes, you can look those up.”

“Huh. Thanks.”

This, being squashed between the two them was mean. And when they both started kissing me and fondling my body, my hormones went into hyperdrive.

“You said no sex,” I accused the doctor when he backed away from kissing me and merely held my breasts beneath the water, weighing them, brushing thumbs over both nipples at once.

“For a while, I said, and it’s been that...” He smiled. “Let’s go eat. You’re still safe, despite being far too unclothed. My

morality is offended.” He ducked underwater, and with Cassius still holding my neck in the crook of his arm, I could only watch, open-mouthed, as the doctor’s shape wavered as he went lower, to stop at my waist and kiss and nip downward over the path of bruises left by Cassius.

“That’s not eating!” I tried to wriggle away.

“Oh yeah? He’s heading for your cunt, and I class that as eating.”

I gasped as the doctor fastened a hand onto my thigh, found my clit and sucked on it, then carefully bit. He increased the pressure slowly until I had to whimper. “Fuck. Fuck.” The bite was hard enough to threaten, stimulate, and possibly drive me insane.

“What is he doing, princess?” Cassius licked my ear, his hard biceps a half-inch from choking me as I bucked against the clit torture.

“My clit... Oh. God.”

“Good man. Looks like we get to fuck you soon.” His mouth arrived at my ear. “And after that stunt you pulled at the rocks, flaunting yourself to a stonefish, I’m betting punishment is coming.”

“Hey. No. You can’t.” I shut my eyes and groaned as the doctor kept on nibbling...sucking.

“Ohhh, we can.” Cassius was ready with a question when the doctor came up for air. “Are we going to punish her for endangering her ass over there at the rocks?”

The doctor shook off the water and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “The stonefish? We should punish her, yes.” Stubborn, I said nothing, only challenged him with a stare. “But after lunch.”

Now I couldn’t hold back. “You never told me it was there. I wouldn’t have swum there if I’d known.” *Liar, liar.* I probably would have.

His focus flicked to Cassius, past my shoulder. “Your thoughts?”

“Bullshit. We can do what we want to her. After lunch is good. We should avoid abusing her ass for a few more days.”

“There. It’s decided. Your punishment is at our discretion.”

Fuck. Stop tingling, clit. Stop thinking this is hot.

Cassius released me, and they waded to shore as if they’d chosen a course in the lunch meal. Maybe they had, and I was going to be the last course.

Annoyed at their presumption but still aching—the rush of water as I walked helped not one jot—I followed them and headed up the beach to the path.

The sun had risen high enough to roast us humans, so we retreated to the hut beneath the trees, hauling the sun lounges into a line, looking out to sea through the thin forest, with the table heaped with all the goodies. They left me the middle lounge. I turned from the food with my plate and wine goblet to find I’d been too slow to grab one of the others.

Cassius raised his glass of white wine in a salute before sipping.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re surrounding me?” I lowered myself to the lounge, careful not to spill anything. This was glorious, with the view, the plate heaped with a croissant, fruit, fancy cheeses, smoked salmon, and those sweet little curls of ham shaped into blossoms. “Was this from your cook?”

The doctor nodded. “Margaux is a chef, though, not merely a cook. And yes, to the other question. We surround you. So you won’t escape.” Nonchalantly, he popped a cracker with cheese on it into his mouth.

It was a few, flustered minutes before we settled into anything like a conversation, and talking here seemed just the right thing to do. I needed to know more. I wanted to get past feeling uncomfortable with the doctor, because if it did come down to living here for years—god help me, I did not want that to come to pass—to feel intimidated by him forever would be a life in Hell.

“Why doesn’t anyone ever happen to park their sailboat here? This cove is gorgeous. It must be close to—” To where? This reminded me of a key fact. I did not know where I was.

“Tradition. It’s been private property for a century or more. Warning signs.” The doctor waved toward the sea. “Beacons, too, those broadcast that warning. No stranger is going to arrive and whisk you away, Charity.”

“I never—” I swallowed a chunk of olive in a hurry then grimaced. I shook my head at his assertion. “Just knowing how many people are out there on the sea, to have no accidental visitors is eerie. No?”

“There have been a few over the last ten years. All were turned away by staff. I suppose it might be a problem in the future.”

Except he didn’t seem worried. “Refugees?” This had to be in the Mediterranean, so surely there had been some boats?

“No.”

“Impressive.” Cassius rose and went to the low table to refill his plate. He brought the wine bottle to me and offered.

I shook my head. The chilled water seemed a better bet. I wanted a clear head and compared to these men, I was a lightweight. I’d be sozzled out of my brain before they were even slightly drunk.

Cassius put his own glass down and forked more ham onto his plate. “So what is the history of this place? You got bombed in WW2 but what about before that? Crusaders on the way to the crusades? Invasions by anyone? You’re in the middle here so...”

I tuned out. *Bingo. In the fucking Mediterranean.* Now all I needed was a way to paddle home to the UK, a submarine, a way to hijack that chopper. Yep, it didn’t help much but was better than being entirely lost.

The island had been overlooked by much of history, it seemed. Civilizations had come and gone, and it had remained neutral, or bypassed. A large island with a small but safe cove

to hide in from storms or enemies. There was something I was missing.

We drifted into discussing the best wines and cheeses, then music. When I wondered what memes were circulating and whether half the royal family was still being idjits as per usual, I was told the queen was dead.

That was a damper.

I wasn't a strict monarchist. I didn't have much stake in this, except the usual sadness at anyone dying...but the passing of an era in British history only served to remind me of how isolated I was from the world and from life.

*C*ASSIUS

Pretending to be the doctor's obedient underling, in this relationship we were forging with Charity, it was not that difficult. I'd spent my life being the obedient one in the army. It paid to obey, but didn't mean I was in utter agreement with him, or that I would rank him above my true employer, Jacob. Or even that I'd neglect the girl's safety just to please him.

On the other hand, I was enjoying his mindfuckery. *Pet her, poke her, plant suggestions, sit back and wait.*

Clearly, Charity was curious about this punishment, and just as clearly, she was happy to delay it.

I'd seen the doctor at play before. I could learn from him and discard him later if I had to.

She'd put that little yellow dress back on after we pulled on our shorts. The tease of her ass peeking out when she lay back on that sun lounge and the dress crept up her hip, that had given me a permanent hard-on. Her lips sucking on the edge of that goblet and her cute pink tongue-tip licking cream off a small chocolate...*fuck*. It was excruciating, but I, too, could wait.

The little glance she gave me, though, when she licked the cream. Was the girl teasing *me*?

I adjusted my shorts and thought about all the things I could do to her.

I was thinking too much and nearly missed her next words, I sat forward. She was tackling the cemetery head on? Charity had balls.

CHARITY

“I saw the cemetery that’s behind here.” I gestured toward the beach house. “Some of those graves must be from the bombing of the tower. Was Patricia Romanus your grandmother? Aunt?”

He stared up at the treetops as he replied. “She was my great grandmother. I wondered when you’d find the graveyard.” The monotone of his answer was odd.

“But you couldn’t have known her?”

“No.”

I wrestled with myself for a second, noted how alert Cassius had become, and said what maybe I shouldn’t have. “I found a bone there, sticking from the earth. I left it there, buried it again. Isn’t that unusual to have no coffin? And creepy.”

He shrugged. “Times were different. The war casualties had coffins. There were five deaths from the tower. Patricia and the servants. It’s one of the few times war touched the island.”

“Plague, maybe? Were the others buried in a hurry?” Maybe I was getting too curious.

“I can’t recall. You can show me which grave later, so I can make sure the remains are interred properly. Cassius...” He continued smoothly, and spoke across me, leaning up on his elbow then placing his glass on the ground. “What do you think of war? You must have seen casualties?”

“I did. Quite a few of them, after some of the IEDs and attacks in the cities. It’s never nice, if I can even use nice in

the same breath. War is ugly.”

“But is it ever justified?”

An interesting point. I drank my wine and nibbled treats as I listened. I’d never seen war except on TV.

“I guess? I mean Hitler, justified. The Taliban, justified. Ukraine, justified. The aggressor should not be allowed to win because he attacks first. Do that and you give them *carte blanche* to do it again.”

Carte blanche. Cassius did read big books. I needed to stop underestimating him. I gulped the last of my water and eyed the few inches left in the wine bottle. Why not. I slid off my lounge, fetched myself some wine, and slipped back, only to realize the men had stopped talking.

“What? Did you want this?” I raised the glass.

“No.” Cassius cleared his throat. “But your dress caught above your ass for a sec. Do it again.”

“Fuck off.” I grinned. “Keep talking.”

“*Fuck.*” Cassius pretended to write on his palm. “*Off.* Noted for later reference.”

I raised my hand to the collar, touching it, remembering the morning wake-up call. *And shut up, ovaries, stop getting excited.*

“Getting back to war,” the doctor hinted. “You consider that war is justified if you’re on the good side.”

“Yep. I do. Though which one is good?” Cassius turned on his side and raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, but my other point is that you see the killing of the soldiers on the other side as fine and not as murder.”

“Because it isn’t that—murder.” Cassius frowned. “There are rules to war.”

This was getting deep, but I was only the listener and in the middle like a tennis match, watching balls lobbed overhead.

“Who makes the rules, Cassius? What century? Was war murder in Roman times? Was Rome good or bad?”

“Are you saying some killing...” Cassius said quietly, clearly thinking this through, “can be good, if it’s war, but if you’re on the wrong side, it’s murder? That’s mind blowing but I don’t agree. Soldiers obey.”

“That was the excuse of the SS. There aren’t always good definitions for killing. I’ll get that last bottle from the cooler in the hut.” The doctor climbed off his lounge. “What would you call it if someone threatened to kill you, or your family, and you killed them? Murder?”

“Self-defense.”

There was more wine? I swished my dregs. “No more for me.”

“Okay.” His voice was muted, and I heard the sound of things being shifted. “And if you knew they would do it eventually, kill you, and you pre-empted it?”

“That’s also okay, though the law might find it hard to call it self-defense.” Cassius twisted to observe the doctor as he returned. His thoughtful expression became far more interested, and I swung my legs so as to sit on the side of the lounge.

“I agree. Murder isn’t murder if the person killed is a bad person.”

What was the doc doing? He was carrying looped, red rope...and the reason was instantly obvious...when our gazes connected.

I knew what that was for. Me.

Should I run, and what was my reason? Nothing. Just I wanted to. My exhilaration hit a new high as I sprinted to the side, leaping the vacated lounge the doctor had used.

Really?” was all I heard from the doctor, and a *whoop* from Cassius.

Fuck. This was stupid, but I was doing it anyway because the thought of them catching me was scary, even though I was

fairly sure I could take whatever they intended and enjoy it. I liked some scary.

They were faster, or Cassius was, I could see that within seconds. The man pounded over the lounge and took off after me like a racehorse.

Stop looking back! Don't sprain your ankle. I raced along, dodging trees, branches, rocks, until I stepped on a sharp stick, and it dug in and hurt. I screamed, hopped, and glanced back.

They were hurtling after me.

And I froze, my stomach lurching into an abysmal state where it dropped forever, churning with a thousand dark possibilities. Nausea surged to my mouth, bitter and frightening. I backed into a tree, the branches and my dress rustling, scraping, cracking. I shook with fear where a moment ago it had been desire. What had I become?

I was afraid of these men who skidded to a halt and waited before me, threatening, rope in hand, and I hated my terrors, hated myself. Did I imagine their leers, their impersonal lusts?

Tears leaked onto my face, but I did not dare to wipe them away. God, when had I become so fucking *weak* and subservient to the memories lurking in my head.

C *HARITY*

My back slid partway down the tree trunk, twigs poking at me, and still I shook. I couldn't stop.

I hate, hate, hate this.

Cassius took a half-step forward and his face fell into bleak shock—if I read him right. “Charity? Are you okay?”

Fuck. Was this comfort from him? Even that made me feel ill, uneasy, and wrong. Strength was what I wanted in myself.

The doctor stood frowning, the loops of red rope in his hand, ready for use. He drew a deep breath.

What I had done, and was still doing, would negate his clause about being what suited him. That also made me despair. I didn't wish to leave the island.

“Safeword,” he said, with that frown remaining. “Use it, Charity.”

I swallowed, hard. My name in his mouth unlocked something...relief, or hope? Both? What safeword had I chosen?

“Distress,” I said, certain it was barely audible.

He nodded. “Good. Let's get you back to the hut. We have to talk.”

“Oh.” I suppose I looked conflicted and miserable. I hugged my stomach, where my doubts still churned. “I failed, didn’t I?”

Cassius came in and went to one knee. “I’m an bastard but not that sort of bastard.”

“No, you have not,” the doctor said. “Hell to the no, as they say. You can walk back or be carried by—” He gestured.

“I’ll carry you.” At that Cassius pulled me forward by my arm and scooped me up.

This entire episode had left me vulnerable, embarrassed, and anxious. “I’m sorry,” I said, and I was instantly fucking ashamed of saying that too. I wanted to be allowed to walk, but I also liked this. He was warm and solid and yes, comforting.

“Don’t be.” He kept walking, dodging trees with ease, in spite of my added weight. I curled up tighter when we brushed by a few.

“I have a horde of bugs fluttering inside me that are definitely not butterflies. I hate this.”

“I know what happened to you. I saw your file. Shut up and be carried. I care. Do I know why exactly I care, considering we don’t know each other much? Nope.”

I squirmed a little before replying. “Still sucks.”

He laughed. “Yes.”

So Cassius cared. This erotic island fantasy was broken, or at the least it was cracked, but it made me think I could trust him.

The doctor was more unfathomable by the second, as I observed him threading his way through this little forest of straggly, claspng branches. Even when a branch scraped a red path over one cheek, below his eye, he was unmoved. I might not have failed, but I’d achieved something, and it seemed to be something bad.

“I told you before, if I have to, I’ll keep you myself, if the doctor hurts you...the wrong way.”

The wrong way was so open to interpretation. Oddly, I could almost imagine myself living here, but with an ex-soldier who was beholden to others it would be far more unsettled. He was an underling, while the doctor was a force unto himself, to put it in dramatic language.

“I was triggered, is all,” I said as he lowered me to the rattan lounge the doctor had used.

“I know.” He squatted before me, lines marring his forehead. “You’re okay now?” He’d left a hand on my thigh, and it pressed on me, reminding me of his other words. He wanted to keep me if the doctor did not, and that was so demeaning—to be a possession.

Demeaning, but...I could grow to like that. I could, I thought I really could. I sucked in my bottom lip. Admitting I wanted a man to own me was a whole new fetish, but dreams and fantasies could have rot under the surface.

“Yes. The horde of bugs has gone.”

“Good.” He moved away, as the doctor strolled in and dropped the rope onto the end of the lounge.

“The talk...” For a moment, the doctor was as interested in the sky as he was in me. “You asked if you failed, Charity, and it is a no, unless you don’t want to participate in CNC.”

“Oh.” I left my mouth wide.

He came closer and crouched, the same as Cassius had, but he reached out and took my hand then turned it over as if thinking of tracing my palm. “I would—”

“If you make her do this, with the threat,” Cassius was glowering, “of something awful if she says no, how the fuck is it CNC?”

“A good point.” His smile flattened his mouth. “*We* are in a position of power, but you like that, don’t you, Cassius? And so does she.” His grip firmed, squeezing on my wrist, squashing skin on bone. My heartbeat accelerated; my gaze focused on where he held me. “Most of the time. Yes?”

I nodded, looked into his eyes, flicked my gaze back to his hold, which was honestly beginning to hurt. It pulsed with pain. “Yes.” How easily I admitted to that.

“Is your pretty cunt saying yes?” His eyebrow tilted.

“Ugh. Crude.” But it was true that each squeeze on my wrist heightened my desire, fed into me as if a wire fed electricity from wrist to pussy.

He crushed my wrist, dragged my hand to his teeth, and put one of my fingers into his mouth then sucked it out, leaving me riveted by its reappearance, glistening, leaving me breathless. “Say yes, again.”

Cassius was hovering behind the doctor, anxious as a mother duck, but he wasn’t the one who held me or demanding answers.

My finger had come out wet and hot from his mouth, though the breeze cooled it. I’d only just recovered from collapsing into a quivering heap of knotted anxiety and he dared this?

“Say yes, and I’m going to tie you up and let Cassius fuck you soon. Maybe in the ass.”

Cassius had frozen at those words. He put his hand to the outline of his dick in his shorts. Maintaining eye contact with me, he squeezed. Fuck the pair of them.

This was messed up, and I licked my lips and whispered, “Yes.”

The doctor smiled. “What’s Cassius doing?”

“He’s umm.” I cleared my throat. “Stroking himself.” The traitorous bastard. He was a weathercock, shifting in the wind, and the unintentional cock pun was so apt.

“Are you imagining being fastened down for our pleasure, to be fucked however we want to fuck you? I’m going to tie you now, unless you say no.” He tilted up my head, his hand splayed across my chin before he slipped it over my jaw to my throat.

He hauled me close and kissed me, tongue plunging in, exploring my mouth, and crudely fucking it. Then he inserted his thumb, pressing down onto my teeth and tongue, with his fingers gripping my chin. “Don’t bite or I’ll flay you alive.”

Ugh. The man was back to his extreme threats, and I was dripping, wet, and thoroughly mindfucked. He used that thumb hold to urge me to lie on my side, head to the lounge.

With my wrist released, he kept me there with that thumbhold in my mouth, while he sat down.

Accidentally I closed my mouth on him, teeth touching his thumb. He flipped up the rear of the dress and delivered one abrupt spank.

“No biting.”

Then he plugged my pussy with a thrust-in finger.

My moan was impossible to stop.

“Now to the other. We will work on what flips the wrong switches in your head, later. We will work on...” he raised his voice. “On the power imbalance later. It’s not negotiable, Cassius. I can’t change it. She’s stuck with us, or me alone, having her holes reamed when we want to do so, or she returns to my other house. And...”

He studied me, and I, feverish with lust, lay there and merely watched, gagged with his thumb, and penetrated. I dared to suck on him. His smile was hot as fuck.

“And you can see she wants this.”

“I can.”

“We’ll need a good tree for this, Cassius. One she can hang from, one that’s strong enough.” He pulled out his thumb and hooked a hand in my collar, pushed me flat to the lounge, with my face past the edge and inches from the dirt. He casually restrained me while he delivered several smacks to my ass.

“Just to redden you nicely,” was his explanation. “Tie her hands.” The dress was pulled from me, over my head, then Cassius whisked the rope off the lounge.

I wriggled then, strove to buck upward to see if I could get free, because I knew myself. I knew. Struggles R Us. The chase, *that chase*, it had been too much, too horrifying, but *this* was not. Being manhandled, compelled, up close and personal, it was my catnip, my drug, my perfect fucking storm.

I couldn't free myself, not once the doctor leaned over me, squashing me down, while Cassius tied my wrists above my head with that red, red rope. The rope ends trailed over the sand-covered cobblestones before my eyes, as the rope was tightened, locking my hands together.

"No...ummm," I dragged in air, "no suturing."

The doctor laughed and laid his head next to mine. He tugged the collar. "Not this time, sweet thing. Remember. Distress. When we gag you, if I make you hurt past your limits, drop the pine-cone."

"A pine-cone? Wait. No." Those things were sharp.

They pulled me to my feet with my hands bound before me. Desire had consumed any notions of care in Cassius. The man was one-track unless hijacked by something disastrous, like me crying.

The doctor forced my head backward then wormed a rope between my teeth and began to tie it at the back.

"Don't!" I shook my head, jerking to and fro, only to be growled at and put to my knees. "Don't! Please."

The laugh that drew from both of them and the blindfold that shrouded half my upper face, those left me truly breathless, and awed. I shut my eyes behind the cloth as their rough grasp rocked my body this way and that. They checked my hands for circulation problems and led me away.

Couldn't see, could only talk in a spit-laden gurgle, and these were intelligible words, but they'd reduced me to an object of their wicked lusts.

I was in heaven. Deviant, and yes, wicked, heaven.

They strung me up, standing on the flats of my feet but with my hands high, with my hair roped into a tail, then

attached to something they pulled toward my ass—and what was that for, I wondered, until a plug of some sort was slipped and screwed into my ass and connected to my hair. The tension drove me to hold my head up and a little back, else any movement I made would tug on that evilly inserted plug. It forced me to arch and push my lower body forward.

One of them smacked me there, over my clit, though with an open hand, thank god. Sensations slammed in.

“Look. She offers her cunt to us, for sacrifice.”

I whined as I tottered about, my feet searching. I was unnerved by the strange position. Then I stiffened, when a vibe was jammed against my mound, over my clit...and turned on. The buzz rumbled, racing high and humming core-deep, as a man grasped my breast, and another hugged me from behind.

Was this their punishment?

Above, someone wormed a small pine-cone into my palm, until I curled my fingers and held it, though with every second the spines seemed to cut into my palm, more and more. If I dropped it, all this would cease. If I dropped it, would I fail finally? I didn't know, I didn't *care*.

I hung onto it grimly, though the tiny prickles cautioned my skin.

The vibe and their ownership of my body, their murmured teasing words, as they kissed and grasped my skin—I screwed my feet into the earth and prayed I wouldn't combust.

But that vibe... I grunted as they increased the power, and I began to shake.

My thighs clenched and unclenched. The moans wouldn't stop edging out, past the gag, in a blatant declaration of how they were wrecking me.

I didn't want this to stop.

“I could cane her anyway. No?”

Cassius laughed. “Fuck no. Those bruises will take a week to fade. Though, man, anything looks good right now. Look at how she wriggles.” Then he nuzzled his head into the angle of

my neck, and from that I knew it was him behind me. “I promise you there’ll be no stitching, Charity. You smell good. Fuck though, I’m going to bury my cock in you and watch you scream as you come.”

“And come and come,” the doctor murmured. The multiple clicks warned me, and the vibe erupted like an untamed engine, rattling into my clit, making me ache and whimper and spit.

I gasp-screamed silently and hurtled into a climax, only to emerge, limp and panting, still bound, still hanging in ropes, and have the vibe pushed onto me again.

“Another one, Charity, before we go whole hog,” the doctor said. “Just know, Cassius, if I decide to suture her cunt or do anything at all, pierce her nipples with safety pins, *anything*, at all. You say, yes sir, unless you want to leave. This is my island.”

“Hey? What?” But Cassius was poking at my back with a very hard erection. I doubt he recognized the words. His bite on my shoulder made me thrust forward and meet the vibe head-on.

My legs were half-jelly.

My breathing was ragged. A high-pitched tone ran on and on, somewhere between my ears. My thighs spasmed and quaked, and the shaking spoke of exhaustion. Havoc was wreaked when two fingers were shoved inside me then slickly pulled out then squeezed in. As my body jerked, the rope connected to my hair tugged at my ass. The hands and mouths on me boiled the sensations into a torrent of lust and demands, and plaintive whimpers that were torn from my lungs. I strained, body bowing forward as the demonic vibe cast me into another orgasm, where I cried out, blanking, with the world sliding away.

“Fuck, fuck.” I came down panting, snorting at times, and someone was removing the butt plug. They stuck a finger up there. I gulped, struggling to make my head make sense of this.

The finger moved in, revolved. It was a finger that was not where a finger should go.

“She’s ready,” Cassius said. “Nice and open.”

“No.” I spluttered, squeezing my eyes shut, and wishing the sweat rolling into them was gone. “No. No.” But the pine-cone was still in my hand. Gingerly, with fingertips, I felt along the sharp points, then I clenched my hand and held it grimly, tighter. At least one of the spikes made me bleed.

“Good.” The doctor had undone the rope from my hair, and now he used my hair to drag back my head. I held the pine-cone, ever tighter. “Stick your cock in her and shut her up.”

Which was when I felt a cock prod me and push a fraction into my ass, pressing inexorably, with the man’s hands on my hips keeping me still, stopping me from pulling away. I keened at the pain, because anal always gave initial pain, and I wasn’t quite ready. I wasn’t, even if my body was in tatters, gathering itself from a recent *O*. I would never be ready for anal.

Panting, I writhed as much as I could, until the doctor spoke again.

“Here.” He pushed the vibe to my clit as if it could shape itself there, as if I was made of dough. The pressure thrummed those vibrations into my very bones. I moaned, and my eyes surely rolled upward, for I ceased to see anything, not even the glow of sunlight through the cloth. The thrust of cock into my ass continued, in small surges, while I jerked and protested the touch of the vibe. It was too much, too soon, on an over-sensitive part.

The circle of muscle at my ass gave way, slowly, and allowed Cassius in, and he swore and let out his own groan as he seated himself, impossibly deep. He grunted out a “God, she feels good.”

I let out a sob, past the soaked rope securing my mouth. My tongue bumped on the roughness, which only reminded of what they’d done. Rope in my mouth. Cock in my ass, and it seemed to pulse and grow larger by the second. This was

barbaric. I was sweating and tied by my hands while two men toyed with me and used me.

As Cassius began to shunt in and out, my own drool spattered my chest. The crude fullness where no cock normally went had weirded me out before, when I had tried this. This time *no* was not an option, unless... The spikes of the pine-cone taunted me, and I gripped them as lovingly as I would a cock if one were to be given me, now. And I cursed, and I cried, because the vibe, *that bastard vibe*, it was beginning to feel ever so good.

They pulled it off my clit. I heard the thud as it hit the ground. *Fuck*.

Cassius thrust as the doctor hoisted my legs hip-high and kissed my mouth. Then he shoved himself into my other hole.

“*Mmmph*,” was my best rebuttal to that.

“Two men in your two holes,” he said, pausing, maybe waiting his turn. “You haven’t dropped the pine cone.” He chuckled then kept going, fucking my pussy while Cassius took my ass.

I hadn’t dropped it, had I.

I heard the guttural noises and cries I made, and they were coarse and nothing like speech.

I was overwhelmed. The doctor finally shoved in all the way. He stayed there a while, forehead to forehead, our bodies moving in rhythm to Cassius’s push and pull. The fullness of them in there swelled, conquering what sense remained in my mind.

I groaned and trembled, and I wished I could put my hands below, to feel them both entering me, going inside. It was wondrous and infinitely dirty. Maybe next time.

I began to arch, or try to, rendered blank and shuddering. The body-breaking climax was close, so close, so fucking close. The push and suck, and thrust and push, kept on, until it took me and tossed thoughts to the hurricane, and my muscles locked, and it shattered me into an unearthly pile of whimpering, chest-heaving flesh.

They came inside me, finished, and left me dripping when they pulled out.

Air became my only need.

My sweat-tangled, twisted hair was before my face. The blindfold was gone, as was the rope gag, but my hands were still in ropes. The men were arguing, even as someone untied my hands and helped me collapse, gently, to the ground.

*C*ASSIUS

“One last thing,” I grated out as I kissed her nape and cradled her, still owning her body, still remembering how it had felt with my cock thrust way-deep inside her ass. I had to say this, no matter the consequences. “No more threatening sutures. You get permission or I’m leaving here, with her.”

The doctor released her legs, leaving them in the leaf litter and her slumped in my arms. “I applaud your determination and your mercy, Cassius. I’m on your side and hers. Though your threat means nothing.”

“There you are wrong.”

“I can own Jacob if I have to.”

A stunning statement. Was he joking?

CHARITY

“Hey. Hey.” I stirred and raised my head. “Argue later, please.”

The doctor laughed, hands on hips. Cassius was silent. I nudged him.

“Sure,” Cassius said.

“Can we please get cleaned up?” It felt odd to be asking for anything after what they’d done to me. I tried to rise and gave up. My head was made of sponge, currently. “Once I turn back into human.”

At that, they seemed to remember we were, all three of us, human. The doctor kneeled and keenly examined my wrists, tracing the rope impressions and smiling. His smiles, real ones, seemed rare.

“You’re okay now?”

I nodded. Was he referring to the brutality of the sex we had shared or my previous episode? Whichever, I was...okay. “I have a question. The sex...”

“Hmmm?”

Cassius stroked my forehead. “Was I too rough? Because I don’t want to break my...our toy.”

Oh my god. Why did being called their toy feel as if it meant something good?

I had to run through my options. Lying would be wrong. I was sore in so many places, including my hand, I realized, for the doctor had uncurled my fingers and was poking the punctures made by the pine-cone. I tugged. He kept hold of my hand and tsked.

Finally I swallowed and went for it, saying the minimal. “It was good.”

“Only good? I’m mortified. Are you being shy?”

My eyeroll and sigh brought another tsk from the doctor. “She might be. We’ll fuck that out of you, Charity, but hopefully not too soon. I like a bit of innocence.”

“Me too.” Cassius tugged at my hair. “But come on, at least say my dick is huge and made you scream when I reached your tonsils?”

“Give me a break,” I whisper-protested. “I’ve never had two men do...all that, at once.”

“We should get that in writing, Cassius. What was your question, girl?”

“My question is, what if I get pregnant?” I was serious. What if I did and had a baby here and then everything would unravel into an unknown.

“You can’t. When you were being transferred you were implanted with *Implanon*. You’ve had no period, right?”

They did what? I nodded.

“That’s why. You can’t get pregnant.”

“Fuck.” I blinked, staring at the ground. They’d done that, and I’d not noticed. Now I recalled the long bump on my arm, and I felt for it, found it. Yes, it existed. I’d thought it scarring from the assault.

“Does that worry you?”

“Is that your therapist voice, doctor? Or your sadist one?”

He lightly shook his head. “Neither. I’m worried something about that bothers you.”

I stared back at this man who’d just finished forcing orgasms on me. “Thank you. I’ll have to think about it some more, but you were the one who injected it in my arm?”

“I did. For practical reasons. Not sadistic ones, since you were asleep.”

“I see.” I wriggled deeper into Cassius’s arms and hoped I’d not given the doctor new ideas.

“Sit here and catch your breath.” He indicated the both of us and Cassius grunted in agreement. “I’ll have a quick swim and a shower—the shower’s on the left side of the hut. We’ll return to the house once you’re ready.”

I ran through what we had said and was in a brain fog for several minutes, thinking. I had become used to being here and used to being a fucktoy to some degree. But being injected with contraception while I was unconscious, it slammed home my true predicament. I was not sure who I was or where I fitted in this world.

The next two days were the same addictive blend of sex, idyllic eating of chef-prepared meals and picnic foods, and swims under a morning sun, walks over the island tracks, and whatever else struck us as worth doing. It couldn't continue the same. There was an edge to this contained world, something sinister nibbling at its edges. No matter how many orgasms they gave me, something was eventually going to snap.

I'd sneaked the finger bone to Cassius when we showered and dressed, and when I stood waving off the helicopter bearing the doctor and Cassius, I could only wonder if that small object would reveal anything about the doctor. Digging up all the bodies and sampling them would have a better chance of showing something significant, if he were a serial killer of lost girls.

I couldn't do that, but I did have other ideas. I liked being in this kinky triad, whether there were love involved or not. The kink and the amount of care they'd shown was enough, for now.

However, for the future to work, I needed more. More security. More assurances. More to do with my life than spread my legs. And I definitely needed more facts about the doctor.

The library?

The fallen tower?

Both of those called to me.

"Where can I go while the doctor is away, Inigo?" The five current staff had all come to this regular farewell event. Inigo seemed to be the most hardworking, or perhaps he was doing overtime due to Roland's wedding?

"He told me to tell you everywhere is open to you, except for the Inner Sanctum of the library and any rooms with locked doors."

"Gotcha." Which put the library at the top of my possible to-do list. "Don't you ever roster off?"

"Not this time. You won't make me work too hard, I suppose? One of us will go with you if you plan to swim. For

all other explorations on the island, Miss Charity, you may go alone if you wish to, but we have an emergency pendant you must wear.” From his pocket he removed a glossy and colorful, blue octopus pendant. At the top was a button. “Press here to summon us.”

“Sure.” I took it, pocketed it in my denim shorts, and vowed to never use it unless the sky was falling. Was there a trick to this? Leaving me utterly alone was a recipe for me to do something thoroughly wrong.

C HARITY

“Watch your step, wherever you go, whatever height you climb to, or trail you’re on. Remember the staff are here to help you,” the doctor said, before he kissed me, hand wrapped about my throat, as per his normal kissing routine. “Want her?”

“Absolutely,” Cassius had answered, and the doctor had handed me over. He too kissed me, only using my hair instead of my neck to keep me still.

I staggered when he released me and needed a moment to compose myself. I was tingling in all the intimate places.

Cassius grinned at my unsteadiness. He hauled me back to him with a finger in the *V*-front of my dress. “Got a smudge there.” He thumb-wiped something from the corner of my mouth.

I thanked him, if quietly, then dared to sneak another kiss from him—he’d been breathing on me from inches away.

They walked away to the helicopter, and I waved with the rest of the staff, while thinking how surreal this was, being left to roam a whole island, with only five other people to talk to or turn to for help. It was an alien experience. I couldn’t leave. I may as well have been on Mars.

Eating breakfast at the big dining table with staff watching me was entirely weird. I had three days before the doctor and Cassius would get back, and I resolved to spend that time finding out as much as I could and exploring the island. In tandem, really—explore, detective, and also getting myself into trouble. There at the back of my mind was a whisper, *dare you to go to the Inner Sanctum*. What had he threatened me with? The loss of my soul? Pfft. Souls were overrated.

He'd also said *off limits, for now*, which made it less of a forbidden place, surely?

Once I detailed my need to go on walks and have small adventures, apart from Inigo sighing and making me promise to take the emergency pendant with me, I was left to do as I wished. The chef would prepare food. I unearthed the phone and tucked it into a small backpack, along with swimmers, hat, sunscreen...and a small knife I stole from the kitchen.

This could be paradise. I even had a library full of books, and probably I could get Doctor Romanus to bring me more, if I begged him.

I decided to do that, as I gazed around the shelves of the library. The framed keys were the elephant in the room. I could not stop glancing at them. What if one of those worked? I would take a pic of the Inner Sanctum lock to see if I could guess which key might match it.

Inigo was watching me from the far wall, judgmental in every aspect of his expression, stance, and villainous black eyebrows, like an uncle babysitting a ten-year-old who wanted a cookie from the jar. If I came here often, he might see me as less a danger?

“Do you read epic fantasies, Inigo? Romances?” I ran a finger along the spines of the shelved books. War stories? Spies?”

“Sci-fi, miss. I prefer that or fantasy.” He relaxed a little, hands unclenching from one another. “The doctor lets me

choose one to read. Sometimes I bring one back from my days off.”

“Oh.” I half-pulled out a well-read copy of *Shantaram* then gently slid it back into place.

“If there is anything you want, just tell me or the doctor.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

It was curious how placidly he spoke, as if that sexual fiasco in the dining room the first day had gone unnoticed. Maybe he was used to such things. I was not. Or not in front of strangers. What would the doctor do or think if I pretended to be blasé?

He’d find something else to challenge me with. That was his way. That whole schtick about suturing bits of me was probably another mindfuck more than anything. Even if Cassius had seen him do it to another woman. The CNC they subjected me to still appeared to be proper CNC, if one ignored that power imbalance. I hoped so because I couldn’t get off this island. Not unless a stray yacht or aircraft came here. Paddling a surfboard away would be suicidal.

I pulled out a few more books and thought about how to take a photo of the keys in the frame. I couldn’t, I decided, not with Inigo here.

“Am I allowed to drive the cars somewhere, by myself? To go on a walk only,” I added hurriedly. “Not to swim.”

“Yes. It’s allowable, miss.”

“Thanks. See you later.” I gave him an amiable finger wriggle-wave and headed for the door, praying he’d stay where he was.

He did.

Fuck yeah.

I took a breath outside the closed door, staring at the Inner Sanctum door while I searched in my backpack for the phone. I wore the light coat Cassius had hidden it inside, which I’d found unscathed in the cupboard. Now to take a fast pic. I should have experimented. Some phones were set to make

audible clicks, and I was not sticking around to figure out settings. I took the chance and snapped two pics then scurried down the stairs.

Step one on my to-do list checked off.

The car was nothing unusual, apart from being a stick shift with only three gears plus reverse, in addition to having no proper sides and looking as if it might disassemble itself any second. The gears grated as I shifted, which might have been my amateur driving. I set off down the narrow, branch-framed road, and felt this amazing lifting of stress from my chest.

For three days, I was free to do what I wanted to.

The map of the island showed few roads, but that was expected. It wasn't as if this small thing needed much of a road network, or that the doctor had people to maintain them. Potholes and dips were mandatory, it seemed. I learned not to go above fifteen mph unless I wanted to risk overturning. The emergency pendant was beginning to look necessary.

I felt the pendant, as I steered, and my fingers traced to where the chain rolled across the collar. Neither of the men had told me I must wear the collar but removing it would mean destroying the lock or the collar.

“Not ready to risk my ass for that, yet.” I had too much else to do to be experimenting with minor bratting.

It was tempting to simply spend the days lazing in the sun, walking at sunset, and eating. No crocodiles or gorillas. There were no predators of any sort, I'd been informed, apart from a rare venomous snake but the chances of meeting one were miniscule.

As I steered around another dodgy corner, I recalled the passionate farewell. I would happily volunteer for being kissed by Cassius and the doctor, forever. Yet here I was, trying to find dirt on the doctor, seriously bad dirt, trying to implicate him in murder. This situation didn't feel serious, though. It felt like a holiday with kinky friends. A holiday where I got to roleplay a detective.

I was not sure why it was so, except that this was rolling out like true CNC might do—if I were Emme and had a raging craving for the hard stuff, where everything was real as real could be. I was on a Girls Own adventure being a kinky Mary Sue.

I stopped to check the map, and verified that yes, there were only a few turn-offs, and I was going the right way. I couldn't ever get lost here. I could walk across the skinny part of the island in fifteen or twenty minutes, but the car was a fancier and less-sweaty method. After a small amount of driving at a snail's pace, I braked to a halt at the beach hut.

I hopped out and left the keys in the ignition because only lizards and crows were in the vicinity.

Seeing this the day after the crazy debauchery, a place where I'd been tied up and screwed by two men at once, I found the quietness eerie. I turned to survey more of my surroundings, breathing in sea air, and fairly inhaling the gorgeous sky showing through the trees, and I thought about that tower.

Swimming here was dangerous, but I could. No one would know.

“No,” I murmured to myself. “Another day.”

I set off for the graveyard. Horror stories had never been my deal, so I expected zero zombies or walking skeletons. I stopped again and heard nothing except the sea, the wind rattling the branches, a distant sea gull crying, and the sand slipping past my shoes. I stared at those. I could hear the sand. “No humans. This is almost too fucking quiet.”

The staff might be watching me with a drone, but with so few clouds I would probably spot a drone. There was nothing up there.

I continued on to the graveyard, to discover my heartbeat was faster than it should be, plus I had this odd ache in my chest. I massaged it. So much for not being scared. When there was nobody for fucking ages, when screaming will alert nothing except the birds, being alone became...wrong.

However, the headstones had not moved since I last saw them, and there were exactly zero skeletal hands rocketing from the earth. This was promising.

“No ominous drums or violins playing.” I sucked on my teeth. *Fuck, Charity, calm yourself.* “It’s all in my head.”

I pulled out the phone and saw the charge was getting low. Cassius had thoughtfully left a charger for it in the coat, and I might need to use that tomorrow. I would turn it off when I wasn’t using it. Then I walked the cemetery from left to right then right to left, zigzagging down the few rows, aiming and shooting, until I had a pic of every legible name.

I should give these to Cassius to check for recent history.

“Because of course any decent killer will name his victims, truthfully.” I tapped the phone on my chin.

Wasn’t there a killer who stuck his victims into graves with another person because nobody ever dug up those again? If that had been done here, good luck to the doctor. I was so not digging anyone up to get tissue or bone samples.

The offer from Jacob was that if I found anything incriminating, he’d let me go. And his people would analyze everything I sent him. I might never know the facts if he chose to lie to me. I needed access to the internet, and the doctor had said I could use a computer here. I’d ask Inigo.

A lightbulb moment hit me. Any internet searches done would remain in the history...but I could delete the history and hope no one here could dig it out. Either I stayed clueless and sent this information to Jacob and learned nothing from it myself, or I risked searching.

“Fuck. What to do?”

I turned to walk back to the car and by the time I reached it I’d decided to climb up to the remains of the tower. I could see the mound on the ridge from here and even though the map showed no true road, there had to be a path going there.

Yes, I would do an internet search for the names of the dead. Those who do nothing in life get nowhere. Then I

recalled the quote I was thinking of, from Jean Paul Sartre. *To know what life is worth you have to risk it once in a while.*

To risk my life... I was doing that simply by living nowadays. I did it when I drove Emme home that night, only I wasn't aware we were being tracked, or that we would be nabbed and taken away and assaulted. Assaulted badly. I closed my eyes and wished that away. I was here now, and moderately safe from that sort of assault. I swallowed down bile. CNC kink was not assault. Being forced to have multiple Os when you wanted to be made to, was definitely not assault.

And why did I have this need to convince myself? I sighed. "Probably because this is the iffiest CNC ever."

I could either cower in a corner or I could take risks, and fuck me if this situation demanded I do exactly that, otherwise *nothing* would be left of me. Nothing except for a fearful woman who barely dared to move in case I did something the doctor, Cassius, or this mysterious Jacob thought was bad.

I scooped up my backpack, double-checked I had the pendant, and that the water bottle was full, plonked a hat on my head, and I set off for the far end of the beach.

No easily found trail led to the old tower site, and I ended up making my own path up the ridge. Once there, I could see the signs of an old road leading from the fallen tower toward the beach hut. It was probably still being used, judging by the lack of plants growing over the gravel.

"Typical." I wiped away sweat and pined for a cool swim in the sea below. The waves were as gentle as they were yesterday. The vibrant blue-green of the lagoon-like part where we'd swum was almost taunting me, beckoning. I could feel the exquisite coolness sliding over my skin as I dove in.

"Later. Maybe." I picked my way through the small trees at the edge of the road, keeping to the cover as I advanced on the debris left from the bombing.

Not much remained above a few yards high. When the tower had fallen it really fell. This was a thorough demolition, and thinking of what I'd seen in the water, the base of the

tower must have crumpled due to the actual cliff face below it being fractured by the blast. The foundations had given way then the tower had simply folded into the ground and the sea.

I climbed on top of the stacked blocks, wondering how it would have been trying to rescue anyone from this. Some of the bodies might have ended up in the ocean.

War was crap. War was always crap. All these innocent people had died for no reason. From where I stood on the tallest block, I looked around then began to hop and slide and make my precarious way into the center. There was a hole there, a sunken area.

The doctor would have chastised me for this. This area could be unstable despite eighty years elapsing. It felt firm underfoot, but I was cautious. I kneeled on the edge of the block above the hole and peered down. The drop was only a few feet to another tilted block which was wedged on two more blocks, and in the middle of those was a true hole that was wide enough for a dog to slip into. Dangerous, if unremarkable.

On the other side of the hole was a slash of fresh dirt, where plants were nonexistent, apart from new sprigs of grass. A minor landslip might have happened here, recently.

It could be dangerous if the ground slipped while I was standing on it. Slippage meant there was weakness below, inside the original foundations. Considering the tower had been bombed, anything might be under my feet.

I held my breath, thinking about moving away.

I was about to retreat when I heard the sea, and it was not coming directly from the ocean that I could see beyond the land drop-off. Dive off there and you'd splash into water or hit the rocks I'd been swimming among.

The hole in the center must communicate with the sea. I inched nearer and looked again, peering into the blackness with my hands planted on the block upon which I kneeled. The waves were sucking and withdrawing. I inched even nearer, straining my eyes. Nothing? I wondered about later in the

morning when the sun would be overhead. It might shine down into this hole.

I'd seen flickers of light deep underwater. Maybe there was something for the sunlight to bounce off down there, way down inside the hole?

Plus my head was in the way, creating shadow. I needed a flashlight. Struck by an idea, I sat back, fished out the phone, and turned it into a flashlight. On my stomach, I slid forward, heart thudding at my stupidity or my bravery—choose one.

I shone it into the hole, clutching the phone's case hard enough to hurt.

Something down there flashed back at me. I looked for a few more seconds before giving up, sliding away then walking to safety far from the hole.

It had been eight decades since World War Two. What could be down there?

“Something interesting?” I breathed.

And what if I looked for the other end of that hole or chasm or hidden bunker or whatever it was, from beneath the sea? And yes, an underground bunker might make sense? The stonefish might get me, or the ocean currents, or something else could kill me. Lack of air for one.

Except I wanted to know life. I wanted to know. “Thank you, Jean Paul.”

I did not believe in omens. Yet this was more than that. This unknown thing was beckoning me. With a crooking of its skeletal finger, maybe?

I made my way back down the ridge to the beach and strolled along it until I was at the level of the beach hut. Swimming was off limits without a guard. I was supposed to wear the pendant at all times. But surely not underwater. I'd have to take it off before diving in. And this could kill me. All of that meant I couldn't ask for help or for scuba gear. Not that I knew how to use that. A snorkel, yes, but not a scuba tank.

The short surfboard left propped in the hut would have to do.

I fetched a towel from the car and pulled on the swimmers, checked the sky for drones, and nope, nothing showed against the clear blue. Then I retraced my steps and threw the towel to the sand near the quieter patch of water.

With a yell of defiance, and a sprint, with the board under my arm, I raced to the sea and flopped in. Having paddled to the choppy water between the tumbled blocks, I abandoned the board. I prayed it would still be there when I surfaced. Then I dove deep.

The water rendered the world silent and beautiful.

I found the place of the light easily—after all, the sun had climbed higher. Something was reflecting from far inside an underground tunnel. I didn't know if I could fit, but I swam to the entrance to the hole, pulled myself a body length inside and saw threads of light whirling against the rocks and lighting up a tunnel of rocks. With my lungs growing desperate for air, I chickened out and thrust myself backward using my arms. Orientating myself by the light filtering down, I rushed for the surface.

I burst from the water, gasping, and sucked in a mouthful of wave. Coughing madly, I floundered my way to the board where it bobbed against a rock.

“Fuck.” I swiped my wet hair backward over my head, clearing my vision.

Up here was serene. The sea kept on rolling in, making mild thunder on the shore, telling me nothing had changed. I took my time and caught my breath. No stonefish had been visible down below. I would need to avoid touching anything strange and leafy-looking on the rocks, if I were to keep looking. Going further inside that tunnel would be scary, but if I were to try, I had to not panic.

If.

Free diving took practice. Swimming into that hole could easily be a death trap. I calculated the spot where I could dive

that would be closer, swam to it, stilled my panicky notions, and dove again.

I lay in bed that night, contemplating the ceiling and the empty bed. Having the men here made everything different, exciting, perilous. So had been my day spent practicing diving into a hole that might swallow me under the sea, and never spit me out.

“I will do this,” I told the ceiling as my eyes drifted shut. “I will.”

I had three days, and one was gone. I needed a routine so as not to alarm the staff. As I had on the first day, I begged for a picnic brunch, picked up ice and a drink, and a thermos of coffee. I visited the library and perused the books to select one to read. Luckily, I’d read most of the first book so when Inigo asked me about the story, I could answer sensibly.

I found myself turning on the phone to check for messages, frequently and fruitlessly. Nothing ever appeared. I couldn’t call out with it, couldn’t use it for the internet or download anything new. It was a camera and a flashlight and a way to send messages outward. I hadn’t sent anything, yet. I was biding my time, wanting to be sure what I sent was right. Right for me. Right for the men.

Accusing the doctor of something he didn’t do would be stupid.

A laptop in the library was available for me to use. That afternoon, Inigo pulled it from a cupboard and set it up on a desk. I searched for stonefish and sea creatures until Inigo lost interest. Then, I began to search for the names from the cemetery—I’d written them down on a piece of notepaper.

“Thirteen names, what an auspicious number.” Afraid I’d alerted Inigo, I glanced at him, but he was playing something on a handheld console.

The most recent two were not in the news, or not in any search results, though I didn’t know which country to mention in the search. I swore under my breath.

Of the rest, one had been registered by historical sources as missing at sea, due to an article on mysterious disappearances. That might be attributed to the mess left by war, since it was just after WW1 when surely people would have been easily missed. Were there floating sea mines then? It could be a man washed ashore, wounded, only recalling his name. My imagination ran with it. A man who then died on the island.

And the bombing? There was nothing I could find about that either. Island tower bombed by Germans...Hitler...Nazis...Mussolini? Add in five killed on all of those? Nothing. Nothing. Patricia Romanus? Nothing.

I sat back and restrained myself from swearing.

About the only creepy thing was that out of thirteen names on those headstones, ten were female-gendered names. That I double-checked on baby name sites by going back through history. It was otherwise a dead end. *Ha!*

I had dreams, too, of the men doing erotic things to me, things I sadly forgot on awakening. Masturbating after that seemed ridiculous, yet the urge was often impossible to ignore. I sunbaked on my beach several times, fingering myself to the memories of *that day*, the day they both took me while I was tied up and helpless. That part of my day was fun. Nobody was with me to tsk at my nude sunbathing or my orgasms, or to punish me for them.

I was beginning to yearn for the day when they were scheduled to return.

Today was the last day of my freedom.

Yet all I'd done was practice holding my breath while diving and reached maybe two body lengths inside the tunnel; gained a suntan; made Inigo less suspicious of me, maybe; and developed an enduring love for the food the chef created.

Her croissants were to die for.

Just...not underwater dying, please.

I was improving, though. A thought struck me, a wonderful, horrible, perilous thought. There was air at the end of that tunnel. I only needed to reach that far and take in more air before I returned. Was I sure of that though? How could I be sure?

I needed to be certain. Ending up a lifeless body, bobbing up and down in the tides locked in a tunnel forever... Yikes.

I needed to drop into that hole something that floated, something light. Glitter? Or food coloring. Both? Then I'd have to dash down the hill, dive in, and check the tunnel underwater. *Not anything Superman couldn't do.* I smooshed my face with my hands, thinking.

It was worth trying.

When I visited the kitchen to pick up my picnic food—croissants, ham, a niçoise salad, and little quiches—though my mouth was watering, I also stole a bottle of red food coloring.

Profusely thanking the woman, I sidled out the door backward carrying the basket of food, a bottle of wine, and my prized stolen food coloring. Glitter, though? The only source I could imagine was a book at the library that had a foil cover. If I tore it up finely, I could use that.

In the end, that was my course of action.

I dropped three, golf-ball sized parcels into the hole. I watched them bounce downwards and vanish rapidly. If they burst too early, I had no way to tell.

The screwed-up paper bundles contained little bomblets of my counterfeit glitter mixed into food coloring inside a piece of plastic wrap from the picnic.

I took off like a startled rabbit on crack, running from the ridge toward the beach, along the path I'd mapped out as my best route. As I ran, I noticed my pink fingers. The dye had leaked everywhere as I handled it. My fingers were an extreme fluoro pink, as if I were a bank robber caught in the blast of exploding money. Maybe it would wash out? What if it didn't? Would the chef tell on me?

I reached the sand and ran the last distance, wading out and hurling myself into the sea. By the time I reached the board I'd left floating in the rock-strewn area above the tunnel, I was exhausted. For over two minutes, I had to cling to the board regaining my breath.

"A slight miscalculation. Dammit, Charity girl." I hiccup-giggled at myself.

The stuff might take ages to filter out anyway, if it ever did, if it even could.

When I felt as if I could stay down there long enough, I upended myself and kicked for the tunnel entry. There, I waited and waited. With no diving watch, I had to guess my time underwater. A large school of fish dawdled past, obscuring the hole.

I peered into the tunnel, wishing I at least had a mask. No redness showed in the water. I'd have to surface and come down again. Disappointing, but then this was the least scientific an experiment could be.

I pushed off from the sand with one foot, glimpsed a glint of silver, and ducked back to the hole, mouth trailing a few bubbles.

Yes! A silver tail of torn glitter, and a few other specks of it, were being drawn out by a sudden current.

I headed for the surface then lay draped over the board, rocking in the mild waves. What had I proved? That the hole connected. So it was possible there was an air pocket I could reach but was it certain? No. Absolutely not.

My breath-holding was improving. That part I was sure of. Not enough, however. Not anything like enough. I'd easily

drown in there. I needed much more practice.

I drove back to the house and the library tower feeling strangely let down by fate, but unsure why. Tomorrow, Cassius and Doctor Romanus would return. What had I learned? Not much at all. I had names that led nowhere. Unless that finger bone was from some missing lost girl, last seen in the presence of a villainous, machete-wielding doctor, we had nothing. I liked the doctor, despite his sadism. If anything, I liked him because of his sadism and dominant ways. He was an honest sadist, and I applauded those, even when they threatened to use safety pins on my nipples.

The thought of that, of safety pins going there, being threaded in while I watched, *hellz* it was enough to make my downstairs department all squirmy. *Bad girl is me.*

But, *but-but-but*, if he was killing girls...I needed to know this. I was fairly sure I had an allergy to serial killers.

The library and the Inner Sanctum, there, my goals for tonight were settled. At least I couldn't drown in a library.

What if I were wrong, and I were caught? I was hedging my bets here. If the key access was too easy to solve, I was meant to go there, but if he was a killer...I wasn't?

My fingers were strangling the wheel and I made myself calm. Do the mantra.

Breathe. One. Two. Three. Imagine you're on a deserted island... Uh. No.

Crap, crappitty, crap.

Life was serving me up problems that were turning my brain into a crumbled pretzel.

C *HARITY*

I hadn't come in here without thought. I'd made a plan and carried it through, followed all the steps. Inigo could not possibly be on duty in the library all night, and so my plan began at midnight.

One. Go to the library floor with my phone and wearing those quiet, rubbery shoes made for walking on rocks in the water. Kind of the doctor to leave me them.

Two. Remove the most promising keys from inside the frame.

Three. Try those keys in the door to the Inner Sanctum. I'd done that and key number two with the pretty gold swirly base had worked in the lock. If there were security cams, they were invisible.

Four. Go up the stairs, also quietly.

Five. Look for evidence of nefarious activity.

The stairs continued upward after the sanctum floor but the metal door across that part looked rusted and barely used.

The entire floor of the Inner Sanctum was in some ways identical to the one below, but with more care given to the preservation of the books and so on. It was full of books in bookshelves, in glass display cabinets, and the oldest or best antiques were in special, dust-free drawers. Gloves were

available, and I guessed that was so the books were not damaged by the oil on one's skin. I knew this because there were instructions on the walls. Who were those charts for? Roland and Inigo must also come here.

I found shelves that held thick glass bottles with specimens swimming in clear liquid. Clear but for the fragments of flesh that had peeled away. I shook one and watched the swirling pieces. It was a horrific version of a snow globe. Hearts, kidneys, a fetus even? There were other samples I couldn't identify that had no labels. These all seemed human in origin.

Creepiness level increase. The room Cassius had found downstairs must have had similar bottles, but was this serial killer stuff, as in mementoes of victims, or simply evidence of a doctor dedicated to study?

One section of wall was covered in antique knives and swords. The pock marks in the metal of the blades advertised their age, as did the labels underneath. Roman, Greek, Phoenician, Incan, and Aztec were represented, and some civilizations I didn't recognize.

Then I found a book that caught my interest. A memoir, held under glass, labeled *Personal Diary*, but the cover looked old as fuck, as old as some of the antiquities, with its custom-made leather. I lifted the glass lid and opened the book, and discovered the pages were merely paper. Modern paper, perhaps. Curious. I fetched a glove, nevertheless, and on a front page was a name that made me smile.

Dr. Horatio Romanus.

"Gotcha." How grandiose to use an antique document cover for his diary. Now what was I to call him for short? Horat? Hor? I giggled at that one.

There were no years inside, no months, just a chunk of blank pages at the front and then reams of writing, lists, descriptions of what appeared to be thoughts or events. Nothing stood out as a memoir to murder.

Due to being unsure how much time I had, I took photos of every page, but did not try to read many of the words. My fast

study of the rest of this Inner Sanctum had not revealed anything that was obviously connected personally to the doctor. Antiquities seemed really low on the list of things that could be clues to murder.

What about the knives, swords, and old doctor's equipment? The preserved organs? Those might be relevant, but I didn't have the time or the ability to study those properly. I took some photos, especially of the organs floating in liquid. I even took pics of the ancient weapons, some jewelry, and a few other objects.

What smart man would use a Roman gladius sword to execute his victims rather than a gun, a modern knife, or perhaps a rope for strangling? A good forensic pathologist might go *omg, this cut was made by an antique sword*. Maybe I was wrong, but it seemed plausible.

"Check, check, check. All done," I muttered as I headed to the door.

On another day I might return. For now, I would retreat and hope some of this was useful. I would sort through those pages before I sent anything to Jacob. I didn't trust a man who was nowhere to be seen, even more than I didn't fully trust the doctor or Cassius. Except, I reminded myself, in kink I trusted them, so far.

A *tap-tap* noise sounded then the rattle of a key in a lock.

I wasn't completely naïve or stupid. I'd imagined there might be motion sensors or similar. With that in mind, I'd sorted out my escape plan after entering. An escape plan for the phone, that is. Me? I was going to be duck food or get another caning. I prayed for nothing worse than a caning because I had found no exit that would let me leave this floor without plummeting to my death.

I shoved open a small window and dropped the phone out, having hurriedly wrapped it in some clothes I had brought for precisely this emergency. I still did not believe the doctor meant to actually harm me. That on 'pain of losing your soul' threat had to be fake.

“It had to be,” I whispered, reassuring myself and biting my lip as the door opened.

The open door revealed not Inigo but one of the heftier staff, dressed in patented security-guard style, with ninja-black, zip-up jacket and black pants with military boots at the bottom.

“Sorry.” I held up my hands to show I was harmless. “I got lost?” Worth a try.

The guard approached me with a gun in hand, though thankfully it was pointed at the floor.

“I am too. Sorry.”

Then he tasered me. The shock dropped me instantly, and I mostly blacked out, only vaguely aware of what was happening because I was in extreme pain and possibly on fire.

By the time I was recovering, I was handcuffed and being dragged and frog-marched between two men, down a deserted corridor, with my legs all wobbly. A door was opened, and I was deposited on the floor on my side.

When the door shut, I was alone and in almost complete darkness.

They left me there, all night. The concrete leached cold into my flesh. I could tell morning had come from the sunrise sneaking in weak rays, through a small grille at the top below the ceiling.

“Damn.” The doctor and Cass would arrive soon, and I wouldn’t be there to greet them. Someone would tell on me, that I’d transgressed, and was waiting in a cell.

I’d been caught where I’d been clearly told not to go. Except, the doctor had nearly signposted the way into the Inner Sanctum, and I didn’t know why, but he had. I hoped it wasn’t luck that I found the key. I didn’t believe in souls, but if I had one, I wanted to keep it.

Hours later, long after the helicopter must have landed, they came for me. Or rather a guard did. The door opened, and

that first guard dragged me to my feet. I remembered him from the staff line-up now that I had time to check his face.

“Alejandro?”

He grunted and jerked my elbow. “Walk. I’m not to talk to you.”

“Like that, hey?”

“Like that.”

Fuck. They’d tasered me, and now this. I was in trouble.

C HARITY

The room he escorted me to was on the ground floor corridor, past the dining room. I recognized the double doors I'd first entered through. This would have once been the hotel's front entry. *SUNROOM* was on the brass plaque on a side door.

"These can come off." Alejandro unlocked and removed the cuffs, ushered me into the room, then retreated outside and shut the door.

Only the doctor and Cassius were waiting for me, near a clutch of sofas gathered around a low table at the opposite wall. French doors led out into what must be a lush garden. It was definitely a room made for the sun, for the two walls were more glass than plastered wall—wide windows of older-style of glass that split into four panes. Ferns and trees smooshed their greenery against the outside of the windows.

The doctor looked grim. He cut a blue armchair out of the pack, swiveled it to face me, and sat down. Cassius had perched his ass against an armchair, and had his arms folded. Neither gave away what this might be. A murder session, a lecture, a lesson in kinky punishment?

I opened my mouth to speak, thinking to pre-empt them, and the doctor went *shhh*.

After one second of internal mind-wrestling with my hands clasped at my front, I stilled.

“Floor, please, kneeling.” He clicked his fingers and waited.

I grimaced then complied. The flooring was a mosaic of large tiles, alternating between black and white, and they were hard on the knees. I still wore the clothes I’d worn to the Inner Sanctum—grimier, but the same black shorts and plum-colored T-shirt.

Staring up at the two of them was strangely calming, perhaps because I’d been in this position many times—many fun times.

“What did you think you’d achieve, Charity?”

What to say?

“Information, sir.” Yes, it was time for ass-kissing. “I was curious about you, about why the Inner Sanctum was off limits, and...” Heart in mouth, I dared to say the next, “I thought, maybe you wanted me to try, seeing how you made it so easy to find the key. Also, you had me tasered!” Pouting, I met his gaze, dead on.

The doctor stared, then burst into laughter. Cassius frowned at him.

“Was I wrong?”

“What a brat you are. Take off your clothes, all of them. Remain kneeling.”

Hmmm. Promising? Definitely, for I wasn’t dead yet. There was always a degree of trepidation when a dominant was angry, and I figured he was that. I stripped without standing, left the clothes to my right, then regained my knees.

“Are you sorry you did what I told you not to?”

“Not...yet. A little worried though. Is Cassius—”

“It’s not his house. My house, my decision.” He smiled. “I will correct that lack of sorry, soon. Why did you decide my punishment was worth risking?”

I screwed up my face. “To lose my soul? It seemed so melodramatic, and I thought you were joking.”

“Ha! Maybe I was a little.” He leaned forward. “I haven’t had a girl here like you for such a long time that I forgot to fix the holes in security, but I knew the key was there. I suppose I was daring you to try, subconsciously. I have lost my way a little. Should I flog you with barbed wire?”

That made me sit up and look. “You told me to surprise you!”

“She’s got you there.” Cassius didn’t move, though, or show distress at the sadistic suggestion.

“Barbed wire is a hard limit,” I whispered.

“She does.” The perplexed look that settled on his face was new. I could not recall a time when he seemed this disconcerted. “I don’t want to reward insolence, however, and I said the Inner Sanctum is off limits. My most valuable pieces are kept there. Apart from perhaps the two of you.”

“What?” Cassius turned to him and chuckled. “Don’t ever say you own me. Not unless you’re paying my wages.”

“Noted, Cassius, but as to this one.” He nodded my way. His tone intensified, as if he were teaching. “I do not like uninspired people who try to blend into the background. I like people who think outside the box, people who can see things that are not in plain sight. The world says it will give the ones who try the hardest the best rewards, but truthfully it is left to chance too often. We need to seek it out and grasp the rewards for ourselves.”

A lecture for sure. Was he hinting at something he’d achieved? Or at what I’d done? Both maybe. Cassius was impassive, and I guessed he’d be irked by being included in this.

The doctor lowered his voice. “I’ve seen and experienced more of this world than most can imagine.”

“I can imagine a lot,” Cassius said, dryly. “And I’ve done a lot.”

“You have no idea. None. The piles of dead, the atrocities, the good, and the really bad things that I’ve seen people do.

One day, I might tell you.” He shook his head. “Charity...no more going to forbidden places on the island? Agreed?”

I nodded, and a second later remembered I’d been swimming in the stonefish area.

“Good, but you also have to be punished, and it should not and will not be something minor.”

I swallowed. There was nothing I could say that would stop this. If I were to be flippant and suggest a spanking, I would probably get worse.

I was already kneeling here naked, getting sore knees.

“Crawl to my chair and stop here.” He pointed to a spot before him.

The three yards I had to crawl were daunting and shameful, and I was thankful only Cassius saw this. The doctor rose and retrieved something that had been left on a table. It was an ancient leather bag, of a sort doctors might have used in the Victorian era—the leather cracked, the metal clasps dark with corrosion or age. The packet he pulled from it was clear plastic and ziplocked. Inside that was what seemed a roll of paper, but when he uncurled it, the other side showed. It was a roll of thin, rectangular packets, and the contents were revealed through the plastic sealing them in.

These were needles, and they could be used for injections, or sticking in people for kinky fun, or if a person was unhappy about pointy things going into their skin they could be used for punishment.

I was cringing and fascinated all at once.

Would he thread one through my nipple? My toes scrunched in at the thought.

He sat down again, displaying the needles by unrolling the connected packets over his knee.

“I could restrain you for this.” He rubbed his chin. “Your choice. Perhaps you’d prefer that?”

“Where?” I squeaked.

“Am I putting these?” His eyes shone with sadistic promise. “Your breasts, down your belly, perhaps further inside your legs?”

“My god. I...I’m not sure I can stand them...down there.” The nerve endings were said to multiply the pain from piercing by a thousandfold. I clamped my thighs together, and it only made him eye me as if I was teasing him. *Crap*. Sadists were bastards.

“Cassius! She’s got cold feet.”

“Not surprising. Though cold tits, too, from the looks of her nipples.”

I scowled and covered my breasts with my crossed arms. I could feel my hard nipples against my forearm. “Are you not on my side?”

He shrugged, grinned. “You baked the cake, now eat it. Besides, I talked him out of the other before you even arrived.”

Cold rushed down my neck, my back, and into my nipples too. “Stitches?” I squeaked.

The doctor leaned in to take my chin and make me tilt my head to look up at him. “Yes. Would you prefer that? If you refuse the needles, then I’m definitely suturing your cunt. And leaving them in for a few hours.” His mouth twitched. “Which, sweet disobedient, Charity?”

I drew a long breath, exhaled. I had to answer. “The needles.”

“Very well, and I think, since you’re so fucking reluctant... we should strap you down.”

We? Again with the traitorous Cassius. The man was looking smug, and he knew, he *fucking knew* I’d done this for him and his boss.

The doctor attached a leash to my collar, and Cassius was given it to hold.

“Bring her.”

Led by that swinging chain, as well as followed by Cassius, with him muttering about wanting to fuck my ass again, we proceeded down the corridor. None of the staff showed their faces. To my shock, and perhaps Cassius's, we entered the room he'd described that first day. A stainless-steel table stood in the middle, on a steel stalk that would allow it to be turned. The drain hole at one end was definitely meant to drain fluids after messy things...such as dissections of bodies. It was longer than ones I'd seen before and, to my dread, the doctor pointed at it.

“Get her up on there while I find the straps.”

Me, up there. This seemed a recipe for disaster. Yet again, it threw me into terrible doubts. What could I do, though, if Cassius were also in on whatever diabolical deed was planned here?

Was this to be just needles, or was there something else in store for me? They wouldn't cut me up on there, would they? What if I were in the hands of two serial killers? What if ten thousand things. *Fuck*. I hauled myself back from the brink of panic.

I pulled myself straighter and allowed myself to be led to the table. If it were so, I was doomed anyway.

The doctor winked at me, returning to the table with a handful of leather straps. “You've gone pale, Charity. I like mindfucks but not when the victim is dead scared and about to throw up. I promise this won't be unbearable.” He sighed and eyed me, studying my body with a gaze that lingered and lent some sexual energy to the room. “I may even do worse to you, like give you an orgasm.”

Oh my. My head switched from *alarm, alarm* to *hmmm, this might work out*. Needles inside me while they made me come? I was suddenly interested.

“There you go. Be good and take what is due, and we might make you come. Happier?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, thank you, *doctor*.”

I blushed and trotted out those words, fast.

“Fucking tempting, isn’t she?” Cassius smacked my ass, sending enough heat simmering into me from the slap on my flesh that my clit noticed and swelled.

I had likely gone all wide-eyed at their words and actions. The pair of them together were assholes, but maybe they qualified as good assholes.

They had me lie on the table with my back to the cold steel, then used the straps to restrain me above and below my breasts, at thighs and lower legs, and an inch or two above where my clit was stirring to life. They strapped my wrists to the table, until I was close to immobile.

The bondage awakened my kinkiest self, especially with the doctor approaching me, unwrapping a needle, showing me the point. This would hurt, and when had I ever been into being pierced? Maybe now I was because everything he was doing was balancing wonderfully, with scary sadism on one side and eroticism on the other.

He began on the upper curve of my right breast, swabbing the area and letting it dry, because the alcohol in it would sting otherwise. *Maybe next time*, were his words. *The sting would add to it...*

The room blurred as I focused in on his hand and the approach of that fine steel point, and as it dug into my breast I tensed and breathed through my clenched teeth. Noises quietened. The push of the point dented my skin for a millisecond, then it slipped into me and popped out the other side, having been tunneled through my skin.

“Fuck.” I hissed, fascinated by the lance of pain. I looked at that sharp point, at that obscene piece of metal that had pierced me, then I shut my eyes.

“There. One down.”

There wasn’t even blood, no wait, there it was, the tiniest bleb.

The next needle was slipped into me, and the next, dodging my actual nipple... Open-mouthed, panting, I

squirmed as he went down to my belly, drawing a painful silvery trail that throbbed. On my stomach, the needles hurt twice as much when they entered. When I breathed, my needle snake writhed. I couldn't see much anymore, for my neck was exhausted—I'd been craning my neck to watch.

The deliberate pain made me needy, especially when he began to needle me then tease my clit, or between my legs. That smooth, aching slide of his fingers and how they glistened; I was wet with arousal.

Cassius crouched beside me, turned my head, and kissed me as the doctor stuck the first needle into my mound, then another, and another. I whined into his mouth. He nibbled my lip and laughed, low and teasing. The kiss was still happening when the doctor reached my clit and grasped it in finger and thumb.

I broke away and blurted, tried to drum my heels. "Not there! Please! Not there."

I could feel what he held, and the doctor had pinched all the flesh of that nub, not just the hood. He raised the needle, high. "How sorry are you?"

"Very! Please. I won't disobey you, doctor. Never ever."

"And if you do, you know what happens."

"I do. I do."

Smiling Cassius leaned over me. "And I never knew how much I'd like watching this. I want to lick the blood off those needles then suck on you, until you sob to be allowed to finish. Are we chastised, Miss Charity?"

I closed my eyes, listened to myself panting, then opened one eye. "You are an a'hole."

"I know. And I love it. Stick a dildo in her, doctor, or whatever you have here. Then let's make her scream."

"Whatever I have?" Musing softly, the doctor looked about. "It's elsewhere. With lube it will fit."

I shut my eyes again, feeling that tugging line of pain that ached rather than stung once the initial pain faded. What was

he talking about? I twisted my hands in the straps to test them, to see if I could escape. It was a thrill when I couldn't, a comfort, in the strangest way.

“I'm going to plug the ends of each needle then get her off there. She doesn't get to come. Or not yet. We can take her on the floor. You'll get on all fours and wait for us to fuck you. Understand?”

I nodded, far too eagerly, and they began to unstrap me.

*C*ASSIUS

I undressed except for my shirt, dropped the clothes on the steel table, shoes on the floor. It was a little weird how much I had loved watching her writhe while the doctor basically tortured her. As punishment it was fine, as a prologue to making her come, even better. And if she wasn't going to be allowed to come? I was salivating at that too.

I squatted to caress her throat, her nape, the length of her back, everywhere I wanted to feel on her, as she waited on all fours with a towel under her knees.

“Let's make you whine,” I whispered with my mouth to her ear, wondering where the doctor had gone and what he intended to fetch. I softly kissed her neck then her mouth before I lay on my back to wriggle beneath her. “Keep your hands beside me, there.” I bit her wrist on the left, keeping hold of her plump breast. I inched higher, sliding on my back to get another mouth-kiss. “What do you think he's gone to get?”

She eyed me dubiously, panting, tongue sneaking out while I felt her body.

“You feel good. Like satin under my hands. I could eat all of you, piece...” I squeezed her neck, ran a nail down her side and made her squirm, “...by fuckable piece.”

I groaned quietly, for my erection was trapped at the join of her thighs, rubbing on her slickness. I had to be careful not to spike myself—the caps on those needle points might come off. I might come off, too—too early, pumping up at her, her thighs slipping by. I imagined her dripping with my come, and I reached up to curl out her bottom lip.

When my cock caught at the join of her legs, maybe poking at her clit, her brows knitted, and she shuddered.

“What did you find out, beautiful girl?” I asked, thrusting again, just a little. I brushed her nipple, revolving my thumb around that taut pink-brown peak while she stared down at me. Charity was cross-eyed and lost in lust.

That lost look, I’d pay a million for it, to see it daily. And what was I doing, with Jacob, with the doc, with the future? I knew I was lost too.

“Huh?” Her eyelids closed and slowly opened. “God. That’s, *mmm*.” She spread her legs a tad, nudged downward as if to entice me into entering her.

“Mmm? About the doc, Miss Wet Cunt?”

“Pfft. It’s not the time. Not now.” She swallowed. “Please?”

“Not now?” I wasn’t ready to yield to her ‘please’, whatever she meant by it. I pinched her nipple. Her mouth opened in a wide *O*, and she gasped.

“Answer me.” I flattened her nipple between finger and thumb.

“Oh. That?” Spoken softly. My sadism had barely put a dent in her consciousness. Those needles, glorious fucking things, and what I was doing, were occupying her mind.

“That.” I could hear the doc returning. “Fast. Say it. What did you find out?”

“Nothing much. Antiques and stuff.” She stared downward a little more pointedly than before. I detected crap with my liar-meter.

“Nothing? Not a thing? Liar. I *will* get the truth from you.” I slipped lower, wriggling, using her hips for purchase, found the unneedled nipple with my mouth and sucked until she made cute noises then wriggled against me as I increased the pressure. My cock sprang higher, harder, aching to bury itself in this sweet submissive. I bit down and pulled her nipple outward, stretching it until she whined and begged.

“No! Please? Please, please? Let go.”

“Turn yourself around so my mouth is at your clit. Now. Quick!” The door to the corridor opened and shut.

She obeyed quickly, walking around and rearranging herself on hands and knees, then checking my position beneath her, her face framed by her swaying breasts. The needles wound up her from mound to belly and breast, spotting her skin with blood.

I let my hands wander over her skin, almost touching where the metal went in and out of her skin, while she watched what I did, equally entranced. Clearly, he liked this.

The pain? The dominance? Probably both.

I grabbed hold of two handfuls of her ass and licked at her clit. It glistened with sexual wetness, and so did her beautifully swollen cunt. Pleased by her strangled noises and the wriggle of that ass, I dabbed at her again, circling the swollen button. I raised my head and sucked, running a thumb downward from her ass and into the crevice to push at her asshole, feeling it give.

I figured the doc planned to have her there today.

“Take it in and suck on me,” I croaked, worming my thumb-tip further and past the tight ring.

She had trouble reaching my cock, so I guided it to her mouth, felt her tongue cruise over me

Even that miniscule contact was enough to blow my mind...I thrust upward, and her hot mouth took more of the head. “Christ.” I left her to it while I played with her cunt and clit.

Fuck, having her do our bidding was more fun than...well, anything I'd tried, for a long, long time. Even if she had lied to me, which said lack of trust. I'd sort that out later, with interest.

The doctor placed another towel on the floor and kneeled between her legs. He'd stripped entirely. I glimpsed something in his hand that waggled, something rubbery, bumpy, and green.

"You'd do best to move," he said.

"Maybe." I eyed her clit and was happily toying with it using the tip of my tongue. Seeing the leak of new wetness from her slit, feeling the grunts and hums of appreciation that came from her throat with my cock, why the fuck should I move? To fuck her mouth properly, idiot brain. My cock twitched.

Still. I had other ideas.

"Got another needle? She said something while you were away and deserves one more. Are we aiming to let her come for sure?"

Her mouth paused in her working at my cock. I grinned inside, knowing what a dilemma this put her in. She couldn't tell doc about our words.

Was it a streak of malicious sadism awakening in me, or because she'd lied to me? Both? I was sure she'd play along, and not just because we made her. The push and pull of her enjoying what we did to her and of us enjoying doing it was purest, unadulterated, mainline awesome. I could live for days on the memories.

I could jack off for days too.

The doc laughed, and I felt sure I hadn't heard him laugh much until today. I didn't know this man. I needed to. I only had Jacob's opinion and no hard facts.

"She'll come if we make her. You may have one more needle, if you can be sure to only get the hood? We don't want to injure our pet."

I snorted.

“Heyyy,” she said, as if to protest, letting my cock pop free of her mouth and moving her knees.

I anchored her in place with my fingers clawed into her ass. “Stay!” I growled. “Abso-fuckin-lutely I can do that, doc. Get it.” Then I went to town on her clit while the doc walked away.

She bowed her head, and only grunts left her mouth, my cock bobbing against her face. I let that be. I had things to do, like eating her.

By the time he returned to hand me that needle, the plug for the other end, and a swab, Charity was well on her way to an orgasm. I stopped licking, and instead I chanced the prick of the needles and wrapped her to me with my legs, then I rolled upright. I needed more light to do this.

I sat on her, ignoring her spluttered complaints, and thanking the heavens my balls hadn’t encountered needles. I swiped and rolled the soaked swab over that erect nub while I held the hood between finger and thumb. “Hold your breath and be still.”

By then the doc was pinning her throat to the floor and daring his pretty pet to do anything at all in veiled murmured threats that made me smile. My weight kept her from doing much, anyway. I aimed the needle, fed it into her clit hood, and out the other side. Her shriek was instantaneous, and she bucked—an automatic reaction, I guess. I’d let go of the needle by then.

“Shhh. Settle, so I can plug the sharp end. I did the right place. You’re fine, girl.”

Fine...but with *my* needle in her clit.

I held onto her until her panting lessened and her hips stopped trying to rise against me and throw me off. I then took one last, long look at her pierced clit. “Jeez.” I held my breath as I thumbed her apart to expose it more.

“Such a good, bad girl.” Doc sounded fucking delighted.

“She was, wasn’t she.” I plugged the needle point and stood. “Back on her hands and knees?”

“Yes.” The doctor rose. He fetched and brandished a fucking huge, green dildo.

“Look at that gorgeous, dragon-sized dick. The man is a revolutionary sadist.”

Charity scrambled to hands and knees, red-faced, disheveled, and perfect. She stared at the dildo. “That won’t *fit*.”

It was almost as girthy as her wrist. “Doc?”

“I’m sure it will. With lube.” He squirted some more on the tip and watched the liquid cruise down to the base as he turned it to and fro. “And our pretty little princess will open her legs and take it.”

Her mouth did a mock downturn. She screwed one eyebrow higher then slowly poked out her tongue. I thought of all the things I could do with that tongue. The doctor was rubbing off on me. Luckily for Charity, he was preoccupied with daubing more lube on the dragon dick.

I leaned down and took a good turn of her hair in my fist. “Should I stick a peg on that tongue?” She pulled in her tongue, fast. “Now open that mouth, wide...wider than that.”

A peg, or a binder clip, or maybe a heavier hinge clip. Yep, the doc had contaminated my brain.

I lavished a few firm strokes of my hand on my dick then angled up her head. I gave her a slow appraisal because simply thinking about how this would feel in there, fucking her mouth, was making me ache in the best way and get harder.

I traced along her bottom lip, felt her tongue do a small circle, welcoming me, I guess.

With my breathing on hold, I eyed her breast where the pierced nipple was visible. “We should make that permanent.” I wanted to brand her, something fierce. Then I pushed into her, past teeth, over tongue, sliding over soft, wet territory. Territory I figured I now owned.

Her eyes widened, her nostrils flared, and she flicked her focus to my shaft that now joined us into one obscenely hot sexual creature.

“Good girl. Behave or I’ll put another needle down there.” I shoved further, swore. “I’ll bet you’re almost wanting that, almost?” Enough to make her waggle her ass, anyway.

She whined in a wet burble, eyebrows angling, then nodded, rocking my dick.

I swore again and took her head between my hands, hair tangled in my fingers, and I thrust and grunted.

The doc, kneeled, and put a hand on her pussy with that green dildo aiming—I had no doubt—straight at her cunt. She squirmed, froze, her jaw slackened, and her eyes jammed shut.

That panting she was doing through her nose, past my dick...*damn*.

All of that along with the molten-hot suction of her mouth on my cock... I was suddenly convinced this, this whole situation here on the island, must be a form of dark magic. This was as addictive as crack. *Fuck*. I shoved in deep and held myself there, inside her mouth, partway to her throat, listening to her struggling to breathe. If only I could leave it in her, forever.

The doc’s hand moved forward, thrusting dragon dick into her with a screwing motion. Charity made sounds deep in her chest, thrumming vibrations into my cock. My dick squirted some come but I held it back, stopped the rest. Teeth gritted, balls tight, like they had a knot in them, I stopped myself. Back in control, I restarted with the fucking of her mouth, and noted the doctor had stuck his cock into her ass.

We jammed deep at the same second, fastening our overwhelmed, gargling, whimpering doll in place.

The noises she made... Tears were running down her face.

“Spit-roast.” I smiled.

Her hands flexed on the floor as the force of his fucking shoved her forward. Her ass was a sight to behold with him

rutting her. He pulled out and started to take her ass hard and fast. I chose to stay still because the rocking was enough, more than enough to get me off, what with her tongue doing nasty things and her gulps squeezing down on me.

I swore a few more nasty curses and hung on for the ride. The smack as he forced dick into her butt and her gurgles and spluttering around me filled the room—wet, animal noises of raw sex, of two men fucking one woman.

*C*HARITY

Being caught between them, spit-roasted, and dominated would almost have been enough to make me come if that green, tree-trunk-sized dildo hadn't slid and fallen out and gone *thunk* to the floor. And if I could have, I would have lowered my head to look down at my body, to absorb the sight of that fucking long line of needles the doctor had stuck into me. The pain was less now but still a surreal reminder of being theirs. The one that ran through my clit hood was the perfect full stop. I felt stretched out, nailed in place like a butterfly, and claimed, and ever so needy.

The grunts of the men as they fucked me, the noises of my mouth being used, this was music I wanted and craved, it was music I never realized I needed. I couldn't climax from this alone, but I didn't care. *Cassius put a needle in my clit.*

I rolled up my eyes so I could lock gazes with him where he stood. His cock slid in and when the doctor speared in hard and rocked me forward, he was squished in further, up to his balls. The intensity in his eyes said 'I want you. I want to keep you'. His words had echoed that, and now his hands owned my head and gripped me...*and I wanted this.*

I was mental to want this.

When the doctor at last rammed in and came, Cassius took that as a cue to fuck my mouth properly and faster. Teeth

bared, he came, filled my mouth, spilling come in thick jets, the whole of his cock pulsing as he emptied.

When the doctor withdrew from my ass, my pussy ached because it wanted more, but I was content. I treasured this. Panting, I watched Cassius pull from my mouth and walk over to get a cloth then wet it at a faucet. His come dribbled down my neck when I sat up on my heels. I reminded myself not to trust them, much, even as he cleaned my face and held me.

For now, this kinky, sexual give-and-take was enough.

The question Cassius had asked had cemented my choice. I would find out more because I had to. He wanted to know what I had discovered. To choose who to tell what, I needed more facts.

But...the needles. The muted sting drew me to look at them. I wanted to touch, same as Cassius had seemed fascinated by the little damage they'd done and the distortion of my flesh. The pain was background, niggling, and nothing much. Except for my clit—that throbbed and warned...and made desire hang around and poke me into wanting more as every second passed by.

The doctor stood aside, studying my actions, and I sat on my heels and played with the needles, until he stepped in and trapped my hands.

“No more.” He kissed me then went lower, bending to tongue my needled nipple, with care.

It was the care that made my theories collapse. A killer would not do that. I was sure. I was very sure.

A revelation arrived. I dearly wanted him to be this, a normal dominant with scary cruel tastes, a man who was who he said he was, and nothing weirder.

Please be this—I begged to no one in particular, even as I craved the blessing of his lips, and tongue, and that warm breath upon my needled clit. I wriggled as he circled my nipple with a finger.

“Go lower,” I croaked.

He turned his head and looked up. Lines formed around his eyes.

“Please?”

“Hold her down, on her back, Cassius, while I play with her.”

Fuck, that hard smile made chills run up my body.

Cassius had sat down behind me, and he dragged me backward by my hair and an arm about my waist. I struggled and tried to gain my feet and run, but was rapidly overcome and arm-locked, until I begged for mercy...mercy from this guy who worked as a frickin' hard-ass bodyguard who could maybe go toe-to-toe with Bruce Lee.

Sucking in much-needed air, I felt the bulge of muscles in his arm.

I loved this. God, I loved this.

I knew the unwritten, exciting rules now. The wrestling and the submission to male dominance, the small burns from the seizure of my wrists, the thud of my heart, these gifted me with flurries of excitement.

And, I had a safeword.

What might they do to me? Fucking anything. Correction: almost fucking anything.

Trembling, I lay with my head in Cassius's lap, still naked and leaking the doctor's come. Cassius gripped my hands, an iron-hard hold at the wrists, and my arms were trapped and held crossed over my breasts. The needle that pierced my nipple pressed into the underside of one arm.

“Going to run again, little girl? Hmmm?” Cassius leaned in above with a tease in his voice and with that adorable curl looping over his forehead that I'd only just noticed.

My heart fluttered, glowing maybe, with fucking mild adulation. I wanted to kiss him, all over. I shook my head. “No, you fucker.”

He chuckled. “Fucker, is that a rank up from bastard? Brave. Don’t forget the bruises I left on your ass and belly. The needle in your clit. Say sorry before I figure out what else I could do to you.”

The doctor straddled my hips, his cock half-erect. I was more worried about *his* devious ideas, but... “Sorry.” I cast a glance at Cassius. “I am sorry, sir.” The sir was a late entry and yet...that had felt right on my tongue, especially when he kissed my hair and whispered, “Good girl.”

The doctor began to draw his fingers down me, spending time on the skin near each needle—those reminders of my mortality. I could bleed. I could be marred by something so small. Here and there, my blood painted me with spots and streaks.

“Beautiful. You’re all pierced and fucked up and horny. Such a cute little victim.” He flicked a needle fastened in the undercurve of my breast. I hissed at the jerk on my skin, anticipating pain that was worse than it actually turned out to be. Then he leaned down and kissed my breast, like a priest who’d found something to worship.

My eyes were likely wide as saucers.

Casually, he shifted backward to spread my legs and kneel between them, then place his hand over my pussy. I struggled against the arm-hold, a token struggle that lasted seconds. He slicked his fingers up my cleft, parting my lips, making me whimper as he swirled them at the entrance. It was as if he might, at any moment, put them inside...

He dipped them in, and then out.

“Fuck me,” I pleaded, my breathing harsh and desperate, but he only kissed down my body, methodically flicking and turning every needle as he went.

“Heyyy,” I whispered, digging in my heels as if to slide backward, and getting nowhere due to the hunk of Cassius behind me.

The doctor’s mouth twisted. He turned another needle, held it.

“You want me to fuck you? Where? Here?” His fingers explored again, and he opened me, toyed there, before forging in with three fingers, slow-as-syrup, inches deep. He stopped.

I squirmed and prayed. He stayed still.

“Yes. Please fuck me, sir.”

“With the green dragon dick, as Cassius named it?” With those fingers held inside me, he found the needle that transfixated my clit, and turned it.

“Ummm.” I swallowed, staring at where he held my precious clit hostage. My pussy clenched on him, on his fingers as they stirred inside my pussy. I was sore, but lust triumphed over small hurts—clearly they did, for I wore a train-track of needles.

I nodded to him, then tried, perversely, to wrench my wrists free from Cassius’s hold, but he only laughed and tsked.

My small rebellions gave me thrills I’d never found with strict Doms who hated resistance.

“Doc, ram that dragon dick in her like there’s no tomorrow, like her slutty cunt wants it all.”

It was no lie, and I knew it. Just seeing the thing was enough to make me imagine it going in and rearranging my insides.

I wanted every inch. I wanted to be challenged, to be filled, and fucked while they made me take it. I trembled when the doctor bowed over me, and his teeth found my pierced clit. I sighed as he sucked and licked, delicately, as if I were gourmet food.

“Please?” By then, I was hornier than I thought possible, dripping, throbbing, with memories of orgasms haunting me. I twisted in place. I was afraid, too, because of that one needle.

What if I came with that metal in me? Would I bleed? Would I be in agony?

“Fuck her while I hold her down.” Cassius urged.

The doctor held my thighs and studied my face then brought the dildo closer. He pushed it, touched my pussy. Open mouthed and fascinated by the risk, I wondered if I might be split if it were too big. I didn't think it'd gone in all the way before.

And then he stood, with the dildo in his hand.

Shamefully, I whined, but my legs were shaking from anticipation. I have excuses, I half convinced myself.

He only said. "I want to watch you fuck yourself instead."

"You want me to let her go?" Cassius asked.

When he nodded, my arms were released, and Cassius pushed my back and helped me sit upright before he, too, gained his feet then went and sat on the steel table, hands on the edge, legs swinging. He grinned at me, the bastard.

"Me?" I frowned. I wasn't into doing it to myself for an audience. The idea of masturbating while they watched though...*ummm*. Could I?

The doctor nodded and backed away, folded his arms. "Go."

The green dragon dick stood upright on the floor, like some mysterious growth found in a cave by a hobbit on a journey to find a ring or lose a ring—whatever.

Me. If I stretched, I could retrieve it.

"It has a vibration attachment. The button is obvious." The doctor gestured.

Even he seemed to be suppressing a smile. Bastard number two. Still, the thought of impaling myself was not entirely awful. I crept forward and snagged the huge thing. It tapered a little from base to head—wrist-thick at the base, normal dick size at the tip. An outreaching knobbly bit mimicked the rabbit vibes I'd seen. It would press on my clit if positioned well.

"I guess," I murmured. An audience? I eyed the two men and felt the pressure of their gaze and expectations, then realized that watching me fuck myself with this would possibly be the second-best thing ever for them, barring

coming in a woman. All I had to do was what I wanted to do, and the idea of it vibrating me into heaven, well...

I was in.

So would this dick be in, soon. Ha-ha.

Sitting up and off my heels, I maneuvered it into place between my spread thighs. Protesting any longer would only make the doctor do something to me he'd love, something I'd be dubious over and possibly screaming over too.

I rose and pulled it closer, snuggled it into the spot where my entrance lay, then slowly let myself descend. The thing kept going and going until I was sure I'd never take it all. I shut my eyes and wriggled. The natural wetness was more than enough. I heard footsteps and found the doctor had approached.

He placed his hands on my shoulders.

Hey." I sucked in my lip and frowned up at him, nervously.

"Just a little help." He shoved, I guess gently, for him, and my butt sank another inch. I gasped and slammed my palms on the floor. "No. More. Fuck."

"Mmmm. Good," he said to me, rumbling words above. "Now make yourself come."

I shuddered, from his deep voice saying that so intimately and from the dragon dick. Without looking, I moved the knob into the spot for my clit, checked the needle would be out of its way, then I found the button and pressed.

The rumble was nice but was there more?

"Press again to get more power." That was the doctor.

I pressed, pressed, pressed again. The thing roared to life, shaking my clit enough to make me bow forward, one hand clawed into my thigh, while the other wanted to hold the floor but that knob was diabolical.

Hurriedly, I adjusted its touch, gargled a weird noise, found my legs were shaking. What the men were doing, I had

no idea. My head was full of buzz, my core was molten with that rumble rattling through to my body.

I found the presence of mind to grab my breast and play with my nipple, soon I was making small choking gasps with every breath and jerking rhythmically as my thumb worked at my breast and the dragon dick gobbled on my clit. The needle there, I had managed to avoid it.

I swore then gave a last strangled sound. My breathing seized up. My pussy walls clamped onto the dick, hard, as if refusing to let it go.

I smooshed the device closer, willing it to meld it to my flesh. Still shaking, still jamming it on, I hurtled into a climax. My mind blanked and fractured within an ecstasy where I tried to hold the thing to myself for just a little longer—*longer, longer, longer*, until I broke and released it, and sucked in much-needed air as I held myself off the floor with my planted hand.

I was too stimulated to do more than flop sideways. The dildo's weight made it slip from me enough to break the contact and tumble out...else I might have self-combusted.

I found myself subsiding into Cassius's arms while he whispered sweet nothings. He bit me, gently, and nuzzled my neck while the doctor began to remove the needles. I winced through the last few, especially when he extracted the clit needle.

Cleaned up, and with my limbs and pussy aching from the sex, from the taser too, perhaps, I lay sprawled on the floor with the men and on a blanket. We were a bundle of warmth and softness, male bodies, and the pungent scents of sex, as well as the cleansing soap. We were intertwined as if never to be untangled. I could hope, couldn't I?

A bed would be nicer, but none of us was willing to move, yet.

I knew my hope was stupid, knew it then, knew it more that night in bed when I had time for regrets and thinking. The sex, I didn't really regret that. Except, none of us could trust

the other, not when bad things happened to those who were dumb and forgot to think things through.

I didn't even have a friend to call to wrench me out of here if it went south. Only me.

I was falling asleep thinking that—*only me*.

“I promise to let you into the Inner Sanctum, to learn, starting tomorrow.”

He would what? “Oh.”

“You like that?”

“Yes.”

“Both of you can come.”

C *HARITY*

At midday, the doctor unlocked the Inner Sanctum door and let us both pass him while he held it open. Going up the stairs with permission to be here was so very odd.

The leather-bound book with personal writing was missing from its case. It was, in fact, the only thing I could see that was different. I ran my hand over the back of an armchair while I looked about. I had not had time to find the phone yet. It should be fairly weatherproof, wrapped up as it was, but shock proof? That depended on the landing.

“And how is Jacob, Cassius?” The doctor sat down in the red chair I was leaning my hip and arm against. “Is he ready to terminate this job of yours? I will be sorry to see you go, and so will Charity, I believe.”

I held back the blush as much as I could. Cassius was more intent on answering, anyway. I would miss him if he had to go. In some ways, he was a safety net, despite his wild temper when he forgot himself that night on the beach. I had other reasons—I liked him and that was stupid, considering.

“Jacob still wants me here.”

“That is your answer? Nothing else? Why? I thought this was due to the CNC Fraternity checking on my treatment of Charity?” He indicated me, without looking my way.

“It was, I guess. I’m just a cog, a soldier obeying orders, if you like. Hey.” He pointed at a weapon on the wall, displayed behind glass. “This isn’t a copy? Is this really—”

“Roman? Yes. Used by a gladiator, or so the provenance said.”

“Huh.” Cassius tucked his hand in a pocket of his blue jeans. “Can I handle any of these?”

“Not today.” The doctor steepled his hands. “Perhaps if you’re a good boy?”

“Don’t fuck with me, doc,” he said, still studying the weapon. “You won’t like the results.”

“Noted. To be honest, I like having you here, so if you’re interested in these, we can negotiate a reason to let you handle a few.”

“Negotiate?” This time Cassius did turn. “And is that all of *your* answer?”

The doctor shrugged. “You tell me more, and I will tell you more.”

“Stalemate then. What do you plan on letting Charity learn here? And yes, I heard you say that.”

I’d been thinking on how to retrieve the phone, and now I was the center of attention. What did the doctor think of Cassius remaining? He was being paid to stay, and if the doctor hadn’t thought through the reasons for that, he should. Whose side was I on, though? The more freedom he gave me, the less I doubted the doctor.

“Latin and history. You were worried about growing bored on my island, Charity. You can start alleviating that boredom by studying.”

“Latin?” I tried not to look dubious. “I...suppose I can?”

“Many of the books on that shelf are written in Latin, and I need you to decipher something for me. Something I’ve noticed that carries down through the ages.”

The shelf had at least eight books on it.

I'd been hoping for something fun to do, like learning to... what? On the island, there were only books and nature...and kink, and of course antiques and ancient weapons. Which made the *only* silly. And there was also swimming and snorkeling and the mysteries to do with the doctor. Though only some of those topics could warrant more learning. I might convince the doctor to teach me how to use a sword? I'd never been one for embroidery and knitting.

As for kink, the two of them were already teaching me more than I'd ever imagined would appeal.

He stood, went to the shelf, and brought a book to me, then he flipped it open on the back of the chair, as if the tome didn't look a few centuries ancient. Even I knew that spines could crack.

"You can help me. I'm studying this ancient Roman ritual. They did blood sacrifices to their gods. I've other books that support the repetition of this same ritual by other cultures all the way to the sixteenth century. Or I think I have. Study these, verify my thoughts, or not, in between being bent over tables and fucked."

Cassius snorted. "That's more like it."

I scowled. "Don't fuck with me either. Is this a make-work thing?"

"It's not, and I'm not. Show me you can learn, and we can go from there. This is something of importance."

Surely, he knew more than I did?

"I do love history," I said, a tad begrudgingly. "The crazy Greek and Roman politics and backstabbing, the rebellions, the conquering." I had actually read a lot of history. "Latin, though? Dry stuff."

I shouldn't refuse before I tried. What else might he let me do if I agreed to this? I pulled the book closer and saw a black-and-white sketch of someone sacrificing a bird of some sort—held up in their hand, with blood dripping. So this was a copy of something drawn thousands of years ago.

"Didn't they have scrolls back then?"

“The Roman Republic did, yes. This is a copy of a copy from about twenty AD, or CE if you want to use that. Only the first two books are in Latin. I have translated it already and have made notes. It’s only this curiously repetitive sacrifice that I’m studying.”

He pulled over a laptop, opened it, and turned it on. “You can use this for the Latin also. The best dictionary site is bookmarked here. Cross-reference, please. Some words have several meanings. For example, *intemerata* can mean chaste or unsullied. You’ll find this is the word I’m having trouble with.”

So...he already knew the sticking point, but wanted me to translate a whole page? This was just a matter of googling.

I wasn’t totally incapable of doing this. I glanced at the spread pages and saw a diagram with tiny notations. “I can try,” I murmured. “If it’s just these.”

“Good. That table is yours. Here are the other books you will need.” He stacked a few more on the honey-hued timber table. Even that was likely an antique. “This is my notebook. It explains what I’m having trouble with. Plus I will give you the key. Use it wisely.”

“I will.” I pulled up a chair and sat. What had I let myself in for? “Okay.” I picked up a pen and twiddled it. The Latin dictionary was modern, and I dragged that over first. I’d never touched a book that was really ancient, and I eyed the oldest tome, wondering how to handle it. To think a real person had made this, read it, two thousand years ago. “I don’t have to use gloves to read these?”

“No. Not those. You like chess, Cassius?”

I’d not seen the chess set, but a timber board had been built into a square table beside a window. The morning sun slanted in and painted gold across the board, the tall chess pieces, and Cassius’s fair hair.

Having retrieved some pieces from a drawer beneath the table, he left a finger atop the black king. “I have played. Bet you’re shocked.”

“A little. Would you like a game, for stakes?” The doctor rested his hand on my shoulder.

“Sure.” He began to set the rest of the pieces into position. “Winner gets a wish, or a question?”

“That could be dangerous, Cassius. I’ll agree, with limits—we state our wish or question before the game begins. I wish to go fishing with you while Charity studies. I’m sure she won’t complain?”

His smile was disarming, even more so when he pulled up a chair until it was adjacent to mine then sat close. Our thighs were pressed together. He draped his arm across my back and gave me a thorough yet warm and gentle hug. Touching a man or being touched by one when sex was not the aim was a whole other ball game. There would always be an undercurrent of attraction, but this was plain and simply *nice*.

I wanted more of these hugs, and after a second leaned my head toward him, nudging his upper arm—which reminded me of the height difference between us. I was getting too sentimental and off-guard.

“Is that the truth, Charity?”

“I...yes, I suppose though I’d love to watch you, and to walk.” I liked the idea of wandering along the beach while they fished, if not the actual catching of fish. I had an aversion to killing creatures for any reason except hunger and a need to eat them.

“You can join us this afternoon.”

“Fishing is not much of a wish, doctor.” Cassius leaned an arm on the carved back of his own chair. The chair’s design was simple, elegant, and it matched the others in the sanctum. “I’d do that anyway. My wish is to get to wield one of your ancient swords.”

“Done. Let’s play. If you lose, we just fish.” Then doctor squeezed my shoulder and pulled me closer to him. “I’ll be quizzing you on this later. Remember, you only need to translate this page.”

I nodded. It looked doable, with the dictionary.

“White or black?” Cassius gestured at the chess board.

In between deciphering the Latin, I watched them play. I knew how to play chess, but once I’d realized that even an app on my phone could beat me at chess, I’d lost interest. I wasn’t pining for chess, I was wondering why—why any of this? Did the doctor really need this done when he must be light years ahead of my amateur skills?

He’d let us in here after punishing me for coming here, which must mean the diary book was important. I *had* to retrieve my phone and read that. Cassius must be wondering this too. Why ban me from a place then rescind the ban?

“Fishing,” Cassius said quietly, studying the moved pieces. “Why do I get the feeling you’re grooming me for something, doctor.” The look he sent the man was dead serious.

“Perhaps I am. I might be grooming both of you. How does that strike you?” He moved a pawn.

“Curiously. You know I’m winning already.”

The doctor laughed, and I watched his face. He’d relaxed since that first day when he’d visited me on the ship. That might not be surprising. We had both been a little, or a lot, stressed and off balance.

I twiddled a pen in one hand as I read the books. It was a habit I had when I wasn’t typing or writing. This was pretty easy, really. There were articles online about the sacrifices and some had the terms used in a way that made it easier to understand. *Precatio* was prayer, for instance.

I was a quarter done, even if I wasn’t sure if the order was correct, because languages screwed around with sentence structure. I’d have to go over it a few times. The thing that really bothered me in a niggly, creepy way was that this wasn’t about animal sacrifice; the words spoke of sacrificing humans to please the gods.

“What do you think of vigilante justice, Cassius?”

The question made me raise my head.

“What happened to movie night. Switched to a serious topic, have we? I’m still winning.”

“Well? Is being a vigilante ever a good career choice?”

“I guess sometimes, in some situations it might be worthwhile? Not in a country with an adequate law enforcement and court system, though.”

Wow, I mouthed the word. Cassius could talk fancy when he wanted to, as well as get me into armlocks and probably beat up bad guys.

“Adequate,” the doctor grumbled. “One needs excellent law not adequate. Vigilante justice could clean up what the legal system misses.” He raised his voice. “Charity, what do you think about vigilantes?”

“I guess if they target the right people, it’s a yes, that’s okay. The problem is how could they ever do a better job?”

“You mean statistically they’d have to get the wrong people a lot? Hang the wrong man, and so on?”

I nodded. Even the courts came to the wrong decision sometimes and jailed the wrong person.

The doctor made a move and sat back. “What if you had an inside view of a criminal organization and knew they were murderers.”

“Like what? The mafia? Is this your killer versus murderer theory again, doc?” Cassius pursed his lips. “You’re trying to distract me, or...” he moved the queen, as far as I could tell, “have you done some vigilante justice yourself? Man, I am beginning to wonder. Check.”

“The question you need to be asking is, if I had done some, would I tell you?”

“Haha. Truth. So...you ain’t saying nuthin”

“Precisely.”

Listening to them talk gave me a weird sense of being in a whole new place here. This was what friends did. Though chess might not be your average game night at the pub.

“Movie night?” I piped up. “Do I get a say in this?”

The doctor spoke while still studying the board. “You can vote on a *Die Hard* marathon, *Lord of the Rings*, the *Matrix* or the *Alien* series.”

I puffed out my lips. “Jeez. Next time do I get a say in which ones we vote for?”

“Of course, Charity. Yes.” The doctor made a move. “Currently, we are locked with one vote for *Aliens* and one for *Die Hard*.”

“Let me think on that.”

“Check the bedroom before you come to the beach. Put on the bikini you find there.”

I kept watching them in between translating.

Cassius won the game then danced about gently flourishing and admiring the gladius sword, while the doctor gave him tips on Roman sword fighting and used a wooden ruler in the duel with a plastic lid as a makeshift shield. It seemed Dr. Romanus knew more than medicine, antiques, and kink. After they left for the beach to go fishing, I studied for the time I’d been told to, then I packed up and contemplated looking for my phone.

Roland waved goodbye then locked the Inner Sanctum door. Which made me think I should have explored the Inner Sanctum more while I was allowed. Tomorrow was still possible.

I went up to our bedroom and found the floral bikini. I dressed, snagged a beach towel, casual shorts, and a soft shirt, then quietly went to the base of the tower to see what I could see. The phone was nowhere in sight. A huge section of prickly shrubbery, that continued toward the beach in swathes and patches, was below the window from which I thought I’d tossed the phone. The clothing I’d wrapped it in could have been a marker, but I found it in the sandy soil, several yards away—blown by the wind or carried by a curious animal. Or thrown by capricious Greek gods, knowing my luck.

“Of course you’re here, not fucking there where it’d be useful.”

I peered up at the roof of the tower and the small window that I must have used.

In a few days, the doc and Cassius would depart. I might wait before attempting phone retrieval. It would probably be wise since, with my bed empty at night, I could come here late and pretend to be admiring the moon.

I just needed a flashlight and a willingness to get scratched to pieces by the shrub.

“Blast and buggery.” I turned and headed for the beach. This difficulty only made me more determined. How fast was this Jacob expecting results? Or put another way, how worried was I that I’d be murdered?

Not very, I mused, not anymore. And why was that? Was I being stupid?

I wandered down the track that led to the beach and found them at the pebbled foreshore with surf rods in hand, despite the lack of real surf.

The sun was already high. I sat in the shade on a sun lounge, not wanting to get toasted to beetroot color, and more into studying these guys when they weren’t looking at me. I had a book from the lower library called *Gormenghast*, and I was ready to either read it, watch the men play at fishing, or sleep with it on my face. Okay maybe not on my face—it was a little too fat a book for that. The ridiculous part of all of this was how much this day resembled a holiday at a resort in Spain or somewhere else delightfully touristy. The staff had laid out a bikini on the bed. Earlier, I’d eaten chef-made granola muesli with fruit puree and some yummy Greek yoghurt for breakfast. If I had a jet ski zooming past and a masseuse...I would be very confused about my situation.

Instead...instead I had these two somewhat cruel men who were fun to be with, who could make me come like there was no tomorrow. I was beginning to think if given the choice of a resort or being here, that I would choose here.

I lay back and watched the pair of them throw out their fishing lines, reel them in, put bait on the line, discuss something—the waves, the wind? Who knew. The square-jawed, muscular, dark-haired doctor versus the blond, slightly less muscular Cassius, and both were barefoot and in shorts and T-shirt. They were opposites, in several ways. Although, with his shirt off, the doctor's shoulders were shocking and giantlike boulder formations. One could run a rollercoaster on the man.

Nevertheless, one man was introspective, thoughtful, and rich—I mustn't forget the rich part. The other was unpredictably, if rarely, aggressive, more impulsive, less inclined to be a rebel, and less a deep thinker? I tsked at myself. I was assuming greatly. I still wasn't sure of either man's depths.

The only thing I was sure of? That I was strangely happy, and how effed up was that?

To stave off the sleepiness caused by being soothed by palms and pine trees waving above me, by the whiffling breeze and the vast ocean rolling in beneath a sky plagued by wheeling seagulls...I roused myself from the sun lounge. I stood, stretched, then strolled down to the men and pretended to be interested in fishing.

They were bantering about the lack of fish.

“Caught anything?” I asked Cassius as he reeled in an empty hook.

He walked sideways, grabbed my ass, then squeezed it as he brought me close for a kiss. The hardness at his groin brought back the recent memories of sex. The kiss...mmm...nirvana. When he drew away, I kissed him again, up on my tiptoes.

“I caught you,” he murmured.

“For now,” I whispered back, tempted into teasing him.

“Wait until I get you tied down again and screaming, little brat.”

I smirked then wriggled from his embrace. With my rear end deliberately swaying, I went to the doctor and observed him silently. He, too, ended up bringing me in for a squeezing hug and a kiss. Wordless, he released me. I stayed there, keeping him company for a few more minutes. It reminded me of how I felt with close friends—there was no need for words when you enjoyed being with someone.

Could this island ever be my version of utopia?

I walked along the rocky shoreline a little way, wetting my feet and ankles in the small waves and wondering about my future, before I returned to the lounge.

Gormenghast proved to be too serious and dense a book for my mood. It made for a good stomach weight, and I fell asleep with it there. The doctor being a vigilante and hunting down murderers was one of my last thoughts before I sank into dreams.

The days slinked by, in the alarming yet wonderful way of this island, with great helpings of sex of the most delicious kind: casual morning sex; forced sex where I would wriggle and wrestle with them before being pinned to the bed, wall or floor; and sex that was a tied-up fuck where I had things done to me that were shocking, but they still made me come like a turbo-charged train. And there were the gourmet meals, the reading, the translating of that page in three different ways, and me constantly wondering what sort of perverted chick I was to enjoy being here.

I had lost track of Emme entirely, I realized to my dismay, while breakfasting one softly sunlit morning in the *sunroom*. It was the morning the doctor was due to leave again, with Cassius.

Roland entered and informed us the chopper had arrived.

I pushed away my plate of buttery scrambled eggs and croissant, drew a deep breath, and looked around at the perfect normality of this room. “Is Emme being treated this well, doctor? Can you find out, please?” I looked up as he pushed back his chair and stood.

The doctor brushed away hair that had drifted across my eye, then idly played with the strands. “I will do so. The last time I inquired, she was still happy. Perhaps, one day, I can arrange for you to see her.”

My heart flip-flopped, and I frowned in a pleading way. “Yes. Please. If you could.”

“I will try my utmost. Say goodbye to Cassius too. If his employer demands his job here is done, he might not come back.”

Then he kissed me softly for a man with his tastes, but that was how he rolled. He was human and was never dull. “Have you found any new slant on the word *intemerata* and its modern meaning?”

Except for this. This was repetitive. This word was somehow supremely important. “No.”

“I want you to make a list of every possible interpretation of the word, including a modern slant on what it might mean. For me.” He kissed the top of my head then twisted his fist in a handful of my hair at the nape. I squeaked at the abrupt pain. He smiled. “No masturbating without us this time.”

“I won’t. And I will make that list. Cross my heart.” This might kill me.

Cassius laughed. “Not crossing your clit is the thing.” He arrived on the other side of my chair, brought me to my feet, then swung me backward in his arms to kiss me like some latter-day, melodramatic, Hollywood star. When he released me, I was staggering and giggling.

I touched my lips, feeling that glow that you get from kisses, and smiling. “You nutter.”

“None of that.” He smacked my butt. “Couldn’t let the doc beat me at kissing. I’ll be back though, Charity. Bet on it.” His eyes were hard, reminding me of his promises.

The doctor didn’t know how possessive *and* obsessive this man was.

Or that Cassius was doing more than supervising my so-called treatment by the doctor, because his employer had suspicions.

“Ignore the show-off. These are for you to use when swimming at Rose Bay.”

That was the name on the island map for the beach where we swam...where I swam, beside the fallen tower. He placed a gift-wrapped shoebox on the table. The wrapping paper was thin pink tissue.

“Don’t open this until after we leave. Stay safe, Charity.”

I obeyed the doctor. I didn’t open the gift until they’d left. I guess I had sensed some importance attached to the gift because I procrastinated. I went to the Inner Sanctum, finished a comprehensive list of a modern interpretation of the word *intemerata*, which didn’t take me long because all I really did was visit a few extra sites on Latin translations. I added one more that came to me, pushed back the chair, and went down to breakfast in the main dining room. By myself, eating there felt ever stranger. The men had kept their hands off me at mealtimes ever since the first time.

I climbed the stairs to the bedroom, sat on the now very empty emperor-sized bed—I liked to imagine that was its size. The loneliness was new, yet I’d felt this as the helicopter rose into the air.

I undid the tiny gold ribbon, unwrapped the shoebox, then pushed off the lid. I doubted Cassius knew what was in this.

Reef shoes was written on the cardboard informational insert. *Guaranteed to keep your soft mortal feet safe from all the nasties like scrapes, stings, and spines. Note, we can’t guarantee these will ward off the bitey sharks. Take care in the sea, hoomans!*

Reef shoes. It suggested someone had been watching me swim where I was told not to. And yet, the doctor had merely

given me these. No punishment, nothing else at all.

Tentatively, I figured he must be okay with me exploring, despite the possible dangers. I'd never worn the pendant in the sea because it wasn't waterproof. Maybe the pendant location had given him ideas about what I was doing, since I was frequently going to the beach where he'd warned me about the stonefish.

Whichever, this had to be his way of saying 'you can do stuff, just be careful'.

I pulled the shoes from the box and tried them on.

"Perfect." I wriggled my toes inside the skin-hugging shoes. The red, pink, and blue design on them was of an abstract coral reef with squiggly seaweed, coral, and fish.

Nothing in the box explained the mild dread occupying my mind and stomach. I dressed in a sun dress and one-piece swimmers, hat, pendant, then found the car keys and all the paraphernalia I needed for a beach visit and a swim into the tunnel. With one hand, I cupped my stomach.

I thought I knew why the existential dread was squirming about inside me.

I'd come to like both men for who they were, for who I thought they were.

I liked them, but here I was again about to try to prove the doctor was a murderer or had concealed some other bad thing.

And there was Cassius, still following Jacob's orders, aiding me in my explorations, and wanting those answers.

Did the doctor know we were digging for this? He might sense something was not quite what it should be. He must do. If I took his side, if I said anything, I might have to reveal Cassius as a betrayer.

I frowned. The doctor must know *something*? If he discovered our deception and it was a total shock, the two men would be pitted against each other. And me? I really did not know that answer. All the balls were in play and bouncing off each other.

Maybe he did know, and he was in fact grooming both Cassius and me for something. These past few days, he'd changed, he'd altered course in some way.

I sighed. "Fuck this." I clattered down the stairs to the car.

C *HARITY*

I left the reef shoes on a brick beside the beach hut. They'd become a sort of a symbol of my commitment.

I climbed the path up to the fallen tower then approached the cliff.

The wind tried to push me off the edge, in that playful way it has. Below, murky green waves splashed and foamed about the rocks and rubble from the tower. I thought it rougher than usual.

I walked back to look inside the hole and sat down to think some more. I didn't want to prove that the doctor was killing his lost girls. I didn't want to mess up what I had here with the two of them, even as I pined for something more than pottering about having fun, eating, and being their sex toy.

Their sex toy and actual friend? The banter on the beach, the casual chess, even the odd task he'd given me, those, and other days, other conversations, had added a depth to this. Least I thought they had. Yeah, I was hoping.

I couldn't imagine living my whole life here however, as a recluse, growing old. What did he do with his 'toys' when they grew old?

I sat on the edge of the rubble, among the sprouting grass, and played with a stalk with a daisy at the end, twirling it this way and that way. The sun was kind today and hidden behind

some gray clouds, with the land shrouded by the shadows of the clouds. Even the ocean had been a green-gray. The day's blah colors suited me. I was pissed at having to choose to do this. If I fessed up to the doctor, Cassius might suffer, and if I turned a blind eye and did nothing? Worse, maybe?

I stood and rolled my shoulders, thought about the reef shoes. I had a pair of flippers and swimming goggles, too, had found them days ago, but I feared the flippers might get stuck on something, plus they weren't meant to protect all of the foot.

"Just because I like the status quo," I told myself. "Doesn't mean I should ignore the creepy clues."

Graveyards, lost girls, warnings, and vigilante justice, these were a few of my not-favorite things. There was the phone too. My lost phone. I would get that tonight, barring something terrible happening. It would take a zombie apocalypse to stop me. I needed more info.

I headed down the hill, half jogging, half picking my way carefully. Wouldn't do to trip and brain myself before I tried to get through that tunnel, again. I stripped off near the hut and set off for the nearest spot to the tunnel dive, with everything I needed, including some courage I'd dredged up. The days off had softened me, that was it, that's why all the ruminating and why the dread was preoccupying me.

"I only have two days, this time," I muttered as I waded in wearing reef shoes, goggles, and swimmers. I prepared myself mentally then dived into the cool water, kicked my way to the bottom, found the tunnel, and plunged inside.

The dark sky and the lack of sunlight filtering through and reflecting into the tunnel did not help. I must have reached three yards in before panic seized me. I could hear the thud of my heart. I struggled to stay calm because letting panic take hold would kill me down here. I did a slow somersault and felt my way around—*rock, rock, space*; there was nothing in front of me. That had to be it.

I prayed the lighter water was the way out, and flutter kicked my way toward it.

I made it out, lunged upward, and broke through the surface choking for air, but I made it.

Unhappy, I stared up at the gray skies, with water making sloppy sashes on nearby rocks. “Fuck. I need a light to go down there today.”

I did not have a light.

All morning and part of the afternoon, I practiced deep diving and holding my breath, counting the seconds in my head without any waterproof watch. I didn’t try the tunnel again. It was peaceful below. I saw fish but no sharks and was sure by now that no stonefish had dared to make its home here. I explored those undersea rocks, felt them, after being sure as I could be that they were safe. There was an extreme beauty in being able to stay alive beneath the sea. There was power, also. I was the alien below the surface, and my god I could almost wish I were a mermaid.

Going further inside the tunnel wasn’t to be. Not today, anyway.

The day remained overcast, and rain was spotting the windshield when I returned to the doctor’s mansion, swung in, and parked. I tapped the steering wheel. I couldn’t even check the weather for tomorrow without a true location.

At the dinner table, I asked Inigo about the weather forecast. He’d returned in the chopper when Cassius and the doctor had left and was on duty again here and at the library.

He only pursed his lips and shook his head.

“Shit. Really? Has the doctor told you not to say, in case I figure out the map location?”

“Maybe.” He looked amused and stayed in his at-ease position beside the entryway to the room.

“Your lips are zipped?”

“I can tell you many things but not that.”

“Damn.” I eyed the half-finished meal of crab, salad, fresh bread rolls, and that scrumptious butter. “I think I’ll leave this. Tell Margaux I apologize. It’s delish but I am tired.”

“Of course.”

I hadn't lied, exactly, though my stomach was churning.

I lay in bed reading and counting down the hour until one AM, wishing I had an alarm I could use that wouldn't wake up the household. At one, on the dot, I swung out of bed, wearing my handy silent, reef shoes again. I tottered down the stairs and outside, listening for the sounds of anyone else stirring. The doors were not locked, ever, here but I had to wonder where the guard with the taser hid. Hopefully, he only ventured out when some alarm warned him of intruders.

I was beginning to think this place was actually in some alternate dimension. I'd seen boats out to sea, cargo ships, yachts, but nothing ever came here, nobody rowed ashore or anchored to swim in the bay.

The best flashlight I'd found had been in the drawer beside the bed, and it was ancient and battered. The batteries needed CPR. The light was weak. Even so, it helped and was better than nothing on this moonless night.

I found the approximate place near the tower, and made a path through the shrub, crackling over leaves and snapping twigs. The minutes ticked by as I searched, trying not to get my eyes poked out. This shrub had it in for me. I'd have to wear a long-sleeved shirt to breakfast to hide the scratches.

Cassius had sounded disbelieving when I'd told him it was buried somewhere impossible to get at without being seen, but after a day, he'd stopped pestering me. It was possible that he, too, had become unsure about whether he wanted to know the truth.

Finally, I found the phone at the very base of the tower, tucked into a pile of leaves.

If I discovered anything that incriminated the doctor, everything might be upturned.

By everything, I meant us.

And by incriminated, I reminded myself, I meant women being murdered. I needed not to be a dumb ass.

I clutched the phone to my chest as I wriggled out of the death claws of the shrubbery, then plucked the last of the leaves and twigs from my hair and clothes. The screen of the cellphone was blank, and the battery was on zero charge, but the charger upstairs should revive this by morning. I could read the pages I'd photographed at the beach, at the hut, in peace.

"You'd better have something worth it inside you," I whispered.

If he'd taken the trouble to hide that book, before allowing us into the Inner Sanctum, it must have something good inside it. I prayed it was something that would prove he wasn't killing the lost girls.

Proving a negative would be difficult.

I frowned. It was late. I was way past being at my best mentally and too sleep deprived to be optimistic. Tomorrow was another day. Though right now it was tomorrow, I reminded myself, as I opened the door to my...to our bedroom.

It was so fucking quiet in here.

My heart stuttered as I stared into the darkness at the familiar shapes of the furniture. Nobody jumped out and tasered me this time. I fell into bed, drew up the sheets, and...

Sleep.

The day was swarming with rain, again. I could hear the patter on the roof and the windows before I rose from the bed.

Nevertheless, I was determined. I ate breakfast, packed, and headed for Rose Bay with the charged-up phone. Tomorrow the men would return. Today I could try diving, if there was a break in the clouds and the sun shone onto the tower and the bay. There were the secrets of the diary that wasn't really a diary, to be read—all two hundred plus tiny photos of its pages and some of them would be out of focus.

The rain was heavy enough to make me need to sprint into the beach hut when I arrived, backpack stuffed with everything, including the chef-made lunch. I could just see myself explaining this abduction and island lifestyle to a cop—yes, officer, I ate lobster mornay twice, and the pastries were to die for.

I sighed at the morose sky and at the rain obscuring the beach and pouring onto the clearing out front of the hut—I couldn't even see the cliff where the tower lay from here. Water streamed off the edge of the roof and pooled on the sandy soil. The sun lounges looked miserable, and I knew the car was getting drenched due to the lack of proper sides.

I could wait. The afternoon might be clear.

I dried my feet, pulled over a dusty, but intact, leather chair and positioned it in the gap where the front door had once existed. The chair groaned and puffed out air when I sat but failed to collapse. I opened the phone then the photos app, pursed my mouth at the god-awful teensy handwriting in the first pic. I was going to hate reading by the time this was done.

This must be all in the doctor's hand.

I leafed through to where the writing began, then started slowly by reading every word. After a while I began to skim. This could have been a diary in the earlier sections, but the doctor lapsed into history and the story told was perhaps part true history, part fiction. I knew he loved books and history, and he seemed to be stretching his authorly muscles here. The wars and battles were fairly well described, but if there was meant to be a plot to each section of history, he lost me.

I plunged onward, found a few philosophical questions asked that he pondered. Some echoed what he'd said to Cassius and me. *War is hell*, someone had once said.

I could not agree more.

Soldiers killed, but is it murder? Is murder hell too? Probably.

For a diary this was back-to-front in the progression of dates.

He drifted through the Middle Ages, wandered across many of the countries of Europe, portrayed wars and village life, even went into how big city life in ye olde London town might have been. Greece, Italy, and their history in AD times had a large mention, and Rome? Rome and the Roman fucking Empire was the final part where he went on about man's search for the gods and for immortality, and for forgiveness for sins.

What would Mankind do with Immortality?

That was a title at the top of one page. Skimming again, then reading in depth, I discovered the doctor thought mankind—ignoring the women there, doc—would probably do something awful with it. Would only the rich get to have it? What if to buy immortality you had to pay in some terrible coin? Not your soul exactly, but with dark deeds.

Dark deeds done dirt cheap. ACDC was on that already. No, wait. That was dirty deeds? Same deal.

As far as I was concerned, *power corrupts* was the motto that humans had stapled to their hearts. Immortality would fuck us up and bring out the worst in most people.

I hadn't realized how much the doctor had cleaved toward religion. Roman gods were fairly well forgotten now? But sins were one of those things most religions loved to bang on about.

I frowned as I turned a page and found two lists, one on the left page, one on the right side. Past that, the book was blank.

The lists were names. The left one seemed male names, though some were foreign, and I'd have to check. The right listed only female names, probably. I halted and reread one name. Patricia Romanus. What was the connection between these names? Several of the others were people buried in the cemetery beyond this hut.

I was onto something here, but what was it? I didn't recognize any of the names in the left-hand list. I really

wanted to get hold of an internet search engine. It would have to wait until I returned and could use the laptop.

The rain continued; the day wore on. Late in the afternoon, it became obvious that this was my last chance.

Despite the rain, I went for a short dip in the sea, after all, I was only getting a little wetter and it was warmer than standing on the beach in the wind.

The lack of visibility was scary even though I'd swum there twenty times by now and seen nothing more dangerous than a turtle. Diving beneath made the world go silent and dim. If I pushed myself down and drifted on my back, I could sometimes see the rain spattering the surface between the waves. I could also imagine something I couldn't see flashing up from the depths, latching onto my leg, and dragging me down.

I surfaced and reminded myself of Sartre and all that take risks to feel alive stuff. "Fuck, I need to do this."

I dived and sought the tunnel. This time I was utterly determined, I kicked and kicked until deep and found the entry, and I recognized the sections by feel and everything was good until that gut-clenching emotion put a wrecking ball through my determination.

I fled again, scratched myself on a rock as I dragged myself past, then shot to the surface even more shaken, more exhausted, more despairing. I'd breathed in some water. I'd been so needy for air. I was going to drown myself doing this. Face it, this was impossible. I should give up. Why had I wanted to explore the tunnel? Because it was my only choice.

My choices had expanded since then.

I trudged up the beach, shivering, coughing a few times to hack up the last of some sea water I'd inhaled. The temperature was dropping.

I was ready to give up for the day, if not forever—except there *was* something down there, I felt it in my heart. I stepped inside the beach hut to dry off and grab the backpack. Inigo was waiting.

He sat in the chair, playing with a phone, and I was shocked by the thought it was mine. It was not mine. The color was wrong.

Casually he looked up from the screen of the phone and smiled. “The rain is going to end soon. The doctor will be flying back tonight. You should return now, shower, get ready to welcome them.”

“Oh. Sure.” I faltered then floundered into an explanation while I picked up the towel from beside the backpack. “I was just swimming, first time I tried since the rain and all... Nothing much else to...” He wouldn’t have looked in the pack? “How did you know where I was?”

He shrugged then stood and retrieved a black umbrella from the ground. “I know things. We have cameras watching the beach, the cliffs, in case of trespassers.”

“Shit.” Had I said that out loud? I had. “I mean that’s a good idea, but I’m not keen on being watched while swimming.” Why did I admit to all the swimming?

The lifting of his black eyebrows and the rest of his expression said it all—incredulity and amusement. “For your safety, also.”

Didn’t he know I wasn’t supposed to swim alone?

“*Mmm.* Your car? I didn’t see it.”

“It’s behind the hut.”

All the better to freaking surprise me, of course.

After a final stare at the long scratch on my leg, one I was surprised to see was still bleeding, Inigo left me. I was a jumble of what-ifs and did-he-see-anything-else, as I dried properly and changed. I almost left the phone behind in a hiding spot but decided not to. The short drive to the mansion was slower than usual due to the light being poor and one of the headlights being shite.

Was Cassius coming back? Inigo hadn’t said. There could come a time when his boss would say no and terminate this

mission of his. Or the doctor might decide to kick him off the island, for any number of reasons.

I did actually want to see him. Was it Stockholm Syndrome? Did that apply when you were stuck on an island of dreams?

Dressed, I joined the staff, and we drove in their convoy of two golf-cart cars to the helipad. The headlights on these were better maintained. There were cameras on the island that I could not detect. It was something to remember next time I did something clandestine.

The lights for the landing pad were on, and I could hear the helicopter overhead in its descent.

I hadn't had time to check the name list in his diary. I was busy turning over that thought when the doctor disembarked, walking low to avoid the blades, then Cassius hopped out and crouch-ran past him, spotting me in the line-up. I smiled and waved, though the doctor ignored me. Once past the danger zone of the blades, Cassius jogged over.

He grabbed me in a bearhug, swung me around and shoved me against a post. After one long fervent kiss he whispered something that sent a chill tumbling down my spine.

"This place is more dangerous than I thought. Meet you to at the top of the house after dinner. Rooftop."

I stared into his darkened eyes—their blueness undetectable at night. I searched for more meaning in them, but he pulled away, gave my ass one squeeze, then towed me by the hand toward a car.

The doctor seemed oblivious, as if other things concerned him, and yet any danger here must concern him?

The list. *The LIST*, my brain reminded me.

That was probably wise.

"Can I stop and visit the library first? I need to do a search."

"If you must," he said. "Don't say anything to him."

To the doctor? Oh fuck. Now I was worried.

“Hey. What are these?” He’d pushed up the skirt of my short dress and was running his hands beneath the waistband of my lacy panties. “Didn’t we say not to wear these?”

“Well...” Truly I wasn’t sure if that was a hard rule. “They were in my drawer.”

“Off with them,” he murmured, already sliding them off my ass and downward until they fell partway down my legs.

I let them fall the rest of the way, glancing over his shoulder to see if anyone else had noticed. The doctor would’ve made it plain and said it out loud. As it was, I could feel a blush warm my face. I wasn’t sure I’d ever get used to this sort of public embarrassment.

“Bad girl.” Cassius waggled his eyebrows. “Just wait...” His hands tightened on my ass. “Until the rooftop.”

I had an inkling he meant punishment, and fuck me if I wasn’t aching for whatever that might be.

On the drive back, I asked what they’d been doing, where they went. Cassius sat next to me, and he shrugged ruefully. “Saw my boss. I can’t say more.”

The doctor had decided to drive, but he had heard me. “Patient doctor confidentiality. Maybe on another day I can reveal more.”

Had he implied that before—that one day he would tell me more? I sat back and thought about what those words could mean. They were promising.

Despite this unknown danger Cassius had hinted at, I smiled.

The trees flickered by in the night as we followed the first car to the mansion. The doctor gave me a quick kiss, a warm *Hello Charity*, then a tired smile, before he left for what he called a staff meeting. Cassius saluted me casually, tapping fingers to his temple, then went upstairs. Once the doctor was out of sight in a downstairs room, and with the door to it closed, I headed for the library tower.

C *HARITY*

I used the key the doctor had given me and let myself into the Inner Sanctum. It seemed sacrilegious almost, to be here to look for some dirt on him. The laptop was where I'd left it, and I sat and turned it on, brought the phone out, turned it on also.

The page with the list was what I needed. Heart thudding with unease, I brought it up on-screen and began to search.

The women, first, because that would be less likely to deliver me a nasty surprise. I knew myself that well, by now. I didn't fucking want to find dirt. This danger Cassius spoke of might be nothing.

None of the thirty-two women popped up except for Patricia. There were three names after hers that gave me nothing. The first couple of names were possibly from ancient times—thousands of years ancient. I wasn't exactly going to see them in the news.

"Men then." I straightened in the chair, rolled my shoulders. I started at the top, figuring from the looks of the names and how the right-hand one was organized, that those might be back in the Dark Ages or thereabouts. To my surprise, two of the first few were probably female names.

"Balbina and Decima." The *As* at the ends gave that away, really. Lesson learned.

Nothing, nothing...

“This is getting boring,” I muttered, after I was done searching for fifteen of the male names.

I was down to five names, then, “Bingo. A winner.”

Three of the last five had been suspected of multiple murders back in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but had disappeared before being prosecuted. One was discussed in a recent article. The others were in excerpts from books about uncaught killers. One might have been called a serial killer if they’d had more facts nailed down. Interesting.

I frowned. This did not tell me anything about the doctor. There were seventy-five names here, in total. Three killers did not make a theory.

I’d found no ‘dirt’ but also nothing wonderful.

I put everything away then locked up and went to find this rooftop area.

The stairway inside the old hotel went to the third floor—I knew this—but it stopped there. I walked along the corridor and past the doctor’s bedroom. Midway, I found an alcove that turned out to conceal a spiral metal stairway. I climbed up and came out in a small, covered room, with windows on all sides. An overhead light had turned on as I exited the stairs. Through the stippled glass of the door, I spotted Cassius leaning on the stone parapet. The screen of his phone lit his face.

I padded across, knowing this might be a moment that would destroy what we had here. Or what I had? *Conflicted* was not a dramatic enough word.

The parapet had taller carved pieces inset at intervals—stonework decorations I recalled seeing from below. Dry leaves and a few pine needles from the taller trees carpeted the concrete roof underfoot. The view in daytime would be spectacular, and I’d make a bet the doctor had placed a camera here.

He looked up and tucked away the phone as I drew near.

“Come here.” Cassius pulled me into his body, one hand sliding up beneath my dress to cup my ass while the other arm wrapped about my back. “I missed you.”

Wow. The words punched in and gave me that gooey feeling. *I can't be falling for this man.*

My mouth turned wistful, I guess, for he kissed me softly, saying, “Don't be sad. I spend my days away worrying about you. I know you're up to no good.” It was his turn to look sad. “Because I told you to dig. We are so fucked up.”

I leaned in and hugged him, sighed with my face in his shoulder. This felt far too nice.

“What did you find out? What's this danger?”

“Jacob told me the doctor is involved in Satanic rites. He thinks people are being sacrificed. Those lost girls...you know?”

Crap. I thought through this, and all the while I was ready to sink into this man and stay like this forever. He was warm and cuddly, even if he was also a budding sadist.

“I want to take you away, and I fucking can't. Like hijack the chopper, hire a boat to sneak in, zoom off.”

“There are surveillance cameras. Probably one up here too.”

“Figures,” he whispered back. “I checked but there are ways to conceal those things.”

I finger-walked across his back, loving the shift of muscles, the hardness there. The stiffening hardness below was even better, and I may have squirmed into him for his hands tightened on me.

“I don't believe it,” I finally said. “I don't think the doctor would do that. He's too...”

“Too what? Did the phone show anything? Did you find it?”

I shook my head. “I found the phone. No, nothing incriminating was on the pics I took.”

“You sent them to Jacob?”

“*Ummm*. No. Not yet.” It would feel wrong to send those.
“What if I send nothing to him?”

“Nothing?” He exhaled then stared at me. “You made a deal, remember? He could help protect you, if something goes wrong.”

The *could* stood out. Could. “Is he a good man, this Jacob? I can trust him? He said give him evidence, either way, and he’d free me. Did that bone reveal anything?”

The small silence was telling.

“You’re not sure?”

“I...don’t know. He’s my boss. He is a prick, like a lot of powerful men. He offered to help you if you helped him. I’ve been told nothing about the bone, except they were trying for DNA.”

An idea dawned. “Did you tell Jacob about that research the doctor has me doing? That was about an old sacrifice rite.”

“Yes. I did. I report everything relevant.”

I pulled away. “That’s it then. He’s wrong. He jumped to conclusions. I just know it.”

“The fuck you do. We have to be careful here.”

I sure hoped we weren’t sitting beside a camera with audio then.

“I smuggled in a gun for you.”

“What?”

“A small gun, a beretta. You know how to shoot, according to your file.”

I nodded. “But why would I—”

“You’ll know if you need it. I’ll put it in the shoebox at the back of the bedroom cupboard. You know the one? Good. I figured it’s better to have one than not.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed with that. If I ever needed one here, it would be impossible to grab in time, most likely. That he

was willing to help me like this...that meant more to me than the gun itself.

“Thank you.”

He grunted. “You’d better never need it.”

I was back to wanting to finish that dive in the tunnel, wasn’t I? What else? What would this Jacob do if he thought he was right? “Would the fraternity do anything to the doctor if they suspected murder was going on? Or if Jacob convinced them it was?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

He hadn’t considered that outcome? That was the difference between the doctor and Cassius—the doctor loved philosophy and figuring out the whys and wherefores and the hows. And that was why I couldn’t see him as some villain who sacrificed girls for Satan. He’d thought about the world too much. He’d probably give Satan the finger. And Cassius?

I began to run my hand down the outside of his ass-holding hand from shoulder to elbow...

“What would you do if you were immortal?” I asked him, stopping my hand.

“Like not-able-to-be-killed immortal, or killable but immortal if you avoided bullets and car crashes?”

I took it back; he did think things through. “The latter?”

“I’d fuck a lot of girls.” He grinned at my expression and slipped his hand down between my legs, where he found my slickness. He pushed several fingertips inside me, pulling me higher, while locking his gaze to mine.

I huffed out a breath, did a small, circular wiggle. “Heyyy. Serious here.”

“Serious. I’d kill off all the a’holes I could find. World peace. Yeah, I’d do the good things.”

“Oh?” I wasn’t sure it would be that simple, but we were only fantasizing after all...and those fingers of his were

dipping in and out, and now Cassius was ducking his head to kiss my shoulder blade.

He kissed a path upward to reach then bite the join of my neck and shoulder, and whisper soft nothing words before he groaned. “Fuck, I need to be inside you.”

I hummed appreciation, my breathing deepening, my body saying *yes, please*.

“Forget it all for a while. I’m going to fuck you up here, and you’re going to be my good girl. You’re going to open up here for me and let me in.” And all the while he said that he was circling inside my pussy entrance, crooning those dirty words. My throat seized up. “First, though, you’ll open that hot mouth for me, little Charity.”

He let me go and pushed me to my knees.

I went down voluntarily, onto the shuffling leaves and grit, kneeling with my hands on my thighs. I looked up, waiting patiently with my mouth open as requested and my tongue wetting my lips. He undid his pants and pulled out his erection.

I closed my eyes as he pushed the head against my lips and surged inward. His hands were on my head, and he knew what turned me on, because he screwed those fingers into my hair until I squeaked and shuddered.

“There’s my girl. Take it deep for me.”

After five, six thrusts, he halted with a “Fuck. God.” Then a breathy swallow, before he pulled out. “Stand against the stone. I want to see your face while I fuck you this time.”

With my mouth still remembering the soft-hard slide of cock stretching it, I leaned against the stone while he lifted my short dress. I was so ready, I knew my slit would be slippery and easily penetrated, but he pulled the dress even higher, paused with the fabric drawn half-across my throat, to handle my breasts then my pebbled nipples.

“I can’t just fuck you normal, can I now.” His smile was hard with desire, and he gathered the dress to knot it taut beneath my armpits, so it stayed above my breasts. Hand in a

V against my throat, he kept my head to the stone and anchored to the high decoration while his knee worked in and forced apart my legs. “We both know you want something more than normal fucking, don’t we.”

I shuddered again, on tiptoes, my legs wide.

“Say yes, Charity, my little dripping slut, before I fuck you. Say yes, I want this. I want to be made to take it, hurt a little, to be made to spread your legs for cock.”

God, I did, didn’t I.

“Fucking eloquent, tonight,” I rasped.

“*Ohhh*, Charity girl.” He slapped one breast then the other, and the sting made me gasp. “Say yes. We both know you like being a fucktoy.” Then as if to punctuate his speech, he put a hand between my legs and not so subtly shoved a bunch of fingers inside me, and out, and in, and stayed in. A second later he shoved harder and lifted me off the ground, and his hand tightened on my throat. My breasts felt ready to pop with the cloth tied above.

Shaken, mouth wide, I fumbled out a “Yes.”

“Good but slow.”

He let me down, and I partly crumpled, legs folding until I recovered and stood against the stone. I watched him undo his belt and whip it from the loops, and I dared to wonder if he meant to thrash my ass with it.

“Turn around.”

Oh, yes. I turned, sure he would make me bend over to bare my ass. Instead, the belt was wrapped about my neck, and he shook me.

“Open your mouth.”

When I opened, he slipped the belt between my teeth, cinched it in, and knotted it at the back. Then he pulled me around. I had to bend low, almost to his thigh, because his hand was down there. He towed me, tottering and wondering where I was going, to a waist-high part of the parapet and bent me against it, stomach down.

Gargling at the belt in my mouth, I attempted to turn and put my hands to it.

“Touch that belt,” he threatened, “and you will be fucked downstairs in front of the staff, night and day, unless doc says stop.”

I wavered then lowered my hands, let him bend me over the stone. I clasped my arms over it a little afraid because the ground was down there, just beyond the curve of stone. Using the belt, he steered my head, controlled me.

He nudged my legs apart again, stepped away. I thought he stared at me, until I heard a click-whirr and saw the flash of a phone taking a photo.

I raised my head a smidgen. “Cassius—” Saying that made me spit around the belt.

“*Shhh*. You’re mine. *This* is mine now.” The belt was seized for a moment, shaken. His finger brushed down my pussy, separating my lips, before slowly sinking into me and revolving. I felt myself clench onto him. “I needed a memento of you, and your cunt, for when I’m away.”

He drew his finger higher and reached my ass. “Such a pretty cunt. And so sloppy wet. You were too slow in answering.”

His thumb screwed into my asshole. He tugged on the belt, just a little, then I heard him move in closer. His voice was just behind and above.

“So, I’m not letting you come. Come and I will use the belt until you scream, until your ass and back are red, red, red.”

That. Sounded. Brilliant. My thoughts were syrup, my eyelids fluttered, as his cock nudged at me, worked at me, poked, then withdrew. The tease was agonizing. “Fuck,” I croaked. He found my pussy entrance again and began to push, while his thumb worked in and out.

He penetrated me ever so slowly until I was whining, panting, and arching my spine, then he speared all the way in, shoving me into the stone. “What did you say, Charity?”

“Thank you, sir,” I spluttered—wetting the belt even more. I felt tingling hot, ready to melt into the stone. That cock that joined us was occupying my cunt and my head.

He squashed his body against mine. “You may have saved your ass then.”

I wished I hadn’t. I was imagining what he could’ve done with that belt. How I loved just being taken, being made to let him fuck me, being tied up or tied down. And sometimes I loved being made to hurt.

He rammed in again, and I screeched as I was pushed up the stone an inch—naked skin versus rock. Luckily, it was smooth.

“Tell me if that’s scraping you badly.” He paused, and I could hear the amusement in his next words. “Safeword if your tits are getting scratched past bearing.”

I shut my eyes. He was in so deep, and my cunt felt awesomely full. “No.” I gasped in a few breaths, clinging to the stone for dear life. If he fucked me hard enough, I could become one with the stone. *I wish.*

He’d said *safeword*.

“Wait. No. No safeword. Thank you, sir,” I said it hastily, half oblivious, still in love with that fat girthy cock of his and the press and grind of his body onto mine.

I was squashed between a rock and a hard man, and it was glorious.

He laughed and began to fuck me thoroughly. *No coming*, ran through my head as he pistoned in and out. My body was his and being lusted after, being made to be his...fucking glorious.

When he came and filled me, he stayed inside breathing rough to my ear, before he withdrew. I slid to my knees then placed my hands on the concrete and stayed there, reveling in the dribble of come and the unexpected smack of his hand on my ass.

He undid the belt and took it away.

I heard him kneel. He took hold of both cheeks of my ass and delivered one large, prolonged bite that made me stiffen, and my breath was not mine to take. I simply could not inhale due to the pain from his teeth, not until he released me.

“Owie.” I reached back, to gingerly touch the spot and feel the dents in my butt.

“That says mine too.”

The smug bastard.

He helped me up. My clit and core ached so badly that the throb seemed to run through half my body. That need was on the verge of being painful. After he unknotted my dress and carefully adjusted it to fall down my body, I cuddled into his side for a while, a long heartwarming cuddle. He seemed happy to just be here with me too.

I leaned away from him and looked up. “I’m too messy to just walk downstairs.”

“My come?”

“Yes.” I scowled at his smirk. “What else would it be?”

He went to his knees before me and lifted the dress. “I could lick it off.”

I grabbed his short hair and tried to make him. The new moon reflected on his fairness and for a moment he reminded me of a chivalric knight on his knees before his maiden.

I figured a true knight should do oral on his maiden.

He resisted. “Uh-uh. I might make you come if I do that.” Grinning at my indignant noises, he stripped off his shirt, gave my thigh a kiss then began to wipe me down.

I shifted my feet apart and he brusquely wiped between my legs then down my thighs. It wasn’t what I needed, but I fantasized for a few seconds.

“There. Let’s go, princess.”

Hand in hand, fingers entwined, as if we were normal people, high on the wonder of new love, we headed toward the stairs.

“I’m...still leaking,” I whispered when we reached the glass door leading in.

“Doesn’t matter. Isn’t far to the room. Just let me hold your hand when you go down the metal stairs.”

“Why?” I asked, poised to place my foot on the first step.

“The come might make you slide off, if it drips on a step.” The glee in his voice almost...almost made me punch his arm.

I didn’t. I was too needy, and maybe if I was well behaved, I could hold him down and sit on his face in the bed. Not likely, but he might take pity on me. And then, maybe he’d spank me. Beforehand would be better. I could wish.

I think both of us had forgotten the whole danger, Satanic rites theory. Or we forgot until we entered the bedroom.

The doctor was seated in an armchair reading a book. He eyed us over the top of the book, like a father springing a couple of teenagers he’d caught sneaking in after curfew.

“Greetings, both of you. Charity, you’re to come with me to the library.”

I opened my mouth to suggest a shower first.

“The Inner Sanctum, now. Even if,” finally, he seemed to realize my state, “you’re covered in Cassius jizz.”

I huffed and was sure I could smell sex on myself—and of course, I could. “Yes, sir.”

As long as this was not me being sacrificed to Satan, I could hope for an orgasm. Of course, I’d never been close to anyone who wanted to do the Satan worshipping thing, so how would I tell?

He isn’t a Satan worshipper. He can’t be.

All the way up the stairs to the library then through the door and up more stairs, I was trying to think of reasons why he might be one. Or not.

In the diary there had been sections about strange religions and sacrifice.

When I stepped into the Inner Sanctum, alone with the doctor, my nipples were tight, and it was not due to arousal.

C *HARITY*

The doctor walked to the two aqua-colored armchairs, picked one up, and turned it to face the desk where I had left the laptop. He'd already removed that, and he gestured at the desk.

“Take off all your clothes, Charity. Stand there, please.”

Saying no was never on the cards, but I must have looked nervous as I fumbled for the hem of the dress. Standing before a dominant who simply wanted to punish you could be nerve-racking, but this was not that. Those diary mentions of sacrifices had been trampling circles through my head ever since I recalled them. The doctor was an opaque sort of man, and I couldn't read him.

Why did he have this island, and where did he get the money for everything, were my newer questions to place on top of my question pile.

I stood there, naked, with the table at my back, and hugged myself across my breasts, trying not to shiver.

The doctor sat on the wide, padded arm of the chair. His lips twitched and I thought...just thought, I detected a modicum of kindness.

“This is nothing horrendous, Charity. I can see you're worried.”

“Oh.”

“Is it punishment?” He mildly rocked his head. “Yes. But that’s my main pleasure in this. I love punishing you, so even if Inigo had not told me you’re doing some dangerous-looking dives where I told you not to...” He leaned over the side of the armchair, and when he righted himself, he held a cane. “I would still be tempted to cane you. The bruises have faded. You need more.”

Oh my, that lethal stare. A familiar chill fluttered through me, possibly making my nipples even harder. I swallowed. The arousal from earlier was stirring.

A memory returned to me of that first day, of him promising not to cut out my heart and eat it. Fuck me, though, that had been such a specific promise. No. Nope, not doing this now. Forget that. I swept away my suspicions.

Still, I kinda wanted to say: *so I’m not being sacrificed to a horned god tonight?* Being that flippant might be a very bad move.

I pinched my lips together. “Okay. Thank you. I think.”

He chuckled. “There is more, of course. I’ve been deficient since I returned. Important issues, that are possibly life-threatening ones, were occupying me.”

“Oh.” I had to say something, dying as I was for more info. “Do I get to know what those are?”

He shook his head, swished the cane, idly. “No. Not...yet. Before we progress to more interesting things, like making your ass black and blue, have you figured out anything more about the document?”

“Black and blue?” I shifted on my feet. I liked red. I loved being given a red ass, but not black and blue. I squeezed myself tighter. “Blue isn’t my favorite color. Can we negotiate for red?”

“No.” His smile turned cold, menacing. Had I awoken the sadist in him? I hoped it was just that.

Those knives and swords on the walls came into focus. He could easily get one of those.

“The document?” I scurried to figure that out. *The Latin one, doofus.* “Not exactly.” A frown crinkled my brow. “I added one more synonym to that unsullied list. I’m not sure I’ve showed you that. It means chaste and unblemished and so on, but you wanted a modern slant. What about unsullied meaning unchanged by modern surgery? No breast implants, no pacemakers?”

His eyebrows tilted inwards. He nodded. “I should’ve thought of that. Good. That will do. Turn around and lie on the desk. Make sure your breasts hang over the other side. I need those.”

My research had been dismissed so casually. I was still torn between it being a make-work situation and him being a closet Satanist.

My gulp and slow inhalation were the only further delays he’d likely allow. I turned and lay on my stomach on the bare timber. The blotter had been removed, the stray pens, and the books. I had to wriggle across to have my breasts clear on the other side, and then I was balancing precariously, and my feet couldn’t touch the floor, though I did try.

“Tsk. Poor girl.”

The cane was placed across my ass and pressed down. He tapped me several times, slowly covering all the territory, from top to bottom. The cane was lifted away.

I froze, and closed my eyes, waiting for the strike. My damnable clit was getting all excited, though. When he rolled the cane over the crease where my legs met my butt, I squeezed my thighs together.

“You are a perfect blank canvas, and you squeal so nicely too. I remember all those noises you made the last time we fucked you. This ass is begging to be marked.” He lifted the cane again and smoothed his palm over my skin. I couldn’t help what I did next. I parted my thighs, craving him inside me or the strike of the cane and unsure which would be best.

“Look at this.” He dipped his finger between my lower lips. You’re wet already.”

“It’s from Cassius,” I dared to say, squirming a little on the desk and willing that finger to enter me.

“You’re such a liar. I can see how much you want this.” He slapped my ass and squeezed it, then walked around the desk without touching me intimately again.

From the corner of my eye, I watched him draw nearer, fascinated by what lay in his open palm. Two weights sat in the middle, and they were attached to two gold clamps. The little blunt teeth on those brought back memories.

“For you.” He kneeled, pinched my left nipple, then swiftly clamped it. The pain was sharp and sudden enough to make me gasp. I slammed shut my eyes then tried to rise, but he’d grabbed my other nipple. With a yelp, I subsided, eyeing him with malice. A second later, he’d clamped that nipple also.

Two clamps.

“*Ffffff...*” The pain was harsh but beneath it, a long way beneath, a thread of pleasure stirred. I rocked in place, getting accustomed to this. Anyone normal would run, surely, and I wasn’t running.

I opened my eyes and was captivated by the swinging of the tiny weights attached to the clamps.

“Do I need to tie you down to get you to be still, Charity?”

I shook my head.

“Good.”

He walked behind me, and at first only spanked me lightly, giving me a warm glow. A few times, he interrupted the spanking to finger me. The stimulation made my nipples ache even more, and my mouth was permanently open, but then he picked up the cane.

I was ready, warmed up, and hoping he would hold back.

The doctor gave me ten before he stopped and complimented my ass. I let out a shuddery breath. I had a bite bruise there already—which would be Cassius, and the lines

were, apparently, red, and gorgeous. They fucking hurt was what I knew.

Ten more strikes whipped down, marking me. I yelped or swore, took my breaths in gasps. Yet...I also whimpered when he fingered me in between the cruelty. I whimpered and cursed him, and then...then he laid the cane across the middle of my back and left it balancing. I heard the rustle of paper, felt the obvious coolness at the top of my butt.

A swab.

I knew what that meant. I clenched my teeth. A needle was thrust through my skin. I exhaled harshly and jiggled my feet for a second. If I kicked him, serve him right. Why was I sitting still for this, again?

The doctor kissed my ass and stepped away. “Beautiful.”

And there it was—part of why I loved his sadism. It wasn’t completely explainable but that was surely half of it.

“A warning. If you keep swearing at me, I’ll be even more tempted to mark you. The next needle goes in your pussy.”

I sighed and subsided onto the table, because the cacophony of hurts and the residual memory of his fingers inside me, those were occupying my brain, swarming in and layering the pain with that exquisite feeling that was more than pain. *Endorphins. Fuck yeah.*

“I won’t swear,” I murmured. And here was the other half of my love of kink. There might have been three halves...

“Michelangelo could not do better. You’re wetter than when I started on you, Charity.”

“Mmm?” I roused from the buzz of pain and pleasure. I heard him move against the table then felt the jar. I turned my head to the side, resting my face on the table. He was lying beside me. Starting at my nape, he ran his hand slowly down my back, caressing me, fingertips circling the needle embedded just above my butt. I jiggled my legs, smiling, as he ended the path with his palm on my ass.

“Hi,” I said softly, spaced out but happy.

“You’re okay?”

I closed then opened my eyes. With my ear to the table this was so like being underwater. “Yes.” I had thickness in my throat. “Very yes.” I smiled.

“I see you like this, and you’re perfect, more perfect than I had hoped. It’s been a long, long time since I found a lost girl I really wanted to keep.”

“Me?” I popped up my eyebrow.

“You.” His mouth moved as if he was about to smile. “Those sounds you make, even the way you wince, and still you get wet and aroused. I cannot ask for more.”

Entranced by his words, spaced out on the heated, pulsebeat of my blood and how it resonated with my core, I ran my tongue out and left it between my lips. A thought slinked by and reminded me that being a good fuck, or a good masochist was not enough.

He raised his hand to brush away hair from my temple. “Do you like Cassius?”

I nodded, and my hair rustled on the desk.

“I do too. He’s problematic and I’m not sure if it’s solvable.”

What an odd thing to say. I roused from my fog.

“Not solvable? What does that mean?”

“Forget I said it. This is my worry, not yours.”

I panicked for a second. If there was a problem, it would be to do with Jacob. If the doctor asked me if I knew anything about that, whatever I said might mess things up for Cassius.

“Please. I really do like him, a lot.”

“Okay.” He nodded to himself. “Noted.”

“Why don’t you smile more?”

“I’m just tired. I’ve seen a lot in my life. You and Cassius have given me a fresh view on life.”

That...had to be good?

“You don’t want me to dive where I was?”

“Not precisely true. You’re an adult, so I expect you to have ideas about what you want to do. You want to explore, and I’m okay with that.”

“Huh?” I frowned. He’d lost me there. “It is okay to swim alone?”

His rules were so changeable I was getting whiplash.

“I’d prefer you didn’t drown. Okay? I have a gift for you, tomorrow. We’ll go to the beach, and you can try it. It’s a secret, for now.”

“So...if you tell me not to do something, I can ignore you?”

Now, he smiled. “At your peril, but you can.”

I eyerolled. “You need to come with an instruction manual, sir.” If I was caught, I was sure he’d use that cane on my butt, or worse.

He liked me, and he liked Cassius but, so many butts. I was sure he was not going to kill me. The rest of the mysteries of this doctor and his island? The answers to those were as yet unclear.

I cleared my throat. “Can I please be allowed to come?”

He sat up on his elbow and studied me, and I could see he was admiring my curves, but especially my ass and where my breasts were exposed. That pleased me. I levered myself off the table to lean on my forearms, which sent the weights swinging again. I winced but was fascinated by what they did to my breasts. They were the best of decorations.

“What did Cassius say?”

“He said no.” The fucker.

The doctor outright laughed and turned over onto his back. He ran his hands through the sides of his hair, through the shaved stubble, then tugged at the longer parts. “He left you all needy?”

Worried at where this was going, I nodded. “Yes.”

“If he said no, it’s no from me. Come over to the chair. I have to get those clamps off you anyway.”

I must have looked peeved, but he rolled off the table, pulled out the needle, then offered his hand. I took it and carefully wriggled backward.

I walked with him to the armchair and sat on his lap, all naked, and feeling cute and sexy. I curled up, my butt between his spread legs and with my bent legs partway across the arm of the chair while he unclamped my nipples. My hiss and strangling massage of his forearm had him chuckling.

We lay together on the chair, not speaking while he patted my hair, and I found myself breathing slower and at peace. The doctor and Cassius were very different men. I tended to think of Cassius as mad puppy dog, an attack puppy, perhaps. The doctor was still an enigma in so many ways.

My courage prodded me and made me dare to ask a question.

“Sir.”

“Mmm?”

“I like you as much as I do Cassius, but I think, maybe, it could become more than like, if I knew more about you.”

His hand paused. “Why?”

“Why?” I snuggled in, making myself comfortable, as well as giving myself time. “Because love...” fuck, I’d said that word, “arrives when you know someone well. Like you need to know someone to trust them too.”

He made a funny grunt and continued patting me and untangling my hair where it spilled across his arm.

“You said you’d experienced a lot in life? How old are you?” He often made himself sound old. Yet, I judged him to be early to late forties, which was old but not ancient.

“Too old. Old enough to have amassed wealth and a great deal of tragedy.”

“You’re brushing off my question,” I muttered into his arm, where my nose was currently resting. His other hand splayed over my butt, and his grip tightened momentarily.

“Brat.”

“You’re stalling.”

“I fear, always, that I may not be a man you want to know more of.”

“And I fear you more because I don’t understand.”

He sighed. “Give me time, please.”

I squirmed in place. “Okay, but I am insatiably curious.”

“And that’s part of why I like you.”

Then he slid a finger along my slit and slowly inserted it.

“Are you...” I swallowed as he began to pump that finger in and out. “Trying to distract me?”

“Am I? To come or not to come, that is the question.”

I closed my eyes. “To come, please?”

“Good choice.” He leaned over the side, with difficulty, and when he straightened, he pressed something large between my thighs, forcing it the last distance to squash it onto my clit, then he switched it on. It rattled and began to consume my clit as he upped the power. Flung halfway to heaven, nearly instantly, throat closing in, I gasped, and my eyes snapped open to see what it was.

Dragon Dick.

Shamefully, I forgot every other question in my head and came within half a minute, jerking against the device with a death grip on his wrist, and loving how he’d clamped his hand over my mouth and face, holding my head to his chest and smothering me so I could strain and writhe against him.

The aftermath was me being sweaty and the doctor sounding amused and petting me again while I recovered my breath. He kissed my head.

“No more questions for now.”

Sated, I nodded, and remained there in his lap, happy, if less knowledgeable than I wished to be.

My sureness that he would not truly hurt me would have to be enough...today.

I did wonder what that secret gift could be.

C *HARITY*

When I woke, I must have stirred whoever was behind me, for he shifted on the bed and laid his arm across me then moved in closer to spoon. There is magic in the weight of a man's arm. I closed my eyes to feel how it anchored me to the mattress and the quiet comfort that sifted in.

Since the man's back before me belonged to Cassius, it had to be the doctor who'd molded himself to me from behind. His presence there was warm and quietly thrilling—promising sex without the need for it to happen. I could lie beneath his arm for hours. At night, when all was dark, and I closed my eyes, the scent of the two men would always remind me they were here. If our bodies were not entangled, I could stretch out my arm and find them. On the nights they were absent, I felt alone. I'd begun to wonder how I would survive if they were to vanish from my life.

The doctor settled even closer.

I sighed, contented.

Cassius turned over slowly, blinked open his eyes, and smiled. I reached out to caress his jaw and found his stubble rough under my fingers. He took my hand and kissed it. "Morning."

I smiled sleepily. The doctor's fingers moved where they lay on the sheet, before my face, and I sneaked my hand

beneath them, thinking to gently wake him. I loved the feel of a man's thick fingers in mine also.

He stirred and grasped mine, interweaving our fingers. "Good morning, sweetness."

I squirmed my rear into him, playful but not insistent. *Sweetness*, after what he'd done to my ass and nipples, last night?

His kiss to my nape was followed by him rasping out, "No sex this morning. Everyone gets blue balls and pussies. We'll go the beach for a few hours then return to pack."

"Where are we off to? Assuming I'm coming?" Cassius asked.

"The next CNC Fraternity party. I have people to talk to. You can show Charity around, and perhaps her friend Emme will be there." At my gasp, he added, "There are no guarantees she will be attending."

I was unsure what showing me around meant but wasn't going to ask. It could be quite scary. I remembered what Emme said happened at those. The doctor seemed inclined to make this low key, however.

"You'll be wearing a mask, Charity. Your presence is not going to be advertised. If Emme is there, I will try to arrange for you to see her."

"Thank you." That was better than I had ever imagined might happen. "So I'm not condemned to be confined to this island, forever?"

He only squeezed my hand. Back to being inscrutable? I guess I could wait.

Letting the sheet fall from him, Cassius sat up in bed, revealing his upper torso. I let my eyes slip over his body and decided I could play my tongue over those muscles for days.

"No sex?" He eyed my breasts where they showed under the doctor's arm. "What about at the party?"

Again the doctor flopped his hand, in a noncommittal way. "We'll see."

No sex. I could tell Cassius was rather miffed by that. It made me think some more about the man and how he really believed the doctor might be a Satan worshipper, yet he'd batted zero eyelids when I was ordered away last night. The dull ache in my backside was a potent advertisement for the doctor's therapy. He might have been about to tie me to a table and dance around while cutting out my heart.

He might have, but my deductions and my emotional radar had both delivered a big nope to that hypothesis.

Cassius, though? Attack puppy indeed. He was a lovely dominant man whose dick I'd suck for free, especially when he shoved it into me with his belt about my face...but I could not rely on him for any deep thinking about what might lie ahead.

Just because I was curious, and to tease the man, I wriggled from the doctor's hold, then slithered down to the end of the bed. I went to the tall standing mirror. Like many pieces of furniture here, it was ornate, with a silvered, rococo-themed frame. The feet at the bottom were grotesque claws resting on balls. I turned around so my rear was to the mirror and looked over my shoulder as I lifted the cheeks of my bottom—as if to better see the marks from the cane.

Truthfully, I was keen to see them. The leftover bruises and marks were a thrill in and of themselves. The men were watching me, of course—the doctor up on his elbow while Cassius sat firmly upright, with his dick doing the same.

I switched around to present my ass to them. “I love the marks, sir. Like them, Cassius?” I swayed and pulled at my ass again, showing off every nook and cranny.

His groan was perfection.

The doctor drawled, “I think she might be teasing you.” He rolled to the edge of the bed and scrubbed his face. By then I was sauntering to the chest of drawers to find clothes. My smirk was suppressed to a mild smile, I thought.

“She is. So I can fuck her into the mattress then?”

“You’re on probation, Charity. One more prick tease and I’ll let him string you up at the beach and do something nasty to you.” He stepped over, floorboards creaking from his weight, and made me bend at the waist, then he gave my ass a smack. “Nice, definitely. The bite shows, too, Cassius. Be content with that, for now.”

We disembarked from the car at Rose Bay, unpacked the food and gear, plus the other things. The doctor perched on a sun lounge with his mysterious gift box in hand. It was quite large and had me puzzled as to what it could be.

“Here. Yours, to use wisely.” He handed it up to me. I had to take it in both hands, due to the weight.

As I wandered to the adjacent lounge, I picked at the tape on the red wrapping. I sat and set it beside me, then removed all the paper, revealing...

“A drone?” I pulled things out, figured out what they were, and wondered exactly how much the doctor had deduced. I piled everything beside the box. The foam padding contained manuals, a buoy, a lithium battery, a huge amount of cable...

“Here. I’ll put it together and show you how, then I can swim in peace. This is in lieu of you diving and half-drowning yourself.” He eyed me skeptically. “Okay?”

“Okay. I’m still swimming though.”

“Swimming is fine.”

Messing around in the sea with the two of them was too attractive to be ignored completely, and as I expected, Cassius sexually molested me when we were close. Including, when I kissed him, or pinched his butt, or swam too near his legs. All of this was fun, and I could barely recall why the fuck I wanted to see the end of that tunnel.

Still, I had to do it. What I’d said to the doctor was correct—my curiosity was insatiable.

Having practiced under the doctor's instruction and by myself, in the more open and less rock-strewn area of the little bay, I swam the buoy closer to the rocks and had Cassius take it right over the middle, where the tunnel entrance just below and a little inshore. He didn't know that, neither did the doctor.

I felt like a schoolgirl sneaking a drag of marijuana with the boyfriend while my parents were in the backyard watering the garden, all unawares.

The buoy transmitted the WIFI signal back and forth to the console in my hand, along with the video feed from the drone. A small screen in fairly good resolution showed me what the drone saw ahead. It was dicey sending it into the tunnel as the tether could get stuck. Luckily, the drone was far smaller than me in width, as well as length. If it did get wedged or hooked on something c'est la vie, as the French might say. The doctor would find out why I was doing this, if that happened. I was ready with my confession. My ass might suffer, but I was ready.

I tested out their interest by swimming out to look at the buoy or the surfaced drone a few times, then waiting until they were dozing in the shade beneath the trees after a late brunch.

Finally, I edged the drone deeper, and entered the tunnel. The screen was small, but the battery life was great. Steering it was frustrating even though the signal came back in real time. I'd already seen the big differences with using a drone underwater and not my own fragile human body that needed air.

Not being able to drown was the first difference, naturally.

Being able to take it slowly was the game changer, though—I could go as slowly as I wanted to, make it study obstacles before I cruised it past them. The only real anxiety was in my wish not to get caught doing this because the doctor would wonder why I needed to go there and see the end.

Why did I? Because a cavity beneath a tower destroyed by the Nazis during WW2 was fascinating. Yeah, I insisted to myself, that was it, that was all of it.

It wasn't, though, my dark subconscious whispered. It really wasn't.

The drone had lovely headlights and once past the three-yard mark, those shone on what seemed the dead end of the tunnel only another yard ahead. Using the thumb toggle, I maneuvered past a thick stone block or outcrop and bumped into wall. When I turned it, the headlights only revealed more stone on either side. The space was small but the drone fitted.

Taking a deep breath, I tilted it to cruise it upward, as well as tilting the camera with the other toggle. Above was the surface of the water, above was what looked to be a fucking floor tile, eroded or corrupted by decades of immersion, but it was too thin and too precisely rectangular not to be building material of some sort.

I swallowed, placed one hand over my galloping heart. There must be a room above, mustn't there? I drove the drone to the surface, and it broke though, bobbing about within a chamber. The camera caught a star of brightness that flashed and swung as the drone bobbed.

“The tower hole.” Again I had to draw a breath before I made the drone swing to the left then to the right. *Steady as she goes. Slow and steady.*

A wall of brick showed, then a curved surface with exact edges, partly cracked, destroyed on the other side, and in the middle hung a fucking portrait. Without humans, without light on it, this evidence of humanity, of the original occupants, had hung, silently, in what appeared to be an alcove near the corner of a room.

I felt...honored to have found this, as if I had rescued the couple in the portrait from oblivion.

Perhaps I had.

The focus on the lens was poor, and the lights were creating reflections, but I stared at the little screen. There was writing below, on a little plaque. The glass over the portrait was what had saved it from the destruction wrought by

moisture, and a bomb had not fractured that glass. I was meant to see this.

Patricia Romanus.

I smiled as I read that.

...with her dear husband, Dr. H. Taylor.

Wait. The surname would be Romanus, wouldn't it, since this had been the family island, inherited through his grandfather? Except their daughter could have inherited, married, and changed her surname. Then why was Patricia a Romanus?

I focused higher, on the couple. The portrait must be of their wedding, considering her veil, though he was in rolled-up shirt sleeves and less formal. It was a photo, a black-and-white photo and not a painting, which made its survival seem even more fated.

The grandfather had been a doctor too.

I stared and brought the screen closer. The grandfather looked a bit like the man snoring a few feet away from me on a towel. I stared at the doctor—his arms were high and keeping a book in place on his chest. There was some sort of mark on the arm of his grandfather.

And my doctor's tattoo looked to be in precisely the same place.

I shook my head. No.

I'd read a few history articles recently and knew *SPQR* was the symbol of the Roman Republic. Seeing the doctor was obsessed with history, it wasn't that strange. Now it was. Or might be.

For several minutes, I patiently tried to get the drone to focus better, so as to decipher what was in the photo. It was not going to happen. The drone could not crawl from the water. That was it then.

I could leave this alone. Finished.

I pursed my lips and looked at the sleeping men.

I should leave this. With painstaking care, I made the drone backtrack and was enormously relieved when it swam free of the tunnel then reached the surface. It would float there until I retrieved it. I placed the controller on my towel, rose, stretched casually, and headed off toward the buoy.

They hadn't stirred. They wouldn't think I was doing anything unusual anyway.

Goggles in hand and with my reef shoes on, I went to the water's edge.

I swam out, partway to the buoy, and even then, neither of the men had raised their head or moved. Treading water, I calmed myself, then dove down and kicked toward the tunnel that I now knew was of a length I could swim through, with an air pocket I could use. This was not foolhardy, just me satisfying an inexorable itch. *I had to know.*

A section of the tether of the drone looped partly into the depths, being slowly pushed by the surging currents, and I took care to avoid it. I reached the entry and kept going, methodically pulling myself through. Without the panic, with the reflections of that star of sunlight flickering through the tunnel, I could see some of the walls and almost enjoy this. I kept going past where my lungs were yelling, *fuck this, go back.* I reached the end wall, and leaped upward, kicking off the stone and likely bruising my foot. I shot from the water, dragged in a few huge lungfuls, and when I was recovered, I realized I barely had enough light to find that portrait.

The sunlight coming down through the hole was not enough.

Wait, my eyes might adjust if I waited a minute? I pulled my goggles onto my forehead and tried sitting in this claustrophobic hole beneath tons of earth for a few more minutes, until I thought my eyes had had time to adjust.

So dark in this hollow. I stared around me, trying not to imagine strange things waiting for me to move. There was nothing else in here that was alive, but if I couldn't find the way out...

I shut that down. I propped my hands on the stone and took slow breaths. I could and would get out of here once I was done.

By feel and by careful clambering about in this small pocket of a collapsed room, I found the alcove, and the framed portrait. This must have been the lowest room of the tower, and if so, it was odd that such a memorable photo would be kept here. It was as if they did not want it seen. I felt all the way around the frame, knowing by then that I had to unhook it to see more.

The hook was rusted and broke within seconds, and the glass cracked and shattered. Somehow, I avoided being cut as the pieces tumbled out, splashing into the water. Those pieces would be a hazard on exit. It could not be helped. I had the framed photo in my hands, and then the photo came loose from the frame and was in my fingers. I took it over to where the light from above illuminated a bright patch of water.

I held it there, staring at his arm in the image, feeling the paper disintegrate in my fingers and slough away. Within seconds, I held only a smudge of flaking paper, and the water below was full of the fallen fragments.

Glass and paper. One would cut me, the other would make it harder to see.

Yet I had seen what I had seen, and I looked skyward, with my hair dripping musically into this trapped part of the sea. I'd risked my life to see a tattoo on a man's arm, and I was now sure that the tattoo was the same one that marked my doctor's arm.

Had I *really* seen that? Memory is a funny thing, and it was difficult not to doubt what my brain had recorded.

I thought this had proved something weird, but was I right? If he was his own grandfather, he was the same man. That made the doctor at least, judging by the looks of the man in the photo, about...one hundred and twenty years old?

That would be extraordinary but not completely impossible.

Except for one thing—he had not aged.

What also bothered me, now that I had a new perspective on the man, was why the *SPQR* was there at all.

I should search the room before I returned. The glass was probably, mostly, in the water. I searched with great care, looking for any remnant of the people who had once upon a time used this room. A realization arrived as I searched—the photo had been taken in a room with black-and-white tiles and I thought I'd seen that room before.

At the base of the alcove, something palm-sized squished beneath my hand. It was made of metal, but fragile. My fingernails raked across small metal links and lumps that seemed attached to whatever was left of the stonework of the alcove. I tugged. It broke apart. Holding the remnants up to the patch of light revealed a mesh of green metal. This might be corroded silver.

So, I'd destroyed two historically significant objects?

Historians would shoot me. I turned the piece in the light and was not shocked to find an engraved gold label beside a clasp that might have belonged to a purse. *To Patricia with Lo*

The rest was gone. It had been *love*, of course, that final word.

This could be a memento, or just a purse she'd left and had meant to fetch on that day. I would never know. I left the remnant in the alcove then studied the water. It was still clouded with paper, and dirt was splattering onto the surface. I raised my head to follow the path of the dirt through the air. It trickled from the hole above, the hole that led to the surface.

How stable could this cavity be when it sat below where a huge tower had once reigned over the cliffscape? The weight of earth and rock above this space must be enormous. It had been here decades, but it would eventually collapse. That was gravity for you.

My anxiety returned with the smallest twinge in my chest and stomach.

“Time to go.”

I could make it out. I’d made it all the way in. I was in no hurry, was I? I felt my way downward, did two dives to check the orientation of my exit, then shook myself into calmness, again.

“I can do this.”

I dived.

The way out was darker, scarier, for the reflections were blocked by my own body, and I almost did not get to the exit in a state where I could even attempt to reach the surface. I did, though, a little addled, a lot terrified, with my lungs burning for oxygen. I kicked upward and was closer than ever to blacking out when I burst through into the air.

The buoy was yards away, bobbing happily. I sucked in a few more much-needed, shaky breaths, coughed out some water, and turned toward the beach. Both the men were standing there, gazing at me. They were looking at me judgmentally, I thought, though I was too far away to really see expressions.

Fuck.

Even if he was older than Tolkien, The Beatles, and the scrappy garden gnome my mother had once owned, the doctor had a hard hand and some ingenious punishments. Did I believe what I thought I had seen? I had no proof, only my memory. I stared at my hands that had held those objects, the photo, and the purse, and I remembered the shape and weight of them, the look of them, then I began to swim to shore.

The dimly lit cave had reeked of a forgotten time and, in this daylight world, what I’d seen below the sea had become quite impossible. My intuition and that silver purse told me I should visit the Inner Sanctum again.

C HARITY

Some memories fade with time and become even more ridiculous. This one hung around, especially when I waded up the beach to face Cassius and the doctor. The sand sank under my feet, and my wet hair clung to my back, as per normal, but I kept thinking about how to tell if I was right. Did he look like the man in the now-vanished photo? Yes, but...

How could I tell? Nothing in life could have prepared me for this, and doubts and questions assailed me with every step. He must know. He must have somehow realized what I was looking for and where I went, and how can he be the same man?

He couldn't be, of course.

But what if he was.

So many *ifs* swirled about. I was drowning in my own wretched memories and thoughts, and breathless from the scariness of the consequences of everything I had done.

But was it real?

Yes, I insisted to myself, it was.

Yet, the quality of the old black-and-white photo had been abysmal, and so I could never be sure, even if I had it before me to compare every crease on his face.

“I was just out there to check the drone,” I said, stopping in front of the doctor, perhaps too cheerfully. He towered over me. Having to angle my neck to meet his eyes was not easing my guilty conscience.

The doctor raised the drone controls. “No, you weren’t. I may have only seen the end of your dive, but I saw enough.”

He’d driven the drone underwater to check on me?

Now that I thought on it, the drone’s position had changed. I had been preoccupied when I surfaced.

Cassius shrugged, a half-smile on his face.

“I’m fine. I went a little deeper than you might’ve expected, but I’m fine.”

The hard stare I received from the doctor was the worst I’d suffered for days. I stopped talking. Something was coming, a punishment. Had the events under the water changed me that much? I wasn’t as concerned as should be. I wasn’t as scared.

I straightened my stance, remembering...

...a faded photo with a tiny scruffy image of a four-letter tattoo.

“We’re leaving now. The chopper landed early. There’s a helicopter flight then a long plane flight to get to where we have to be by evening. By the time I reach the site of the party, I’ll have decided on what to do with you, Miss Charity.”

Mouth open, I watched him turn from me and head toward the beach hut—no doubt to pack. I looked to Cassius, and he waved me onward. My attack puppy was of no use.

“Bugger.” I followed after the doctor. Things to do, places to go...possibly with a butt plug stuck up my ass, or worse, a dragon dick. I just knew this was going to be a noteworthy night.

While everyone was packing, arranging things, and shouting for staff, I dug my phone from where I'd hidden it in the closet, and I holed up in the bathroom, leaning against the wall. My memory jarred. The gun. When I could, I should move the gun somewhere else.

I turned on the phone and swiped to the photos app.

I needed to visit the sanctum, but I had no time for that today. Deprived of actually prowling the place and staring at the doctor's collection of swords and so on, I could examine my photos from there. My curiosity antennae were still twitching.

I scanned quickly, looking for items like a purse, that might be personal. The emerald pendant showed me nothing until I went *duh* and focused in on the label below. "A match. Shit. I am so stupid."

The name attributed to the pendant was on the list of women. Had this been staring at me all this time? The date on the label was eighteen forty-five. Death? Birth? Something else?

I checked four other items that seemed likely to be hits, and the labels on all of them matched to the women. I had links to that list that went back to the fifteenth century. I settled against the bathroom wall, to think.

Maybe he was an immortal serial killer, and fricking dedicated with his souvenirs?

Maybe he was a Time Lord with amnesia. I snorted at that.

I rubbed my forehead, whispering, "I'm getting way too carried away here."

Out of a need for some sort of thoroughness, I scrolled through the other objects. The labels seemed to mean nothing, until I reached the photo of the gallic helmet, an antique that went all the way back to the army of the Roman Republic. The helmet had been displayed beneath a glass box on a pedestal and could be viewed from all angles. It wasn't the paper label that caught my eye, it was the small words punched into the back of the helmet, just above where it would meet the neck.

They were roughly done, and I couldn't read all of it, but *HORATIVS TERTIVS* was stamped in the metal, at the top of a list of three roman names. Could this mean what I thought it did?

Probably not. I was definitely hallucinating.

The transfer from helicopter to plane had been similar to when I'd flown to the island—I was blinded by wraparound glasses and concealed under a hooded coat. Dressed in faded jeans and T-shirt, and cuffed by one hand to the seat, I found myself wearing a blindfold in the plane. I'd hoped to watch the coastline creep up on us so I could try to identify the country. Spain, France, Italy, or perhaps Greece? Those were the likeliest countries to be near the doctor's island. He still didn't trust me enough to let me see, but I'd thought something had changed.

Wouldn't I be paranoid about trusting people if I knew how to live and not age? I would.

If I brought up that subject, would I live another day?

I promise not to kill you and eat your heart.

Promises were said to be cheap.

I trusted him though, still, didn't I? Even if he didn't quite trust me.

At some stage, the engine sounds changed, or something else did quite subtly, because the cuff was released and Cassius helped me stand, before I was stripped of every shred of my clothes.

Standing naked in the aisle of a plane when you're blindfolded was a kink I was fairly sure I did not have. I shivered and tried to hug myself, but a dress or shirt was pulled over my head, my arms pointed in the right direction for the armholes, and the dress was tugged downward. I felt the tulle of the skirt and wondered if this was what it seemed to be. Someone fumbled between my legs and clipped together

the lower part of the attached bodysuit. I could tell the material there was gossamer thin and probably see-through.

I plucked at the neckline before being shuffled back to my seat and strapped in. The skirt flared up, due to the stiffness of the material.

“Is this a ballerina outfit?” I asked whoever was near me.

No one answered.

I stewed for a minute, feeling the angle of the plane alter as we descended. I tried again. “Cassius, are you there?”

Nothing.

“You are being horrible humans, and I hate you both.” I slumped into the seat, would’ve folded my arms if the cuff hadn’t been reapplied. “Wankers,” I muttered, hopefully inaudibly.

Someone, probably Cassius, sniggered.

So it was to be the silent treatment for the meantime? So be it. I could withstand that without blinking, so to speak.

There was a final transfer to a second helicopter then a short flight. It wasn’t until we landed, and a new leather collar was fastened around my neck, with leash then attached, that the blindfold was removed. Cassius held the other end, while the doctor was a few yards ahead.

With a tug on the leash, I was encouraged to follow. I wore no shoes, just this little ballerina costume. The panties part of them was a mere strap at the back and riding up something awful. Every few steps I had to resist plucking the thong part from between my ass cheeks. The glare of overhead lights showed me the color was probably classic white. The skirt was tulle and the bodice silk. It was pretty and supremely short, and I had to wonder what the doctor planned to do with me.

He was being terribly aloof, and even Cassius was silent.

“What’s to happen, tonight...here?” We were passing between low white walls that guarded this paved pathway that wound toward a wide, two-story mansion. The towers on either end gave the building the appearance of a modern

facsimile of a castle, rendered white and stark, with rows of square glass windows stalking the front. Limousines were driving up to the curved and tapering stairway leading to the front doorway, dropping off guests, then driving away.

Even from a distance, I could tell the guests were dressed in an array of clothes that veered between latex and leather gear, suits, sexually provocative and barely-there clothing, to roleplay costumes.

As we neared the circular driveway, the doctor, who wore a black, retro-styled suit and carried a gentlemen's cane, fished in his coat pocket. He held up one finger, and everyone halted. As he walked back to us, he removed a collapsible mask from his pocket and casually undid the buckle at the back.

“Stay.” It was the one, bare-boned word he said to me, before he wrapped the mask around my face, positioned it, and fastened it.

I'd glimpsed the pale front, and it resembled a Mexican day-of-the-dead mask, with a painted skull design and sutures crisscrossing over the bright red lips.

“Guard her, Cassius. I have people to consult with.” He swung the cane and tapped it on the ground, signaled we were to follow.

“This is going to be fucking painful,” Cassius muttered.

Why did I get the impression he meant the uneventful kind of painful? And yet, the CNC Fraternity was where Emme had seen women with their eyes sutured shut, and kinky stage shows, and more.

“Onward.” The doctor tapped his cane again.

I frowned as we toddled after him like obedient ducklings. That cane was vintage in appearance and too solid to be used for punishment. So he couldn't intend to use that on me. I was beginning to think he would be doing precisely nothing to me, tonight. The expression in his eyes had been so dead he might have been looking at a pond full of slime, or a distasteful piece of food.

Had I annoyed him that much? It seemed so. *Don't drown yourself*, had been his last instruction, or similar. I'd done what he'd said not to. His reaction left me nauseous, my stomach churned, my chest ached—and it was not the nice sort of ache either. I felt anxious and awful.

Whatever he truly was, whoever he was, being rejected left me empty, as if he had ripped out my heart after all.

We climbed the concrete stairs, went through the entryway, passing a metal detector and a pair of security guards. One of them nodded to Cassius. Then my fears were made real—the doctor pointed to a small, cushioned platform, atop a squat, decorative column then he left us, stalking away down the wide corridor.

I stood there in my tutu and mask, feeling bereft.

Taking pity on me, Cassius took my hand, then helped me climb onto the square platform which sat at waist-height. I arranged the skirt and sat with my legs angled to the side, while he hooked the metal leash to an anchor point below that was sunk into the column. He wandered off down the corridor, and I was afraid he, too, was leaving. I'd be alone and unguarded in the middle of this dangerously kinky party.

He returned carrying a chair, parked it a yard from me, then sat.

“Fuck this,” he muttered, shooting me a glance.

“What?” I asked, muffled due to the mask.

He shook his head. “Shh. I'm not to talk to you.”

“Oh.”

“Fuck this. He's not paying me, but I'm staying with you. Don't be too concerned about his attitude. I don't think it's all you. He's distracted, and it's probably due to Jacob.”

While we'd set up here and talked, people had been going past—more of the weird crowd, which was saying something. I was not exactly the average, sitting here in a tutu and skull mask, with my transparent panties showing, and chained to a column like an ornament.

More people drifted past. More latex and leather. A trio with a naked woman in a cage on wheels. How had that been brought up the stairs? Tattoos and piercings decorated one man, in fact so many piercings the dude glittered. His owner carried a cattle prod and a coiled whip. A few men drifted close and eyed me but were warned off by Cassius. I was grateful they paid heed.

Off and on, I became bored, interspersed with alarm when anyone leered at me too pointedly.

The mask was removed twice, at intervals that were clocked, to let me drink and eat a snack. I tried to engage Cassius in conversation, but he was almost as disgruntled and sullen as the doctor. Until, that is, a gaunt, tall man in steel-gray shirt and black pants halted beside us. Cassius was already on alert and seemed to be assessing the man for threats. The two men flanking Mister Gaunt looked to be security, judging by how they studied everyone who came near him.

Cassius rose from his chair.

“Cassius.” The man nodded. The muscles and tendons of his face and neck were bare of fat, and every movement, every word spoken, seemed organized by ropes and strings. Yet he struck me as being less than forty. “On the job, are we?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is this her?” He nodded at me.

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmph. She hasn’t sent me anything worthwhile. I’ve seen the photos she took.”

What? This had to be Jacob, but I hadn’t sent him *anything*.

“The pages in that book only reinforced what I already suspected about your doctor. The deal I offered her is off. However, I have another use for her. She’s good enough for my purpose and you can earn a promotion.”

If my stomach had been unhappy before, now it was in creepy turmoil. How had he seen those pics? Automatic cloud update was how. So he had everything that was on the phone. Behind the mask, I was chewing my inner cheek and flustered, even if my body was rock-still.

“Oh, sir? What would that be?”

I was half ready to spit on Cassius, if he went for this spiel. For a moment I doubted him.

“Just say nothing when we take her. Tell the doctor you were away at the restroom.”

The two extras in their cheap black suits made a move toward me. Cassius stepped in between.

“I can’t do that...sir. What do you need her for?”

Jacob sighed. “You don’t get to know that. I pay your wages. Let me have her. I’ll double your pay. Is that what you wanted?”

“No. Sir. It was not what I wanted. I’m guarding her. Please remove yourself and your men.” He flicked his gaze their way. “From our vicinity.”

Jacob didn’t move. “You want to be fired? This behavior puts you in my seriously bad books, if you carry through.”

“Back off, *sir*, unless you want me to call for CNC security.”

Finally, he backed away then strode off down the corridor with his men—they gifted Cassius with a few backward, dirty looks.

No guns were allowed in here, but if there were, I’d bet on them being drawn and maybe fired during that conversation.

“Thank you, Cassius,” I said quietly.

“You’re welcome.” He shrugged then looked straight at me. “You know I wouldn’t let harm come to you.”

“Yes. I do.” I’d said that with sincerity and honesty. More honesty than I’d applied to many things recently. It made me think about what I was doing and what I had done. Maybe it

was time for a big change, no matter how perilous it might appear from my side of the equation.

A half an hour later, the doctor returned down the corridor and stopped before us.

Cassius rose, pulling straight his shirt.

“All good?” He propped his cane against Cassius’s chair.

“We had a visitor.”

“Jacob?”

“Yes. He was here, briefly. You too?”

“Yes, but I am guessing he wasn’t happy with you? He wanted information from me, in return for payment, and then when that failed, he threatened me.”

Cassius screwed up his mouth and nodded. “Now that’s my boss.” He faltered saying that and I thought he’d clarify it and say ex-boss. He did not.

“Hmmm.” The doctor swung to me, and I sensed a softening in him compared to before. “Charity, you did something bad.” He paused. “But then so did I.”

He did what? Uneasy, I wondered if he’d agreed to give me to Jacob.

Which was awful of me to think, but how much did I really know him? That was the recurring fucking question. There was blind trust, based on a hunch and a smattering of info, and there was absolute trust based on real-life reactions, on helping you when you were down, and on being by your side when you needed them.

“What do you mean?” I spoke through that mask, and it was so horribly distancing. He couldn’t know my body language.

“You put yourself in danger when I told you not to. You did it in exactly the way we had discussed.”

I winced, then I was shaking my head. “I am sorry. I did do that.”

“Yes. And I hated it. I lost trust in you. Trust. You were tossing that about before—how to trust people and what it meant.” He stood there, broad of stance, hands clasped at his front—a man who was confident in his arena.

I waited. It seemed he had more to say.

“Even so, my anger was wrong. I was already unsettled over something else. My silence and neglect was your punishment, and that would be fine, if I’d explained why. I am sorry I did not. I apologize.”

“Oh.” I was wide of eye behind the mask and feeling so much happier. I was the puppy this time, wagging my little tail. It might be pathetic to some but to me, it was just happiness.

Then I noticed the look of abject awe on Cassius’s face, as if seeing the doctor apologize was a revelation for him. A moment later, his face was wiped of expression, but I had seen it.

This had affected both of us.

The doctor was waiting.

“Oh. Oh, I should say, thank you for apologizing.”

“Good. I thought we should get a little more involved in the party. Sound good, Cassius?”

“Yes, sir.”

Was that ‘sir’ new? It was what Cassius had used when addressing Jacob.

The doctor stepped forward and detached my leash from the column then he reached up and took me about the waist, swinging me down and steadying me. “Can I have a moment with her, Cassius?”

“Absolutely.” He walked away until out of earshot and stood at attention further along the corridor, like a soldier on parade. He looked lonely down there, and I resolved to tell the doctor of his intervention with Jacob, if Cassius did not.

“Now, Charity.” The doctor picked me up again and encouraged me to wrap my legs about his waist. He steadied my back against the wall, removed the mask, and locked eyes with me. “Here is a more serious question that I need an answer to. Remember how I said I wanted to keep you?”

I nodded.

“This is one of those pivotal times. I won’t send you back to live in my other house, but I need the truth on this, or else.” That *or else* was scarier than I would’ve imagined. Did he mean to leave me with someone else? I wanted things as they were, but with just a little more freedom.

“I want to be with you,” I said, sounding timid. Fuck, I was not timid. I was just worried. “You and Cassius.”

“Tell me why you were diving in the sea at that spot, so often. Why you risked your life to do so.”

“Because I’m crazy and because...”

“Hmmm?”

I had to tell him, didn’t I? I searched his eyes, and he gave me the hint of a smile, making crinkly smile-lines spread. Maybe that was his way to reassure me, but it looked so sexy on this mysterious man with his beautiful face and cruel ways. These powerful arms securing me seemed strong enough to hold back the world.

He adjusted his grip, his big hands shifting to a place well beneath my rear. His body pressed me into the wall, spreading my legs, making me hot. I almost whined. Instead I caught my lip in my teeth. His smile broadened. All those secrets I hadn’t quite deciphered poured into my head.

If I told him the truth about the dive, what would he do? Was he a hundred years old, and did it matter to me?

To know what life is worth you have to risk it once in a while.

I’m taking a shitload of risks though, aren’t I?

I heaved in a breath and rattled out, “I was diving there because there’s a cavity beneath the tower that was bombed in

WW2, and an undersea tunnel leads to it. That's why." When he looked alarmed, I hurriedly added, "There's also an air pocket I could breathe."

"Okay. Okay." He bowed his head before looking at me again. "And what did you find?"

"Stuff?" My own smile was ragged. "I found a photo of a man who appears to be you, taken seventy-five years ago, on his wedding day, with his wife, Patricia Romanus."

"Huh. You did, did you. Thank you for being honest, Charity. Cassius! Let's go have some fun."

That was all? Openmouthed, I looked up at him.

He lowered me to stand on my bare feet on the floor tiles, then pulled the mask back into place over my face. With gentle precision, he swapped out the generic black collar for the spiked one Cassius had chosen weeks ago.

With my head to the side and leaning into his coat and shirt, I stared at his hands as he finished doing up the buckle—his sure fingers, the capable shape of them, the callouses. This was a symbol to me and surely also for him. "Everything is okay?"

"Yes. Except, we are all having a very big conversation later."

"What big talk?" Cassius asked as he strolled over.

"You'll see. First, we need to show off our little fucktoy to the other members."

My eyebrows rose at that and so did my excitement.

"Thank fucking, god. Finally." Cassius considered the doctor before adding, "I want to apologize for Jacob. He's always been a dick, but I've never said it. I've quit that job, and so...I'm no longer employed to watch you and Charity."

The heavy silence lasted all of two seconds. The doctor nodded and held out his hand. "I feel that needs a congratulations. This doesn't change anything for me. I hope you'll be joining us, tonight."

The hand shaking intensified, and Cassius looked positively smug. He winked at me.

That had sounded like an invitation to a soirée not the kinky fuckery I was sure lay ahead.

“Definitely, doc. I’ll be your rearguard and holder of crops, dildos, and butt plugs.”

“Exactly what I need.” Dr. Romanus eyed me. “Your punishment isn’t quite done, miss.”

C *HARITY*

“In that room is a toy bag I arranged to be sent here, Cassius. Could you fetch it? Just tell the attendant my name.”

Without a word, Cassius sprinted to the door the doctor pointed out with his cane.

I trailed after the doctor, compelled by the leash. I trotted closer to his shoulder.

“Is Emme here?” I ventured, as we began to climb a grand flight of stairs to the next floor.

The tutu was bothering me, and I tugged at it to try to conceal myself. The stiff tulle made it rise to near my waist so that almost nothing of me was covered. Due to the barely there undergarments every detail of my pussy would be visible. I knew this because I’d checked while sitting on the platform. Unless I forced the skirt lower, I was completely exposed below the waist.

It was a losing battle, and the skirt was winning, but I was stubborn.

“No. I did ask about her and her owners. If you’re wondering, this is not the same house she was first taken to.”

Her owners. I didn’t recall him using that telling word before this.

“Thank you for trying.”

A man in a white staff uniform slipped by, carrying an empty tray, heading down the stairs. The staff I'd overheard were speaking in a language I didn't understand. Greek or Italian, perhaps. We'd almost reached the next floor and I crammed the skirt even lower, at both sides, despite knowing what was happening in every room here—sex.

As we took the last few steps, the doctor scanned the floor. I was a little mindboggled despite what Emme had told me. Our local club was nowhere near this ostentatious or innovative, and sex was not allowed in public. A glance showed me a woman mounting a man lying on a table. His legs were tied high, and he was covered in clamps and silver clothes pins. Kinky black leather gear with straps, buckles, and spreader devices were everywhere on people being fucked upside down, horizontally, and possibly sideways.

The floor before us was open space all the way to a set of immense square windows that were interrupted by square columns.

At the back, before the windows, was a low stage. A gagged woman stood in the middle, naked except for a red body harness, with her hands stretched high and bound to a hanging chain. She was being flogged with a whip made of something destructive. Her back was bloody. Her legs were fastened apart by a bar strapped between her ankles.

The man wielding the whip walked to her and placed his hand between her legs. She stretched onto her tiptoes, then her head tilted back as she arched.

I gaped at the sight, aroused by such wicked deviancy, as usual, but also a little frightened at the idea that it could be me up there being flogged and intermittently fingered. Absentmindedly, I pushed at the tulle.

“Stop doing that.” The doctor eyed me critically, and I tried to look like a sad kitten, while I hung onto the skirt, but probably succeeded in nothing of the sort. “Amuse yourself with her, Cassius. I'll be back. I have to arrange for more security for a house, and I see just the man for it.”

A house. That must be the one I'd initially stayed at.

“No limits?” Cassius asked.

“Use her how you want to, but sensibly.”

The doctor weaved through the crowd, moving toward the stage. He’d gone again, but everything was fine now, apart from all the people staring at little old me.

A lean, tattooed man reclining on a long sofa raked a stare down my body. A woman kneeled before the sofa, and she was sucking on his cock, with his hand on her head guiding her. The tattoos covered his torso to the waist, and his nipples were pierced, with metal rings in both.

His stare made thrills slither through me, like hot evil serpents invading my flesh and my blood. My clit awoke and swelled, the dirty thing. He was hot but had to be eminently dangerous, and probably owned half a country. Every guest here was a member of the CNC Fraternity and every one of them would be rich and powerful. Dangerous came with that territory, Emme had told me all of this.

I made to turn as Cassius came up behind me, but his hands locked onto my wrists and drew them together. He caught them both in one hand in a grip I couldn’t budge, then he leaned into me. “You’re my property now. Doctor’s orders. I can do what I want.” I closed my eyes as those words whispered in, warming my neck, stirring me to goosebumps.

A moment later he kicked the toy bag to beside my feet, then he dragged me onto my knees. One-handed, he opened the bag’s flap to rummage inside.

Even more people were watching us now, and I was blushing, an automatic response I would kill someone to lose.

Cassius swung me away from him before clamping metal to my wrists. Rapid clicks sounded as he locked down a pair of handcuffs.

“That’s to stop you fussing with the skirt. Stand up.”

I struggled to stand with my hands cuffed, but he boosted me higher with one hand on my arm and the other between my legs. A little breathless, I looked over the heads of the crowd

nonchalantly—or as nonchalantly as possible, considering—until he slipped a finger inside me.

My gasp brought a smile to the tattooed man's mouth and a chuckle from Cassius. Mister OTT Tattoos pulled the woman off his cock. It stood up, erect, glistening from him fucking the woman's mouth. I couldn't look away, fascinated, as he stuck out his tongue, which was also pierced, then pulled the woman higher and delivered a long lick to the side of her face.

Then he shoved her back on his cock. She choked as he pulled her head up and down.

I shuddered and tore my gaze from him.

Though he crouched on the floor, Cassius had noticed.

He hooked the crotch of my ballerina costume, stretching them downward. "You know, I think he likes you."

Using a pair of scissors, he sliced across the crotch, then began to painstakingly shear away the rest of the fabric, leaving only an inch beneath the waistline of the skirt.

With my hands fastened at my back by metal, I was torn between tensing whenever those scissor blades touched me and being very aware of how close that man's mouth was to my pussy. The magic his tongue could work...

"Much better." He climbed to his feet and stood between me and the others. "I have something to say before I get started with the kinky fuckery."

I raised my eyebrows.

He folded up the cloth mask, high enough to reveal my mouth. As if I were reluctant, I leaned away. His fingers dug into my ass where the doctor's cane had left bruises, and he pulled me closer with both hands. When I tried to protest, he kissed me, brutally, his tongue forcing its way into my mouth, and he trailed a path of pain over my ass with well-placed pinches.

I writhed to escape the pain. His teeth bit my lower lip and held on, just hard enough that I was afraid to pull away. This was messing with my head. He let go of my lip, but the

pinches kept coming. Gasping, I bowed backward, and only his hands stopped me from falling. It was such delicious cruelty. My heart was thudding and murdering my calm by the end.

When he released me, I almost fell, my knees buckling.

I was crushed to his body, the tulle skirt flattened between us, the hard shaft of his cock obvious and digging into my stomach.

“That...” I poked my hurt lip with my tongue, “was some speech.”

“What did the doctor say to you?”

“I...can't. He has to tell you.” I frowned. Or did he. It was I who found the tunnel and the hollow in the ground. “I found something on my dive...a photo from WW2, and the man looked like the doctor. He even had the same tattoo. That's it.” Even saying that much, or that little, seemed a step too far.

“That's all you'll tell me, even if I put you up there.” He jerked his chin at the stage. “And flog you”—he ground against me in small circles, leaning in to say to my ear—“and ass fuck you with every single person watching me ream you, and make you come, screaming?”

Oh, god. For that I would, strangely and probably, sell my first-born child. He made it sound so hot. I cleared my throat.

“Sorry? I'm sorry. I can't.”

“Then say this...” He leaned his forehead onto mine, rocking our bodies, one against the other, as if we were dancing. “Do you believe what he's accused of? You trust him, yeah?”

“I trust the doctor, yes.”

“Fuck.” He gave a long sigh. “And Jacob is a snake. I know that. I just needed to hear you say it. Okay. Talk over.”

“Hold still.” The scissors appeared before my face, large and menacing in the eyeholes of the mask. With the scissors crunching terrifyingly close to my nose, he chopped off the lower part of the mask, to expose my mouth.

After he dropped the scissors into the bag, he rose to his feet with something else in hand...

Thinking he was about to use a shred of the panties' fabric for a gag, I tried to back away, but he gripped the back of my hair then began to insert the foulest type of metal gag into my mouth—I knew it on contact, a spider gag—wriggled it deeper, then locked it on me, at the back.

The metal legs of the spider gag, were in my mouth, pressing at my lips. They'd hold my mouth open, until he removed the whole fucking thing. I'd tried one on before, as an experiment, hated it, and safeworded, to the disgust of the Dom.

I frowned and shook my head, as if that would help me dislodge it. It didn't. Drool was already collecting beneath my tongue. Gargling mangled syllables, I scowled ferociously at Cassius.

"You'll survive." He unlocked the cuffs and tossed them into the bag. "Down girl. Crawl."

I hesitated.

"Down," he murmured. "Or else you can suck on that guy's cock for starters."

Tattoo guy? I grimaced. I lowered myself to my hands and knees then looked to Cassius for guidance.

This position was so subservient. He smiled down at me. "You look so pretty down there." He patted my head. "Good little Charity. Like this, your cunt is perfectly on display. No. More. Hiding."

I closed my eyes, and somehow that reset my attitude. I knew it as I opened them. Fuck me but...I liked this. Mostly because I liked being told what to do when half-naked. *I'm such a fucked-up little kink bunny.*

"Let's see what we can find to do with you." He picked up the toy bag and tugged the leash. I followed his heels. "Suggestions! Anyone. What should I do with my kitty?"

Though really, I wasn't sure I liked the randomness of using suggestions from this crowd.

We stopped at the first person who raised a hand and said "Yo!" Mr. fucking tattooed.

I tried to pout but only screwed my mouth onto the gag. *Ouch.*

"I thought you might. What's your idea?" Cassius asked.

"Make her sit on the cock of everyone who wants her." He clicked his tongue at me. "I volunteer for first go. I'll even use a condom."

CASSIUS

“Not a bad idea,” I told the guy with the tats. Then I looked at Charity, down there on her hands and knees, with her breasts ready to fall out the top of the costume, and her nipples popping against the shiny fabric. “I’ll make a note of that one.”

She looked appalled. It’d almost be worth doing it just to see her vexation and shame as she bounced on this guy’s cock. Almost.

“Absolutely do that.” He turned aside and signaled to a waiter carrying a tray of filled wine goblets.

I left him to it, leading my girl away, jingling the chain leash. That spiked collar was perfect on her, made her look sexy and dangerous. I kind of liked dangerous girls who’d stick their necks under my heel and whimper for me, and ones who would suck my cock too.

Maybe I should just get her to do that. Cock-sucking had many pros and few cons—when it was my cock. I kept walking.

The doctor had said anything sensible. I’d been here before but only as a guard for Jacob, and my participation in the kink had been at the behest of members. Some of them had a thing for fucking the security guards. I kept going, steering between the little scenes, gathering suggestions. I found out I *could* put

her on the stage, but it was best to plan ahead and ask for equipment.

Next time, I'd do that. A nyotaimori, sushi platter girl might not be that doable tonight, but next time, yes. More suggestions came to me.

Pinata girl...no.

Put her head and hands in in stocks, and have her flogged and spanked at one end and give out BJs at the other? That also meant equipment I didn't see already here. I was sure most of the members didn't expect me to go, yes, to the ones where I sexually shared her, though some might. Fuck that. I was not inclined to share, except for with the doc.

And where he stood on it, same, I figured.

A lady suggested fucking Charity with vegetables then getting her to eat them. A vegetarian kink? I smiled, kept walking.

Someone else put down a bowl before her containing what looked like milk. "Milk?"

He nodded.

I released the spider gag, kept it in my hand.

"Drink." I pointed to the bowl and clicked my tongue, then went to one knee to say quietly. "This or cock worshipping every man here." I was bluffing, and she knew it, but when I put out my hand, curious about this, she licked my fingers then sucked on the tips. Eyes narrowed, I pointed again. "Drink the milk."

She lowered herself and lapped—her tongue licking out, tutu flared, her naked rear in the air. A ballerina kitty. It was odd how my hard-on responded to her doing that.

Fuck me though, these people and their kinks. I thought I was deprived.

As for the doc, I'd been willing to believe he might be some evil girl-sacrificing-medico but Charity had swung me round, as had his niceness, and Jacob's general dickheaded-

ness. Don't think I believed anything that dude had said now. I was finished with him.

No job, no pay though. What was I doing next?

I didn't want to lose this girl.

I did not intend to ever lose her. Not to the doc, not to anyone. And suddenly I was unhappy. I had to figure this out. That big talk was going to involve me.

Harden up, man. I reined in the angst. It was fixable.

I put the gag back on, despite her grumbling. No safeword was said, so we were good. The minx was enjoying this in some aspect—the humiliation, I figured.

I did a half circle around a group who were doing something bloody to a guy, with knives. It would be calculated cutting and not fatal or anything but whoa, hell to the no.

I was on a final meander before the stage when a woman placed a pair of black kitten ears on Charity, then she asked me if she could have one of the litter, if we bred her. The lady was almost purring, saying it. It was said mostly in jest, partly in roleplay kink, but it left me reeling. I could go with that... breeding her. It made me look at her ass in a whole other way.

Childbearing hips. I grinned.

It was a fuck yes, and not a fuck no, this time.

The man doing the barbed wire flogging had wound down by then and was helping his sub off the stage.

I coaxed my kitty up there, onto the stage, to the tune of ragged cheers. About half the members had thrown suggestions at me and were invested in whatever I chose. I dropped the toy bag. Inside it were at least three different dick-shaped vibes, and a big, black one with a second offshoot knob for clit stimulation, similar to dragon dick, and some marker pens in various colors.

“How about I give anyone who wants to do it, a go at making her come?” I held up a marker pen. “Winners get to sign her back!” The yelling intensified.

For rich, powerful a’holes, these people knew how to have fun.

Charity was sitting on her heels by then, and looking around, a little bewildered.

I lowered myself beside her. “I’ll have to get you completely naked. This thing is cute,” I flicked the tutu, “but I figure we are going to need a lot of skin for this signing party.”

I put my finger in her spider gaged, open mouth, and stroked the front of her tongue. The drool was pooling in her mouth and dripping over her lip. “Can’t wait to see you coming and coming, and all sweaty and messed up. I’ll have to make sure you drink enough water now, won’t I?”

And all she could do in answer was sit there and whine and blink at me. With a finger hooked in her collar, I drew her a little higher and pulled out the black vibe.

“Sit on this now, princess kitty.” I tapped to make her widen her thighs then put the dildo to her slippery entrance, poised it with the tip nudging into her. “Go up and down. Show me how you want to be played with.” I switched on the vibe, pressed three more times until it was growling nicely and rattling in my hand. “Down, until that knob sits against your clit. I want to hear you making those noises before we start our travels through that nasty bunch of perverts.”

She frowned but favored me with those Bambi-soft, wide eyes and then she lowered herself, squishing her cunt lips over the dildo, letting it sink in. The big *O* her mouth made, the choking noise, sheesh, I was already dripping come in my pants. I let my cock loose and stroked myself as she shuddered and pressed herself harder against that humming knob.

“That’s a good kitty. Fuck yourself. Up...down. Grind that clit on it.”

I was going to stop her soon and lead her off the stage to let them all play with her, but not quite yet.

Her moans and gulps were building fast, the drool spilling, too, as she ducked her head. Her thighs began to shake. She planted her hands on the floor, and I pulled the dildo out of her

from behind, smirking at the string of wetness following the tip, then I gave myself one last stroke. Choosing when to come on her or in her was a fine damn art.

“Follow me.”

She hesitated, stared out at the crowd, then padded after me toward the small approach ramp, with her kitty ears and ass swaying. I grabbed the toy bag on the way, checked the scissors were in there. I hadn't made her naked yet.

The fair-haired woman who'd given us the kitty ears waved us over first. I led Charity there, nodded to the woman.

“May I?” Her hand was manicured with pointed black nails. Her sub was trans, perhaps, and they sprawled at the base of her throne-like seat, licking her feet.

“Sure.” I gave her a small dildo and steered Charity so she was assward at the woman. “Five minutes, tops. And go.”

Charity was frowning up at me, with one eyebrow tilted, and that gag was making her mouth look so very accessible. I picked up the safety scissors, aimed them down the back of the garment, and the lady flicked on the dildo and applied it to what must have been the right spot.

Instantly, my girl's expression dissolved into one of wonderment, and that little choke she made...*fuck*. I cut down the ballerina costume and stripped her naked in seconds, leaving a few shreds of tutu here and there. Grabbing a handful of Charity's hair, I pulled her head higher, freed my cock, aimed, and plunged into her wet mouth. The gag made going deep easy, almost too easy.

I could reach the back of her throat with little resistance. The stimulation was less, the grasp of her mouth poor. Maybe this was good?

I outlasted the poor girl. She was making more and more choking noises, and it wasn't due to me stuffing her full.

Grimacing, I withdrew, and watched her dissolve onto the floor, facedown, clawing at it. The dildo was ratcheted up a notch in power, and Charity orgasmed, jerking her butt, with the woman smiling, exactly like a cat that's found the cream.

It was difficult to resist jacking off on her.

The woman signed some swirly name on Charity. Probably a pseudonym like everyone used here. I'd almost forgotten the doctor's—Hulk, until he'd said it earlier at the main entry.

Speaking of entries...Charity was moaning still, half on her side, face to the floor, drooling spilling from her gagged mouth. My cock twitched. I was going to have blue balls, but I'd figured out when to fuck her to come-ageddon time, and how to do it.

“Let's go.” I tugged on the leash. “Next customer wants your ass in his face.”

Floppy-limbed, she hauled herself onto all fours, with that gorgeous long black hair of hers spilling everywhere.

I said, quietly, “We are going to see one messy Charity by the end of tonight.”

She spluttered at me. I smiled, as evilly as possible.

We went onward, signaled by a couple of guys on a couch next over. Their female subs were tied up at their feet, covered in leather and clamps and still moaning from whatever had been done. “One at a time, sirs.”

“Sure.” The man with the brutish shaved head agreed. “Or...suggestion only...he could use one of your toys on her tits, while I make her come.”

That suggestion made Charity squeak and shake her head—which meant I should tell them yes, knowing her. I'd give her an out. The gag had been on a while anyway. I held up one finger to the guys, then kneeled and removed the gag.

I kissed her on the mouth, gently. “Be good, and it stays off.”

This way she could safeword. I was a mix of fucking joyous at doing this, and anxious, in case I went too far. This place would tempt an angel to go too far.

“Say, thank you.” I stroked her hair.

“Thank you. Sir.” Her voice was raspy, and she worked her jaw as if it needed exercise. Her gaze fell on my cock where I’d left it free of my pants. Parading fully naked wasn’t me, or not this time, but with my cock out? Absolutely.

I rose and pulled her leash taut, so she was nicely off the floor, and perfectly situated on hands and knees.

“May I suggest the clover clamps and a second dildo?”

They gave me the thumbs up and set to work.

I didn’t fuck her mouth this time, I just stared, and I was counting to one hundred while they did their work on her—so that I didn’t come from watching her moans and her shaking, or from the squirt of her come when she came with her ass being held in the air by guy two.

They signed her back: *Thing One* and *Thing Two* for all I knew. I wasn’t reading the signatures, then we moved on.

To be honest, by the time we reached my destination, I was in awe that she could still crawl.

As if she read my mind, she collapsed and protested, when I ordered her to move. I gave in and picked her up, hauling her to where I needed her—the floor in front of Mister Tattoos R Us.

He’d waved as I walked his way, lying back on his sofa, totally naked now, and showing the world he really, really liked tattoos—nearly every inch of him was covered. His female companion was tied over the armrest of the sofa beside him. Her legs were forced open, her face half-buried in a pillow. Her head was inside a plastic bag—with nose and mouth-holes—I stared at her to be sure she was okay. Security would be on him if she was not.

Every other hole she had was occupied by something lewd, but he’d also clamped together her labia above and below the veiny dildo stuffed in there. She was making these little squeaking noises, and jerking, then I realized he’d left her like that with a vibe inside her. Maybe two vibes.

“Call me Razor, and I’m your last choice?” His eyebrows rose.

“Sure are, Razor. I figured you’d scare the hell out of my little Charity, plus I’m fucking her while you do it.”

“You want a specific dynamic?”

It was weird hearing such precise speech from this guy. “Yup. I’m going to fuck her cunt while you make her come.”

He hummed. “Difficult for me to keep a dildo on her, while you do that. I’ve one stipulation. I get to torture her pussy with clover clamps, and I’m going to stick something in her little pristine asshole. I noticed no one else was allowed to play with her there.”

Figging or butt plug? I frowned and fastened my hand on her nape, so she was stuck in place and couldn’t see whatever he showed me. “Exactly what?”

He pulled a plastic bag from his own fancy pink toy bag. Inside was a small bottle labelled, *ginger oil*. I nodded an okay.

I locked eyes with Charity, and she peered up at me while I thumbed away the residue of tears on her face. Those tears were good ones, from some screaming *Os*. I brought my cock to her mouth, popped up my eyebrows.

“You heard him.” If not all of what he’s planning. I showed her my teeth. “Stick your tongue out for yes.”

She paused as if thinking, sneaked a sideways glance as if trying to see the guy. Her brown eyes fastened on me again, and she licked her mouth, dabbing with her cute little pink tongue tip. I imagined that swirling over my cock.

My nostrils flared, and I registered the strong scent of all the climaxes she’d succumbed to, all the sex. I should’ve eaten her out.

“Good girl. Open wide.”

I palmed my cock, then brought her nearer. A twist of her hair looped around my fist made it impossible for Charity to duck. I nudged in, sighing heavily as she did indeed lick me, her tongue glided along my shaft as I shoved in. This time, I had the full effect of her lips suctioning down on my cock.

Would I even last? My balls ached to the point of pain. They were full of come and the unrequited fucking of Miss Charity.

Razor gestured at my toy bag, which was piled up with some sticky toys by now. I'd wiped them down, but anything left on them was her own wetness. "Do I pick?"

"Your weapon of choice, sir. Fucking anything, yes."

He took a long time to sort through stuff in there. I started thrusting, keeping under control, gritting my teeth, and stopping myself coming too soon. Was the bastard trying to see if I'd fill her mouth before he got to step one?

I groaned softly, Charity's gaze swiveled to mine, and I thought I detected amusement there.

Did she think she controlled my pleasure? I narrowed my eyes, noticed Razor had laid out four clover clamps on the sofa and the black dildo.

I waited.

He stuck something in her ass, a finger coated with ginger oil, I thought.

Charity squeaked and looked as if she was registering that invasion. My turn to grin.

I rocked in, jamming my cock deep to keep her distracted.

He clamped two clover clamps on her, and her throat spasmed on my cock.

"Now we're talking."

Two more clamps were applied to her pussy, and Charity tried to wriggle away and made bubbling sounds. Dribble spilled past the seal of her mouth on me. I held her hair and began to get busy, thrusting faster, deep, satisfied with Razor to the extreme. The dildo began to buzz, and the girl was completely flustered. She stared ahead as if I were invisible and tried to lean closer to the floor.

I fucked her mouth three more times then extracted myself. My cock glistened; a string of drool connected me to her lips.

Charity made a weird noise then collapsed onto her forearms.

Razor held the dildo high, like he'd pulled a sword from a stone for King Arthur. "She's almost there." He smiled crookedly. "You need to get back here fast if you want to do what you said."

"Sure." I hauled Charity around so she was side-on to Razor, smacked her butt until she edged it higher. Her head was still down near the floor, and her eyes were shut. I figured she was craving me filling her with cock. I was too.

Those four clover clamps on her cunt were the prettiest things. They shone with her wetness. I ran a finger down the middle, between her swollen lips, then sank it into her, pulled it out. She mewled for more, wagged her ass at me. I put my cock to her and pushed in.

At first, I penetrated her slowly, wary of the metal, but the scraping from the jaws only added to the sensation. I stuck myself in all the way, to the hilt, pleased at the little grunts and squeaks she made just from this. Then...Razor reached under her and applied that buzzing dildo to her clit. He flicked the power button until it was at jet engine level, and I could tell she was trying to ride the thing. I hoisted her ass up again and watched him look beneath to adjust aim.

Her cunt walls clamped down on me, and Charity was moaning at a higher and higher pitch, her fingers scratching at the floor like she could sink them into the timber. Enough of the finessing. She shook her head and raised herself onto her forearms and I began to fuck her harder faster, deeper, making wet noises whenever I rammed in and met her butt.

Ten or twenty thrusts later, my eyes were ready to bulge from their sockets. My cock was suddenly squeezed in a cunt grip I'd not experienced ever before. A wail tore from her throat and Charity shook then tensed in waves.

With my hands embedded in her bruised ass, I gave her a last few pounding stabs, buried in her and came. I think I summoned chaos with this climax. The jets of come ached up through to my teeth, drawing every residue of jizz from the

depths of my balls. I spurted multiple times until milked dry by the girl under me.

She was slumped, a mess of useless limbs, with her mouth open, her eyes closed. Charity stayed on the end of my cock for a minute longer before I could bear to pull out. She sort of flowed onto the floor, one arm crooked under her head, the other outflung.

Razor leaned down and signed her back with a sharpie, then removed the clamps from her pussy. He left them draped over her hip like little trophies, then leaned into the sofa.

I laid down next to her, propped on my elbow. “You okay?”

“I can’t feel my pussy...or my legs,” Charity murmured between her panting. Her brown eyes opened. “That was...” She closed them again, blinked. “Awesome.”

“Hulk!” I heard someone yell in greeting.

And here was the man himself, walking our way.

I brushed her hair off her face. “We need to get you cleaned up.”

Hulk, aka the doctor, arrived. “We have a bedroom here for the night. I can see you kept yourselves busy. Are you alright, Charity?”

“I think...I’m dead, and my ass is on fire.”

His mouth twisted until I thought he was having a problem, then he broke into a smile and guffawed. “Good. I guess. Carry her if you have to, Cassius. If you’re still capable.”

I flopped onto my back. “I’m dead, too, Hulk. I just shot a load that blew my brains out through my dick.”

“That was entertaining.” Razor casually tossed the nipple clamps into the bag. “Let’s do that again sometime. With Hulk’s permission, of course.”

“Not likely, Razor.” The doctor studied him then Charity where she lay on the floor, catching her breath.

She rolled over onto her side to mostly face us, with her breasts in full view, and her hair flared above her head. The spiked collar stood out on her neck, with the leash trailing over the timber floor. Much of her skin was reddened here and there, from clamps on her nipples, from fingers, pinches, and smacks. The signature of a woman a few climaxes ago showed in blatant red marker, scrawled from hip to the little arrow of hair on her mons. A sketched pair of red, kissy lips sat beside her clit. That one had been quite the fan of Miss Charity.

“Hulk.” I should call him that here. “What are you thinking?” I levered myself off the floor, tucked away my dick and zipped up.

“That everyone here has signed their name on our girl.” He rubbed his chin, his other hand on his hip, with his coat swept out of the way. “We should sign ours too.”

Charity crawled up and sat on her heels. She found the marker and offered it to us both, laid across her palm like an offering. “Please. I’d like that.”

He took the pen and studied it, then looked to Charity. “I was planning to do this tonight, but not with ink. Cassius wanted to brand you. I have an electro-cautery pen I want to use. This will create a moderately permanent scar, and it will hurt. I’ll let you choose whether you want local anesthesia for it or not.”

Charity fidgeted with her fingers, intertwining them. She inhaled then nodded. “How much pain?”

“It’s impossible for me to judge. I promise to distract you, and I can stop and give an anesthetic injection, if it proves too much for you. Good enough?”

“Okay,” she said, softly.

I was sure she was as in the dark about what was going to happen as I was. I went to her and retrieved the leash. She followed Hulk and me, staying on hands and knees when I pointed downward.

“How do I use this electro cautery thing, Hulk?” I asked.

“You will sign in marker. I’ll go over it to make the brand. It’s not an instrument you can learn in a few minutes... What do I call you here, Cassius?” He stopped. We were almost at the stage, and I figured he was going there.

“Call me?” I frowned. “A name for the CNC Fraternity? I’m not a—”

“You are. I made you a member.”

That stunned me. It said permanent. It said trust. It even said he’d probably paid some enormous sum to do this.

“I must owe you a fuck ton.”

“No.” He shook his head, slowly. “You owe me nothing, currently. Your CNC name?”

I thought fast. “Priest. I had a severely religious experience just now, inside Charity.”

Hulk look astonished for a second, then he threw back his head and laughed. I had to grin at that, this unfathomable man laughing like that, it was a memorable sight. It drew a few eyes from members. Most of them smiled.

“Priest it is.” He wiped his eyes. “Let’s get this done. I’m getting you to bend over the edge of the stage while I do this, Charity. And you will be still, *very, very still*, while I do this. Unless you want to have a squiggle of god knows what written on your butt.”

Me, I remained silent until we reached the stage. I watched him position her lying with her front on the stage and her knees on the main floor, so her ass was perfectly in view.

“Sign next to where I wrote *PROPERTY OF*, then get up there and hold her still, Priest.” Hulk gave me a black marker while he removed his coat.

“I use my CNC name?”

“Yes. Otherwise anyone here will see your real name.”

“Okay.” I signed her ass cheek with *Priest*, returned the pen to him, and noticed a new and very different pen in his hand. It was white plastic with a narrow loop of wire instead

of a nib, and a slider and pair of buttons on the shaft. It looked terribly benign. “You’re distracting her, you said?”

“I am. Position yourself.”

I climbed up and took hold of her wrists. Not that I could stop her standing up with this sort of grip. That was up to her. Maybe I was here more for reassurance.

“I’m here, Charity. Yell, if you want him to stop.”

She nodded, blinking up at me. “I will.”

The doctor unzipped his pants, brought out his dick, and gave himself a few tugs. He slid his cock between his fist and squirted lubricant over it, worked it in with a grunt then he stepped up. So that was the distraction? I had to grin when he knelt behind her and finger-fucked her hole before he slowly began to force his cock into her ass.

“Heyyy.” After a single gasp, Charity wriggled then looked around. Her eyes closed and she rasped out, “Fuck. You never said that was it.”

He only shoved in further, his cock burying itself deep. It was fascinating, watching it vanish inside her, in, out, like a retractable stage dagger. It was a magic trick I loved. He kept fucking her asshole while his electric gun waited on a cloth to the side. “You’ve ginger in here still, so we both get to hurt a little.”

“Fuuuck. God...*umpfff*. You think...it’s...the same?” she whispered that in grated, staccato syllables, hunching over, trying to pull her arms backward. I hung on, then leaned down and kissed her mouth. She answered the kiss, huffing, groaning, as he shunted into her a few times.

Then he stilled. “Doing it now, Charity. Brace your little ass.”

How he could be coherent enough to do this was beyond me. I kept kissing her, soothing her with words as he began to sign our names and, I assumed, to write over that PROPERTY OF part as well.

Charity gave a few squeaks, a few grunts. The pen wrote onward.

She was astoundingly well-behaved, though I'd bet no other doctor ever did this while ass-fucking his patient. A few times, he paused in the writing to fuck himself into her, do a few jarring thrusts. I didn't think she could come again so soon, after the series of climaxes before, but she was getting aroused.

Her eyes were shut, her moans seemed half pain, half pleasure, and out of curiosity I released her wrists—that wasn't helping anyway—then carefully worked my hand under her to her clit. The tiny nub was standing erect, an obvious button of flesh. I circled it, massaging.

Hulk met my eyes. The scent of smoke was rising from her ass.

“Are you done?”

“I am, yes.” He set aside the pen then began to seriously plow her, thrusting in slowly but hard enough to bump her into the stage. My fingers couldn't stay on her clit, so I sat back and watched as he worked his cock in and out. I was up on my elbow and Charity took hold of my hand, found my finger with her mouth, and started sucking while he jarred her back and forth with the force as he impaled her.

It was fucking erotic watching him doing that and her sucking on me. My hard-on resurrected, and I squeezed myself through my pants in time with what Hulk was doing.

Her moans came out past my finger. I stroked myself harder.

Another few thrusts and Hulk coughed once, then came. His face screwed up like most men's did, looking like he'd bitten something and it tasted bad.

When he pulled out, Charity stayed where she lay, looking blissed out while licking me softly.

“All finished?” she finally asked, in a hushed voice.

“Yes.”

Hulk had wiped his dick, and now he kneeled to clean Charity and examine the burned-in signatures. “*Property of Hulk and Priest. Nice.*”

“That means you’re ours, forever,” I whispered, and leaned down to lie face to face. I had a lump and a glow in my chest I’d never had before.

“*Mmm.*” She licked my finger that her own fingers were curled around. “Lucky I like both of you then.”

I snorted, grinned.

“I heard that, miss.” Hulk hauled himself onto the stage and lay behind her. “I’d spank you for insolence, but I can’t.”

Charity giggled. “Thank god for that. Hey, does this mean I can be all—”

“No,” we both said in unison.

I met Hulk’s eyes over the top of her, distantly aware the crowd had whistled and cheered when Hulk climaxed. “We can still string her up and flog her back?”

“Or suture her mouth shut.”

“Better,” I agreed, teasing her while also wondering *if...*

“*Pfft.* Threats will never deter me.”

That was a challenge if ever I heard one. “There’s a bed for us here?”

“The whole shebang. Ensuite, bed, balcony. We stay the night. After all, I own this house.”

Fuck. How much did I not know about this man?

“That’s a secret,” he added.

So now I was in on secrets. It gave me serious pause in the middle of all this kinky mayhem.

“Let’s go shower,” he said. “We can climb into bed and discuss how to punish our brat when her rear is off limits.” Hulk elevated himself above her, took her jaw, and made her turn her head to look at him. “You have a week, approximately. That’s the extent of your grace. After that—”

“Buttageddon?” I suggested.

“Buttageddon? What the fuck?” Charity chortled, chest heaving as she laughed.

Hulk hooked fingers into the corner of her mouth, abruptly silencing her. “I think I like the sound of that.”

I guess I had Armageddon on the brain tonight.

I had to wonder why. It wasn't all joking. Life never was, and nobody ever gave anything to you for free. Those secrets of his—I knew so few of them. What Charity had said—about how the photo of the other man looked the same as Hulk—was she trying to say they really were the same person? Was that why she was so reluctant to tell me?

Until now, I hadn't had time to really wonder about her words.

C *HARITY*

The soundproofing in the house must be excellent, was my first thought on waking, as I lay on my back in bed staring at what seemed to be butterflies made of light dancing on the ceiling.

My second thought was about the dream I'd had. I vaguely recalled the three of us having a big talk in the dream, and everything was revealed and then...then the doctor realized Cassius and I had betrayed him. I wasn't sure what happened after that except it had involved a long endless chase through a darkened house.

I rechecked the ceiling and the floating specks of sunlight were reflections from the frosted glass shade outside the bedroom window.

Not the same room as in my dream.

Which meant we still hadn't talked.

I'd zonked out last night, hadn't I? The shower with the men while they talked and soaped me up was memorable but then I must've brushed my teeth and afterward was hazy. I'd crawled into bed and snuggled between them while they played chess on the wall screen. I sat up slowly, letting the sheet slip off my breasts and upper torso. To either side of me, the men were still asleep. Cassius was snoring.

So much for his military experience, I thought wryly.

Trying to not rock the bed, I slid off at the foot end—carefully, due to the dressing over the brand—then went to the bathroom.

When I returned, the doctor was awake. He eyed me as I tiptoed to the bed. I halted, smiled, and he said nothing. He only pointed to the now non-snoring Cassius, as if to say *shhh*.

I shrugged and slipped onto the bottom of the bed, ready to crawl back into my spot.

“I’m fuckin’ awake, you two.” Cassius rolled over, yawned, then hauled himself into a sitting position. “Time?”

“Almost six AM,” I told him, pausing, and sitting up on my heels. “Are we going to have that talk, soon?”

A little morsel of panic arrived in the region of my heart. Was I pushing too hard?

The doctor went up on his elbow and gave me this quizzical look that exploded the possibilities in my suspicious mind. Was he trying to tell me something?

I was ready, though. I needed this done. I couldn’t live any longer in a limbo of misinformation, mystification, and silence. I didn’t crawl further up to the head of the bed. It would be too easy for him to grab me and make me shut up, turn me on even, pretend he only wanted to talk about sex... whatever.

I perched on my heels, naked though I was, and opened my mouth to speak.

“You want to talk,” the doctor said.

“Yes. Are you ready to do this?” I raised my eyebrows because giving him an out was polite and instinctive. I sat with my hands clasped in my lap, my naked lap, feeling terribly vulnerable. It was possible all my deductions were completely stupid.

“What is this going to be about?” Cassius looked puzzled. “You two seem to be talking in another language.”

The doctor pulled himself higher and patted the bed beside him. “First. Up here, Charity.”

“I’m staying here for now. Safer.”

“Really? Okay. Stay there.” He looked from me to Cassius and back. “You’ll have to allow me some leeway and some time, Cassius, because I am never ready for this.”

I thought that through, fast. “You’ve done this before then?”

“A few times. Most of my lost girls had a talk, but not all.”

“Is this...is this partly about what she found on that dive?” Cassius opened his hand. “If it is, I’m listening. I know how to absorb info and not jump in too soon.”

Except on the beach that night. I chose not to say that. It wasn’t relevant.

“I have to know I can trust people first.” The doctor nodded at me. “It’s that and other things. I’m never sure, almost never am I sure, completely.” His voice had trailed off.

He was delaying.

“Maybe I should start? I can say what I have figured out.” I looked at the quilt next to my knee and drew pretend squiggles. The distraction calmed me. “It’s possible I’m way off base. If so...” I inhaled deeply. “I will look dumb. But hey, if you’d rather I say stuff first?”

I looked at the doctor. He pursed his lips.

“I should start with my own confession.” I hoped that Cassius would follow my lead. “I was spying on you for Jacob. Well, I was supposed to, but I never sent him anything directly.”

He said nothing, just popped up one eyebrow and gestured for me to continue.

“I have a phone from him. It’s back on the island. I took photos of your personal diary and I’m sorry. He said he’d seen those—so, I’m guessing it was on cloud back up.”

He nodded. “That explains some of what he knew.”

“I apologize for what I did.”

He folded back the quilt and sheet and slipped from the bed to pace to the wide window. The view out there was probably his land. “You didn’t know me well when you agreed?”

“No.” I relocated to the edge of the bed and sat there instead. Cassius slithered over on his stomach, in his naked male glory. I couldn’t help admiring him. He perched beside me on his belly, up on his forearms. He wasn’t looking at me though, but at the doctor’s back.

“If we’re doing confessions, I have one too.” He kissed my thigh, and I ruffled my hand through his fair hair, half-smiling. The man was so pretty, and his mouth was even prettier. Impossible not to imagine him licking me to orgasm, even this morning in the middle of this.

Was this going to be a revelatory time? The secrets the doctor had spoken of would gobble me up from the inside if left to fester.

“I forgive you. You, too, Cassius. I knew you were planted on me by Jacob. It was obvious from the first day. I’ve kept far worse secrets. I *have* worse secrets. I cannot tell you everything. Please, understand this before I begin.”

“Oh, I understand. You knew already?” Cassius seemed more disconcerted by the doctor knowing he’d been spying for Jacob, than anything else.

I grinned down at him. This man...adorable if a bit stupid.

“Me too.” I raised my head. “I guess I understand?” It was difficult to say for sure when the facts were so murky.

“Thank you. Your admissions helped. Trust does need clarity.” Three armchairs faced the window, and he turned and sat in one, placed his arms on the armrests before regarding us with that familiar stony expression of his.

“I am not blameless. I am not perfect. I won’t deny I’ve been a bad man for part of my long life, but I changed. I’m a living example of someone who can change.” He smiled then. “Cassius, did you know that Jacob has cancer?”

“Oh. Fuck no. I didn’t.” He swung around on the bed to sit with me. I leaned into his shoulder, and he pulled me into his lovely warm body.

“This is why he’s been looking into my life, into me, where I have been, and what I do. I’m unsure what made him initially interested, but he thinks I can help him cure his cancer.”

Could he cure cancer? Another question to add to my pile.

The light from the window played on half his face and lent the doctor a dramatic appearance—half darkened and shadowed, half well-lit and warm in soft morning tones.

“Why?” I thought I knew why. Was he waiting, maybe to see how much I knew. I decided I should trigger this. If it helped him decide what to tell us, if my deductions truly led to a reality, then this was good and fine with me. If not? Klutz R Us.

“Have you...” The room closed in, external sounds fading, as if the room also hung on the next words, “Have you lived far longer than the average person?”

“I figured that’s what you meant,” Cassius whispered. “And that you’re on the wrong meds.”

I flicked him a stare. He still had no idea, and of course he didn’t. I’d been mulling this over for far too long and was on the edge of a precipice...but a familiar one. I needed to jump.

The doctor steepled his fingers. “Yes, Charity, I have lived a very long time. Perhaps it is best if you prompt me. I am always fearful of the consequences of whatever I say in these moments.”

Fuck me but he was spewing mouthfuls of long-winded sentences. And still he’d not shared his age. He was circling the topic like water going around a drain.

The doctor was afraid.

He would have reasons for his fear. This made me afraid too. I was tapping at the ice I was walking on with a big blunt stick.

“You’ve been afraid of this before,” I mused. “How many times have you done this—told people? Was that list in the diary all of your lost girls? In the Inner Sanctum, I found some objects that seemed theirs. As if you’ve kept mementos?”

He frowned and said nothing. His hands shifted to the armrests, his fingers clutching.

I suddenly empathized in a way that turned things upside down.

“This is like...” I met his eyes and melted into a sadness, a weird soul matching sadness. “It’s like telling your family you are really an alien? Is that why?”

He laughed, briefly, then he nodded, staring at the floor. “Yes. Except I’m not an alien.”

“That’s good,” Cassius drawled. “Never ever thought you were. We’re friends, though, doc. If this is that hard to say—”

I interrupted, “I’m going to butt in and punch this out. Here’s what I know or think I know. You can choose what to tell us?”

“Okay. Wait.” He stood and walked back to us, flopped onto the bed, back where he began. “This is better. Friends and lovers, yes.” He nudged me with his toes, then Cassius. “Please, Charity. Go on.” He held out his hand, palm out. “Please.”

“Okay.” I inhaled, thinking. “This is so hard to sum up. I might just run through it in the same order as I found out these things.” I rubbed my temple, thinking. “After Cassius, and Jacob, wanted to know about you, and were worried you were some psycho demon-worshipping serial killer...” I peeked past my hand, and he was just waiting, “After that, I got the phone. I saw all the stuff in the lower library in the tower. The pots of tissue samples. The weapons.”

None of that was what I needed.

“Then I found the fallen tower, the underwater tunnel, and saw they were connected.” I rattled onward. “I accessed the Inner Sanctum and found your diary. I’m sorry, doctor, but I

took photos of every page. Oh! I forgot the cemetery.” He grunted and waved me on.

“The lists in the diary meant almost nothing, even though some of the men in the left list were serial killers. It was when I found the photo beneath the tower that everything fell into place. You have the same tattoo as that man, Dr. H. Taylor. Horatio Taylor?” I was guessing there. “You are the same man. The tattoo SPQR is in the precisely same place. It’s also the symbol of the Roman Republic. The women on the list, one of them you married.” It had to be so. I had ceased to call these guesses and maybes because saying it made me even more sure of it.

“I think all of the women are your *lost girls*, like me.” I’d made inverted commas with my fingers as I said that. I looked at him again. “I think you have lived since the time of the Roman Republic, and that it’s your name on that helmet in the sanctum. Horatius Tertius.” I cleared my throat. “So. Tell me. Are you immortal?”

The other questions, I let lie. I’d leave it to him.

“I am...” He shut his eyes, opened them. “I believe I am immortal to a degree. I’m killable. As for whether I could cure Jacob’s cancer. No. I can’t because I won’t.”

He crossed his ankles and drew several slow deep breaths.

I was astounded to hear him confirm what I’d guessed. Cassius? Probably disbelieving, as well as stunned. He’d raised a hand at one point, as if to question the doctor, but had desisted, lowered it.

“*Ummm*,” Cassius seemed unsure who to speak to but settled on the doctor. “I could ask if you’re both on crack, but I know you’re not. You’re not joking, are you?”

The doctor shook his head. “No.”

“Not pranking me? If you are—”

“No,” he repeated.

“Fuck. This is a bit crazy.”

I rested my palm on Cassius's back. "I've been thinking about this a lot. I'm still having doubts... Even now. So, I get it—your confusion and doubts." I raised my head. "I'm unsure the doctor can even prove this irrefutably?"

"I can't. I never will. It's too dangerous to try to keep some sort of evidence. Though an antiquities professor would have a fit if they saw my full collection." He straightened himself against the headboard, ran a hand over his hair. "I could speak to you in ancient Latin, but that does not prove I have lived since then."

"DNA?" I frowned.

"Hah. It was actually a worry of mine. The contamination of any samples, with the DNA of anyone who handles them, would make that inconclusive. It'd mean nothing."

Cassius grabbed my arm and brought it to his front then took my hand in his. "I feel like I should run around yelling or something. I can't handle this as like a pre-breakfast spilling of ancient secrets. If you're really going to insist on this being real..." He stared at the ceiling, then shook his head. "Yeah, look. I'm at sea. I'm fucking at sea."

"There is no hurry, Cassius. Truthfully, I don't care if you don't believe in this. Let it be. As long as we, the three of us, are together..." His expression both hardened and looked a little lost. He blinked. "Just that will be enough for me. Please, don't worry about this."

"Don't worry about immortality? *Hmmm*. Okay. Time is all I think I need. And a drink or three, later."

I patted his chest. "We'll get thoroughly pissed tonight, together. Although maybe we should have champagne, to celebrate? Or we could play a dirge?" I asked, only mildly sarcastic there. I was wondering. The man was immortal and thousands of years old.

"A few drinks will be enough for me." The doctor reached his leg over the top of Cassius and nudged me with that toe again. "I wouldn't say your deductions were perfect, but you

dug enough of it out. Can you both understand why I don't reveal this to the world?"

"If true, you're old enough to have seen so much shit go down." Cassius stared at him. "The wars, the disasters, the plagues. The changes in countries, the fall and rise of empires."

"I have at that, yes. I will admit I have forgotten more than I remember. The human brain does not have the capacity to recall everything after thousands of years."

"I've forgotten all but the most striking details of my earlier life."

"That's why the mementoes and the notes." I thought back to the cemetery. "You knew all of those people in the cemetery."

"Yes. I've owned the island since the fourteenth century. I've accumulated wealth and land, and I've hidden away much of it. Terrible things have happened when I revealed my..." He grimaced. "My luck. I made the mistake of telling a few. Now, only we know, and Inigo. We can never tell the world, for reasons I discussed weeks ago."

"Okay. Assuming you're immortal." Cassius looked at him sideways. "This is making my head hurt, seriously. I get why the secrecy. Tell someone like Jacob and he'd use it in the worst ways. Why not form a secret cabal to get world domination and maybe angle us toward world peace? It doesn't have to be a bad thing. Does it?"

"People fuck things up. Immortality is power. The rich would have it. They'd have a chokehold on the means to immortality within a few decades. The poor would still be there, being stomped on."

I had to agree with him there. Even democracies seemed to favor the power mad and the billionaires in the climb to the top of the heap.

"I get that, doctor. So, what did you do with this?"

He still hadn't said how he achieved immortality. I was not asking. All in good time, I figured. The man looked strained to

his limits as it was. Cassius might ask, but I would not.

“I lived. I changed from someone who lacked a certain empathy for humanity, to someone who accepts our weaknesses, but never condemns all of us. We are all different, and it will always be so. I’ve grown rich, yes, but I use it wisely, I hope. I help people, anonymously for the most part. I decided I would likely let you both know who I am a week ago. I want you to work for me temporarily, Cassius. You seem to thrive on that. Learn from me, and then if I die one day, you can reap the benefits. Just swear to me, both of you, that this will remain a secret.”

“Done. I will swear, doc. Even if I’m still feeling a bit lost.”

“I promise I’ll keep your secret. It’s your secret anyway, sir. I know there is more you could say to us, but that can wait. And...” I shrugged one shoulder. “If you never tell us more, that’s also okay.”

“Hah.” The doctor leaned forward, snagged my upper arm, then pulled me up the bed and past Cassius, to sit between his legs. He smoothed back my hair from my forehead. “We’ll see. You are the only lost girl who has sorted this out long before I wanted to say anything. Some of them, I never told. Some, I released back into the world once their problems were resolved.”

Cassius crawled up to the top of the bed to join us. “Can I ask you this one thing?”

“Sure.” The doctor waited but he kissed the top of my head.

“She said you had a list of men who were killers? Were you killing them off? I recall you asking me what I would do if I was immortal.”

“And now you’re sleuthing too. Did I kill some bad men? I did. I killed more than are on that list. The others have been lost to time. I did tell you I was doing good. I see that as good.”

“Excellent. I’ll cross out Satan-worshipper then. Phew.”

The doctor reached over and punched Cassius on the arm. “Asshole.”

I leaned my head back to see the doctor. “Tsk. Bad language!” I thought I may as well add to the antics. Anything was better than the serious drama we’d just endured.

He chuckled then wrapped his arm about my neck. “If you weren’t already so very bruised on your behind—”

“And branded. You wrote your names on me.”

“That’s what we forgot to discuss,” he added. “How to punish you without involving spanking your ass.”

I held up a finger. “Safewording here. Defiance? Distress! I already need a retread of my clit due to yesterday.”

“How’s that immortal memory, doc? Do you recall a safeword for this girl? I don’t.”

I had to smile. They were only teasing me. I knew we hadn’t extracted everything from the doctor, but that was fine. We had a lot of time to get used to this and to learn about each other.

The doctor mock strangled me then encouraged me to turn around. He held my face and kissed me, generously, with great care and very slowly. When Cassius cleared his throat, he looked to him.

“I am not kissing you. You can have her, though.”

I untangled my legs and moved to Cassius. Before we could kiss, the doctor spoke.

“We have to visit the first house before we return to the island. I have things to do, security to check. Your ex-employer was removed from CNC membership last night.”

*C*HARITY

We were going to the first house, where this had all begun. I would never have imagined this would be the denouement, the result of those days. I had been despairing of a future, and now I had two lovers—two exceptionally sadistic yet adorable lovers. If one could ever call sadists adorable? It was probably illegal.

Though it was late afternoon and much later than the doctor had intended to fly out, I wore no blindfold.

I smiled and peered out the chopper's window again.

Once he'd revealed that he was immortal, the doctor had sat me down and told me I was allowed to go out into the world again. I was free. Yet he held my shackles, and we all knew it. If he were to send me away, I would beg to be allowed to return.

The reverse was also true. I was certain that if I expressed the wish to leave, Cassius and the doctor would be begging me to stay.

Would he ever tell us how he became immortal? I would like to know the answer, but I could wait. I'd rein in that curiosity of mine. I nestled my head into the seat headrest.

The helicopter blades massacred the air above us, but I was smiling despite the loud *thwop-thwop* in my ears. I closed my eyes and thought about all the centuries of life he had

experienced. I would get him to talk about those, with my head on his lap, perhaps, or at the dining table on the island, or on the beach while lounging and listening to the waves roll in. If it took years to listen to whatever he wished to say, I would be there.

The limo took us to the first house, eating up the roads in elegance and comfort, while the doctor drove. Cassius had sat in the front, so I unpacked a book I'd found at the CNC mansion and read. We passed through a security checkpoint at the edge of the land the house resided on.

“Is that normal?” Cassius asked as the car surged forward.

“No. I set it up last night, after Jacob made threats. I'll have to deal with him soon. I may not tell you how, but as you can imagine I've had a lot of experience dealing with men like him in my lifetime.”

“I bet you have.” Cassius looked back at me, then continued, “You know, identity is harder to spoof or change now. Technology and all. You can't just vanish then reappear as a new person.”

“This is true. It is becoming difficult. I have to set things up decades ahead.”

Interesting. I sank back into my novel. Decades meant nothing was happening right now.

We passed through the gate in the wall that surrounded the house and garden. The guard I'd seen before was there. He opened the limo door for me.

The gate shut behind us with a small *thunk* as it slid home.

Night was falling.

I looked around. This was not the same garden, where I'd sat with the doctor. There was a garage ahead and what I assumed was the front of the house—an arched trelliswork

covered a path leading to an arch-shaped door. It was a match to the rear door—white paint and a brushed steel handle.

The guard ushered us in. The house was mostly dark, except for a few hallway lights, and the doors to the rooms we passed were shut.

“Only Estelle is still here?” the doctor asked the guard. “I texted her to say we were coming but forgot to ask that.”

“Yes, sir. The gardener and housekeeper come in twice weekly and only during the day, while you’re away.”

“Good. Where is she?”

“In the Angel Room, here, sir.” He opened the door beside me. “I believe she thought we had some vermin and was checking.”

As the door swung wider open, I remembered this room with the black-and-white tiles. It had the grand window with the stained-glass tableaux of angels and demons. This was where I’d lain on a table to be probed by the doctor.

“We’ll stay for a meal,” the doctor said, ushering me in first. “I have to decide on whether to shut the house down for a while.” He followed me in. Cassius and the guard were last.

“Where are you, Estelle?” the doctor asked.

I believe I saw it first—the table with her body on it. It was the same table I’d lain on, and now a dead woman was there, tied down at wrists and ankles, and with blood leaking onto the floor. Jacob must have just pulled the red-stained sheet from over her, as it was floating down. A dagger stood up between her breasts. I couldn’t say what expression was on her face, but Jacob had a triumphant sneer on his.

I was too slow, I thought, in those few seconds while I stared. I should have looked faster.

If it’d been Cassius through the door first, or even the doctor, we might have been saved.

They’d moved the table, so it was to the left and in the far corner, as well as flush against the wall the door was situated in. Jacob stood behind the table.

They must have known we were coming, was one of my few coherent thoughts, as the shock washed through me.

The guard, was my second thought.

By the time I'd gasped and said, "What is—" which was a stupid, useless warning, the doctor had spun to look, and the two guards Jacob employed had yelled, "Don't move! Hands up!"

There was a contradiction in those words, but I raised my hands. My heart thudded in preparation for flight, but here I was frozen with fear. My lips turned cold.

Our own guard had pulled his gun and trained it on Cassius.

"Move into the middle," Jacob's ugliest guard indicated with his weapon. Guard One, I designated him. Guard Two was the other.

Betrayer Guard was the one employed by Dr. Romanus. If not for the gun he aimed at the back of Cassius's head, from barely a foot away, I thought Cassius might have tried something by now—he looked quietly furious. Me, my legs had decided to quake. If I'd had a gun to shoot, I'd probably hit a pigeon on the outside roof before anyone in here.

All of them held their pistols to eye level and were unwavering. They seemed keen on aiming at Cassius or the doctor. I was the lesser threat.

"Good evening, Jacob," the doctor said. "Let me guess, you want to be cured of cancer?"

"I do." Pushing the table, its wheels squeaking, he brought it to where it had originally been placed. The wheels left bloody tracks. Then he sat on the nearest of the red sofas. Those still formed a half-circle, as if ready for an audience.

"As you can see, I've tried by myself." He gestured vaguely at the dead woman. "It didn't work, though I suspect it was more a matter of *she* didn't suit the ritual, than the ritual being wrong?" His gaze drifted to me for a moment, before returning to the doctor.

A greater chill settled over me until my heart seemed likely to freeze in the utter cold.

What was this?

Jacob's pallor made me wonder if he'd declined hospitalization due to some desperate hope that the doctor knew a secret cure. A gory secret cure.

The dagger in the woman was impossible to ignore. *What had I missed*, my brain was asking me. There was a ritual, and it was a sacrificial one. Jacob had always seemed fixated on this idea.

"Why did you have to kill her?" The doctor was staring sadly at the woman.

"Because you would not help me. It was a simple ask." He coughed into his hand. "So, you will help me do this properly. We will all get out of here alive...or almost all, and then we can discuss the removal of the CNC security detail that's out there, and how to use this immortality to the best advantage. Yes?"

"How did you get past them?" the doctor asked, hands still high.

"We arrived before they did. Simple."

I'd been slowly lowering my hands, and no one cared as far as I could tell. I pretended to be fascinated by the dead woman, by the blood on her, and that dagger. I was fascinated, as well as severely nauseous. So. Much. Blood. My legs were still shaking. The dagger was obscene.

Her chest had a gaping hole where I thought they'd removed her heart.

This all fitted the diagram in the first book the doctor gave me.

The *room* fitted the diagram.

The black-and-white tiles were not random; they matched what that original drawing had showed me, weeks ago.

Fuck. I swallowed down bile.

This was what the doctor had failed to tell us and, of course, why he didn't do that was now screamingly obvious.

This woman must have screamed, despite the gag wrapped about her mouth.

"Perhaps I can help." The doctor's words seemed to arrive from a distance. "Have you any implants, Jacob? Anything left inside you?"

"No. Is that key. Is this what I missed?"

Unsullied. Jacob was unsullied.

"Will my people survive? You'll let them live?"

Those were the doctor's words again, and I turned to listen.

"Not her. I need your special girl for the ritual." Jacob was pointing at me.

Oh shit.

Cassius turned and lunged for the Betrayer. A shot erupted from his gun and went past Cassius's ear, judging by how he'd deflected the barrel. He somehow ripped the gun from the man's hand, eliciting a scream as his hand broke. Cassius shot Betrayer, and he turned...

And the other two guards gunned him down. The gun skidded across the floor.

Shit... Again.

Open-mouthed, my heart crying out, I stared at my lover, bleeding on the floor in a twisted heap. He was breathing, but those were his last ragged breaths, and everyone in the room knew it.

"Not him either," Jacob added. "Sorry."

I reached over and yanked the dagger from the woman's chest, then I marched toward the nearest guard, Guard One.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Jacob sounded exasperated. "Get that off her but do not injure her, much."

“You can’t use her. You don’t need to. Anyone will do.”
My doctor sounded desperate.

“Sorry. I know you killed rarely and only selected victims. I ran the data through a computer looking for matches, reasons, similarities.”

“I killed killers.”

“Really? Half were women.”

Mistakes were the mother of mayhem. No idea where that came from, but I knew Jacob had made one. I’d known it since I realized that a ritual was the reason for the doctor’s immortality. The reason I knew? Trust. The big bad *T* word.

By then the guard had reached me, and I’d reached him, because I’d run. It wasn’t easy disarming someone with a knife unless you had protective gear or a gun. I knew this.

How confident was this man? I thought I had a good hunch as to how this would play out.

I slashed at him; he leaped back. Then he raised the gun and shot me in the upper leg. The kick from that, the agony blew through me. *Fuck*. I hated being proven right was my thought as I spun with my leg collapsing, and I fell.

I’d always been a determined woman. Even as I heard the doctor’s anguished, “No!” I reversed the dagger. *Don’t move your hand! Don’t!* My chest hit the dagger and it sank in, my full body weight slamming me downward onto the point. Gravity sucks.

I screamed. I rolled, my mouth torn into the shape of pain, my arms out as if in plea to some unknown god, and I was hearing Jacob’s “No!”

There were gunshots: four of. My view was that of unfocussed floor, and then a wave of nothing came creeping into my mind to silence me.

My last thoughts were of hope: *he was a soldier, once, or a hundred times. If not, if I were wrong, I’d fail. If this was death, perhaps I deserved it for my mistake.*

I should have looked.

D OCTOR H. ROMANUS

As soon as Charity turned the dagger on herself, I knew what she was doing. Forewarned, I was ready, or readier than they were. That millisecond of uncertainty when she was shot and fell and stabbed herself, when Jacob launched himself upright, shouting *no*, because his sacrifice was dying—it was enough. The guards looked to her then to Jacob, while I dropped to my knees and scooped up the gun dropped by my bastard guard.

My little Charity had banked on me remaining calm and being able to do this, to shoot methodically when my whole world lay burning at my feet, with Cassius bleeding out, with her sobbing in agony and rocking on the floor with a knife in her chest.

First, I shot the guard next to her, he'd bent over her, as if to extract that knife. Headshot, chest shot. He was gone, collapsing. I turned, gun arm extended. Three more shots swiftly placed in the guard turning back to me with his gun coming to bear. One to the chest, two more to the leg. I approached them both, carefully but fast.

First was dead, but I kicked his gun away. Second was alive. Jacob was reaching into his jacket.

“Don't! Hands high!”

He raised them, shakily.

I needed Jacob. He was clean and unsullied, and this second guard was young. I ran to the guard, past Charity, only sparing her one agonized glance. I tuned out her cries. I'd heard a million cries on the battlefield, held the hands of a thousand mortally wounded friends.

Jacob still held his hands high.

Not today, Hades, Mars, and Satan. Not my friends. Not my lovers.

Triage was my key. Fix the urgent things, first.

I must do this in order.

Yet, Cassius was unconscious and going to die within the next few minutes. The bubbles of blood said his wounds were bleeding into the respiratory tract. An emergency call might save Charity, but not my brother. I'd never thought to have a brother again, after two thousand years. I wiped my eyes with my spare hand.

I tied the living guard with a zip tie from the table. They'd left a whole bag of them for me. Nice of them. Watching Jacob, I dragged the guard closer to the table, leaving a swathe of blood. Would he live long enough? He must.

I threw a mental prayer to my long-lost gods—the good ones.

“What are you doing?” Jacob shrieked. He'd finally regained his voice.

I stalked to him and shot him in the arm. Triage.

I pointed at the floor, and he groveled there, begging. One memory of how Estelle looked with her heart excised expunged all my sympathy for this asshole. I shot his other arm, careful not to hit anything dangerously close to major vessels. While he cried, I dragged him to the table.

It took a few seconds to snap Estelle's bonds then lift her down.

I worked fast, unmoved by the blood, violence, and death. But I placed her gently, two paces to the side.

I smashed Jacob in the face, once, then lifted him onto the table and tied his arms then his legs to the corners. I gagged him to lessen his interference.

I eyed the distribution. The other bodies were okay where they lay. It was him I needed, and the other man. The ritual itself, I could say it as fast as possible, if every syllable was enunciated. Every step around the room, every gesture must be correct, every tone in my voice, every need must be ripe and ready for execution. I'd done this a hundred times, give or take a few.

Practice makes perfect. I sniffed and ignored the sweat running down my face.

Triage. I should ignore everything else, get the greater good done faster.

But a cry and movement from Charity called me, made me hesitate.

She might not make it. None of this was certain. I ran to her and bowed my head, lifted hers off the floor a bare inch, cradling her. "I'm here. I'm sorry, little one, I'm sorry."

She couldn't talk by then, her breaths shallow and fast—her chest wasn't expanding. The dagger protruding from her was an accusation, but I couldn't pull it out. Extraction might cause catastrophic bleeding and damage that would hasten her death. That must only be only done when I was seconds from completion of the rite.

I thought I felt her nod, felt the stir of her fingers at my side, then she closed her eyes. I kissed her forehead. "I'll be back. Hold on. Don't die, girl." Tears blurred my vision, and I whispered a last plea, "Don't die, else I'll spank your ass red."

I lowered her head.

Her gaze followed me as I rose.

Even if everything succeeded, I was dooming them to be as I was, and it wasn't all wine, roses, and song.

I am ready. I strode purposefully toward the first sacrifice.

Triage. Do it in order. Then I realized that the dagger I'd been using for centuries was inside Charity.

If I pulled it from her, she would scream and die in my arms. Arms rigid and hands propped on the table, I thought this through.

It wasn't the instrument, it was the ritual, it was hitting the vocal marks, the steps and turns, and the need must be utmost in my mind. I just needed something sharp and capable of dealing with bone.

I could do this without it. "I can fucking do this," I said out loud, aware my hands were in pain from my grip on the edge of the table. I turned, sprinted for the door.

When I returned a few minutes later, I was ready...again.

His eyes bulged and Jacob whimpered as I swung my tenth-century, *Kissaki-moroha* tanto knife high. It was poised above his heart, and I gripped a pair of heavy-duty garden secateurs in my left hand, in reserve.

"You'd better not hurt my knife, you asshole." I plunged it downward.

CASSIUS

Groaning, I sat up, aware of the doctor beside me but too overwhelmed to care. I buried my face in my hands, rocking, acclimatizing to an immense pain that bored through me in so many places on my body. The pain pulsed and expanded, shrank, shrank some more. A moment later, the pain was gone.

Instead, I felt whole yet surreal—distorted in some way.

"What the fuck?" I addressed that partly to myself and my hands, partly to the doctor. From what I could see of the floor, my eyesight was going in and out of focus like a badly adjusted camera. My skin prickled all the way to inside my head. I groaned again and gulped back nausea.

“Good. It worked on you. Her. I don’t know. The guy is dying,” he whispered those last words, then stood and took two long paces. Efficient as a robot, he ripped away four zip ties from anchor points on a table, then pulled a bloodied body off the table to the floor. It hit with a dull thud and a sharper noise as the head connected. Was that Jacob?

I’d been shot? Hadn’t I? I checked my chest, patting it, and found holes where the bullets had entered cloth...and my blood, but my skin beneath was perfect and painless. “He shot me?”

“This one did.” Doc hauled a weakly protesting guard onto the table and began to ruthlessly tie him down. Blood dripped from the table, leaking in drizzles, leaving a pool below.

I, too, was sitting in thick smears of blood. “Fuck this.”

The doctor was busy, maybe he needed help doing this... whatever.

What was he doing? Beneath the table, far across the other side, my eyesight finally decided to show me Charity on her back, with the knife sticking up from her chest and shaking as she breathed.

“Oh fuck. Not you too.” I rose and stagger-sprawled her way, almost tripped.

“Bring her to me, gently. I don’t know if this will work.” His voice was torn, and almost a sob. It was not a sound I’d ever heard the doctor make.

I reached her and went to one knee and scooped her up. My balance was improving. I was careful not to topple and drop her. I turned to go to the doctor. He’d brought some antique knife high, looked ready to plunge it into the guard.

“Bring her! Leave her near me, Cassius. Unless you prefer to let her die?” He lowered the knife a tad, hand shaking. His forehead was corrugated with apprehension and maybe doubt.

“That’s a real question?” I asked as I approached.

“A real urgent one. I gave Jacob’s life energy to you. This man is for her, but this dooms you both, to forever needing

more.”

“Really?” More deaths. More victims like these bastards. I placed Charity on the floor. Her eyes were closed, and she was unconscious, or near to it. Did I have the power, the right to make this decision?

“She stabbed herself to distract the guards,” he explained. “It’s how I got to where we are. She knew what I could do.” And yet still the doctor looked as if he thought he had one foot in Hell.

“She trusted you to save her. She wanted to save us all.” I locked eyes with the doctor. “Do it.”

“Run to the wall. Don’t speak at all. Don’t move until I say to.”

I nodded and ran, kept myself facing the huge window of angels and demons this room seemed named for. The symbolism was so perfectly apt.

I heard the thud as the knife met flesh.

I really hoped I was right.

C *HARITY*

My awakening was nothing like an awakening should be.

An ill-defined succession of days surfaced in my awareness, unsorted by time or space, of being cared for, talked to, fed, and bathed. I took one breath that sounded inside the empty blackness that dwelled within my eyes...and felt my chest rise.

The fog evaporated.

The world zoomed in like great piece of cinematography on a 5K OLED screen.

Tree branches waved against a cloud-free blue sky. The murmuring sea seduced my ears. The fresh, heated smell of a sun-toasted beach, and the feel of beautifully soft bed linen beneath my bare legs and arms were, suddenly, real.

I sat up and smoothed my hand over the red-black-and-white Japanese-inspired quilt. The swirls of metalwork at the foot of the bed drew me to look past it, through the trees and dune grasses, to where sand sloped away to the glare of the beach.

Dry leaves rattled as they rolled between the trees, spurred on by a stray gust.

My vision wavered and rocked. I steadied myself.

Those memories returned, slightly enhanced, and I recalled the doctor visiting me, and meals being spooned and forked to my mouth, and the tinkle of bath water as I was sponged. Those were still jumbled, but they led me further into the past.

There had been a night of murder, betrayal, blood, and gunfire. It was vaguely there in my head but had faded and messed up. Maybe that was good.

Gingerly, I felt my chest where the dagger had thrust in, then I swung my legs over to the edge, and lowered myself to the ground. Was this real? This bed was almost on the beach. I doubted the existence of the ground, until my toes hit the warm sand.

Grit edged up through my toes, and I squirmed my feet deeper, marveling at the sensations.

The bed was in the shade and at the house's rear, or the front entrance—depending on how you saw the house. The house lay behind me.

I was alive and on the island. Unless this was some strange dream in the afterlife?

I wore a strappy, soft-blue top and white linen shorts. I gathered up the cloth of the top and found a scar, below my breast, where the knife had cut me.

Wait... That night, it'd done far more than cut. The thing had stuck up from me, like a malevolent cross.

I should have died. Maybe I had.

I flexed my left leg where a bullet had struck and there, at last, was more than a faint scar. The muscle was tight, and I winced at a remaining ache. I took a step and found I had a limp. The limp made this real and strangely satisfying. I had survived.

The doctor had survived.

A man was stretched out on a towel on the beach, just below me, with a book over his face. My heart skittered and yet a small desolation set in. And Cassius? Could he be alive?

Using the occasional tree as a prop, I shuffled and limped down the sand to the doctor.

He must have heard me coming, for he shifted aside the book, rolled over then leaped to his feet, with a smile spreading across his face. He opened his arms, and I fell into his embrace, sighing at the feel of him surrounding me.

“You,” I said.

“Me.” He stroked my hair. “And you, gorgeous princess. You’re properly awake, at last. You had us fretting.”

Us. I clung to that *us*, though he might mean Inigo or any number of the staff.

The question waited, unsaid, for I was afraid to know the answer. I recalled Cassius on the floor, gasping for air, bloody and horribly silenced, after he tried to save us from whatever had happened.

I found my courage and my tongue, but I almost whimpered it into the doctor’s shoulder, “Cassius? Is he... He didn’t?”

“Well, he told me to say he died a brave death, but—”

He what? I tilted back my head, frowning. Which was when I heard a string of rapid, sand-muffled footsteps.

“Holy shit! You’re awake! Charityyyyyy!”

I turned in the doctor’s arms, grinning, and ready to curse Cassius for telling the doctor to lie, when he slammed into us both. I think he braked, at the last, thank fuck.

He grabbed my face and kissed me, then broke away, panting and laughing all at once.

“You wanker.” I poked his ribs through the open front of the vile floral shirt he wore. “You told him to tell me you died? What the?”

From the corner of my eyes, I flicked away a few embarrassing tears with a finger.

He shrugged and kissed me again, and his breathing quieted slowly as he searched my eyes. “You have no idea

how worried I was. Even the doc worried. We had to give you this extra dose to bring you back.”

“Oh.” The reason I’d stabbed myself avalanched into my head—the CNC party and the shock of being ambushed at the house, the ritual, oh yes, the ritual. That there was the reason Jacob wanted me alive and why he’d murdered Estelle.

A moment ago, I’d somehow been floating in a place where the memories existed but were not connecting and registering in my consciousness.

“I hadn’t...” I shook my head. “I’m sorry, I...”

“I know. It took me a while too.” He looked over my head at the doctor, who had simply held my waist while Cassius and I babbled at each other.

“I saved Cassius first. You came within seconds of dying, Charity. The guard’s life was dwindling and not enough to heal you completely.”

“So...” I bit my lip. “You killed someone else?”

I was struggling to understand. I’d thought I knew what the ritual was, that night, but I had not been certain. I’d gambled on the doctor being able to come out on top, with my distraction happening.

“No. We haven’t killed anyone else. I’ve developed a way to save some of the lifeforce, for emergencies. I used a stored sample. It’s not the best way, so we waited to be sure we had no alternative.” He exhaled, and I could feel and hear the shake in it. “I’m sorry to have drawn you into this. It can make you feel dirty and evil.”

I stepped away from them, but held one of their hands in mine, as if we were children about to do a dance. It made me think of that old children’s game, *Ring Around the Rosie*, that some thought harked back to the plague. I was being terribly morbid, but I had reasons.

“I don’t think my head is functioning normally, yet. Do you mean you’ve drawn me into using killers to help us to...” Us—it was funny to be saying that, and what words were used for this ritual that extracted life? “To regenerate.”

“I do. To do that and to simply live longer than anyone else on this planet. To outlive friends and family, to watch the history of mankind as we die and live and fuck up everything. I don’t expect you to see all the ramifications at once, Charity.”

He sounded bitter. He *was* bitter.

“This needs no forgiveness, but if you need it, I forgive you, sir.” I cupped his face with my hands, then I did a hop to reach up and kiss him, which made him laugh. He leaned in, and we shared a long, soul-healing kiss. “I needed that.” Cassius came in and hugged me from behind, his arms below my breasts. “Can we go back to the shade and sit on that bed that’s surreally out here, where no bed should be? I’m still a bit woozy.”

“Sure,” the doctor said. He stayed to one side of me, Cassius to the other.

I guess they thought to rescue me if I fell. It felt odd to be so weak in the legs. My limp was obvious as we walked.

Cassius spoke across me to the doctor. “Is her leg going to improve?”

“I’m unsure. We might have to seek out another source.”

And *source* must mean find someone to kill who sucked enough at living to make killing them seem justifiable,

How did one justify taking a life to heal an injured leg?

The doctor was right. This was giving me a slimy feeling. On the other hand, I’d sacrifice a Dahmer for free, anytime. Or a Hitler, or even a Putin. This was going to take time to wrap my head around. Could I ever see murderers as simply an energy source?

We reached the bed, and I leaned on it then hopped back on board, leaving sand on the quilt. I pulled myself to the middle, where a bank of pillows waited. I sighed and slumped into one, face first.

“Let’s have brunch here, doc? Inigo is waving.”

The doctor dropped onto the bed to my left, and I rolled onto my side and found his hairy knee next to me. I ran my hand over his muscular calf, as he bellowed out an order. We were all of us, killers now. Even I, for I'd stabbed myself to help the doctor kill. Self-defense, I could have argued, but still, it bothered my morals.

Mainly it bothered them because I remembered the hole in Estelle's chest.

I knew why that was there. That ritual in the book had required a heart, a newly harvested heart.

"Brunch, Inigo!"

"Okay!"

We were all alive. My god, how had this happened? And we were ordering food. I frowned at my thoughts. Everything was feeling wrong.

"Charity is awake, Inigo. A cocktail please, three of, to celebrate. And bring her a cooked breakfast! You're going to be extra hungry, soon," Cassius said that down to me before climbing into bed.

We were ordering food, blithely, after all that talk about death. What did one call that? Sacrilegious maybe, except everyone ate, even after they crashed planes, mowed down hundreds of soldiers with a machine gun, or gave birth to a baby. Life went on.

I looked at the men, to either side, then decided to hold in my maudlin thoughts. It would only make the doctor feel awful.

I sat up against the pillows. "This is decadent. A bed here, outside."

"My idea." Cassius patted my thigh. "After we gave you that extra dose, I told him we should put you somewhere more alive than the bedroom."

"Well, thank you then." I looked above. "Those trees and the sky woke me."

"He does have good ideas, occasionally."

“Yes. I think I should know more about everything. The ritual seemed out of a horror movie.”

He put his hand over mine and played with my fingers. “I can tell you more. If today is too soon, tell me. If you want to walk away from all of this, you can. Except...there is a penalty for using the ritual. If you decide to walk away from me over this, I’ll have to say what that is.”

“Walking away is never going to be for me. Not when I have you two. You should both know that,” I said quietly. I slipped downward and lay with my arm over his chest, felt Cassius move in to mold his body to mine. “Plus, you know my curiosity. Tell me what began this for you. Leave out the gore, please.”

“Insatiable Charity, yes.” He stirred my hair. “Rome used to sacrifice Gauls, during the time of the Roman Republic. I saw some dark reasons given for those. Once, just once, the priests happened upon a sequence that was both bloodier and more consequential. Three of us were regenerated, for no reason other than we were vicious bastards mocking a brave enemy. This, I remember well. That was the beginning. I’m not sure any of the others survived to repeat the rite.”

I partly raised my head. “You’ve seen nothing of them in all those thousands of years?”

“No. If they had lived, I fear the rite would have leaked out by now. Even if not common knowledge, I’d have seen echoes of its use.”

“Hmph.” I thought some more. Echoes of use sounded so normal yet also creepy. “I’m not sure I could have kept living if you two weren’t here when I woke up. You know...” I touched my chest. “In here seems different. Me. We cheated death. I stuck a knife inside myself. I remember the pain and seeing Cassius dying too. The rape almost shattered me.” Frowning, I shook my head and tried to voice this weird shift in attitude that had happened. “This is different, though. It’s bad but not the same.”

“It’s not your fault, any of this,” he said.

Cassius ran his hand over my shoulder. “That night was bad. Most people would find it hard to shake off. Even me, but I’ve had time and found my peace with this. It’s not your fault.”

“It didn’t do anything to you? You’re the same as always?”

He kissed my shoulder. “No one could be the same. I’m just fucking glad we all came out of that. I’ve seen soldiers fall apart after violence and killing. I feel justified, and at peace with this, and if this means we get to take out a confirmed serial killer, why not?”

I sat up on my elbow. “Doctor, what is the penalty?”

“Every twenty years or so your body will show signs of needing what I call a recharge. Or I call it that now. Modern times.” He flashed a half-smile. “We will need to kill someone. Three someones.”

“Oh. Fuck. That’s a lot.” I poked at his chest. “I see why you said I could walk away, but there’s a price. I won’t be leaving.” I looked at them both. “Jeez, though. This is fucked up.”

“The plus is...” He trapped my hand against his chest. “I’m rich. I have control of the board of the CNC Fraternity and many other resources around the world. This is how I removed Jacob. We can go anywhere, do almost anything you wish to do over those twenty years.”

“Oh.” I thought fast. “And you, when is your twenty up?”

“Very soon. I was searching because that whole unsullied thing was making the rite fail.”

I raised my eyebrows. So he’d tried and some victim or other had failed him. A bloody murder like Estelle, but with a bad man under the knife...like Jacob. Was I okay enough with this to continue?

“You never told me that, doc.”

He shrugged. “I was getting to it.”

“So, we can visit Paris, go to the North Pole, help the poor, and all we have to do is kill, now and then.” So fucking fucked

up.

Could I find peace in this, like Cassius? I guess I felt a new sort of power. I had a control over my life that I'd never had before. Jacob had intended to kill me, and I had survived and lived. I had consumed my enemy and defeated him. And I had my two men, whom I loved dearly and would kill for, if I had to.

I turned over on my back, with that vast blue sky above and sandwiched between my guys.

"I've definitely decided I'm not going anywhere. I would sink another knife into my chest to save us, if I that was what the situation needed. Or into someone else's chest."

Lunch was coming. Or brunch? I'd heard the door open and here was Inigo heading down the path, balancing a tray.

"If I am free now, to do as I wish, can I please see Emme?"

"I will arrange this. Perhaps Emme can meet you here."

Now that future prospect made me happy.

Once we were sitting up, eating, and trying to not spill food or drink on the quilt, I found myself coming up with more ideas. I placed my fork on the plate.

"Is it worth excavating the fallen tower to recover whatever is there, doctor?"

The doctor nodded. "Possibly. I'll have to think about it."

"Am I considered legally dead?" I stared at the doctor and Cassius in turn. "I am, aren't I? Since before I came to you."

"No. No longer dead. You have a new ID. A new last name," the doctor explained. "It's been done."

"Doctor." I pursed my lips. "What do I call you from now on? Isn't doctor getting old? I should have a proper name for you. Romanus means *citizen of Rome* so calling you Roman would be—"

"Old? An interesting concept. But I agree. Call me Hulk."

That name did suit him.

We sat there talking, about how the doctor was going to keep working, and if I or Cassius wished to, we could study something that interested us, such as engineering or how to hack a quantum computer. According to the doctor, living forever meant bettering your education. The quantum hacking had been my suggestion. In the middle of it all, I realized that apart from some kisses and hugs, this had been markedly non-sexual. Were they treating me with kid gloves due to my recent resurrection, so to speak? I'd been close to fucking dead, hadn't I? Were they scared to hurt me?

Perhaps they were.

That night, I lay between them in bed, listening to their breathing slowly wind down. Cassius began to snore, as he often did, and I sneaked my hand under both of their big warm hands, with all the manly bumps and callouses, and I wondered how I had ever gotten this lucky.

“Hey.” The doctor gently pulled me over to him, until I was cradled in the hollow between arm and shoulder. “Just know that you've given me life. I love you both more than I can ever say.”

“That's so beautiful.” I kissed the side of his chest. “Thank you for saving me, and you know I love you.”

Cassius stirred. “Hey. Me too, sweet thing. Me too. Love you, including even that big hairy man with the stethoscope and bad bedside manner.”

“If you were a sub, Cassius, I'd be making you pay for that,” Hulk added with a grumble. Cassius snorted.

I think the doctor wanted to say more, but he lapsed into silence.

It was enough, what had been said, more than enough.

I kept my hand in his and felt myself coasting into sleep as the wind outside sighed across the rooftop with the churn of the surf lending a minor distant key. I was safe, finally, and in the arms of my lovers.

The next morning, I woke first—it was the order in which we often woke. Me then doc, then Cassius. I thought about

coaxing them to do something to me, to have madly kinky sex but I guess I was not ready, and they were still playing it safe and gentle.

I wasn't normally one for gentle.

The day passed. We slept and woke without anything particularly sexual happening. Were they wanking while I wasn't looking? Had this ritual scared all the sperm from their bodies? I was being silly and yet starting our relationship again was curiously difficult. I wasn't used to being the instigator.

Maybe I should begin this? Right now, there was no CNC. There was in fact no C, no N, and no C.

The next morning, I lay flat on my back, awake, for more than a few minutes, watching the sun slide in across the ceiling, before I made a decision. I sneaked from under the sheets and watched and waited. Both remained oblivious. I grabbed the sheet and began stealthily pulling it off them, until both were uncovered to their knees. Cassius was wearing boxers, while the doctor aka Hulk slept naked. I was wearing PJ shorts but no panties.

Hulk woke up and eyed me from partly closed lids. "Hmmm?"

I crawled up his legs and sat on his thighs, took his semi-erect cock in hand then daintily applied my tongue in a long stroke that wound its way up his shaft. I thought about putting my mouth over him but watching it grow in my hand was just as good.

"So, you've decided you're well enough to be paddled?"

"I decided"—I ducked and favored him with a small suck then stopped—"that since you're both being slow at this sex stuff, including my attack puppy there." I sent Cassius a nod. "I'd start things. I'm going to get you hard then ride you while I get myself off."

Hulk looked exceptionally dubious, his mouth set in a straight line, though I detected a twitch, as if a smile threatened.

“Did she call me her attack puppy?” Cassius sat up straight like a vampire from a coffin. He swiped his hands over his face.

Hulk laughed. “She did. What should we do with her?”

Deviously, I leaned down and began to give a vigorous BJ. The doctor grunted and put his hands behind his head, but Cassius did what I’d hoped. He lunged for me, and I released my captive piece of man-meat and attempted a dodge, despite my giggle.

He pinned me down, hauled me over his lap, then yanked down the shorts. He let out a loud groan. “Finally, I get to spank this again.”

“Heyyy.” I shot him a glare. “That’s mine now, you defaulted.”

“Fuck. I need tickets to this show.” Hulk prodded the side of my hip with his foot. “How many clamps do you think will fit on her?”

“A few hundred,” Cassius growled. “It says here...” On my bare skin, he traced his fingers over the brand, “*PROPERTY OF HULK AND PRIEST.*” Then he smacked my ass, once. “Sit still for this, or else.”

“Wait. Bend her over the bed, and let me get her mouth on me, first.”

They tied my wrists at my back with a belt before positioning me. I was essentially gagged by what was shoved in my mouth, and it had become nicely erect and hard. The first smacks made me gasp around Hulk, and he jammed himself deeper.

“A warning, Miss Charity. If you bite me, far worse things will be inside you. There is a handy broom handle outside the door, for one.”

I was turned on but also a bit worried he was being truthful. I was never sure with Hulk.

Another ten spanks had that glow starting, the one that spread from my rear and through my lower body in a burn of

pleasure and pain.

The doctor slid off the bed, muttering about needing those clamps and a chain for the ceiling.

Cassius stopped and seemed to be waiting. Me, I panted into the quilt with my eyes closed, while quietly trying to press my clit to the bedding.

This was my first spanking after being made undead, or made more alive, or whatever it was I was now...

The future was bright after all, despite the murder, havoc, and gunfights that no doubt lay ahead.

As I drifted, I thought about how I could use Hulk for his name now. I loved that name. It rolled off my tongue.

We were a perfect threesome.

Hulk the big, deadly, sadistic, yet kind man.

Cassius, my attack puppy. He'd found another belt, and I heard the tinkle of the buckle a second before he thrashed the leather across both cheeks. I gasped and buried my face in the bedding, stuck my rear just a little higher. All the better to make myself a target.

"Mmmm. Pretty in red." He stepped in to feel where he'd marked me and pinch me until I jerked away and swore.

There was Hulk, Cassius, and there was me, the one with the insatiable curiosity and the ability to stab herself when needed.

Undead Vigilantes R Us.

I smiled at my silliness. Beneath my wacky sense of humor was a sincere appreciation of how well we suited each other. I knew now that living without them would devastate me. We were three people who complemented each other, and we loved each other to—dare I say it—the ends of the Earth.

GET the free BONUS EPILOGUE to His Talisman with more of Doc, Charity, and Cassius, at a CNC Fraternity castle. This bonus ties up some loose ends and you get to see Emme again.

The above link goes to my website. You can read the bonus chapters there, or download it as a book from Bookfunnel.

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Cari Silverwood is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling writer of kinky darkness or sometimes dark kinkiness, depending on her moods and the amount of time she's spent staring into the night.

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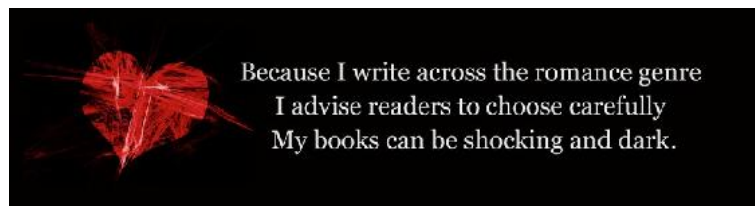
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NIGHTMARE RISING – a dark contemporary paranormal story cowritten with Nicolette Hugo

Magience series – epic fantasy

MAGIENCE

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