



CLUB AVALON BOOK 7

Live **LIVE**
for Me **FOR ME**

KAY ELLE PARKER

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This book is intended for a mature audience only.

Note From The Author & Dedication

Finishing *Live For Me* is bittersweet.

For the last few years, since Braun and Boadicea first popped into my head and then onto paper, Club Avalon has been my primary focus. Making sure all our favorite people find their happy-ever-after has been very important to me, and I hope I've achieved that—in your eyes, at the very least.

After some arm-twisting, I've decided to give Zeke his own book, which will be available in February 2023 in the *Tease Me* anthology.

A new character introduced in this book will have his own story, also in February 2023, in the *Black Light: Roulette* anthology. His story won't end there, however, and I look forward to introducing a new BDSM series in summer 2023.

***Live For Me* is slightly darker than the previous books, so please be aware that there is blood, death, and a whole lot of Dominic in this—which should be warning enough for die-hard Avalon fans.**

Thank you to every single reader who has picked up and read a book from this series. From *Dance to Live*, your support and love for the Avalon Masters got us this far, and they belong to you as much as they belong to me.

To my Nanette and Nora, who literally work their asses off to keep me and my ADHD brain in line—thank you for everything you do for me. You know how much I love you guys.

To Chas and the team, who worked through Christmas with me to get the story polished before deadline...I owe you more than I can say.

Live For Me

Chapter One

She was completely and utterly *fucked*.

It was astonishing really, how a small chain of seemingly harmless incidents could combine into an E.L.E—extinction level event. How things deteriorated so quickly, she couldn't understand, but it was clear her life was unraveling one thread at a time.

Myna sank into a chair and dropped her head onto the table, squeezing her eyes shut as tears threatened to fall. If they did, if she allowed them their freedom, they would drown her.

For once, she hadn't spent the holidays alone. Christmas might have been months ago, but she hadn't forgotten a moment of that week. The feeling of belonging to someone, to a community, remained with her despite the weeks that had passed and the distance between her and Phoenix.

Loki Jackson, one of the Masters of Avalon, had made her believe she had a place with him, with the people he called family. When he kissed her, it was with everything she'd ever dreamed of—passion, love, hope. When his hands roamed over her, it was with reverence, as though touching her was his reason for existing.

When he was inside her...she was home.

Sniffing, she shook her head, rubbing her forehead into the papers littering the tabletop. Why the hell hadn't she stayed? Why didn't she go with her gut instinct and say to hell with her life in D.C. and all the shit that came with it?

The moment she'd stepped off the plane, everything went wrong.

Her bag was stolen as she waited for a cab outside the airport, a snatch-and-grab that cost her a wrenched shoulder along with the loss of her phone, house keys, all her credit cards and cash, and a huge chunk of her confidence.

A week later, right before she opened her doors to her patients again, an electrical fault in a neighboring unit sparked a fire that ripped through the whole goddamn building. Eight businesses, including hers, were razed to the ground.

All her equipment, her patient files, had gone up in smoke. Big, black plumes of it. She hadn't had the money to invest in a computer system to track her records, so everything had been on paper, and what hadn't burned in the flames had been ruined by the copious amounts of water sprayed into the inferno.

The insurance money would come through, eventually, but it had taken over a month—well into February—before the investigation into the fire had been completed. Her insurance company had warned her it might take up to six months before she got paid, which meant six months of no income.

The stress of it all had made her so, so sick. She couldn't eat for days at a time, vomiting if she so much as looked at food. When she could manage to put anything in her mouth, she gorged. Her weight fluctuated from one day to the next, and she seemed to be permanently exhausted, crying over what she'd given up to be here in this shitstorm.

Myna lifted her head from the table, staring at the eviction notice glaring at her in big red letters. She laughed weakly,

tears wetting her lashes as she picked it up, screwed it into a ball, and lobbed it across the room.

Her landlord was selling out, giving his tenants a month to find somewhere else to live before the developers rolled in and flattened the apartment complex to make way for bigger, fancier accommodations.

By the end of April, she would be homeless.

She had nowhere to go. No friends. No job. No strong, tattooed shoulder to lean on.

God, how she wished she had the guts to go back to Phoenix. Just sell the stuff she didn't need, pack the rest, and return to where she'd left her heart, but she'd blown that chance when she hadn't kept in touch with Loki.

His number had been on her phone.

She didn't have his email address, and the contact details for Atticus and Alicia were nothing more than soggy ash. She'd tried ringing the club a couple of times, but no one had picked up and she'd been too embarrassed to leave a message.

Besides, if Loki felt the same way she did, surely, he'd have found a way to get in touch with her?

Maybe his affections were focused on another woman now, one he could see and touch and taste. That wonderful body being stroked and aroused by different hands.

It left a bitter taste in her mouth.

During the week she'd spent with him and his wonderful friends, more than one teasing comment had been thrown in his direction. It hadn't been difficult to work out that Loki was

more than a ladies' man—he was a downright playboy, charming women out of their panties with a look, and eagerly falling between their widely spread thighs.

There was no reason at all to believe anything had changed after she'd left.

That she'd changed him at all.

With a sigh, Myna let her eyes slide over to the edge of the table where she'd dropped the last piece of her downfall in shock. The slim white piece of plastic with its damning two lines in the little clear screens sat there innocently, mocking her in silence.

She might not have changed Loki's life, but what they'd shared together would soon be a very real, very tangible entity in hers.

It was the middle of the damn day, and Avalon had never been as chaotic.

Renovations were still underway in the third barn, slowly creeping into the second, but Liam had spent the past two weeks fiercely guarding the social area from the builders, with Zeke as his backup.

The swing doors to the walkway were firmly closed, the workmen dismissed for the day, and the Avalon subs—with help from their other halves—were scurrying around putting the finishing touches on a scene that would go down in the history books.

A three-piece band was setting up in the seating pit—a violist, a cellist, and a guitarist were fiddling with their

instruments, tuning up and finding their rhythm.

In the social area, all the tables that could be moved had already been carted next door to make room for the dozens of chairs spread out in rows facing the stage, leaving a path from the outer swing doors to the foot of the stage steps.

White lilies and burgundy roses were paired together on the back of each chair and arranged artfully in displays on the stage.

Oh, Loki got the symbolism. If his mood hadn't been down in the sewer with the rats, he'd have appreciated it more. While the white clearly depicted Anarchy's innocence—and matched her soon-to-be husband's hair—it seemed fitting for both the bride and groom to have the roses balance the scales. After all, the happy couple both had bloody secrets in their past.

As he sipped a beer and wished the ceremony was over so he could have something suitably stronger, Loki scowled at his watch. In just twenty minutes, Jasper would meet his bride up on that stage and pledge his love, his life, and his sanity to Anarchy.

Feeling his brittle heart crumble at the reminder that it could have been him up there, sliding a gold band of promise onto his woman's finger if he hadn't let her slip away, he took a couple of hefty gulps of his drink to quell the ache in his throat.

Since Myna left four months previously, after a fucking fantastic week of getting to know her, he hadn't heard a word from her. The dozens of calls he'd made, the sheer number of

texts he'd fired off on a daily basis, probably relegated him into stalker territory, but he couldn't help himself.

He just wanted to know she was safe.

Foolishly, he'd risked his heart on seven days of bliss, letting himself dream of a future where the woman he loved stayed with him. While he'd daydreamed of finding his one and only love, Myna had been planning how to get home.

Now, it didn't matter how much bare skin was exposed or what costumes the club subs used to lure him out to play, his cock was immune to it all. Hell, even waving a Catholic schoolgirl skirt in front of it like a matador dancing with a bull had no effect.

The little songbird he was pining over had emasculated him.

A hand the size of a pizza paddle smacked him between the shoulders. Grunting loudly, Loki almost found himself lodged in his glass, drowning in beer. "Can't sulk today, Loki."

"Not sulking," he muttered, scowling up into concerned green eyes. "Reminiscing."

Atticus grunted and settled onto the stool beside him, looking smart in a tailored black suit. All in black aside from a pristine white shirt open at the collar, it gave the Daddy Dom a refined look that his usual jeans and shirt couldn't mimic. "Myna."

"Yeah."

The big guy sighed heavily, rubbing a hand over his neatly trimmed beard. "It's been four months, Loki."

“I know, I know. Why the hell am I pining over her when she obviously doesn’t want anything more than what we had?” he asked, mocking himself.

“Because you’re in love, you fucking idiot. What I want to know is why you haven’t asked me, or Archie, or anyone to help you get in touch with her, or at least find out where she is.”

Startled, Loki jerked. “Isn’t that stalking?”

“Personally, I call it being a responsible Dom, but...” Atticus shrugged.

Something about the older man’s body language ignited Loki’s suspicions. Setting his glass down slowly, he ignored the wedding guests trickling in through the doors and glowered at his friend. “What do you know that you’re not telling me?”

Smirking, Att held his hands out. “Why would I, master of all knowledge, know anything about your spunky submissive? It’s not as though she was Lisha’s physical therapist for months, or that we grew to like her for more than her rehabilitation skills.”

“Sonofabitch. Tell me!”

“Ask nicely. For months you’ve been drowning yourself in all this *woe is me* crap. Rather than buckling up and hunting down what you want, you’ve been a mopey asshole.” Atticus flicked his gaze toward the band as they began to play a soft, slow melody to guide in the guests. “Perhaps now isn’t the best time to talk about it.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Loki hissed furiously.

“No.” Atticus rose and straightened the line of his pants, adjusting his jacket. “I can confirm that she’s safe, but right now, you need to plaster on a fucking smile and get up on that stage to stand beside our friends. Today is about two people who have survived their own personal hells to be with each other, and I’ll be damned if your sour face ruins it for them.”

Fuck. Torn between beating the massive man for information and being part of something incredibly special, Loki gritted his teeth. Following his friend’s lead, he stood and made sure he was presentable. “You promise she’s all right?”

“My word on it.” Atticus pressed a finger to his ear, his head tilting slightly as he listened to the person talking to him. “All right, Jasper is on his way. Archie and her entourage are scheduled five minutes behind. My team is standing by to escort them across from the house, then they’ll stand guard outside.”

Loki grimaced. Since Jasper’s father, Dominic, had made serious threats against his soon-to-be daughter-in-law, security had been ramped up high. Like, guards posted outside the club, following both Jasper and Archie *everywhere*, high. It had been almost three weeks of nerves, wedding jitters, arguments, and planning to get to today with everyone in one piece.

There were more important things to worry about right now than a flighty sub, he thought ruefully, and if Atticus gave his word that Myna was safe, then she was. The priority today was getting the sadist and his kitten down the non-traditional aisle and making sure they got hitched in peace.

As if on cue, Jasper stalked into the club wearing a suit similar to Att's. Only, where Atticus wore a white shirt to break up the dark, Jasper embraced it completely. Black shirt, jacket, waistcoat, pants, and boots. With his white-blond hair and icy-blue eyes, he was comparable to some kind of demon striding through mere mortals.

Loki thought he heard several subs lamenting the loss of the club sadist above the chatter of the ever-growing crowd of spectators. Neither Jasper nor Archie had family they wanted to invite to their special day, so their entire guest list was comprised of Avalon members—the family of their heart.

Braun walked beside Jasper, again in a perfectly-fitted suit. He was polished to within an inch of his life, and had a babbling baby Declan on his hip, suited up just like his daddy. One of his tiny hands clasped a long silver chain that swung in his grasp, two matching wedding bands dangling on the end.

Behind them, Liam and Saul followed sedately, tailed by Connie and Thane.

As he and Atticus stepped into the procession, Loki noticed that the ex-soldier wasn't doing so well—the man was, by all appearances, leading his partner, but upon closer inspection, it was Connie who was holding her lover upright as he stumbled along, his bad leg almost dragging in his wake.

When Thane tripped, almost taking them both down, Loki's heart twisted as he exchanged a look with Atticus. Concern vibrated in the space between them, and as one, they flanked the couple as though it was part of the ceremony.

“Go on ahead, Constance,” Atticus murmured. “We've got him.”

“Are you sure?”

“We won’t let him fall. You’re officiating, so you should already be up there.”

“Goddamn it.” Obviously torn between her official duties and her lover, Connie hesitated.

“Go on, sugar,” Thane rasped, pain staining the words. “I’ll just sit here for a moment.” He staggered, and in a fluid move, Loki nudged the Mistress out of the way and looped his arm around the older man’s waist, anchoring him securely. “You look so beautiful, Connie. So beautiful.”

When she grasped Thane’s face in her hands and kissed him, Loki could see the waves of fear emanating from her. Whatever was wrong, it wasn’t good if she was struggling to contain her worry. “I love you, Thane. Just sit with Loki and rest, okay? I’ll be back.”

He gave her a sweet smile. “Go marry our friends, Con. Make the sadist cry for me.”

Shooting Loki a pleading look, the Mistress laughed weakly. “Just for you.”

“Come on, Thane, this way.” Slowly, Loki guided him a few steps to the chairs, settling his friend into the nearest one. As Connie hurried away to the stage, Loki decided they didn’t need him up there, and plopped down beside the Switch. “Dude, what is going on with you?”

Amber eyes slightly glazed, Thane gritted his teeth. “Pain is a terrible companion, Loki. You don’t have to stay with me, I’ll just—”

“Shut up, you idiot,” he interrupted without bite. “We’ll talk when Archie has a new ball and chain firmly shackled around her ankle.”

Thane chuckled. “That’s supposed to be the other way around.”

The three-piece band switched tunes as Jasper, grinning like a fucking idiot, stood waiting with the Masters surrounding him. *Running Up That Hill* filled the room, silencing the murmurs, and everyone turned to the swing doors.

Caera and Sierra entered first, nervously clutching little bunches of peonies. So pretty in their pale-yellow dresses. Shy as ever, the pair of them kept their gazes on their feet as they headed toward the stage, both uncomfortable with the attention.

Bodie and Alicia came next, beaming matching smiles. They were fucking striking together, their blood tie so obvious with their black hair—although Alicia’s was considerably shorter than her sister’s—and those gorgeous blue eyes.

Spotting her Daddy Dom on the stage, Alicia gained an added spring in her step, almost breaking ranks to run to him before Bodie clamped a hand on her arm. Instead, she waved her flowers in the air and squealed. “Daddy!”

Everyone laughed quietly—they loved the Little, and her antics in the club were fast becoming legend—as Att tapped a finger against his lips to remind her to be calm.

Finally, glowing radiantly thanks to the bun cooking in her oven, Anarchy made her grand entrance as the band hit the

chorus of the song. Brown eyes wet but bright, she searched the stage without missing a step, finding her Master.

Once their eyes locked, Loki was surprised a tractor beam didn't appear between them, dragging the sweet sub straight to her sadist.

Unlike her maids of honor—plural—Archie wore a dress similar to the color of Jasper's eyes. So pale a blue, it was almost white, but as she moved, the blue shimmered to a darker shade. She carried blue-tipped roses and wore a collar. J had bought her one ages ago; one she'd worn everywhere until it had rubbed a sore patch on her neck because she'd refused to take it off for anything.

That leather collar had been replaced with platinum silver links of delicate chain, resting an intricate row of Celtic knots along the bridge of her slender collarbone.

Someone had coiled her beautiful blonde hair into some weird and wonderful arrangement at the nape of her neck, so fragile it seemed as though the whole thing would tumble free if so much as a single strand escaped.

“Lucky bastard,” Thane murmured.

“Seconded,” Loki agreed, watching Archie's steps pick up pace until she damn near ran the distance left between her and her beloved. “From the look on his face, he knows it.”

Jasper bounded down the stairs, opening his arms to catch his girl as she bolted into them. For a long, beautiful moment, they stood with their foreheads pressed together.

Today of all days, the shit they'd been through together, the pain and the nightmares, were inconsequential. The bond

between them might always be forged in that chaos, but in front of God and Avalon, they were ready to move away from the badness and build something mighty on fresh ground.

More pain was coming, Loki knew that. So did Jasper and every other Master in their circle of friends. It couldn't be avoided, not when Dominic Fairfax had thrown down the gauntlet. It couldn't be outmaneuvered or outrun.

Jasper's father didn't play fair, didn't know the fucking meaning of the word. Blood would be spilled, people would die, if the asshole didn't get what he wanted when he demanded it.

Surrendering Anarchy and her unborn child to that entitled prick wasn't an option.

Unbeknownst to her, there was an entire team of Atticus's mercenaries working together with the Masters to put an end to the threat. Unwilling to stress her out before the wedding, Jasper had sworn all of them to secrecy—not an easy task when she was one of the tech geeks helping Att gather data on cases just like it.

She'd probably make herself a widow if she found out before Jasper told her.

Chuckling at the idea, Loki smiled despite his morbid thoughts as Jasper escorted his woman up the steps and across the stage, to stand before Connie as the officiator.

“Are we ready to begin?”

“Yes, Mistress,” the white-blond sadist said immediately.

“No.”

An almost inaudible gasp of surprise hummed from the audience as Anarchy shook her head, with several murmurs of unease rippling beneath the collective sound. The look of distress on Jasper's face was indescribable.

Reaching out, the mischievous little pain slut snagged her lover's lapels and yanked him down for a long, torrid kiss that had more than one person squirming enviously in their chair.

When she was done, Archie pushed Jasper back a step, then daintily dabbed her fingertips around the edges of her lips—lips curved in a wicked smirk. “Okay, ready.”

“The ‘*you may kiss the bride*’ part of the ceremony usually happens at the end,” Connie chastised gently, trying to hide her smile. “And the groom usually instigates it.”

Loki grinned as Jasper smacked a hard hand down on his pretty kitten's ass, eliciting a squeal that undoubtedly made him erect. It must suck—even for a sadist—to have to cause pain just to get a goddamn stiffy.

“All right, before the lucky couple decides to start their honeymoon here on the stage prior to getting married, let's make things official.” Straightening, Connie smiled broadly. “We are gathered here today for a momentous occasion; one Jasper and Anarchy wish to share with you all. They've both written their own vows. Jasper, if you'd like to begin.”

Sharp blue eyes roamed over Archie's dress in blatant approval before they latched unerringly onto her face. “Every day since I met you, I've thought you've grown more beautiful. Every damn day, and that's saying something when you were stunning that first night. Now, standing here, giving yourself to me, I realize you're not stunning, or gorgeous, or

beautiful.” He took her hands, lifting them to his lips. “You’re all of those and more besides. You are my everything, Anarchy.

“I know it isn’t easy being with me. My past won’t leave us alone, but you don’t hide from it. You’ve sacrificed things I never would have asked you to, in order to save me. Now you’re giving me even more, things I could never bring myself to hope for, because I didn’t deserve them.” Beneath the harsh stage lights, his pale eyes glimmered with emotions far deeper than he usually portrayed. “For you, I strive to be a better man, one who deserves everything you are, all that you bring to my life. A man who has every right to wake up beside the strongest, bravest, most creative woman on this goddamn earth.”

Eyes soft, Archie lifted her hand to his cheek, cupping it as he leaned into her palm.

“If it takes me the rest of my life, I will be the man worthy of you, kitten. I will love you until the day I die, longer if heaven exists.” He splayed his fingers over her lower belly protectively. “Our family will want for nothing. My love has no conditions, no boundaries. This child is wanted and loved.”

Someone sniffled loudly.

“I’m standing before you now, vowing to be...” Jasper paused, pressing his lips together as he searched her face. “Your world. Protector, defender, disciplinarian, lover. Husband,” he added proudly. “I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t, you never have.” Archie kissed him again, then glanced at Connie. “Is it my turn now?”

The Mistress inclined her head in the affirmative.

“The first time I saw you, you were slapping a flogger against your thigh as you walked toward the bar. The friends I was with that night scattered, but I didn’t. Couldn’t. My heart chose you before the rest of me had a say, and while loving you hasn’t been the easiest journey, it’s one I’d take over and over again.” A serious expression crossed her face as she reached out and brushed her hand over his hair. “You broke my heart once, but I forgave you because not only did you fix it, you fortified it. Made me a stronger, braver woman who now only fears one thing. Losing you,” she admitted with a sigh.

“There will never be another man in my life who commands me the way you do. Who loves and protects me the way you do. Who *deserves* me as much as you. Well, unless your mighty sperm has implanted me with those superior masculine genes,” she said, touching her belly as laughter rippled. “But on the same hand, you will never find another woman willing to kill for you, who will throw everything down to keep you safe, who will love you with all that she has every second of her life until the world ends. So, *I’m* standing here before you now,” she said boldly, repeating his earlier words with vehemence, “vowing to be your future. Your protector, defender, lover, and pain in the ass brat for the rest of time.” She stood on her tiptoes and rubbed her nose against his. “Your wife.”

“That’s it, ceremony’s over,” he growled, scooping Archie off her feet. “I do, she does, we’re all married. Where’s the nearest flat surface?”

Loki snorted as everyone looked shocked, then Connie set her hand on the sadist's arm.

“Jasper, it needs to be official. Put the girl down so we can do it right.”

“Go faster,” he instructed, making his sub giggle. Still, he didn't put her down.

“So impatient,” Connie muttered, then smiled as though this wedding wasn't going down in history as one of the funniest ceremonies ever performed. “Jasper Fairfax, do you take Anarchy Campbell to be your wife, through whatever may come, and promise to love, cherish, and protect her for the rest of your life?”

“Damn right, I do.”

Beside Loki, Thane chuckled. “She's gonna get mad. We rehearsed this three times, and it was perfect.” He slanted Loki a look. “You ever think about tying the knot?”

Once, he thought. More recently than anyone would guess. Until Myna had blown that idea out of the fucking water by disappearing on him. “Not seriously enough to propose. You?”

On stage, Jasper reluctantly set his girl on her feet so he could take her ring from Braun's outstretched palm. On his Daddy's hip, Declan looked seriously pissed that one of his shiny toys was being given away. With that almost sullen expression and the miniature suit, the kid resembled a mini mobster in the making.

“Got the ring,” Thane mused, shifting uncomfortably as whatever ailed him flared up. “Got a yen to watch my woman walk toward me in a white dress, then say all the pretty words

that make her mine legally.” He smirked, his eyes back on Connie. “She’d look hot with a baby belly, wouldn’t she? All swollen and curvy, glowing and hormonal...”

Loki lifted an eyebrow as his friend trailed off, obviously losing himself in the fantasy. Hormonal? Did he not realize that his completely sane Domme-slash-sub would become a rollercoaster of emotion, swinging from tears to laughter to murderous rage within seconds?

“Anarchy Campbell, do you take Jasper Fairfax to be your husband, through whatever may come, and promise to love, cherish, and protect him for the rest of your life?”

“Obey,” Jasper interjected with a scowl. “Not protect.”

“Shush,” Archie chastised, covering his mouth with dainty fingers, then squealed when he nipped them. “I do.”

Glancing at the ceiling in exasperation, Connie cleared her throat as the little sub took the thicker gold band from Braun and slid it on Jasper’s finger. “By the power vested in me by the Internet gods, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may now ki—”

Jasper yanked Archie’s hand away from his mouth, capturing her wrists and pinning them behind her back. With his other hand at the back of her head, he ravaged her mouth in a kiss that would surely blister their lips from the sheer heat.

“—ss the bride,” Connie finished on a sigh. “Congratulations.”

There was no polite round of applause—that wasn’t Avalon style. Raucous clapping, hollering, and whooping ensued as the kiss continued. Wolf whistles came from the stage and the

crowd as the delicate ensemble of Archie's hair came loose, spilling gold down her back.

Jasper finally freed his sub's mouth long enough to murmur something, and her laugh rang like church bells through the room. Hugs and handshakes were exchanged on stage before the sadist swung his new bride into his arms and carried her gracefully down the steps and along the makeshift aisle with a hungry gleam in his eyes.

Loki had never seen either of them as happy.

The band hurriedly struck up a tune, obviously taken by surprise, as the guests began to rise and mingle, ready for the reception to begin. Although if the glint in Jasper's eyes was anything to go by, the bride and groom would be conspicuously absent for a while.

The man of honor stopped beside Thane. "Missed you up there, brother." Those pale blue eyes landed on Loki, including him in the statement.

Thane grinned, though it wavered slightly at the edges. "Like you had eyes for anyone else but this beautiful creature. Congratulations, guys. It's been a long time coming."

Archie's lips twitched; her face flushed with arousal. "Blame Mr. Cautious. I'd have married him months ago."

"You've been worth the wait, Mrs. Fairfax," Jasper murmured.

"I should hope so, Mr. Fairfax."

Oh God. The big, bad sadist had been reduced to playing cutesy name games. Clearing his throat, Loki lifted an eyebrow. "Are you keeping your family name, J?"

“Wasn’t going to, but my kitten made an excellent point. Once certain people are no longer polluting the world with their toxicity, there’ll be an opportunity to rebuild and rebrand the Fairfax name. Make it into something to be proud of instead of a weight around my neck.” Jasper nuzzled contentedly against his sub’s throat. “Besides, Anarchy Fairfax has a particularly lovely ring to it.”

“Let’s go make it official,” Archie said eagerly. “Then I want to dance and eat cake!”

“Your wish, kitten.” Winking at Loki and Thane, he strode away with a giggling Archie held tight to his chest.

Around them, people were already milling into groups and heading toward the bar so Zeke could start the longest night of his life, slinging drinks. Chairs were swiftly being stacked and removed to the stage for storage, with a few moved back against the walls for anyone who wanted to be a wallflower.

The Masters were reuniting with their significant others—Alicia bunny-hopping adorably toward her Daddy, bouncing into his waiting arms was certainly entertaining—and Loki wondered how many more marriage proposals would be forthcoming now Jasper had set the bar.

The Avalon family was expanding, one way and another. Declan was the first baby, but it seemed Archie and Caera would be in a race to provide the second and third bundles of joy. Knowing Jasper’s kitten, he didn’t think she would be content to be the last one holding her baby in a two-woman sprint.

Added to that, new members were joining on a weekly basis. Zeke was Master material, and there were a few others

—including a couple of Dommies—who showed promise for future positions in the club hierarchy.

“Think you can make it to the bar, brother?” he asked Thane.

“I’m in pain, not dying. Go enjoy yourself, Loki. I’ll just wait here for my woman.”

“They gotten you some better pain meds yet?”

“What, better than the narcolepsy pills?” Thane snorted. “Atticus is hooking me up with a doctor friend of his, hopefully organizing scans and a few tests to get to the root of the problem. I’d rather lop it off at the base than attack it from the top. I hate drugs.”

“Me too. Want me to bring you something over?”

“Stop fussing, mother hen.” Thane patted him on the shoulder. “I hereby set you free from babysitting duties, Loki, on the most of auspicious of nights—the night when every guy in a suit is guaranteed to get laid. Unless, of course, he’s an asshole. I think weddings are some kind of unspoken aphrodisiac...or maybe someone just spikes the punch at these shindigs.”

Laughing, Loki thought about the chaos such a prank could cause. Saul, Jasper, and Atticus would seethe so darkly they’d block out the sun with their fury. Not that any of their women had never been drunk before, but with two of them pregnant and the third turning into a hellion under alcoholic influence, there would be some unhappy Doms.

Leaving Thane staring up at the stage with an adoring expression, Loki moved through the guests with ease. There

might have been a kernel of jealousy festering in his gut, growing with every public display of affection he saw.

Myna should have been here with him, her arm tucked through his as they strolled to the bar. He'd have whispered something dirty and provocative in her ear, making her laugh and blush before she dragged him somewhere private for a little taste to hold them through the evening.

Christ, he missed her.

Zeke was already in the swing of serving by the time Loki reached the bar, capably filling glasses with efficiency as the orders rolled in. Without asking, he slid a short glass across the wooden top. "Hope you don't look like you're attending a funeral at every wedding you go to, lad."

"Thank God I don't go to many."

"That might change after today. Seen a few envious women admiring the bride, and more than one guy examining his future. My money's on those two." Zeke jerked his head toward Braun and Bodie, who were sharing a sweet kiss with a perturbed Declan squashed between them. "Got marriage written all over them."

Loki snorted. Those two were as married as they could be without the paperwork; more than a few times, Braun referred to her as his wife, and in all honesty, Loki was surprised they hadn't been more forthcoming with making it all legal. They were already bound together by a collaring ceremony, and by the baby.

Of course, between Bodie's recovery and her disastrous pregnancy, there hadn't really been time to organize a wedding

—not the one she deserved, anyway.

“Think most of the Masters’ circle is heading that way,” Loki murmured.

“Last man standing, huh?” Zeke smirked. “Feeling the pressure?”

“Last man...shit.” Shaking his head, Loki realized he was indeed the last of the original Masters without a significant other. Thanks to Myna, he likely wouldn’t be searching for anyone else to share his heart with again. Maybe he’d change his name from Master Loki to Eternal Playboy. “No pressure. I couldn’t be happier for all of them.”

Zeke’s attention veered away, his eyes darkening beneath a frown. “Trouble’s brewing.”

Loki sipped his drink, then followed the direction of the older Dom’s cold gaze. Across the room, Wyatt was stepping back from Sierra, his hands held up as she hung her head. Her insecurity radiated like a neon glow, drawing several curious stares her way, and she folded in on herself. “Wyatt the asshat opened his goddamn mouth again.”

Zeke growled. “Thought he was changing his ways?”

“He’s trying. Takes more than falling in love to change years of habit.” Loki still didn’t trust the guy, despite Liam being deeply involved with the good-looking mechanic. Perhaps with time, it would feel as though the guy belonged, but right now, Wyatt was on a precipice. “Liam won’t put up with his shit, not knowing what went on between them before.”

“Zeke? Sir?” Someone called from further down the bar.

“Bethany, I’ll be with you in a moment,” Zeke shot back.

“Are you playing tonight, sir?”

The older man laughed. “Sweetheart, ain’t no one playing tonight ‘less it’s in the comfort of their own home.” Lifting his chin at someone else, he lined a row of glasses up and poured vodka into each one with a steady hand. “There’s always tomorrow.”

Tomorrow was gonna be a bitch for most of the attendees, Loki mused silently, watching Zeke struggle to keep up with the number of orders flowing in. With any and all play prohibited for the evening, Braun had opened the bar for the wedding, and the guests were making the most of it.

Giving the room—and all the freakishly happy couples in it—a wistful glance, Loki shrugged off his jacket as he walked to the end of the bar and under the hinged section. There was no point sitting at the bar, sulking over his drink like some drunk whose life was slowly swirling down the drain, dragging down the celebratory mood.

“Should be on the other side,” Zeke admonished gruffly.

Loki snorted and grabbed a glass when one of the Dommies requested wine. “Not gonna be much use to you standing on that side, am I? Don’t worry, I’ll return to the fun and games once the married couple gets back. If they ever do,” he muttered, thinking of the possessive hunger in Jasper’s eyes.

“Antisocial bastard, eh?”

Quite the opposite, actually. Normally, he was the heart and soul of any shindig—he knew how to strut, charm, cajole, and entertain a crowd, and do it with style. Hell, he’d usually

expect to fuck at least three pretty women to sate his appetite, and perhaps take one home in case he required something to nibble on during the night.

Now, his entire life just felt *blah*.

The thrill had gone out of sex.

The passion had gone out of his work.

Socializing, even with his friends, was now a chore.

Flipping Zeke the bird, he buckled down and got to work.

Two fucking hours later, he was sweating beneath his shirt, the party was in full swing, and the groom still hadn't returned with his bride. Bets were being placed as to whether or not the sadist would end up attending his own damn reception.

Loki was leaning towards a resounding *no*.

Empty glasses were coming back faster than full ones were going out. Music pumped from the speakers around the room, encouraging the tipsy rabble to move and shake in ways even his imagination couldn't fathom. Watching the oldest couple in the club getting down to the beat in elderly, explicit style was more than his sober brain could handle.

“Unca Loki!”

At the earsplitting screech, his shoulders rose to protect his hearing. Across the room, Alicia was riding her Daddy toward the bar, using what looked like fierce grips on Atticus' hair to steer him as she clung to his back.

Loki often wondered if Att had to resort to using a gag to shut her up for a few minutes when she was in her Little

headspace, because God help them all, that adorable mouth of hers could run a mile a minute.

Still passing out drinks, he kept an eye on her progress until she pulled Atticus to a sharp halt with a vicious yank on his head. Her Daddy's unimpressed expression didn't change until she gave him a loving stroke down the side of his neck, like she would a pony.

“Good Daddy.”

More than a few waiting customers snorted and laughed.

“What can I get for you, sweetheart?” Loki asked, stifling his own smile. “Are you thirsty after your long and arduous ride?”

She beamed at him, delighted. “It was very dangerous, but we survived. I want pop, and water for my Daddy.”

“Manners, Lisha,” Att growled.

“Sorry,” she purred, dropping her chin on top of his head. “Please may I have a soda pop, Unca Loki, and water for my Daddy.”

“Anything for our intrepid explorer,” he told her with a wink, then retrieved her special sippy cup from under the counter where he knew Liam stashed it, filling it with juice when Att arched his eyebrow. A small glass of scotch joined it a moment later. “There you go, sweetie.”

Imperiously, Alicia studied the offerings. “I'm not a baby, Unca Loki, and that is not soda pop.” She sniffed distastefully. “Are you trying to get my Daddy drunk?”

“Well, you can’t drink and ride with a glass in your hand, can you? And that is the finest water for the most magnificent steed.” Christ, he couldn’t meet Atticus’ eyes, not for love nor money. The Daddy Dom was going to stab him numerous times with his own piercing gun.

He swore, if Lisha had been standing, she’d have stomped her little heeled foot.

“What do you say, baby girl?” Atticus prompted.

She heaved a sigh. “Thank you, Unca Loki.”

Atticus picked up the cup and passed it back to her, then cocked an eyebrow at Loki. “Need a word with you when you get a minute from your bartending duties. Thought it might wait until tomorrow, but there’s a delivery coming in tonight you might want to intercept.”

“*Presents?*” Alicia shrieked.

“Not for you, noisy princess.” Att winced and took a hefty gulp of his drink. “Question is, where would you like the package redirected? I’ve got room at my place, Connie—”

“No. This doesn’t get dumped in Con’s lap, not when she has enough to deal with.” Loki clenched his jaw. If Myna was back in the area, he couldn’t begin to guess why, but she wasn’t his responsibility, his submissive to care for, even if his heart argued otherwise. “Do what you want with her, Att. Stick her in a motel, find her somewhere reputable and safe, take her home with you. Whatever.”

“Thought you loved her?”

“I do, but love doesn’t walk away and not say a word for a third of a year.” Bitterness stained his voice, a barely

contained fury at the thought of her waltzing back into his life as carelessly as she'd left it. "She had me hooked on the first night, Att. I was sunk by the end of the week. I honestly believed she felt the same way, and then she pulls a disappearing act to rival Jasper's. Not a fucking word in—"

"Unca Loki *swore*, Daddy!" Outraged, Alicia scowled at him. "Bad word!"

"Shush, princess, and drink your juice." Atticus sighed and cocked his head. "Loki, you don't know the whole story. If you'd just let her explain, you'd understand there's a reason—several good ones, actually—for her not getting in touch."

"Unfortunate then, that I have one big fu-fudging reason," he amended when Lisha's scowl deepened, "not to be the least bit interested." A badly battered heart was certainly at the top of the list, in his opinion. "Tell her I wish her well, good luck in the future, yadda blah, but hell will freeze over before what might have been becomes reality."

"This is going to backfire on you," his friend warned.

"No, I'll tell you what *backfired* on me, Att. Trusting a woman for the first time in my life. Letting my guard down over a pair of beautiful eyes and a tortured smile. Throwing my heart at her feet and expecting her to offer hers in return, all the while dreaming about a real, solid future where she wasn't just my submissive, but my goddamn queen." Though his voice hadn't risen, the anger in it couldn't be contained. "I want what you and the princess have, what all our friends have found with their respective others. That missing piece, the one key that fits the lock. I want *this*," he growled, gesturing to the

reception, “and what comes after. I would have given her the world, but she walked out of mine without looking back.”

“Jesus, Loki.”

“You know what, I’m done.” Stepping back, he offered Alicia—who was now sucking on her thumb unhappily—a strained smile, then hailed Zeke. “I’m out, buddy. Have a good night.”

“Thanks for the help.” Zeke lifted his hand in response.

Retrieving his jacket, Loki returned to the opposite side of the bar, pausing beside Alicia and her two-legged steed. Resting his hand on Atticus’ shoulder, he exhaled slowly. “I don’t care where she stays for the duration of her visit as long as she’s treated well. I don’t wish her harm, but she’s not welcome back in my life. If Jasper and his blushing bride come back, give them my congratulations.”

“Unca Loki?” Lisha whimpered.

God, he’d never be a Daddy Dom, not with the infinite amount of patience it must take to play a multitude of positive roles, but Alicia never failed to make his heart melt around the edges. He gave her a quick pat on the arm in reassurance. “Everything’s just fine, sweetheart. Make sure your Daddy gives you an extra special kiss before he tucks you into bed tonight, yeah? Remind him what a lucky guy he is to have you.”

“Don’t leave, Loki.”

He looked around at the madly dancing couples, the ones swaying on the sidelines in time to a rhythm of their own, the ones mired in their own little universe without a care for what

was going on around them. Living the dream, creating memories, being happy in the arms of another. “Brother, there’s nothing here for me anymore.”

Chapter Two

Fucking hormones!

Feeling like a complete fool, Myna sat in the grass beside the road, bathed in the flashing red glow of her hazard lights, and lost the battle against crying. Of course, it was the stupid pregnancy hormones making tears leak from her eyes in a mighty flood.

It wasn't that her life had turned into a massive clusterfuck causing her to bawl like a baby. No, it was those ridiculous hormones which somehow convinced her that leasing a shitty, *shitty* rental car and *driving* to Phoenix was a better option than flying—it would give her more time before she had to face Loki and tell him about her condition.

Before she humiliated herself in front of him and his friends.

She'd sold everything she had left, aside from a few things she absolutely couldn't part with. Her suitcase was stuffed with her favorite clothes, there was a box of knick-knacks and books that held no value to anyone but to her, and a small stack of files that summed up her financial and academic world.

The gas gauge had plummeted not an hour after she'd spent the last of her cash on filling the tank, and now she was twenty miles from her destination with no fuel, no phone, no hope.

It was dark, a little creepy, and there were a whole lot of horror movie vibes.

Myna really didn't want to become a statistic.

Digging her fingers into her eyes, she took several slow breaths and fought the urge to just give up, roll over, and die. The last four months had been nothing but one disaster after another, and tonight was perilously close to being the proverbial last straw on a very fragile back.

Her life in D.C. was over and done. There was no going back—nothing to go back for. Her apartment was likely demolished by now; the ruins of her office scooped up by a bulldozer.

There was no guarantee she had any semblance of a life here in Phoenix, but it was all she had left, the only opportunity still available for a broke, single mother-to-be. Claiming sanctuary amongst Loki and his friends may not work, but if it didn't, she'd be penniless, homeless, and carrying a baby around in a shopping bag until the insurance money came through.

Okay, the pity party was finished, she decided. Struggling to her feet, she contemplated taking her suitcase on the twenty-mile hike, then opted for not dragging around any more weight than necessary. Hopefully the car and her possessions would still be here if she managed to find someone to help her with the gas situation.

Taking her bottle of water from the holder, she slammed the door shut with attitude, glaring at the hunk of junk. Maybe she took a sly kick at the front tire as she walked away, in retaliation for its crap attitude towards work.

In the habit she'd picked up in the two weeks since her pregnancy was confirmed, Myna rested her hand on the gentle swell of her belly. "We've got a journey ahead of us, peanut.

Twenty whole miles between us and where we need to be. Where we should have been all along. Yes, yes, I know,” she muttered as though the child sleeping inside her chastised the idiotic choice to leave, “it’s all my fault. I take full responsibility. But we need to be prepared for your daddy to be really, really mad at me, okay?”

She was sweating before the car was out of sight.

“Don’t get me wrong, he’s going to love you. I already do, and once the shock wears off, I have no doubts he will be wrapped around your tiny, little finger as soon as you’re born. But we have to give him time to process, right? I mean, *I* was shocked, so God knows what Loki will think.” Christ, how could she be tired after walking like a hundred steps? It was the stupid heat, she thought with a snarl. They weren’t even in May yet and it was horribly humid. Was Arizona like this all the damn time? “Can’t blame him, can we, peanut? We used condoms religiously, and I’m probably considered a geriatric mother now that I’m thirty-two. I should not be nearly five months pregnant with an itty-bitty person, but I guess we’re just going to play with the cards we’ve been dealt.”

The one question weighing heavily on her mind was: what if Loki demanded an abortion? He was younger than she was, almost four years her junior. He was an Avalon Master, the Playboy Master. He worked long, hard hours at Blessed Ink, and liked to chill out with his sub of the night at the club.

A child was a massive responsibility. So much pressure on time, finances, emotions.

Would he see his baby as something hopeful, to be treasured and revered, or simply a burden on his already rich

lifestyle?

No matter. This baby was half of her, and it was growing in *her* body.

Loki could posture and preen, shout and argue all he wanted, but by God, he would not take away the one thing keeping her alive. The last hope she had left, the first thing she thought about when she woke up.

This baby was her light in the darkest time of her life.

Headlights illuminated her from the rear, casting her shadow ahead of her. Staying well onto the side of the road, Myna considered sticking her thumb out for a ride, then thought of all the hapless young men and women who'd fallen prey to rapists and serial killers in similar situations.

No, thank you.

But the powerful growl of the approaching engine decreased as the light grew stronger around her. A massive blue pickup truck pulled up beside her, the front window sliding down. "Hey there, you okay?"

Myna glanced over at the driver, squinting to make out his face in the dim light. "I'm good."

"Bad road to be walking on," he commented, letting the truck roll alongside her as she continued forward. "Especially at this time of night."

"I'm good. I've got someone meeting me."

He laughed. "We both know that's a lie, Myna. Look, I'm not here to hurt you. Atticus sent me to pick you up. I'm Grit, one of his crew. I'm guessing that's your car back there?" He

switched the interior light on so she could see his face. “I’d appreciate it if you’d hop on in, let me give you a ride. We can swing back and grab your gear, then I’ll take you to the boss.”

Friendly face, curious eyes. Maybe early-thirties, with short blond hair and matching facial scruff. Not quite a beard, not really stubble.

Eyeing him suspiciously, Myna stopped and folded her arms over her chest. “You’re lying. Atticus doesn’t know I’m coming, and I haven’t told any—” *Shut up, you idiot.*

“Why don’t I call him for you, and you can verify I am who I say I am?” Grit shifted in his seat, lifting his hip to pull his phone from his back pocket. He messed around with it, and ringing sounded from the truck speakers.

“Daddy’s phone!” A tipsy yet familiar voice answered in a sing-song rhythm.

The blond guy laughed. “Alicia, is it not past your bedtime?”

“No,” was the mulish response. “I’s at a wedding, silly. I’s a bride of honor.”

Rolling his eyes humorously, Grit grinned. “Bridesmaid, Alicia. We talked about this, remember, about three hundred times in the past week?”

“Pfft. I’s a bride of honor if I—” *Hiccup.* “—wants to be.”

“Of course,” he responded placatingly. “Can I talk to Atticus?”

The line went quiet, allowing the noises of a party in full swing to drift into the silence. Laughter and cheers, clinking

glasses and loud music.

Whoever was holding the shindig must be having a good time.

“I can’t do that,” Alicia said finally. “Not supposed to answer Daddy’s phone. Bye!”

“No, wait,” Grit interjected, but the Little had already ended the call. “Damn it. She’s adorable, but she’s a pain in the ass when she’s immersed in that headspace.”

Myna narrowed her eyes. “You know about Alicia?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “It’s pretty damn obvious. She wreaks havoc in the office, running around in her onesies, playing hide and seek. She let those goddamn pups loose in the office a few days ago, dressed up in her dolls’ clothing. The stupid mutts ate their costumes, then proceeded to gnaw on every doorjamb, chair, and ankle in the vicinity. She thought it was hilarious.”

That definitely sounded like Alicia, Myna thought, relaxing slightly. Through the struggles of her therapy, the girl had soldiered on with relentless cheer, even when the pain made her cry. Her desire to leave the wheelchair and all it represented behind was unlike any resolve Myna had seen in a patient, and Alicia had surpassed every expectation.

Grit’s phone began to ring.

“That’ll be the boss,” he said cheerfully, a moment before Atticus’ rough voice took over.

“You’ve acquired the package?”

“Ah...” Grit gave her a look. “Not exactly, sir. The package is wary.”

Atticus growled. “Goddamn it, Myna, if you can hear me, get in the fucking truck.”

The command was clear enough. Opening the door, she climbed into the passenger seat and barely refrained from slamming the door shut. “How the hell did you know where I was?”

“I’ll explain everything once you’re settled, Myna. For now, all you need to know is that you’re important to Loki, so you’re under my care until further notice. Grit will take you somewhere safe. Try to get some rest, and I’ll see you in the morning. Take me off speakerphone, Grit.”

The blond pressed a button on his phone, then lifted it to his ear. “Yes, boss. Mmm-hmm. Yes, got it. Mm-hmm, yes, sir.”

This was all very clandestine, she thought with a frown. How exactly had they known where she was, when she hadn’t been using her bank card consistently? The leased car was a shitty junker, nothing worth putting a GPS tracker on. Hell, if someone stole it, she imagined the company would do a happy dance at the insurance payoff.

This wasn’t the way she’d envisioned returning to Phoenix, that was for sure. Although, to be honest, she hadn’t really considered how her sudden reappearance might affect everyone in Loki’s life. Her desperate daydreams consisted of two variants—being welcomed with a scolding for staying away for so long without contacting him, or being screamed at and told to leave, never to return again.

Neither option was what she wished for, but she didn't think he'd welcome her back with wide arms and a forgive-all, forget-all kiss.

Dimly, she heard Grit say something, but she assumed he was talking to Atticus, until his hand lightly patted her knee. She jerked away, then focused on his face as he offered her a placating show of his palms. "Huh?"

"Sorry, didn't mean to make you jump. I said, do you want me to swing back and pick your stuff up? Is there anything you need tonight that can't wait until one of the guys gets out here to collect that junkheap?"

Maybe she should be offended at the term *junkheap*, but she'd thought the same just moments earlier. She supposed it had almost gotten her where she needed to be. *Almost*. But the truth was, she was too damn tired to worry about whether someone might decide to loot the abandoned piece of shit and steal her knick-knacks, clothes, and paperwork. She'd lost far more important things in the last few months.

"No, it's fine. I have everything I need."

"If you're sure. Don't forget your belt," he added, waiting until she fastened herself in before flipping off the interior light. "You've got maybe half an hour if you want to rest. I can wake you when we arrive."

As the truck set off, the idea was tempting. Sleep was an elusive creature right now, shying away from the stress and uncertainty she carried around like a dull, dark aura. However, pregnancy hormones might make her feel stupid, but she wasn't that dumb.

Grit didn't bother with small talk, thankfully. She was too exhausted to maintain any meaningful conversation, and it took energy to keep herself awake. The motion of the truck and the low murmur of some country and western song on the radio worked an odd magic on her, trying to lull her into just closing her eyes for one brief moment.

Once or twice, she almost succumbed, feeling her head drop to her chest.

"I'm not going to drive you into the desert and kill you," Grit muttered in annoyance. "But you will give yourself whiplash, you keep falling asleep sitting up like that. If it helps any, Atticus has all the company trucks hooked up with GPS trackers. If I was insane enough to go anywhere but where he's told me to, the big guns would be riding our tail before we made it another ten miles."

Because Atticus was a controlling, thorough man who always kept his thumb on the pulse. She knew that much from her interactions with him in D.C., as well as her week with Loki. The big guy held the reins in a fierce grip and didn't let them loose; all part of his consuming desire to keep people safe.

His inner circle was tight, and she was surprised she was being included.

"If I nap now, I won't sleep later." She gave her hair a tug, rolling her eyes as she realized several thick hanks of her lush black hair were escaping from the braid. "Plus, hormones and bed hair do not a good combination make. I'd like to be presentable if nothing else."

His low hum set her stretched nerves on fire. “Hate to tell you this, Myna, but I think you’re well past the presentable stage. Sweaty, dusty, pale, with bags I could hide my gun in under your eyes. In my opinion, you need some good food, a shower, and a week’s sleep.”

“Wow. You are such a gentleman.”

“Just sayin’ it like it is.”

Maybe she should take a nap, before he listed more reasons why she looked like a hag. At least he hadn’t mentioned she smelled like the rear end of a donkey, that would have been a real kick to her pride, even if it was true. The heat, the traveling, and the lack of adequate hygiene facilities in the low-budget motels she could barely afford left her feeling like someone had dragged her through shit on the bottom of their boot.

“How far along are you?” he asked casually.

Myna snorted. “You mean the all-knowing Atticus hasn’t told you?”

Grit’s fingers tapped on the steering wheel in time to the beat on the radio. “Don’t think he knows you’re pregnant. Told me to wrestle you to the ground and hog-tie you if you gave me any hassle, throw you in the back and get you where you need to be.”

Her mouth dropped open. “*What?*”

He chuckled. “Man’s got too much respect for life to put a pregnant woman through that, so my guess is you’ve managed to slip that bit of data under his radar. Kudos to you.”

“So how do *you* know?”

In the dark of the truck cab, she saw his head tilt in her direction. “Bump wasn’t as noticeable when you were standing, but now you’re sitting down? Pops right out into a cute little—”

“Don’t even go there,” she snapped, rubbing her hand over her face.

“Look, my sister was the same. By the end of the first trimester, she’d lost so much weight through morning sickness, we thought about posing her on the porch for Halloween—sans makeup. She was exhausted, underweight, dehydrated. Once she was in the second stage, the sickness eased off, and she began to bloom. Her bump kind of... inflated almost overnight. Plenty of nutritious food, as much sleep as you can stand, and no stress for a few weeks helps.”

Her head thumped back against the seat. Food was currently a precious commodity, along with sleep. Both desperately needed, craved even, and in limited supply. And as for no stress...that was a fucking joke. Stress was her new reality. Worrying about everything from where to live to how to survive was her goddamn job, and that was without the pressure of knowing she’d fucked up and added a tiny little person into the disaster.

Too anxious to consider a nap now, Myna blew out a breath and decided to do some digging. “So, if Atticus doesn’t know I’m pregnant, what *does* he know?”

“Huh, well, let’s see. Mugging, check. Office fire, check. Eviction, check.” Those tapping fingers broke into a rhythm of their own. “I don’t think he was too pleased with your choice of rentals. Should’ve taken the newer model the rep offered.”

“What the fuck?” Torn between shock and outrage, Myna fired a glare at her driver, wishing he was Atticus so she could...do something. What, she didn’t know, but by God, that asshole was keen on sticking his nose into other people’s business! “That was his doing?”

“We’ve been keeping tabs on you the last few weeks. Atticus set some things rolling once he realized how bad shit was going down. Fifty-six dollars in a checking account won’t get you far, so we figured you couldn’t fly out of D.C.”

“Maybe I was *staying* in D.C.”

Grit dismissed her with a hand wave. “No tenancy agreements were signed by you in the run up to the eviction date. No deposits placed. What you sold your belongings for wasn’t enough for an apartment, so it stood to reason that you were moving on. No home, no business, no ties. An excellent time for a fresh start.”

“Goddamn bastard stalkers!”

“We prefer elite security team,” he replied nonchalantly. “The car you were urged toward was already tagged with one of our trackers, but I had to pull a fast switch when you turned it down. Atticus was dubious about letting you travel all the way by yourself—several of us suggested flying you here with an escort—but he thought you’d want to retain your sense of independence. You’ve had a tail since you left Washington, Myna, you just didn’t know to look for one.”

“And if I decided not to come to Pheonix?”

“The odds were slim, but my orders were to follow you and make sure you were safe. If you’d made a beeline for Florida,

I'd have been riding your bumper all the way there.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What if I'd chosen a different rental company?”

“Just full of what if's today, aren't you? It was a calculated guess you'd go for the cheapest company you could find with a semi-decent choice of cars. If we'd guessed wrong, I'd have followed you and slipped the tracker on at a gas station or when you stopped for the night.”

“Do you understand how creepy that is?”

“Do you know how fucking dangerous it is for a single woman to travel from D.C. to Phoenix in a battered piece of shit, with no money, no phone, and no one waiting for her arrival? Just be thankful Atticus had your back, Myna, otherwise you'd still be trudging your way down this very long road on foot, wondering when the serial killers would come out of the dark.”

She couldn't stop the scowl from furrowing her brow. Just because her hormone levels were swinging up and down like a yoyo didn't mean she'd taken on a trip of this magnitude with her eyes closed, for God's sake. She'd weighed every angle, every scenario—okay, *almost* every scenario, because this sure as hell hadn't crossed her mind—and made an informed decision. “I'm sure they'd regret it, should they be stupid enough to try and kidnap me.”

“Why, are you packing a knife in that bottle of water? Perhaps a taser?” Grit shook his head in disgust. “Thought you were supposed to be a smart woman from everything I've been told.”

She growled.

“Don’t get in a snit with me. Even you have to admit this was a pretty reckless stunt.”

“Even me?” Fury erupted inside her, bubbling dangerously through her veins. “You don’t even *know* me or anything about my life!” Her breath hitched raggedly. “This year has been an absolute clusterfuck, and I don’t need some...some...” Instead of the angry profanity she intended to spew at him, a sob wrenched her chest. Tears dripped down her cheeks for no reason she could see, other than she was madder than a wet cat. “Fuck.”

The truck slowed, pulling to the side of the road. Switching the inner light on, Grit reached over into the glove compartment and drew out a packet of tissues, handing them to her. “It’s not my place to judge you or your life, Myna. I only know what Atticus told us in the briefings, which I’m sure doesn’t encompass you as a person.” When she fumbled with the packet, he eased it from her fingers and plucked one out for her. “As a guy who is trained in keeping people safe, I think your behavior tonight was reckless.”

Reckless was waiting by her car for someone not as invested in her wellbeing as Grit to come along. “I don’t need a lecture, thank you.”

“No, you need someone to drag you over his knee and paddle your ass until you really think about what the consequences of your actions could have been.”

“Oh my God,” she muttered. “You’re a fucking Dom.”

Grit grinned at her, hazel eyes alight with mischief. “What gave it away?”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Oh, if you were mine, I’d give that dirty mouth something much better to do than curse.” Taking the unused tissue from her limp hand, he dabbed at the tears on her face. “For full disclosure, you should probably know I claimed dibs on you the instant I saw your photo. Atticus shot me down pretty quick, said you had a relationship on hold.”

Shocked enough that the last lingering tears froze on her lashes, Myna simply stared at him. He found her attractive, looking like *this*? It was a shame that her heart was already attached to someone else. Someone with beautiful brown eyes, so deep and rich it was like sinking slowly into his mind when she looked into them.

Reminding herself not to get too enamored with the fantasy of falling into Loki’s arms and being thoroughly kissed, she shook it off. “There’s a guy. The reason for coming here, actually. I can’t imagine he’s going to be thrilled to see me.”

His sympathetic expression came close to undoing her again. Shaking his head, Grit shifted in his seat, reaching up to turn off the light, then pulled back out onto the road. “Any man who isn’t thanking his lucky stars when he sees you isn’t worth your time. Is he the father?”

Father. Mother.

Titles that would follow both Loki and her for the rest of their lives.

“Yeah.”

“Well, if he’s an ass and sticks his head in the sand, don’t bother chasing after him. Just come and find me.”

Myna laughed, scrunching the pack of tissues in her hand. “Why is a guy who looks and talks like you sniffing around a woman pregnant with another man’s child? Is it a fetish?”

“Ouch.” But he laughed as well, without a trace of insult. “I’m just a man who knows what he wants and isn’t afraid to step on another guy’s toes to get it. Say the word and I’ll stomp all over his feet, but I get the feeling the jackass won’t let you go as easily as you think.”

It was unsettling to know this stranger knew more about her before even meeting her than she’d likely learn about him in a month. His boss was, by all accounts, a depthless well of knowledge. What Atticus hadn’t found out about her during Alicia’s treatment, he’d have dug out in the time since.

Obviously, the ginormous Daddy Dom had no issues sharing that information with his *team*.

How many more were privy to intimate details of her life?

“This is the strangest conversation,” she muttered to herself.

“Never been hit on before?” Grit asked.

“Been hit on plenty,” she fired back lightly. “Just never by a guy who’s basically professing his love after, what, twenty minutes?”

An oncoming vehicle blinded her briefly as it approached with its headlights on bright. Even as she winced and lifted her hand to shield against the bright glare, Grit smacked the horn twice in reprimand. “Twenty-two, but who’s counting? I have

a time limit, you know. I learned the hard way to make my point in a way that sticks. Better to be remembered in five years than forgotten tomorrow.”

Myna smiled. The pressure of traveling was wearing on her, but her companion was an improvement over being alone on the journey. Swamped by fatigue, she thought it might be best to close her eyes for a few moments and gather what strength she had left. “I doubt many people forget you, Grit.”

She was asleep before he answered her.

A cannonball woke her from a dead sleep.

Eyelids barely cracked and refusing to open fully, Myna felt her stomach churn as the mattress bounced and shuddered beneath the impact. Before she could wonder how the hell she was comfy in a strange bed, her belly roiled in a depressingly familiar manner, and she turned onto her side as she heaved.

Mercifully grateful for her cash-induced fasting, she threw up nothing but bile onto the pretty silver-blue carpet. God, she owed somebody a huge apology.

Moaning miserably, she rested her cheek against the edge of the bed.

“Uh-oh.” Warmth pressed against her bare back, then a cheek brushed hers. Black hair gleamed in the dim light of the room as the person hunched over her stared down at the same mess she was. “Daddy didn’t mention you was sick. I go tells him.”

“Alicia?” Myna rasped, throat raw.

“Uh-huh.”

“Where am I?”

“Here, silly!” Alicia’s delighted laugh pierced Myna’s tired brain like a dull knife. “Daddy gets me a cloth when I’s sick.” She scrambled away, off the bed, and the soft thud of her feet departing was a blessed relief.

Slowly, Myna rolled onto her back and closed her eyes, wiling the nausea to subside. Sleep beckoned her again, but her mind was fluttering around where exactly ‘*here, silly*’ was. It hadn’t escaped her notice that she was naked, or damn near, beneath the covers, which meant someone had stripped her before putting her into this incredibly snuggly bed.

At least if Alicia was here, it was safe. Atticus would never let his Little run around if there was even a small potential threat to her.

Myna thought more sleep was a damn good idea, letting herself relax into the mattress with a slow exhale...until the cannonball returned, and a dripping wet cloth splatted onto her face, stealing her breath.

“Gently, gently,” Alicia murmured to herself, carefully folding the saturated cloth over Myna’s forehead. “There. All better!”

Water trickled down her temples, into her hairline.

It was irritating, but with Lisha’s earnest blue eyes peering into hers so hopefully, Myna resisted the urge to fling the cloth across the room. The younger woman had nothing but good intentions, driven by the childlike need to please. “All better, Alicia, thank you.”

“Yay!”

“For the love of God, Alicia, what the hell are you doing?”

Myna smirked when the woman froze in place. In a conspiratorial whisper, she said, “I think he’s already seen you, Lisha.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Uh-huh,” Atticus replied dryly. Hands on his hips, he dominated the doorway, his green gaze searing into Alicia’s back. “Little girl, what did I tell you about leaving our guest to sleep?”

Blue eyes widened, but Alicia didn’t make a sound.

The Daddy Dom stalked into the room, his eyes roaming over Myna with exasperation. He switched his attention back onto his little girl, a scowl darkening his features. “Answer me, Alicia. When you woke up this morning, what exactly did I tell you *not* to do?”

Lips pursed in a pout, she hung her head. “Not to bother Myna. But Daddy—”

“No buts. What else did I say?”

“That she needed her rest because she had a long trip.” Her eyes narrowed, and a spark of adult Alicia flashed. “You didn’t tell me she was sick.”

Again, those green eyes landed on Myna, and she felt herself shrink under the intensity. Rather like being bathed in a forest fire. “I’m not sick. I’m just tired and a bit stressed, that’s all.”

A dark eyebrow flicked up, unamused. “Alicia, go to your bedroom. Panties off, nose in the corner. No Mr. Bear.” When she whined, he ignored her. “Naughty girls who disturb guests don’t get company when they’re waiting for a punishment. What they do get is an uncomfortably red ass and an hour with the discipline plug.”

Myna was slightly alarmed by the way Alicia went white. She questioned him silently, wondering if she should be intervening, but he shook his head.

“Apologize to Myna.”

Tears glimmered in those huge eyes, accompanied by a little chin wobble. “I’s sorry, Myna.” Without waiting for another word from Atticus, Lisha burst into tears and bolted off the bed and out of the room, her sobs loud and distressingly pained.

As though waiting for such an opportunity, Myna’s own eyes welled in response, her hormones surging to the forefront. She and this baby were going to have words when they were in private, about how not to embarrass her in front of people this way.

Atticus moved closer, sitting at the foot of the bed and studying her silently. After a few moments, he tugged thoughtfully on his beard. “Life been treating you well, Myna?”

Goddamn him, he knew how to hit her weak spots. Throat too tight to talk, she took the opportunity to yank the cloth off her forehead. Slowly, she washed her face with it, stealing the tears so close to escaping before he dug harder into the wounds in her soul.

“Not lying to me is a good start,” he told her with approval. “I don’t like liars, and the mood I’m in today, you’d be standing right next to my errant sub with your pregnant ass bared.”

“Grit is such a snitch,” she muttered.

Atticus quirked his eyebrow. “As if I need one of my men to rat you out. I have ways and means of finding information, Myna. You took longer than I thought to come home.”

“This isn’t home, Atticus. It’s a stepping stone.” She just wished she didn’t have so many hopes and dreams piled high upon it. “Have you been stalking me?”

His massive shoulders shrugged. “Stalking is such a negative word. We have an impending situation, one that puts a lot of people at risk, and your connection to Loki, the club, and ultimately Jasper...well, let’s just say you’re not in the crosshairs, but that could change.” He stared at her thoughtfully. “I’ve heard that you became a different person over Christmas, how you came alive in a way you weren’t when you were in D.C. Loki did something to you, just as you did it to him right back, and now both of you are lost without each other. Am I wrong in thinking you’ve returned for him?”

She wasn’t in the crosshairs? Oh, how wonderful. Should she expect to be shot in the back or just blown up by a missile? And what about the others? The Masters and their submissives, what kind of danger were they in?

She remembered how tight the group was, the familial bond interlinking them all. If Jasper—the sadist, if she recalled correctly—was at the heart of the situation, then his friends would band together against the threat.

It was how this particular group worked.

“What’s the threat?” she demanded, shifting into a sitting position with a quiet groan.

“Answer my question, and perhaps I’ll return the favor.”

Winning a verbal fight against him was as likely as being victorious in a physical one, she thought in disgust. The man simply backtracked and circled around an issue until he got what he wanted—how many times had she seen him do exactly that with Alicia in a therapy session?

Atticus was a machine, relentless and persistent.

Rolling her eyes, Myna huffed an annoyed breath. “Fine. I came back here because I had nowhere left to go, all right? Is that what you want to hear? My business literally burned to the ground. My home is rubble. I’m broke as fuck, and somehow, Loki’ sperm attained superpowers and chewed their way through latex to plant a baby in me right about here,” she finished, jabbing her belly. “Don’t worry, Att, I’m not going to trap your friend into marriage using my uterus. He just deserves to know that, however it happened, we made something beautiful between us.”

“He’s been pining since you left. Acting like a kicked dog. Don’t be shocked if he ties you up and drags you to the nearest city hall.” Atticus frowned, then shrugged. “My advice would be to step away until we resolve the current situation, but given your circumstances, I imagine that won’t be possible. We had an altercation with Jasper’s father, over a year ago now, but the asshole has resurfaced. Threats have been made, and we’re taking them seriously. Understand that if you stay,

we will put you into lockdown with the other women at the first sign of trouble.”

“What kind of threats?”

“Kidnap, rape, murder. The last skirmish we had resulted in three dead men and one injured Jasper. This time around, we stand to lose a lot more. Dominic gets women pregnant, then his wife takes the babies for testing and training. They want Anarchy as their next victim, but more, they want Jasper to continue the bloodline. Dominic uses his children as a trademark for quality when he sells them as assassins to the highest bidder, but now he’s getting on in age, I suspect he needs Jasper to be the family stud.”

Kidnap, rape, murder. What the hell was going on around here? Did Jasper come from some faction of the mob? The family stud, breeding assassins? Did his family traffic in humans, too, or was procreating for profit their sole objective?

Curving her hand protectively over her bump, she eyed him with trepidation. “If I didn’t know you, I’d think you were playing a nasty prank on me, Att. People really died?”

“I lost one of my team, Michael. Two of Dominic’s men—his sons—were killed as well.”

“His sons? But wouldn’t that mean they were...”

“Jasper’s brothers. Half-brothers,” he qualified.

“And Jasper killed them?”

“No,” was the blunt reply, followed by no explanation.

“This is all very disturbing.”

“I know. Unfortunately, it’s part of the group history, and it’s bleeding into our present. I wouldn’t tell you this but seeing as you’re walking into the middle of it, it would be unfair not to warn you.” He gave her a sharp, utterly Dominant glare. “However, none of the other women are aware of what’s unfolding; Anarchy in particular. I will not be pleased if they acquire this knowledge from you. Understood?”

Her hackles rose. “What do you want, Atticus? Would you like me to sign an NDA in blood or would a pinky swear suffice?”

“Your word is enough, Myna. Reuniting with Loki means you’ll be pulled into the girls’ circle, especially with precious cargo on board. Both Archie and Caera are expecting, possibly around the same time as you judging by the size of your bump.” He inclined his head, his voice softening. “The Masters of Avalon chose women with courage and sensible heads, but this is unlike anything we’ve gone up against before. Panic and stress won’t help anyone. Throw in a trio of infants—plus Lisha with her Little head on—and things go from complicated to clusterfuck.”

Part of her resented him for dumping such a huge secret on her shoulders without asking if she could keep it. But another, less hormonal part respected him for divulging it. She’d have gone Momma Bear on his ass if he’d allowed her to try and make amends with Loki, settling in for the long haul, with no idea that this shit was brewing beneath the surface. “They’re going to string all of you up by the balls and skin you alive when they find out you’ve been keeping them in the dark. Anarchy and Caera will lead the charge.”

Atticus winced, but it lasted less than a second, his confidence overriding his concern. “In this world, Doms take their responsibilities seriously. That includes the health and wellbeing of their subs. Physically, psychologically, emotionally. Archie and Caera suffer from nightmares already—Archie from her past run-in with Dominic’s men, and Caera because she was raised by him. Half-sister,” he said when Myna’s mouth dropped open. “Long story, not pleasant. Connie has enough on her plate caring for Thane. Bodie’s dealing with mild agoraphobia and looking after Declan. Sierra is handling her own shit, and Alicia...well, my princess is finally happy, and I’d like to give her that for just a bit longer.”

Myna couldn’t recall any Sierra being in the group at Christmas, which made her wonder who had lured another sub into the circle. Liam, maybe? Perhaps they’d promoted some new Masters from the membership.

“My guys have this, I promise you. Security is high and tight, on everyone. The Masters are all involved with the planning stages of taking Dominic down, and this time, we will not fucking fail.” Eyes blazing, he met her gaze directly. “It’s a bad time for you to come home, but Loki is going to need you every bit as much as you need him. Even if he currently has his head up his ass to hide his heartbreak.”

She swallowed, feeling a flutter of movement deep inside her. A hopeful sign of the future. “Does he know I’m back in Arizona?”

“Arizona, Phoenix, right here in this damn bed.”

Okay, that hurt more than she expected, but then, he hadn't made an effort to track her down when she'd lost her way, had he? While she was floundering in the ruins of her world, thinking of him while sifting through soggy ashes and packing her measly belongings, he hadn't come to D.C. "Have you told him about..."

"It's not my place to do that, Myna. Grit will keep his mouth shut as well."

"Thank you."

Atticus gave her leg a gentle pat, then smiled. "Let me clean this accident up, and then I'll let you get some rest. Can you handle something to eat and drink?"

"Oh, no, please don't think you have to wait on me, Att. Go put Alicia out of her misery, I can see to tidying up and feeding myself."

He gave her *the look*. The one that silently told her to shut up and do as she was told. Of course, she clammed up quickly, afraid her natural bitchiness might land her in hotter water than she was used to. "You are a guest in my house, Myna. More than that, you're a friend. So, when I tell you to rest and get some color back in your cheeks, what are you going to do?"

Anything but that? The thought was snarky, so she bit it back. "Say thank you?"

"An excellent idea." He rose slowly. "Tea and toast?"

"I think coffee..." she trailed off as he scowled.

"Think again," he admonished. "And if you're cursing me out right now, just remember I'm a fucking teddy bear

compared to how Loki's going to be when he discovers you're carrying his child."

Monday morning came around the same as usual.

Having spent all day yesterday tipping back a bottle of whisky and letting thoughts of Myna stew in his brain, Loki was not daisy fresh this morning. The shower he'd taken before stumbling from the office had rinsed off the stink of drunkenness and pity, but his mind couldn't focus on anything but *her*.

Atticus had made sure to keep him updated. On the hour, every fucking hour, as if he was interested in what the woman who broke his heart was doing. Did he care that Atticus estimated her to be twenty pounds lighter than she'd been when last he saw her? Or that she was sleeping as though she hadn't caught a wink in the past four months?

Of course, he fucking did; his moronic heart refused to sever the strings.

Throwing himself into the receptionist's chair, he yanked out the appointment book and flipped through the worn pages until he reached the right date, skimming his finger down the list of clients on the schedule. It was almost fully booked until August, which promised to keep him and his team of two happy.

Buying the place had been reckless, impulsive, but Loki had cast his doubts aside when his former boss told him he was retiring and selling out to go live in some bumfuck town in the west. The potential in the shop hadn't been met, despite

having two skilled artists under its roof, but once the legalities were finalized, Loki made use of his free rein and turned a lackluster enterprise into a bustling space of creative energy.

The walls were no longer beige and dotted with bland, talentless drawings that barely resembled artwork. The only thing they'd added to the ambience was boredom, reflecting Armand's personality and management.

Ginny, the receptionist, had used her powers of sweetness and charm to convince Loki that sunny buttercup yellow was more attractive to the eye than white or cream. She'd given him a lecture on how cold blue was, and how garish red would be.

He'd bowed to her instincts, leaving her to decorate while he handled the equipment overhaul and the new front window. After deep consideration, it hadn't been too difficult to decide to leave the name exactly as it was.

Blessed Ink.

Now he had yellow walls with framed sketches and photos of not only his work, but Indigo's as well. Leather armchairs, a goddamn coffee table with inane magazines, some variation of a potted plant in the corner beside his impressive bay window, and some kind of new-age rock music thundering through the speakers as soon as Ginny walked in the door.

Indigo, almost a decade older than Loki, was both a friend and mentor. He had some radical ideas which, fortunately, were rivalled only by his talent. The man threaded needles through skin as though he'd been born piercing, but his real skill was with the tattoo gun.

Running through the schedule in his head, Loki frowned. First on his list was a monochromatic tattoo, part two of a three-session job. That should take him until lunchtime, depending on whether the client could sit fucking still for more than ten minutes, and then there was...three piercings, followed by a consult for a full sleeve of ink.

A busy day, but he'd lost his enthusiasm. How the hell was he supposed to tattoo someone when his heart wasn't in it? He took pride in inking not just colors but passion into his clients' skin, bringing them to life with vibrancy.

Myna's return was screwing him up and, in turn, messing with his fucking livelihood.

Grumbling, he slammed the book shut and leaned back in the chair. Turning his hand over, he studied the ridiculously sentimental initial he'd tattooed on himself the day after he'd kissed her goodbye, high on lust and sugar cookies and foolish dreams.

The M was centered perfectly on his left wrist, done in blue and gold. No bigger than the pad of his thumb, it had been an impulsive gesture, one he saw every time he moved his hand a certain way. A constant reminder of how she made him feel—like his heart was made to beat for her.

Now, he had to decide how to cover it up.

“Must've been an amazing wedding if you're still hung over, Kiki.” The voice broke through the quiet ring of the old-fashioned door-top bell as Ginny pushed through, a tray of takeout coffee in one hand, a box of donuts balanced on her forearm, and her mammoth purse clutched in her other fingers by the strap. She sniffed the air and grimaced. “We have

fifteen until we open. Go take a shower before the smell of sweat and alcohol repels the customers from six stores down.”

Loki grunted. He hated that fucking nickname. “Already showered.”

“Can’t tell,” she responded sweetly, juggling her stuff so she could prop the door open. “Maybe go for round two. This time, try something we human beings like to call *body wash* and *deodorant*. Toothbrush and mouthwash wouldn’t go amiss either.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not in the mood, Gin.”

Still sweet as a candy cane, his lilac-haired, gold-eyed receptionist strutted over to the desk and slid the tray onto the surface. The hair dye and contact lenses were temporary and highly interchangeable depending on her mood, but the riot of piercings—nose, ears, lip, eyebrows—and the clash of styles scribed in ink in her skin was definitely not. “This bitch needs her coffee, her donuts, and her goddamn chair before she’s not in the mood to handle clients whining about how it smells like a racoon crawled up your ass and died in a vat of semi-digested whisky. Shower. Now.”

“Don’t make me lose my temper,” he warned, his mood souring further. If he wasn’t careful, he’d end up groveling for a week again to appease her wounded sensibilities.

The donut box slapped onto a pile of paperwork. “Don’t test my patience.”

They glowered at each other. Boss and employee were loose terms around here—the team was more like a continual brother-sister bickering match, with Indigo occasionally

stepping in as a paternal figure to stop minor bloodshed becoming grossly infected mortal wounds.

Ginny's eyes narrowed as she studied his face with the keen gaze of a predator going in for the kill. She dropped her purse to the floor, then kicked it under the desk as she smacked her palms down on the wood, leaning forward with a scowl. "This is not a celebratory hangover, Kiki. This is the remnants of a Christmas Chick drunk. What the fuck happened over the weekend?"

Ah shit, keeping secrets from her was like stopping a bloodhound from scenting prey. The only way to keep them safe was to tie a concrete block around their feet and sink them deep into unfathomable waters. "What usually happens at weddings. People get married in front of everyone they know, then the whole lot of them get shitfaced and dance until they pass out halfway through sex with a stranger. Or a cousin, but there wasn't really a familial element this time."

She jabbed a finger at him, the nail as purple as her hair. "Lacking the sex vibes, so that's bullshit. All this right here," she continued, circling her finger around his face, "is disturbingly reminiscent of January, February, and March combined."

Fuck it, he was taking the easy route out of this minefield and surrendering before he lost too many body parts. Shoving out of the chair, he stepped out from behind the desk. "Only ten minutes until opening. Better go find out what this *body wash* crap can fix."

"She came back, didn't she? For the wedding."

One of the biggest regrets of his life was getting so fucking drunk he'd thought the clock on the wall was beaming Myna memories directly into his brain, then spilling the whole goddamn mess over Ginny in an explosion of word vomit. He had hoped that her own inebriated state would affect her recollection, but apparently, she was a limitless hard drive, unaffected by alcohol, power shortages, or a fucking nuclear detonation.

Just his luck.

The sigh wrenched his lungs. "No, she didn't." Archie had sent Myna an invite to her office, but never received a response. "She came back, but I don't know why. She's not welcome here, not with me anyway."

"More bullshit," Ginny declared, straightening and setting her hands on her hips, resembling a disgruntled pixie. "Who are you lying to, her or yourself?"

"Don't be a smart ass all your life, Gin. We were done when she fucking ghosted me. She's free to swan around doing whatever the hell she likes, and I'll resume my attempt to get into the Guinness Book of World Records as a monumental playboy."

"Lofty aspirations you've got there. Are you forgetting the part where you tattooed her initial on your arm? Or the night you waxed poetic about how good she looked naked, and how all her sins would be forgiven if she just came back to you?"

"I can't be held responsible for whatever I say when I'm kiss-the-floor drunk."

“Yeah, you really can. Shitfaced Loki is so much more honest than sober Loki. Cuter, too. Booze removes the brain-to-mouth filter.”

“Like hell it does. I’m a close-mouthed asshole all the damn time.”

“Oh really, Master Loki?”

His body tensed at the honorific. He tried his damndest to separate business from pleasure, more to save himself from his vanilla friends’ ribbing than from a sense of shame. Evidently, it seemed he’d betrayed himself and given Ginny some fresh, armor-piercing bullets to play with.

He shrugged it off lightly. “I am who I am, Gin.”

“Uh-huh. I distinctly recall you being an infatuated Dominant who fell head over heels for a pretty woman in a sex club, then accidentally gave her a whoopsie moment by shoving your baton up her no way, Jose. Piercings and all.” The smile she gave him was so innocent, it was pure evil. “Close-mouthed, huh?”

Shocked, a little horrified, Loki stared at her as *fuck, fuck, fuck* bleated through his brain like a malfunctioning alarm. If he was blurting out highly personal details like that, it was time he cut himself off from the bottle. Maybe he could drown himself in orange juice instead.

“Secret’s safe with me,” Ginny assured him. “Unlike you, I’m a vault even under the influence. My point is, even though you’re so adamant this thing is over between you, it’s really not. Little love hearts gleam in your eyes with her name in

them, and you talk to her a lot when you sleep. A few of your catnaps had...intriguing developments.”

Jesus Christ, he wasn't safe in his sleep, either?

“It doesn't change anything. She came, we fucked. I conquered, she bolted. Game over.”

“You mean you were a pussy and got your feelings hurt without asking *why* she might have done such a thing? She didn't bolt, Kiki. You kissed her goodbye at the frickin' airport. Maybe you should give her a chance to explain what happened after she left before you wave bye-bye to a future with her.”

His phone buzzed angrily on the desk before he managed to formulate a reply that wasn't utterly childish.

They looked at each other, as still and silent as jaguars poised to pounce from a branch, then down at the phone. It vibrated again, and this time Ginny's left eyebrow arched wickedly in a curve as slow and devilish as her smile.

Leaping at the same time, they grappled for the damn thing, fingers sliding on glass and plastic, shooting it up higher between their warring fists. Adding in a little tug of war, Loki fully expected the cell phone to fly free and smash into pieces, but as it fired into the air, nimble digits snatched it out of his grasp.

Deftly bypassing his pitiful security, Ginny perched her hip on the edge of the desk and delved into the messages. She hummed low in her throat, tilting her head. “This is her?” She turned the screen in his direction long enough for him to see dark hair and ashen skin. “Kiki, hate to point this out to a guy

as smart as you, but Christmas Chick ain't looking so hot. Hasn't been for a while, I'd guess."

"Not my—"

She scrolled down to the second picture, then shook her head. "Yeah, it's your fucking problem. Chickadee is in deep sourdough. She's either grieving or sick." Passing the phone back, those gold eyes bore into his disapprovingly. "I can clear your schedule for the day."

The first picture was definitely Myna, taken inconspicuously from a doorway. She was asleep, dark hair spread over the pillow, several inches shorter than it had been. That infuriated him almost as much as the obvious signs of neglect etched into her face—a hollowness to her cheeks, the bone structure sharper and more prominent. Thick pools of shadow beneath her closed eyes, made more sinister by the lack of color in her skin.

Loki's gut clenched as he studied the second picture. This one, he assumed, was Alicia's handiwork, seeing as his former lover was awake in this photo, naked save for her underwear, with her back to the camera. The decadent fall of black hair was a lot damn shorter—only an inch or so below the tops of her shoulders rather than down to her ass.

The lush curves he'd admired and worshipped for an entire week were gone. The vertebrae down her spine were visible, her figure a poor imitation of an hourglass. Christ, even her limbs were more slender, a hell of a lot more fragile than the ones that had banded around him like steel cables.

She really was sick.

“I’ll go see her tonight,” he decided, wincing as his inner Dom kicked off, demanding they do their duty and go right *the fuck* now. “Tonight, Gin. I’m not going storming over there despite you trying to piss me off into going sooner. Deal with it.”

His friend huffed at him, then skewered Indigo with a blazing laser glare as he strolled in through the open door, tossed his bag on a chair near his workstation, and collapsed gracefully onto the tattooing table. Sunglasses perched on his nose, he mumbled, “Wake me up when the first client arrives,” and promptly stuck his headphones in his ears.

“Damn good thing his talent ranks higher than his Monday morning attitude,” Ginny sniped, gearing up for the battle that was waking Indi up from a power nap.

“Give him two minutes, then kick him out of that chair. Shove that coffee down his throat by force if you need to. I’d better prepare for the day.” Pocketing the phone and those damning photos, Loki choked his mental gears as he tried to switch, unsuccessfully, from Dominant to tattoo artist.

He didn’t last an hour before he set the stencil for his current project down and made his excuses.

Once a Dom, always a goddamn Dom.

Chapter Three

Atticus had a dog.

Apparently, there'd been six—something to do with Mr. Bear being devoured by a pack of them at the pound—and the enormous lummoX had been guilted by big blue eyes into saving the whole litter from a grim future. The other five were in excellent homes, being trained as K9 security, but the sixth...

What big teeth you have, my dear.

From where she was curled up on the couch, Myna watched the dog watching her. Her eyes darted from the TV screen to the mutt, but as far as she could tell, it never took those devilish eyes off her for a second.

At three months old, Snog the dog—or Sir Snoggington Bumblefluff, as he'd been christened by Alicia—was the size of a small SUV. When he matured, if he didn't weigh the same as a bus full of college football players, she'd be surprised, considering his paws were the size of her spread hand, his legs heavy boned, with the dark coloring of a Rottweiler.

Myna supposed he was cute if she ignored his pearly whites, and the contrasting dark pits of hell that were his eyes.

The carcasses of his kills were strewn haphazardly around the games room that housed Atticus's television, music system, video game consoles, and pool table. The pup appeared to have no great love for anything soft and fluffy, or stuffed.

Or her.

Oh so slowly, she wrapped her arms tightly around the cushion protecting her midsection, hoping she didn't send the fiend into a murderous rage. His earlier rampage against a plush koala had been unprovoked and deadly, a celebration of mutilation.

Where the hell was Atticus, and why hadn't he taken his demon dog with him?

Snog's ears pricked as he rose slowly, his hackles rising. Claws scrabbling, he spun around in pursuit of better prey than her and tore off down the hallway with a baying howl that was adorable compared to his hulking physique.

Approximately thirteen seconds later, there was a loud bellow. One that didn't sound at all like Atticus and wasn't accompanied by Lisha's manic giggles as she rolled around on the floor with the hellhound.

"Snog, don't be an asshole all your goddamn life!"

The hairs on her skin stood at attention, reacting to the familiar cadence and tone. Recognizing a certain Master's presence, her aching body tried to throw off the shackles of hormone-induced sickness and make itself presentable, but in the end, fatigue won.

Savage growling echoed down the hall, along with musical curses.

"I swear to God, dog, bite me one more time and I won't give a fuck if Alicia believes you shit rainbows and fairy dust." Loki's tone was probably more amused than angry, but his words suggested it was a fine line. "I will pick you up and

toss your scarily muscular body down the laundry chute. Do you understand me?”

The pup snarled.

“Why, out of all the damn dogs he had to pick from, did he choose *you*? He could have had one of those cute, fluffy bastards with a bow on its head, and instead he decided a mutt born in the fires of hell was best?” The Master snorted derisively, almost outside the door. “Oh look, something you haven’t destroyed yet. You want it? Yeah, you fucking want it. Fetch, Satan.”

The games room door closed with a firm click, and a few seconds later, the pup began to howl as if he was competing for an award.

Dread and excitement swirled in Myna’s belly. Sixteen weeks apart, of not hearing his voice or seeing the affection in his eyes, had wreaked a terrible toll on her. Her hopes rose, though she begged them not to—rejection was still very much on the cards.

Footsteps approached the back of the couch, stopping when they reached her.

On screen, detectives were trying to put pieces of a murder puzzle together.

If her body had quivered at the sound of his voice, it was vibrating now. His presence overrode everything else, eclipsing the room. The scent of his deodorant was fragrantly musky, decidedly male. It filled her lungs every time she breathed in, reminding her of the times she’d curled up to him

in bed, her heart still racing from an orgasm, with her cheek pressed to his chest.

The way his artist's fingers stroked up and down the length of her arm.

God, what she would do to feel that again.

“Least you can do is look at me when you crawl back into my life, Myna.”

Okay then, he was going for antagonism straight off the bat. That would teach her not to wax poetic about how he smelled while he was aiming for her throat. Engaging her defenses, Myna shuffled herself into an upright position and prepared to launch Operation: Two Can Play That Game.

“I may be broke,” she said coldly, struggling to stand. “I may be homeless, with my business in ashes.” Finally, she found her feet, swaying gently as a wave of fatigue hit her and made her head light. “But I don't crawl.”

Still cradling the cushion, she made herself turn slowly.

Christ, it seemed despicably unfair that he should look so good while she probably bore the appearance of a woman who'd been dragged backwards through a hedge, followed by a sewage system, and then completed her disaster ensemble with a hefty layer of sickness sweat.

Those dark eyes of his were guarded, but there were lines of anger and concern etched into the firm skin around them. He wore what looked like a couple days' worth of stubble, giving him a rough, sexy edge that suited the intensity of his ink.

No, not giving, Myna corrected herself. *Adding to* the edge he always had.

His talented hands rested on the back of the couch, long fingers digging into the soft fabric as he stared at her as though he wasn't sure she was real. As if he couldn't make up his mind whether he wanted her to be. The muscles in his arms were strained, his body braced.

"You're sick," he said accusatorily.

"That offends you?"

"It offends me that you've been sick, and you haven't told me," he ground out. "It offends me that you blinked out of existence despite everything we shared. Jesus Christ, Myna, I was falling in fucking love with you, and you just vanished from my life like it meant nothing. *That* offends me!"

Already in the past tense, she noted. How long had it taken him to take another woman to bed and fuck all thoughts of her away? Knowing his reputation, not long at all.

"Communication works both ways," she reminded him haughtily. "Has the tattoo shop burned down since Christmas, Loki? Do you still have a roof over your head, your belongings in your possession? What have you been doing since I left, because it sure as hell doesn't seem as though *you* made any effort to find me."

His knuckles turned white. "I sent you texts. I called you more than thirty times."

"I'm sure the asshole who mugged me at the airport when I got home appreciated your kind and concerned messages,"

Myna fired back, snark dripping like venom. “Tell me, did he just cut your calls off or let them roll over to voicemail?”

Loki’s jaw tensed. “Unfair, Myna. You could have called me when you got a new phone, gotten my number off Atticus if you couldn’t remember it.”

“A new phone? Do you *see* a fucking cell phone on me, Loki? Within reach?”

Heat sizzled between them, fractious and raw. One wrong word and they’d ignite.

“It’s a big house you’ve invited yourself into,” he pointed out.

Tempted to claw his eyes out and wear them as earrings, Myna straightened to her full height and snarled. “Invited, my ass. That giant do-gooder brought me here without asking me if I wanted to stay or not, and he seems pretty disinclined to let me leave. With any luck, once I’ve killed you and left your body parts strewn all over his home, he might actually kick me out.”

“The beleaguered act doesn’t work on me. You were pretty damn comfortable, curled up on the do-gooder’s couch, watching his theater-sized TV, when I came in. What game are you playing, Myna? I’m over you, I’m over this, so just pack your shit up and go back to the fucking hole you’ve been hiding in for months.”

Like a naked flame touching gas, Myna felt her temper erupt. Fire scorched her from the inside out, rising from her feet until it enveloped her from head to toe. With a banshee-

esque screech, she launched the cushion concealing her bump without thinking, hurling it at his head.

“I don’t know why I bothered coming back here. Maybe I thought you’d be an adult and *listen* to what I have to say, but you’re not the man I’ve been pining over since Christmas. I loved that man. I wanted to share my hopes and dreams with that man, but the boy who’s taken his place has a lot of fucking growing up to do.” Anger gnawed away at her energy reserves like a nasty little beaver, making her legs weak. “You go your way, Loki, and I’ll go mine. We can both forget how naïve I’ve been.”

“Sit down.”

“Fuck you. You’re not my Dom anymore, asshole.” Oh boy, her hormones weren’t afraid of unleashing the profanity.

Loki’s eyes were focused unblinkingly on the subtle roundness of her midsection. Hands clenched into fists, a muscle working in his jaw, he snapped, “Sit your ass down, Myna, before you fall over.”

She was itching to throw something else at him. He treated her like she was shit he’d stepped in, then expected her to roll over and expose her belly for him upon command? “Make me, jackass. Try it,” she warned when he took a purposeful step towards the end of the couch, “and what I do to you will make Thane’s limp seem like a cramp.”

“You’re not sick.”

“Specifically? No. As a wonderful side benefit of my condition? Absolutely.” Goddamn it, she really did need to sit. Stubbornly, she refused every instinct screaming warnings at

her. “If being sick offended you, God knows how being pregnant will affect your sensibilities.”

Loki swallowed hard. “Is it mine?”

She supposed it was a logical question, but that didn’t stop it from cutting deep. One that most men would ask. But it made her wonder if he thought she’d gotten knocked up before or after they’d been together.

Just as she was softening, sympathizing with the position he found himself in, he opened his big mouth and shattered any emotion she had left.

“I mean, a DNA test will prove it one way or another, right? If it’s mine, then we’ll get married and make sure it has a stable upbringing. None of this single parent crap.”

Her knees almost buckled with the derision in his words. Bristling with outrage, she walked slowly around the couch with her left hand guarding her bump. When she was close enough to touch him, she offered no warning before her right palm cracked across his cheek, hard enough to snap his head to the side.

“No, Loki, she’s not yours.” The lie didn’t taste as bitter as she expected. “She’ll never be yours. When she’s old enough to ask me who her father is and why I did the single parent *crap*, I’ll tell her he wasn’t worthy of being in her life.” Her hand burned, abraded by his scruff, but it only fueled her tirade. “If you believe that after what we shared, I could go out and fuck another man, then you don’t deserve to be in mine.”

By tonight, she would no longer be in his, she thought. Clenching her teeth against the surge of tears threatening to

take her by storm, she spun around and pretended as though her legs weren't on the cusp of giving out.

“Myna.”

Ignoring him, she walked to the door, aware that the demon hound was lurking on the other side. His howls might have subsided, but Snog was proving to be a fierce opponent.

“Myna, I'm sorry.”

Too little, too fucking late.

Fingers wrapped around the handle, she glanced over her shoulder at him. “I came back for you, Loki. Not because I'm pregnant and I wanted to force you into stepping up into fatherly duties, but because I loved you. My life went to shit the moment I walked away from you. Everything came crashing down in the space of weeks. I was sick and lonely, and all I dreamed about was dealing with the legal shit and coming home.”

His hard eyes softened, revealing the man she loved beneath.

“Too bad I had to travel halfway across the country to realize that home isn't here.”

Apparently, that barb dug in deep enough to get him moving toward her, but she was done. Emotionally wrung dry, far too close to crying for her comfort, she yanked the door open, staying behind it so that Snog's primary target was Loki.

Barking manically, the devil puppy attacked at speed, giving her an opportunity to slip out and shut the door behind her as Loki shouted her name, then yelled curses at the dog.

Rushing down the hallway, she locked herself in the guest bedroom. Gulping in breaths to stave off the tears, she realized there was nothing in here for her to take. None of it was hers. The clothes she wore were borrowed from Atticus, seeing as he was more her size than Alicia, but she would just launder them when she got...well, wherever she landed this time.

God, she didn't have the energy for this.

But it had to be done. Throwing marriage out there when he obviously thought so poorly of her proved he had a good heart, but she knew how those kinds of relationships went over the years. There would always be a kernel of doubt that she hadn't been sleeping around in D.C. and it would fester into bitterness.

Even with his goddamn DNA test as proof that the baby was his.

They'd spend eighteen years putting on a show for their child, going through the motions of a happy family, until he or she went to college, and then the divorce petition would arrive.

She'd be in her fifties by then, alone and unloved. Probably too broken and exhausted to even try and attempt another relationship. In the end, she would die as she'd lived.

Alone. Always fucking alone.

Better alone than trapped in a loveless marriage, she reminded herself firmly. Plastering on a happy smile every morning so her child grew up without some form of emotional trauma, all the while dying inside as her heart withered away.

No, she and peanut were going to leave before her attachment to this place made it impossible. Perhaps she could

come back when Caera and Anarchy had their babies. Be a friend, be supportive, then get the hell out of dodge again.

In nothing but her borrowed clothes, she cracked open the door and peered out, relieved to see the hallway empty. There was still yelling coming from the games room, and the puppy was evidently having the time of his life.

Myna hurried into the kitchen in her socked feet, cutting into the foyer where she knew Atticus left his boots. She discovered several pairs of footwear, but not one of them was her battered sneakers. “Oh, this is not the time to be playing hide and seek with my shoes, Att.”

Maybe someone had put them in the closet in the guest bedroom. Or Snog had eaten them, which wouldn’t come as a surprise.

Muttering under her breath, she marched back into the kitchen, griping about her stuff going missing, and how was a woman supposed to make an effective escape when she couldn’t even find her own damn shoes?

“Looking for these?”

She jumped, her socks slipping slightly on the tiles as she whirled to see Atticus leaning against the breakfast bar, long fingers tapping her elusive sneakers. Hand to her racing heart, she glared at him. “How long have you been there?”

He shrugged. “Around about the time Loki got his ass handed to him by my dog.”

“It’s not a dog, it’s the devil.”

“And you’re evading.” Straightening, Atticus jerked his bearded chin toward the ongoing ruckus down the hall.

“Where are you going to go if you run from this, Myna? Bank account’s empty, car’s dead in the water. You need safety and security right now. You need *him*.”

Her throat closed. “He doesn’t want to listen to what I’m saying, Att. In his mind, I’m the bad guy. That’s fine, I’ve been the bad guy before, but I’m not hanging around waiting for him to make my life a misery. I’m not exactly in Happyland right now.”

He picked up her sneakers and held them out. “Seems to me you have two choices. Take these and go, see where life leads you. Maybe you’ll do just fine, maybe you’ll have regrets. I don’t think it will be easy for a while, not in the latter stages of pregnancy, and then with a little one in tow.”

It felt as though he’d jammed his thumb down on her doubt button, triggering each and every one of them.

“Or you can channel the Domme you played for so long, dig down deep and find the strength and courage to walk back in that room. Kick his dumb ass off the four walls for a while with help from the dog, and then sit down and sort this fucking mess out. Being a mom doesn’t mean you’re weak or incapable of being on your own, Myna, but why the hell should you have to be when he’s been waiting for you for months?”

Myna snorted. “Let’s not pretend we don’t both know his penchant for anything that has a vagina and talks. Perhaps he missed me, but I’m not fooling myself that he kept his dick to himself. Self-proclaimed playboy of Avalon, remember? Master of threesomes and singledom.”

“All that’s true. Or was, until he met you.” Setting her footwear aside, Atticus folded his arms over his chest and stared at her with eyes that screamed dominance. “He’s turned down every submissive who came within proposition distance. The closest he’s been to the scening areas in the club is when he’s on monitoring duty. Hard as it is to believe, Loki went cold turkey.”

It was incredibly hard to believe. Their week together had been fun and intense, complex and fulfilling. The man was a machine, for God’s sake, with endless stamina and an impressive recovery time. Sex once a day wouldn’t be enough for him, so to imagine him abstaining for weeks was... difficult.

She wandered over to the nearest stool and perched on it, her breath shuddering out heavily. “I’m four months pregnant, Atticus. Loki’s given up sex. How the hell did this happen?”

“When two adults do the dirty, there’s a chance that several million sperm will introduce themselves to an egg,” he intoned with a smirk. “Particularly if the participants forget contraception or use inadequate protection.”

Myna chose an apple at random from the fruit bowl beside her and lobbed it at his head. Scowling when he not only caught it, but gave it a brisk rub on his shirt before taking a bite, she shook her head. “I mean, why us? We used condoms, for fuck’s sake. We were careful.”

“You’re not the only one with an unexpected new arrival incoming,” he pointed out. “Anarchy’s pregnancy was planned, but Caera’s definitely wasn’t.” The apple jabbed in her direction. “That reminds me, don’t mention it when you

see her. She's reached the point where she can't hide it anymore, but it still terrifies her."

Join the freaking club, Myna thought.

"Caera's young, isn't she? Twenty-one, twenty-two?"

"Hmm. Don't think it's her age that's putting the fear of God in her. Jasper's her half-brother—they share the same asshole father. Dominic was contemplating using her as one of his broodmares, planning to breed her when she reached her teens. He was intrigued to see what direct inbreeding could produce for his program." Disgust rippled in Atticus' voice. "She was little more than a baby at that point; her first memories started when she was eight. Rita decided Caera wasn't worth keeping in the interim and ordered one of the other, older siblings to kill her."

Christ, could that family *get* any worse? "Obviously, the sibling didn't."

"No, he took pity on her and dropped her a few towns away on some woman's doorstep. She couldn't handle the kid, so she found adoptive parents for the girl. They were just as bad."

Myna thought of the quiet, easily spooked little blonde who'd been tucked into Saul's side at every turn. It was horrifying to think that people like Dominic and Rita were real, that their actions went unnoticed and unchallenged. "Does she think Saul wants to use her the same way her father did?"

"No. If she did, Saul would set her straight. He loves her for her, not for carrying on his family name. I think she's afraid she won't be a good mother, that her time in Rita's care

will reflect most prominently in her parenting skills. It's bullshit; there's a reason Saul calls her *little rabbit*."

While she was musing that over, comparing it to her own fears, Snog came bounding into the kitchen, mercilessly killing the long strip of material between his teeth. Paws skidding on the tiles, he growled and let the fabric fly before pouncing on it again.

Atticus snorted, then laughed uproariously as Loki stalked in.

From the right knee down, his leg was bare aside from his tattoos and the part of his jeans Snog hadn't managed to rip off. It flapped against his calf with every stride. "That thing is a fucking menace, Att. Six months down the line, it'll be able to eat my fucking leg, not just my goddamn pants!"

"Snog is learning how to be a good attack dog." With a low whistle, Atticus summoned the pup. He bent and engaged in a short tug of war over the denim trophy. "In six months, there won't be a man alive willing to risk the wrath of Snog. My princess will be perfectly protected."

"You owe me a pair of jeans, jackass!"

"I can get Snog to rip the other leg off, give you a matching pair of shorts."

"Some friend you are." Loki sank warily onto the stool next to Myna, then cursed as the pup beelined for him, going straight for his exposed ankle. "Atticus, I swear to God, if it bites me, I'll be patching my clothes with puppy pelt!"

"You and what army?" Myna muttered, drawing her feet up as best she could. The pup sniffed at her before deciding Loki

was more fun to torment.

“On that note, I’m going to find my princess and see what trouble she’s causing. Or do I need to stay and referee round two?”

She shook her head. They were highly unlikely to come to any form of understanding today, and all she wanted was to drop her head onto the breakfast bar and take a nap.

“All right then. Come with me, Snog.” Patting his thigh as he whistled, Atticus strolled away while his dog continued to harass Loki. “*Snog.*”

Giving Loki a final glare, the pup responded to Atticus’ dominant command and trotted after him.

“What the hell did I do to make that dog hate me?” Loki muttered under his breath.

“Being your usual jackass self was probably enough.”

“Goddamn it, Myna, you can’t expect to blindside me like this and expect me to think straight!” he exploded, slapping his hand down on the bar with a sharp smack. The sound went straight between her thighs, a reminder of what that palm could do to a vulnerable ass. “None of this is what I wanted for us! I’ve been worried sick for months. Heartbroken for the first time in my life, and I fucking hate it.”

Round two was ending with a swift knockout.

Her heart felt as though he’d cleaved it in two with one swipe of his words.

None of this is what I wanted for us.

That made things incredibly simple, didn't it? He wanted his freedom, the right to fuck around and cater to his club harem, not a catastrophic responsibility like a child chaining him down.

Myna nodded slowly and rose, walking around the breakfast bar to take her sneakers. Dropping them to the floor, she shoved her feet into them without bothering to tie the laces. "I get it, Loki. This wasn't exactly in my plans for the future either, but unlike you, I can't walk away from it. I know you're hurting, and I'm sorry for it, but you're not the only one in pain here. Maybe you were worried, but that wasn't enough for you to come and find me."

"Don't turn this around—"

"On you? Damn right I am. The moment I could, I came back to you. I scraped together the little I had left and rented a car to drive here. Maybe I should've just bought a new phone and called you. At least then I'd still have the fucking phone." She blinked as her vision blurred. "You've been here, in your routine. Day in, day out. Doing the bachelor thing. Living your life as normal. So, I'll make things really easy for you."

It tore her apart to look at him, to see his eyes shimmer from anger to concern to regret. God help her if their baby had his eyes, because she didn't know how she'd handle staring into them every day, trying to laugh and smile and be happy.

"Go back to the club, Loki. Go be the manwhore you take such pride in. Forget about me, about the baby. Don't come looking for us. Don't send Atticus in your stead. We don't want anything from you."

“Give me a goddamn chance to wrap my head around this, Myna. You’ve had months to get used to the idea of being pregnant; I’m literally just finding out about it.”

“Two weeks,” she corrected.

“What?”

“I’ve only known for two weeks. I thought it was the stress of everything making me sick, but it wasn’t. If you think I can’t understand the shock you’re in, imagine what it feels like to wake up every damn morning knowing there’s another person growing inside your body.”

“I don’t know how to be a father, Myna.”

She wasn’t sure how to be a mother, either, but she would prevail. Reaching out, she let herself touch his arm. Just the briefest, gentlest stroke she could muster. “All the more reason to let us go. We made her through love, Loki. That will be your gift to her.” She thought of the happiness he’d brought her, the sense of belonging he and his friends had offered so selflessly, and bent to brush her lips over his forehead. “Think of me fondly, Loki, if you ever think of me at all.”

With the world pressing down on her shoulders, her fingers trailed off his arm as she walked away. If this was the most civil way to officially end things between them, then so be it.

It was just her and the peanut from now on.

There should be relief, Loki thought as the woman who’d dropped a bombshell on his head made her quiet exit. He should be dancing a jig at the prospect of being let off the hook of a responsibility that lasted a lifetime.

A kid, for fuck's sake.

How the hell had that happened? They'd been careful, using a condom every damn time. No risky dips into the fertile pool, no raw rides in the dark. Safe and sane right down the line.

So why was his pride ripped to shreds?

Children were...well, not his forte. Aside from Declan, Loki's involvement with anything small and screaming was kept to a minimum. Wailing, crying, shouting, and all the other expressions of emotion upset the fine balance of his creativity—although there wasn't much left of that after Myna flipped his universe upside down.

But still...if she was to be believed, it was his blood, his DNA, forming part of the life growing inside her.

His baby, he thought with a mixture of fear and amazement. The biggest responsibility a man could have, and he was going to not only let it slip through his fingers, but allow the woman his heart was stuck on to traipse off into the unknown, unprotected?

He scowled at his hands.

Not a fucking chance.

It might take him a while to get over the shock, but they had time, right? Going on the assumption it *was* his kid, it wouldn't be due until...shit, his math sucked. September, if the pregnancy went okay and Myna didn't go over term.

That gave him four months and change to get his life into order.

It concerned him that she wasn't glowing radiantly like Anarchy and Caera. If not for the obvious rounding of her belly, he might have believed she was chronically ill rather than pregnant.

Had she been to the doctor yet? Myna kept calling the baby 'she' as though the sex was already confirmed, but surely a physician would be monitoring the mother's condition as well as the fetus's development?

Something was amiss.

Shoving off the stool, Loki headed down the hallway after Atticus. The plan forming in his head wasn't exactly conventional, and technically, Myna was under the Daddy Dom's care. Right now, as things stood, Loki's opinion meant little to the pregnant sub, but Atticus held a lot more sway.

He knocked on the office door, relieved to see the pup asleep in its crate beside the massive desk. "Got a minute, Att?"

Amused green eyes lifted to stare at him over the top of the computer monitor. "Seems like she didn't flay too much skin off your thick hide before she left. You going after her or do I have to send Grit on her tail?"

"I want to go after her."

"Finally took your head out of your ass." With a quiet grunt of approval, Atticus pushed away from the desk. "Did she tell you what's been going on, or were your ears still deafened by your rectum?"

Not the most pleasant imagery. Loki grimaced. "Do you blame me for being angry?"

“Not at all. But I did expect you to be more mature about it when she made her return.”

Honestly, his reaction to her coming back was more extreme than he'd anticipated. It was more than just anger at being ghosted for months. It was the culmination of all the stress and concern he'd felt for her, the slow death of his dreams, the self-loathing of thinking he'd done something to push her away.

“Come, take a seat.” Atticus picked up his phone and made a call. “Grit, I need you to handle a situation for me. Our guest is currently heading down the drive. Yes, I'm aware it's too fucking hot for her to be out there, that's why you're going to retrieve her and return her back to the house. No, I doubt she'll come quietly. Restrain her however you feel necessary, as long as she isn't harmed. Bruise her, and her Dom will not be pleased.”

Understatement of the year, Loki thought dourly, then narrowed his eyes when Atticus laughed.

“I'll be sure to tell him that, Grit. Just escort her to my office when you've got her.” The big bastard was still grinning when he ended the call and set the phone down. “If you're keeping Myna, I'd make your intentions known, Loki. Loud and very clear. Grit is taken with her, and I'm not sure how much longer I can keep him from making a move.”

“Over my dead body.”

Atticus shrugged. “Well, he is on my A-team, so that is a distinct possibility.”

Subtly, Loki flexed his biceps, wondering how hard it would be to take down one of the mercenaries disguised as *security operatives*. In all likelihood, he'd be carried out of the room in a body bag in under ten seconds, but he was willing to risk it. "Bet I could take him."

"I'd hire you on the spot if you could. Now, are you going to behave like a calm, reasonable adult when Myna walks in here? You're on your third strike in less than an hour, and I get the feeling she wasn't planning on coming back when she stomped out the front door."

Think of me fondly, Loki, if you ever think of me at all.

Teeth gritted, he nodded. "I wasn't prepared. I'll be better once it's sunk in properly, but that might take a few days. Being a father has never been at the top of my wish list."

"Hmmm. How much of what she told you did you take in?"

"She didn't really *tell* me anything. It was more of a lecture, then she stormed off."

"The pair of you are useless. *Communication*, Loki. One of the basic tenets of the lifestyle." Atticus rolled his eyes, then smirked as he watched something on the monitor. He winced briefly, then his attention flicked back to the conversation. "Myna didn't ghost you. She was mugged at the airport in D.C. when she arrived home, and then the building housing her business burned to the ground. On top of that, her landlord evicted her and the other tenants of her apartment block so it could be demolished for development."

What the fuck? Blindsided a second time, Loki's mouth dropped open.

“She did try calling the club, but no one answered. Never left a message. Maybe she was embarrassed to spill her woes on a recording, who knows. As soon as the legal shit regarding the business and her home was resolved, she leased a shitty piece of junk car and drove here.” Atticus drummed his fingers on the desk. “Open your eyes, boy. Myna’s prepared to become a single mom, despite the fact she’s broke and homeless. She’s alone, sick half the goddamn time, and still willing to carry around the one piece of you she still has, even though terminating it would make her life a thousand times simpler.”

“You’ve been stalking her,” he choked out.

“I’ve been doing what you should have done,” came the terse reply. “Keeping an eye on the woman you purportedly love. I told myself I wouldn’t intervene unless the situation became dire. A pregnant woman in the second trimester without a home, reliable transportation, or an income is pretty fucking dire, don’t you think?”

There were no excuses to justify his actions, Loki realized. Myna had been right when she’d thrown that at him—he *had* carried on with his life, going through the motions as he pined for her, but he’d just sat back and waited for her to return as though she was the one who should do all the work maintaining their relationship.

Fuck, he had some groveling to do.

Flowers were not going to make up for this clusterfuck.

“I’m taking her home,” Loki announced suddenly, raking his hands through his hair. He caught a glimpse of the M on his wrist, and the ache in his chest was painful. “She’s not

staying here. No offense, Att, but she belongs with me. She's mine. The baby is mine. This is my family."

"That's the first sensible thing I've heard you say in weeks."

"Has she seen a doctor?"

"Broke," Att reminded him. "If she's seen one since she went back to D.C., my team hasn't found any record of it."

"Okay, then that's the next step. I'll find a doctor, take her and the baby for a check-up. What about her stuff? Do I need to lease a U-Haul?"

A card slid across the desk beneath Att's finger. "Call the number on here. It's the doctor both Archie and Caera are registered with. I've already done a background check on her, and she's good. She runs maternity groups, Lamaze classes, social mornings for expectant mothers. It might be helpful for Myna to immerse herself into a relaxed support group and make some new friends."

Doctor Elizabeth Rockford, Loki read before slipping the card into his pocket. "Thanks. It kind of helps that Jasper and Saul are going through this at the same time. I mean, there can't be more than a few weeks between the three of them."

"Archie's due late August. Caera is about a month later."

"Three babies due at the same time. It'll be chaos."

"We thrive on chaos. Speaking of," Atticus muttered as a shrill shriek echoed from the far end of the house. "I do believe a certain submissive has been returned."

“Put me down, you asshole! I have every right to leave if I want to!”

“That’s quite a mouth she has on her.” Obviously delighted by the impending tornado of hormones bearing down on them, Atticus settled himself more comfortably in his chair and smirked. “I believe I heard Jasper telling someone that spanking is permissible up to a late stage of pregnancy. With due care, of course.”

“Jasper would know,” Loki said dryly.

The shouting grew steadily louder, all one-sided. Either Grit wasn’t responding to her threats, or he had an exceptional wealth of patience. If he was as enamored with her as Atticus suggested, perhaps he thought leniency might gain him some favor.

“I will kick you so hard in the nuts, you’ll sneeze cum for a year,” Myna promised savagely. “Put me down right the fuck now!”

“Is Alicia out of firing range?” Loki asked, estimating they had ten seconds before Storm Myna hit the ground running and annihilated them all.

“She’s downstairs with the office staff, having great fun pretending to be a receptionist. They’ve set her up with her own computer and phone, and they call her every so often with a new task to complete.” Atticus’s green gaze locked on the doorway. “Three...two...one...”

“I hope you run better than you listen to orders, jackass. As soon as my feet are on the floor, I am kicking your cowboy ass back to whatever redneck town you came from!”

Whistling a merry tune under his breath, a man stalked into the office with a seriously pissed off Myna in his arms. Her ankles and wrists were bound with rope tight enough to stop her from slipping an appendage free, without compromising her circulation.

“Might want to consider hobbling her next time, boss.”

Loki assessed the newcomer, scowling at the blond-haired, hazel-eyed jerk manhandling his woman. The asshole was pretty enough to be a model, but he wouldn't look out of place on the back of a horse or wrestling goddamn cows by the horns.

“Have you been giving Grit trouble, Myna?” Atticus damn near purred.

She growled, her face flushing with temper. Sweat glistened at her temples and hairline.

“Gotta admit, she was making good time down the road. Must have been a third of the way down when I caught up to her, pacing off her mad.” Grit grinned as though her agitation was harmless. “Tried to make a run for it, but she flagged after about twenty feet. Someone needs a damn good spanking and a nap.”

This time she snarled, and Loki's cock responded by thickening swiftly. “I'm going to hurt you. I am going to—”

“*Enough.*” To his surprise, Loki found himself on his feet, his throat raw from the depth of that single command. He stepped forward and relieved Grit of his burden, his stomach sinking as he comprehended how underweight she was. “As a

guest in this house, you show respect to not only Atticus, but those he invites into his home. Apologize, Myna.”

She squirmed in his arms as though she couldn't stand to be touched by him. “Go fuck yourself, all of you. You're not my Dom, you don't get to order me around. I'm leaving, I'm—” Eyes a shade lighter than Atticus' jungle green filled with furious tears as her voice broke. “I don't belong here.”

This was his doing, Loki thought bitterly as he sank back into his chair and cuddled her. Deftly, he tugged on the quick release knots holding the ropes in place and let the restraints slip to the carpet. “You do, pet. This is absolutely where you and the peanut belong,” he added, using her endearment for their baby. “Here with me, and Atticus, and our friends. I'm sorry if I made you believe otherwise.”

Myna resisted any attempt to comfort her, slapping away his hands and sliding off his lap. “Thirty minutes ago, you didn't want to give me the time of day. You threw marriage at me like I'm some damsel in distress needing matrimony to save me from an asshole prince—*if* a DNA test proved you're the father.”

“Pet—”

“Don't you dare *pet* me! Either you think I was pregnant before we met and I'm trying to pass you off as the father, or you believe I screwed around on you when I left. Honestly, at this point, I don't fucking care what your opinions are.” Barely keeping her feet under her, she glared at all three men with equal disdain. “I'm done being pushed and pulled where everyone wants me to go. Now, is Grit going to drive me into the city or am I walking?”

Her frustration was palpable when none of them answered.

Grit looked to Atticus for orders, but the big guy just folded his arms over his barrel chest and gave Loki a baleful stare, handing the reins of the situation into his hands. Did he ask her to stay or watch her walk out of his life with his child in situ?

Hah, who was he kidding? She'd bite his head off and spit it back at him if he asked her to do anything right now, but he'd be damned if he was stupid enough to send her on her way with that asshole Grit as her driver.

My family. My baby. My goddamn Myna.

Lip curled in disgust, the woman he loved jabbed her middle finger at him, then spun clumsily and headed for the door. "Thanks for the hospitality, Atticus. Give my love to Alicia."

Wood slammed against wood when she exited the office.

"You handled that like a champ," Atticus said dryly into the gaping silence. "Grit, do the honors, would you? It's really not safe for the women to be wandering around at the moment, let alone hiking to the city in her condition."

Hazel eyes lit up with pleasure. "Want me to take her to one of the safe houses?"

Loki was prepared to gouge those pretty-boy eyes out with one of his piercing needles. He stood slowly as Atticus mulled over the available options for the errant submissive. "This is my problem; I'll deal with it. You can just back off and keep your fucking hands off my woman," he snapped as the blond's eyebrows hiked to his hairline. "Now excuse me, I have a sub to catch and castigate."

Grit's right arm twitched as though he wanted to take a swing, so Loki took the opportunity to escape before he spent the next couple of days wearing a black eye. Holding his own in a fight wasn't an issue, but holding it against a fully trained member of Att's mercenary team was a completely different matter.

The echo of the front door slamming was rippling down the hallway when he stepped from the office. His little songbird was moving faster than he thought, which meant she'd burn out sooner than she expected. From experience—surviving the rollercoaster of Bodie's pregnancy and experiencing the highs and lows of Archie and Caera's so far—he knew her energy levels would bounce up and down, particularly when she was stressed or hormonal.

He didn't rush after her. He got the feeling if he chased her, she'd run, and there were too many accidents just waiting to happen. A slip could snowball into a fall, resulting in a concussion, sprains, breaks, miscarriage...yeah, he wasn't taking that risk.

Instead, he walked at his usual pace, trying to gather his thoughts into a presentable argument that came across as reasonable. Anything defensive would set her hackles rising, he mused, because in her eyes he was indefensible. He couldn't excuse ignoring her over the past couple of days, or his behavior today.

There was a strong possibility he'd lost her. One thing he'd learned about women was that the longer they were alone, the more independent they became. Not just physically.

Emotionally, they evolved into fortresses where men were neither wanted nor needed.

After everything she'd been through, perhaps Myna's walls were now settled in place.

If it came down to his willpower versus hers, he might be in trouble.

That just left the dominance card to play. Being a pseudo-Domme hadn't worked well for her in the past, even though she'd believed that it was the right path for her. All she'd gained from the pretense was a community-wide blanket of disapproval and seclusion, months of being shunned and blacklisted.

At Avalon, her slate was clean. Everyone who'd met her recognized her as a submissive, and her history in D.C. was exactly where it was meant to be—in the past, a concrete block in the stairway to a new beginning.

Myna was hard-wired for submission, the rules and boundaries of it which kept her balanced.

By the time Loki stepped outside, his naughty girl was trudging down the long drive without looking back. As he pursued her at a distance, he wondered if anyone had ever fought *for* her. Plenty of people had taken sides against her, with one group even going so far to beat the crap out of her, but was there one person in this world who'd ever turned around and unconditionally shielded her from the shit?

“Myna,” he called out.

Her next step faltered as though she hadn't expected someone to follow her, but she didn't stop. Stubborn wench.

“Go back to your one-night-only subs, Loki. Fuck them and leave them, I don’t care anymore.”

“There hasn’t been anyone since you,” he answered. “That’s not what I want. It’s definitely not what I need. Will you stop for a minute so I can talk to you properly?”

“The time for talking is long gone,” she snapped back, still not looking at him.

“I know about your office, and your home. I’m sorry I didn’t let you explain. I was so worried about you, and as time went on, it turned into anger.” His boots weren’t moving any faster than before, but he was catching up to her quickly. “For God’s sake, Myna, you’re the first woman who’s ever made me think about the future. When you were gone...my fucking world went off-kilter, like nothing would ever be right again.”

“Atticus stuck his nose in, didn’t he?”

“What?”

“Atticus. He poked his big, stalker nose into the situation and, instead of listening to *me*, you did the man thing and decided that what he had to say was worth more than anything I could.” Her dark hair whirled as she spun to face him. “Even though it was the same fucking thing I needed you to hear from me.”

They faced off against each other under the heating warmth of the sun.

It struck him that she didn’t look well. Despite her temper, her skin was pale and clammy with sweat. She licked her lips, but they remained dry. She was trembling, swaying slightly as

she had in the office, which told him something wasn't right with her body.

Memories of Bodie during her pregnancy pelted him, a litany of red flags and warning signs.

"Baby, I know you're mad," he crooned softly, hoping to defuse what promised to be a screaming argument, "but I think you need to sit down. When was the last time you saw a doctor?"

"Don't change the subject," she snapped, eyes sparking with green fire. Yet all that heat died too quickly, glazing slightly before she shook her head. "That's your problem, Loki, you don't *listen*. You just steer the conversation where you think it should go."

He took a step forward; she retreated on unsteady legs.

"Answer the question, Myna. Please don't lie to me."

"You have no right to ask me anything," she stated, dismissing him with a wave of her hand. "What I do or don't do is none of your..." She trailed off, staring at him unblinkingly.

A moment later, her eyes rolled back in her head as her body crumpled.

"Fuck." Already in motion, Loki lunged forward, wrapping his arm around her torso beneath her breasts. Her knees hit the road before he could catch her fully, but he managed to swing her into his arms with remarkable ease before the rest of her followed.

Where the hell had his woman gone?

She was little more than skin and bone, her healthy post-Christmas weight eaten away by stress and hormones. Her head lolled over his arm, the pretty features he'd dreamed about slack.

“Well, little songbird, if you can't take care of yourself, then into the cage you go.”

Chapter Four

Myna reached out and groped for the alarm clock next to her bed. It wouldn't stop making that incessant noise, and she was so damned tired. Eyes still closed, she ran her hand over the table, not finding the source of her irritation.

Instead, someone enfolded her appendage in two of theirs, linking fingers with her when she whimpered in protest. "Ssssh, pet. Everything's going to be fine. We've got you now."

Loki's voice stroked her worries, urging them to fade away. She'd heard it in her dreams before when she was trapped in that barren place between being awake and falling into sleep. Longed to hear it when the weight of her broken world crashed down on her shoulders.

She shifted restlessly, her legs sliding over soft, cool sheets. So comfortable. When had she bought a new bed? This mattress was firm and supportive, cradling her just right. The pillows under her head were fluffy clouds, begging her to float away on them.

But the damn alarm clock wouldn't stop nagging her, which meant she was going to have to get up and find it. When she did, she was going to smash it into tiny, silent pieces.

She ran her free hand over her belly the way she always did now, saying a quiet good morning to the life inside her. Groaning, she tried to turn onto her side so she could haul her clumsy ass out of bed, but more hands stopped her.

"Stay still, Myna. The IV line needs a bit more time to do its job."

IV line? What the hell? Jerking fully awake, she blinked her eyes open to find herself in a strange place that was part cozy guest room, and a whole lot of hospital. Panic reared up and snagged her by the throat before she had time to think, freezing her muscles.

Not an alarm clock, she realized, but a goddamn monitor. It was going crazy now, her heartrate making the beeps merge into a shrill whine, piercing into her skull. She wrenched her hand free from Loki's, snatching at the tube feeding fluids into her vein through a canula in the crook of her left arm.

"No!" he snapped as hands clamped down on her arms and pinned them to the bed. "Leave it alone, pet. It's only helping you, I promise."

Teeth bared, breath whistling, Myna strained against the immovable hold. Trying not to let her fear show—although it was far too late for that—she glared at Atticus, then Loki. "Get the hell off me. This is assault. This is against my consent, I —"

"Quiet," Loki ordered. "This is saving your foolish life, Myna. Yours and the baby's."

Okay, that shut her up. Judging by his tone, she'd messed something up without consciously thinking about it. If it involved the pregnancy...she had to buckle up and settle in for the ride to follow. Protecting herself was a moot point if the consequences bounced back on the baby.

"Good girl. That's better, just calm down. No one here is going to hurt you. This is Atticus's medical wing, so it's secure. The doctors and nurses are all security checked. Whatever's scaring you stops here and now."

Easy for him to say, she thought. He wasn't the one in the damn bed, being studied like a cockroach smushed on a microscope slide. Besides, she *wasn't* scared; she just hated the scent of a sterile environment, the way she could taste the antiseptic of the cleaning product and feel it on her skin.

Plus, she didn't enjoy the idea of stuff being pumped into her body without knowing what it was or what it might do to her baby.

Regaining some control, she forced herself to relax. This was just a blip in her plans, that was all. As soon as her guards left her alone, she'd dress and make her escape.

"Oh, this is fortunate timing," a woman said cheerfully, standing in the doorway with a tablet in one hand. Her hair was bright blue, twisted into a sleek French knot at the back of her head, matching the color of her eyes behind wire-framed glasses. "I expected you to be out at least an hour more, but we'll work with what we've got."

"Myna," Atticus rumbled. "This is Doctor Rockford. She's taking care of Anarchy and Caera through their pregnancies, and now you as well."

Like hell she was.

"Please, let's leave the formalities at the door. Given my profession, it can be a little awkward to curse me out if you have to use Doctor Rockford every time. Call me Lizzie. It's nice to meet you, Myna." Beaming a brilliant smile, the woman approached the bed. "Boys, I think you can release her now. Being held down when she's afraid won't help matters."

“I’m not afraid,” Myna muttered mulishly as the pressure on her arms abated.

The doctor tsked in disapproval, studying the monitor and making a quick note on the tablet. “Of course you are. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. This is a very exciting time, growing new life, but it’s also incredibly frightening. So many alterations to your body, to your nervous system and hormones. It can be an overwhelming process.”

“Why am I here?”

“You passed out,” Loki told her.

Myna scoffed, “I’ve never passed out in my life.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” Rockford pulled over a chair and sat, scrolling down the screen with a fingertip. She tsked again. “What is the last thing you remember before you collapsed?”

Myna grimaced. She’d been arguing with Loki, yet again. Maybe she’d felt a bit nauseous, so horribly tired as the adrenaline wore off, but then something else had risen and taken her out. “I was angry. I didn’t feel well, but I haven’t for a while, so it was nothing new. Just tired. I was talking and then...I went numb. From the top of my head to my shoulders, I was numb.”

“Hmmm. The blood test results should be back by now.” More scrolling, a long sigh.

“Blood tests?” Horrified, Myna shot Loki an accusing stare. “How long have I been in here?”

Absently, the doctor answered, “Around eight hours. Loki and Atticus brought you here immediately after you passed

out. I came as soon as Atticus called, and you were barely lucid when I arrived. The nurses gave you a mild sedative when you became difficult.”

What the actual fuck? Myna felt her eyes widen. How did she have no memory of that? Was there something in the IV that was suppressing her brain functions? She eyed it with distrust, wondering if she was fast enough to rip it out before they stopped her.

“Deficient, deficient, deficient,” Rockford muttered under her breath. “This really is a mess. You’re very lucky you haven’t been hospitalized before now, Myna. There is a distinct lack of self-care evident, and it cannot continue.”

She pressed her hands to her bump as though the doctor might try and take the baby from her. They’d need more than two Masters and a skinny, blue-haired nymph to pin her down if they attempted it.

“Low blood pressure caused you to pass out. You are severely dehydrated, malnourished, and lacking in several important vitamins. I see no records of fetal monitoring.” Setting the tablet down, the doctor shook her head. “The IV is currently rehydrating your system. It will remain in place for the next few days so we can continue to keep your fluids up. I’ve ordered a bag of vitamins to be hung as well, although that should only take a few hours to feed through on a slow drip. Bed rest for the next week, minimum. We’ll reevaluate the situation in seven days, but if there’s little improvement, expect to be here for a while.”

Myna felt the blood drain from her face.

“We’ll formulate a nutrition plan to build your weight up. Your body is using its reserves to nurture the baby’s growth, because you’re not eating appropriately. Sleep is essential, and I recommend as little stress as possible.”

A laugh nearly burst free. Her life was one gigantic tangle of stressed string, knotted and gnarly. Getting herself out of it wasn’t as easy as waving a magic wand and making it disappear.

“Now you’re awake, we’ll go ahead with an examination and your first ultrasound.”

“No.”

Loki growled. “The decision is out of your hands, pet.”

“Go f—”

The rest of her sentence turned to muffled grunts when his hand covered her mouth. Dark, irritated eyes bore into hers, conveying his displeasure. “The hierarchy has been replaced, Myna, and you are no longer in charge. Swear at me again and, pregnant or not, you’re going over my knee. Obviously, you’ve been finding it difficult to take care of yourself the last few months, so as of today, it’s out of your control.”

Nuh-uh. Control was her lifeline; it was why she’d spent so long trying to perfect her dominant persona. It wasn’t something she allowed anyone to take away from her, and she very rarely gave it away.

Now was not a giving moment.

This was a hold onto it and don’t let go moment, because if she admitted things had gotten on top of her, Loki wouldn’t be content manning the reins for a little while, he’d yank them

from her for the rest of her life, the same way her father had trapped her mom.

The little things first—suggestive comments on what to wear, how to act, how to *better* herself. Restrictive commands—no TV after nine p.m., no phone after nine-thirty, and definitely no reading before bedtime.

Eventually, it became a cycle of no friends, no social life, no outside interaction.

Sex was on his terms, loveless and lacking everything but physical bodily contact.

Myna shuddered. Her parents' marriage had become a prison for her mother. Invisible shackles chaining her to the house and a husband who didn't love her, but kept her around as maid, hooker, and verbal punching bag rolled into one unpaid, unappreciated woman.

That would never be her fate, she decreed, trying to bite Loki's palm. Her submission was something to be earned, and he had, once.

“We'll step out of the room for the physical exam,” Loki continued, ignoring the beams of hateful fire she directed his way. “However, I would like to be present for the ultrasound. I'm going to be a father, Myna. Let me be a part of the experience.”

It wasn't a question or a request.

It was a statement.

That pissed her off. She didn't want the first glimpse of her baby to be ruined by him adding pressure onto her already burdened shoulders. He'd known about the pregnancy for

hours, yet she'd had to live with it—unknowingly, for too long—as well as the consequences, for months.

She was too independent, too used to being alone, to tolerate his orders and directives.

When he dropped his hand, she resisted the urge to scrub the taste of his palm off her lips. “My body. My baby. My choice. I’m not a dog you can drag to the vet and demand to have me seen, Loki. Yes, you’ll be a father. But that doesn’t give you any right to dictate my life.”

The heart monitors were vocalizing her agitation.

“What gives you the right to ambush me like this? No offense to the doctor, but I don’t know her. I didn’t choose her. When did I ever give you permission to make medical decisions for me?” Furious, Myna snagged the IV and yanked, baring her teeth at the flash of pain. “Get the fuck out, Loki. All of you. Just leave me alone.”

Loki opened his mouth, but Atticus set a hand on his shoulder.

“I think it would be best if everyone in possession of a penis left the room. I’d like to talk to Myna in private, if I may.” Rockford bent and retrieved the IV line, cutting off the flow of fluid spreading over the floor. “It might do both of you good to have a little time apart, Loki. Just take an hour to let the news sink in properly. I’ll take care of Myna.”

“I don’t need taking care of,” she hissed.

At the same time, Loki snarled, “We’ve been apart for months. Look what good that did us.”

Prepared to leap out of bed and throttle him with her bare hands while lecturing him on *how* they'd ended up apart for so long, Myna shuffled herself upright and flipped back the covers. Her stomach twisted at the sight of the huge T-shirt covering her body.

How many goddamn liberties did they think they were entitled to?

What was next, tying her to the bed so she couldn't escape?

Gagging her so she couldn't protest?

"Come on, brother. Give her some room." Atticus steered Loki away from the bed. "We put her in a vulnerable position, so we need to back off until she feels safe."

The look Loki gave her promised...all manner of things, she realized. There was anger, a hint of a threat. Concern, unease, a fervent need to defend and protect. And to top it all off, she saw the man she'd fallen in love with, the one she'd cuddled into after sex.

"An hour," he said grimly, "and then we level this shit out, Myna. Everything on the table, all grievances aired."

Myna glared daggers at him as he strode out, Atticus following him like a guard. She knew he was dominant, but by Christ, did he have to utilize it *everywhere*? Maybe stop and think about the pressure he was putting on her with words and tone?

She didn't have the energy to juggle being a mother and a submissive. When her body was this tired, it dragged her brain down with it.

“Well, that was exciting, wasn’t it? A bit fraught toward the end there, but babies have a way of complicating matters even before they’re born.” The doctor frowned in disapproval at the blood trickling down Myna’s arm. “Will you let me reinsert the canula, sweetie? You really do need the fluids. I’m quite concerned about how depleted you are in several areas.”

Laughing bitterly, she gripped her hair in both hands and tugged sharply. “My insurance ran out a few weeks ago. I can’t pay for anything you use or put in me. Flat broke,” she stated with a grim sense of doom hanging over her head. “Not a penny to my name.”

Gently, Rockford detangled Myna’s fingers from her knotted locks. “Atticus explained some of your circumstances. Some, not all. Apparently, there’s been a delay in your employment paperwork, but the company insurance provider is willing to start cover from the day the contract was signed.”

A delay in her what now? “I’m sorry, what employment paperwork?”

“The contract giving you a very generous level of health care. It seems you have friends who care a great deal about you. All your medical needs are taken care of, when you decide to let me do my job.”

Stunned, Myna stared at the other woman, searching for a lie. Unable to find one, she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Why the hell would Atticus do that? It wasn’t like she held any importance in his life, even if she thought of him as a friend.

Besides, friends didn’t make grand gestures such as this, did they? Gestures which ran into the tens, if not hundreds, of

thousands of dollars. Not only that, he was toying with insurance fraud, for God's sake.

She couldn't accept it. Gift or otherwise, it was an enormous debt she couldn't afford to bear—and one she refused to let Atticus carry.

“Yeah, that's not happening.” Grimacing, she swung her legs out of bed and exhaled slowly. “I pay my own way. Once I start letting people take over my responsibilities, it turns into a slippery slope where I lose myself. I've done that once, and barely scraped myself out of the hole. It's the little things first, then the favors get bigger and bigger until there's no way in hell I can repay them.”

Only Atticus had gone straight for the big guns, hadn't he?

Asshole.

“I'd say it's a kind gesture.”

“No offense, Doctor Rockford—”

The woman smiled, but her eyes gleamed with sharp understanding. “That right there is one of your flaws, Myna. Is it me in particular, or just everyone you can't let your guard down around? Sticking with formalities might keep you on higher ground, but when you get down in the trenches, they don't matter anymore. Now I don't know you, we've just met, but I've known women like you. Holding the world at bay doesn't solve any problems; it just creates more when you need friends to rely on.”

“I—”

“Shush. I get the sense there's some tumultuous history between you and Loki. My advice is to do whatever it takes to

let it go. The way he looks at you...I have single moms in my clinics and social meetings who would run you over with a Zamboni to have him look at them the way he watches you.” The doctor lifted her shoulder. “Being a mom is the hardest job in the universe. Doing it alone doubles the difficulty, but you also miss out on sharing the rewards and growth of your baby with someone who is equally invested in that child.”

Sharing wasn't the issue, she thought sourly. She just didn't want to be absorbed into Loki's dominance until there was nothing left of her.

“From where I'm standing, as an outsider in this thrilling drama, there are several hands stretched toward you, ready to help. Mine included,” she added, offering hers with the palm up. “Reach for them while they're still here, Myna. Link fingers with them, build bonds. When you need them, they'll come together and form a safety net. Trust that they'll catch you when it matters most.”

Hesitantly, Myna went against every instinct and obeyed. “Doctor—”

“Call me Lizzie.”

It didn't feel right. “Doc—”

“Lizzie.”

Too tired to play word games, she sighed in defeat. “Lizzie. I'm fucking things up every way I turn. Making friends is just asking for heartbreak. They'll walk away when the next quake shakes a ton of rubble down on my head, and I can't stand by and let them get caught up in it.”

Lizzie tsked. “Who abandoned you when you needed them? Someone’s given you a jaded outlook on life. Yes, there will be shit you can’t avoid, but with the right friends around you, you can find shelter. Forgive me, Myna, if I’m speaking out of turn but I think you’ve got the perfect support system forming around you.”

“I...” She trailed off, unable to vocalize her thoughts.

“Settle yourself back into bed,” the doctor ordered gently. “Close your eyes and rest. I’m going to put a fresh line in and do a quick exam while you organize your thoughts. Let me bear some of the stress until you’re ready to share it.”

“I don’t need a new line.”

“Yes, you do. I’m the professional here.”

She felt her lip poke out in a pout. “Don’t want an exam.”

“That’s what we call tough luck. Legs under the duvet, Myna. Ease back gently, that’s a good girl.” Hands supported her descent down to the pillows.

“Not a girl,” she muttered. “I’m older than you, probably.”

“Sweetheart, when the going gets tough and we’re scared, all of us are girls again at the core. It doesn’t mean we won’t power through it like a warrior bitch, because we always do. We’re human, that’s all.”

Myna mulled that over as she sank into the comfort of the bed. Everyone had flaws, no matter whether they believed it or not. There was no perfect human being, no single person whose life was mapped out with every T crossed and every I dotted. It just wasn’t feasible, because the human race was inherently flawed down to the DNA.

As a new canula slipped into her arm, she wished Loki hadn't gone. It would have been nice to hold his hand while she was prodded and poked, to listen to his voice telling her things would work out just fine. To lose herself in his eyes and forget just how much of a fuck-up she was.

If wishes were horses, she'd have a thousand of them.

“Stop pacing.”

“I can't.”

“It's been five minutes, Loki.”

Twenty-seven and thirty-six seconds, but who was counting? “I shouldn't have said an hour. Why the fuck did I give her an hour? She's just going to use the time to shore up her defenses and slap another layer of impenetrable stone over those stupid walls of hers. Stubborn goddamn woman!”

Atticus rolled his eyes. “No more stubborn than you. If anyone can give Jasper a run for his money in that department, it's you. Myna's only protecting herself and the baby. Give her space to calm down, and perhaps those walls will lower when she feels safer.”

Loki snorted and spun on his heel for the return trip. “Talking with her right now is like trying to lift a porcupine with my bare hands. Jesus, Att, where did things go wrong? Where did I take a wrong step and set us on this path?”

“Well, that depends on which part you think you fucked up. Is the baby the wrong path? Because that started the moment you didn't suit up properly.”

“Can we not bring up the baby yet? I’m still wrapping my head around the fact that Myna and I made one between us.” Thankfully, some of the shock was wearing off. Without the haze blinding him, Loki was finally beginning to see a clear path ahead. “Honestly, I don’t think that was where we turned the corner. A baby is...fucking terrifying,” he admitted, “but I’m not regretting it.”

“Finally, some sensible thinking. So, if it didn’t go wrong then, when did it?”

That was the million-dollar question.

The events of their time apart were scrolling through his brain as he tried to pinpoint where he’d lost control of a very good thing. Unfortunately, it was highlighting how...blasé he’d been about it all, and the fact Myna was right.

He’d whined and complained that she’d ghosted him, sulking in his pit of misery while she’d been fighting simply to keep a roof over her head and money in the bank.

There’d been no effort on his part to find her and make sure she was okay. Perhaps if he had, she wouldn’t be through the door on his left, arguing with the doctor—because he knew damn well she was—and facing a hard journey to replenish her system even as the tiny gremlin inside her continued to grow.

“If you like your balls where they are, I wouldn’t call your baby a gremlin within earshot of Myna,” Atticus suggested with a laugh.

“Huh?”

“You’re thinking aloud, brother. Bad habit.”

Another spin, more striding. “Maybe I deserve to lose my balls. For months, I’ve set the blame on Myna’s shoulders, putting the onus on her to keep in touch. Having tantrums because she didn’t. I’m the fucking Dom, and I just dismissed her. Christ, what a dick.”

“Ding-ding-ding, we have a winner. So, you’ve identified the point of dissention; what’s your next move?”

“I’ll take groveling my ass off for five hundred,” Loki muttered, stopping and flopping his weight into the chair beside his friend. “The worst thing? I can’t explain why I didn’t chase after her, even to myself. I could say I wanted to see if what I felt for her was reciprocated, if it was enough to bring her back, but I think that elevates me into upper douche status.”

“Super douche status,” Atticus amended.

“I’m going to make it up to her. I’ll admit that I was wrong, that I messed everything up. When she’s ready, I’ll take her home. Pamper her like a princess. She won’t have to worry about anything.”

This was his second chance, his final opportunity to do right by his woman and his kid. If he fucked it up, he doubted Myna would ever give him the time of day again, let alone involve him in the intricacies of raising a small human.

So, he’d just have to break out No Shit Loki and prove that he was man enough, fucking mature enough, to have a civilized conversation and debate how they were going to make a go of things permanently.

Marriage was preferable, seeing as his heart was completely wrapped up in her. A ring on her finger, a collar around her throat, and his name on the baby's birth certificate made a perfect trifecta.

He'd made an unwise decision throwing marriage at her earlier, which meant that when he broached the subject again, he needed to make his intentions—and the reasons behind them—pristinely clear so she didn't get hooked up on any previous misconceptions.

Loki rubbed his jaw. It couldn't be that hard, right? He just had to show her how much he wanted her in his life, how much he needed to be everything she dreamed of in a partner. How much he fucking loved her, and the child they'd created between them.

There was a lot he needed to examine and reprioritize in his usual routine.

Top of the list was finding a tenant for the apartment above the shop and searching for somewhere more spacious in a quieter neighborhood. Two bedrooms and a backyard so the kid could play, but maybe he should hold off on a place with a pool.

He was gonna baby-proof shit so well, the kid wouldn't get so much as a graze.

Spending more time with Myna was a priority, which meant he should probably hit up his list of talent for someone to lease his chair in the shop a few days a week. He could keep his hand in, sate his creative urges, while still dedicating the bulk of his attention to his family.

An elbow rammed into his side. “The fuck?”

“The doc wants you,” Atticus said gruffly, jerking his head toward the door to Myna’s room.

Alarm rushed to the surface of his thoughts, sending him to his feet the instant he saw Doctor Rockford waiting patiently for his attention. “Is everything okay?”

“Just fine,” she assured him without hesitation. “Myna would like to see you.”

He barely stopped from checking his watch. “Now? Is it safe? I mean,” he corrected when Rockford lifted an eyebrow at him, “is it safe for me to go in there so soon? She got upset last time, and I don’t want to put additional stress on her or the baby.”

“You’ll learn that Myna’s going to get upset on a regular basis. It’s all part of the thrilling rollercoaster ride that is pregnancy. Come on in, it won’t be long before she’s asleep again.”

Somehow, he was already near the door, his legs working without a direct order. Following Lizzie, the super-cheery doctor, he was surprised to find that not only was Myna hooked back up to the IV, but she also had an additional bag of yellow fluid feeding through a second tube.

Pale and drawn, she was barely awake. The pretty green eyes he found so hypnotic were little more than narrow slits, and the monitors beside the bed beeped in a slow, lazy rhythm.

“This could have waited until later,” he murmured, irritated at the idea of rousing her when she obviously needed sleep more than a conversation. “Let her rest.”

“I haven’t forgiven you yet.” Myna told him, her voice husky and low.

“Don’t blame you,” he replied, walking over to her unencumbered side. “I was an asshole, Myna. I made too many mistakes. Give me a chance, and I’ll make amends.”

“Can I get that in writing?” Evidently amused by her reply, she flashed him an adorable grin. “I can frame it for my wall.”

“Sure, little songbird.” Unable to help himself, he nudged a loose strand of hair away from her cheek. “Being this tired isn’t healthy. Why don’t you get some sleep, and we’ll reassess everything later. I’m not going anywhere.”

“No. Haven’t forgiven you yet,” she repeated, grunting softly as she sat up and leaned against the pillows, “but when I do, there shouldn’t be any hardships left. Our first ultrasound should be something we share, not a bone of contention. I want...we should be together for this. The first time we see our daughter.”

Hope swelled inside him. If this wasn’t an olive branch, he didn’t know what was. “Here and now?”

“Here and now,” Lizzie confirmed, wheeling an ultrasound machine over. She gave them a beaming smile that encompassed her apparent love for her job. “Are we ready to see if this little one wants to flash the goods?”

Myna narrowed her eyes. “We’re having a girl, period.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Humming, Lizzie carefully pulled down the duvet until it folded over Myna’s thighs, exposing the swell of her belly beneath the oversized T-shirt she wore. “What about you, Daddy? Are you rooting for a princess or a prince?”

Loki rubbed the material of the shirt between his thumb and forefinger slowly, smirking as Myna blushed furiously. Oh yeah, she knew she'd been caught—it was his shirt, one he hadn't been able to find since the new year. At least that mystery was solved. “Can't deny it would be kinda cool to have a boy. Honestly, I don't care as long as we get through the whole process with everyone safe and healthy.”

“That's the goal.” Still humming, the doctor moved through motions she obviously did on a regular basis, fiddling with the machine. “Can you lift your shirt up for me, Myna? As high as you feel comfortable with. Perfect,” she said happily as his woman pulled the fabric up beneath her breasts. “Lucky you, you missed the transvaginal scans. Normally I'd lecture you mercilessly on how important early monitoring is, but I'll refrain. The gel might be a little cold, but it will warm up.”

When Myna's hand trembled, Loki reached out and clasped it in both of his. The simple contact made all the fractious edges that had plagued him for weeks smooth out, as though touching her made the world spin again. “Be thankful it's not Jasper doing the ultrasound; he'd probably put the gel in the refrigerator so it was extra cold.”

She laughed, then gasped as clear gel met warm skin. “I think Lizzie has a touch of sadist in her.”

“I spend most of my time helping women squeeze watermelon-sized babies out of a small, tight orifice. Not because I enjoy their pain, but because I love helping new life into the world.” Lizzie's perpetual dazzling smile brightened to blinding. “By definition, I believe that makes me not a sadist.”

Loki had a witty retort on the tip of his tongue, but it died suddenly as the dark screen lit up with a grainy image. His gaze dropped to the transducer gliding over Myna's belly, guided by the doctor's steady hand, then shot back to the screen.

“Okay, guys, say hello to your little one. Right now, she's only about the size of an avocado so she's still got some growing to do over the next five months. Everything looks as though it's developing correctly,” she murmured, studying the picture with intense focus. She tapped her fingertip on the screen. “We've got the spine here, legs, ribs. This little dot here is your baby's heart.”

Emotion choked him by the throat. “She's so small.”

“She is. Once Myna forms a proper routine of sleeping, eating, and hydrating on a regular basis, fetal development should increase. At the moment, the baby is feeding off you and siphoning your energy, resources you don't have an abundance of to spare,” Lizzie told Myna in a firm tone. “I trust that will change when you're in Loki's care.”

“Damn straight,” he muttered absently, riveted by the image on screen.

Myna's eyes were wet. “She's actually real. Can you see her, Loki? She's real. Even after I took the test, part of me doubted it. But she's there. Here,” she corrected, running the fingers of her free hand across her slick bump. “Sleeping in here, passing time until we get to hold her.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, brushing them over her knuckles before pressing it to his cheek. “I see her, little songbird. She's going to be so beautiful, just like her mom.”

“Or handsome like his daddy,” Lizzie said with a wink. Her finger moved across the screen slightly. “The angle isn’t fantastic, so I’ll have to officially confirm it at a later scan, but I believe blue is your color.”

“A boy?” Myna squeezed his hand tightly. “A little boy, Loki.”

Speechless, he stared at the screen where Lizzie’s finger indicated...something. Was that a penis or a blip in the image? Even squinting and tilting his head, he didn’t know how the doctor could tell what was what.

“Would you like to hear his heartbeat?”

“Yes,” he croaked. “Yes, please.”

“Okay, it’s going to sound a bit fast compared to an adult’s. This is normal. At sixteen weeks, we expect the fetal heartbeat to be between one hundred and thirty and one hundred and sixty-five beats per minute.” A sound filtered through the speakers, and it reminded him of a hummingbird’s wings. “He’s right on track. Nice and strong.”

Brimming with pride and joy, he couldn’t help himself. Pushing every boundary line Myna had set between them—and the ones he’d erected himself—Loki released her hand and slipped his beneath her head. He bent, kissing her with fervor as the thrill of being a father caught up with him.

The moment their lips touched, he sank deeper into the reminder of why he loved her so damn much. Instead of shoving him away and slapping him for his audacity, Myna joined him in the sweetly urgent passion of his kiss, gripping the front of his shirt tightly.

This was home.

God, he'd missed her. Her attitude, her wit, her goddamn mouth.

She moaned, her fingers running through his hair to grip a handful.

"No sex until the mandatory bedrest ends," Lizzie admonished sternly. "Myna's body is under enough duress without being rutted like a buffalo in bulling season."

The woman in question snorted a laugh, completely undermining the moment. As they broke apart, Loki leaning back, she murmured, "No bulling me like a buffalo until you're forgiven, Loki. Doctor's orders."

He grunted, running the pad of his thumb over her kiss-plumped lower lip.

"We'll wrap this up, so Myna can get some sleep. Alone," the doctor added pointedly. "Want me to print some pictures so you can show off your son to everyone? It's a rite of passage," she said when Loki frowned. "Soon-to-be parents are allowed to flash ultrasound images as often as they like. I believe Anarchy is taking full advantage of it."

Jasper's kitten really was. Although both of them were adamant they didn't want to know the sex of their baby, they were all too happy to pass around the photos to anyone who'd look. "She's very enthusiastic about being a mom."

"She'll be a fantastic mother. Pregnancy suits her."

A printer hummed to life beneath the machine, and a few moments later, the first physical memento of their son was in Loki's hands.

In a few months, it wouldn't be paper, but an honest to God baby he held.

Flesh and blood, a life to nurture and shape.

Not in his image—the poor kid deserved more than that. The sins of the father should never be the son's, and Loki made a vow to do everything in his power to steer his boy away from the mistakes that he'd stumbled through as a teenager.

Lizzie cleaned up the mess on Myna's stomach, but before she pulled the shirt down, he cleared his throat.

“Would you mind if I...”

Myna reached out and took his hand, placing it on the curve of her bump. “You can't feel it yet, but sometimes she—*he*—kicks. Or moves. Whatever it is an avocado-sized baby does in there. It feels like a flutter, like there's a butterfly in there.”

“Maybe Lizzie should check for wings.” Her skin was warm and smooth beneath his palm. He remembered how it felt to press his lips to the softness, the way she squirmed when his stubble tickled her. “Are there any tests to do? I know Bodie went through a few. Normal ones, not connected to the issues they had with Declan.”

“I've taken blood and urine. We'll get the less invasive tests out of the way first, then discuss genetic screening methods once Myna is feeling more like herself.”

He didn't know much about the medical needs of a pregnant woman, only the bits and pieces he'd picked up from Braun. It was a minefield of alien language and technical terms he had no hope of understanding. His brain was geared

to the creative side, to the ebb and flow of outlines on the skin, the etch of color that brought his ideas to life.

“Is there anything I can do? Should be *doing*?”

Lizzie smiled, lifting her chin toward his hand where it rubbed in slow circles on Myna’s belly. “This is a good start. Back and foot rubs are also highly recommended. Keeping Myna company and out of trouble for the next couple of weeks meets my approval; bedrest gets boring. Although,” she drawled with a pointed glare at the woman under discussion, “you’ll be sleeping most of the time, won’t you?”

“Hmm,” was the non-committal reply.

“Yes, you will. I advise that she stays here. Atticus’s medical facilities are better than most hospitals, and a lot more homely. His staff are competent, the food is amazing, and we don’t want to run the risk of causing undue stress by moving her unnecessarily.”

“I’m right here,” Myna mumbled. “Don’t talk around me.”

“We’ll just wait until you finish falling asleep then.” With a wink, Lizzie started shutting the machine down, wiping off the transducer. “Loki, I know this is going to be a shock—to your routine, your future, everything that makes your life what it is now. But despite the angry blip, you’re stepping up to the plate, and I admire that. Just keep doing what you’re doing, what feels right to you.”

Myna’s hand went lax on top of his, and a quick glance showed him that she’d succumbed to sleep. With one last gentle caress over where his son lay sleeping, he drew the shirt back down, then pulled the duvet up to her chin. “It’s more

than an angry blip. I fucked things up, and I could have lost *this*. All of this. Doing what feels right for *me* isn't necessarily what's right for her."

"That's something you'll have to fix, but given her willingness to have you in here, I'd guess it isn't an insurmountable task. Grovel," she advised cheerily, "and do everything in your power to board up the holes in her trust. It's not just bruised feelings you're contending with, Loki. Anger like hers stems from putting your trust in someone, and having it ripped in half."

"I know. I deserve whatever she throws at me." With a caress over Myna's temple, because he just couldn't keep his hands to himself, he sighed. "All right, Doc, you might as well lay it all out for me. The good, the bad, and the ugly of what to expect in the next few months."

When Lizzie finished telling him, he wished he'd never asked.

Chapter Five

Two weeks of bed, bed, and nothing but bed was driving her up the wall.

A wall that, in partnership with its three associates, was rapidly shrinking around her as the days ticked past at a snail's pace. Even though she was sleeping a good portion of the afternoon away, there was still a lot of time to fill.

Company kept stopping by. Alicia was her most regular, non-Loki visitor, but it was nice to enjoy the more adult conversation offered by Archie, Connie, Caera, and Sierra. Bodie joined in via Zoom, because Braun hadn't yet broken her aversion to being off home ground for anything more than short periods of time.

They'd brought presents—magazines, books, ridiculous board games they'd spent a few hours playing while talking about the antics at Avalon, and the building work that was turning Liam into a grumpy prick.

Sierra had even brought her a reconditioned stuffed...thing.

Myna thought it might be a dog of some kind. Or a mutant hyena crafted from tartan. It was cute, sure, but weirdly disturbing. Especially when it was perched on the end of the bed, watching her with glossy black eyes that followed her no matter what she did.

Loki got an A-plus for attentiveness. He was there when she went to sleep and when she woke up. If she so much as hinted at wanting something, he made sure she had it in her hands without too much time passing.

For hours, he sat with her while she flicked through channels on the TV, saying nothing as she dismissed shows that would normally pique her interest. He massaged her feet, gave her insane back rubs that—had she the energy—would've turned into something a whole lot more carnal.

Refusing to let the nurses handle her day-to-day care, he escorted her to the adjacent bathroom for toilet breaks and personal hygiene, going above and beyond to wash her in the shower, brush her hair, and bundle her into a robe.

Twice a day, he lent her his arm as they walked around the 'medical unit' of Atticus's company headquarters. One section housed what Myna thought of as the traditional hospital setup—exam tables, sterile surroundings, built more like cubicles than rooms.

On her side of the unit was what Atticus called the recovery ward. Part exam room, mostly bedroom, with all the home comforts any wounded security officer might desire on the road back to full fitness.

All in all, she was ready to stage an escape.

Now was the prime time.

Loki was in a meeting with Atticus and several of the other Avalon Masters, as well as half of the security team. From the information she'd managed to glean, it wasn't quite a code red situation, but it was definitely linked to the web of mystery and danger Atticus had warned her about.

Sliding from the bed, Myna found her clothes in a drawer, neatly laundered and pressed. It felt so nice to wear actual

garments instead of pattering around like an old woman in a robe and slippers.

The IV had been removed a couple of days prior, giving her the freedom to move around without hauling the stupid stand around with her. Not that she had any right to complain; the fluids had refreshed her body, the vitamins feeding depleted resources.

Today, she was on a mission to rekindle her brain cells before they all atrophied.

Giving her peanut a quick pat, she made her way to the door, cracking it open and peering out into the hallway. If her timing was right—and she'd conducted several subtle interviews with the nurses to ensure it was—the staff on duty should be taking their eleven a.m. break with some of the security guys.

“It's go time, little man,” she whispered.

It was surreal knowing she was going to be a mom to a little boy. Her heart hadn't been set on a girl, not really, but the idea of being a single mother to one was easier to imagine. Instead, she'd had two weeks to mull over what raising a son might entail.

Football. Baseball. Girls.

Well, all of those applied to a girl too, so maybe she was worrying too much.

Easing over the threshold, braced for alarms to scream, Myna headed to the left. Her detective skills pinned the location of the breakroom at the end of the hallway to the

right, and her walks with Loki proved useful for planning her route.

Nonchalantly, as though she wasn't sentenced to death by boredom via bedrest, she wandered down the brightly lit hall toward the elevator. She'd thought about dashing for freedom through the garage, but suspected security would be higher down there, not to mention running a higher risk of bumping into Atticus's men by accident.

When the doors whisked shut behind her, she breathed a sigh of relief and pressed the button to go up. Her stomach did a sickly roll as the metal box ascended, but the short journey was worth it.

She stepped out into the Daddy Dom's office...

Into a circle of male eye candy.

Shit.

Heads turned to look at her, eyebrows raising in synchronized surprise. Six of them she knew, but the other five men standing against the wall like supercharged soldiers were unfamiliar.

"Going somewhere fun, Myna?" Atticus demanded reprovingly.

"Over my goddamn lap." Loki growled, rising slowly from his seat. "Lizzie hasn't cleared you yet, little songbird. Go back to bed and stay there until I get the all clear to spank your ass bright red."

She folded her arms over her chest. "I'm bored. I'm going outside for some fresh air and sunlight before I wither into ash. If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I'll get out of your way."

The soldiers' expressions didn't change by a fraction. Dressed in black, from their shirts to the remarkable shine of their boots, they watched her without comment. It was obvious that, with a word, they were prepared to haul her back downstairs whether she agreed or not.

The Masters were another entity altogether.

Jasper smirked, rubbing his thumb over his lip as though concocting a diabolical sadist plot for her punishment. Beside him, Saul offered her a brief yet understanding smile. Liam, Loki, and Atticus didn't appear to be in an understanding mood, and Thane...

Myna tilted her head, straightening as Thane's body language tripped her professional switch, luring her to him warily. She set her hand lightly on his shoulder and felt his muscles spasm, heard the hiss of pain from between his teeth. "Have you seen a doctor, Thane?"

Amber eyes heavy with pain drifted to hers. "A few times."

"What meds are you on?"

"I've lost track. Too many."

"Diagnosis?"

His grin was lopsided, accentuating the horribly etched lines around his mouth. "I got shot one too many times, and now I'm paying for it. Don't worry about me, pet. I'll be fine."

"Men," she muttered in disgust. "Would rather suffer than sacrifice your pride. Is the pain restricted only to your upper body?"

"Shoulder," he confirmed, then admitted, "Thigh too."

“Uh-huh. Pain level?”

“Oh, you know, a three,” he replied.

His yelp as she manipulated his shoulder gently was vaguely satisfying. “Don’t lie to the person trying to help you, Thane. Being macho to save face around your buddies isn’t smart. Can’t work my magic if I don’t know what the problem is,” she murmured, pressing her fingertips lightly around where she sensed the pain was worse. “Did they tell you it was nerve damage?”

He grunted. “Irreparable. Welcome to a lifetime of ineffective pain meds and excruciating agony.”

“Pffft.” Dismissing that, she stepped back. “Come with me.”

It dawned on her that there were a lot of eyes on the situation, and several of them were not amused. Atticus’ soldier boys looked as though they wanted to frog march her out of their supersecret meeting. Preferably in handcuffs and a gag.

“Myna, we’re in the middle of something here,” Atticus rumbled, “and you’re supposed to be resting.”

She cast her gaze over the blueprints spread out on his desk, the map being projected onto the wall to the left, and shrugged. “I’m not interested in whatever you boy scouts are cooking up, but if you need Thane to be part of your nefarious plans, you should let me do my thing.”

“No nefariousness here,” Saul said with a tight smile.

“Of course not,” she replied sarcastically. “That’s why there are six Doms and five pretty soldier boys huddled in here with

blueprints, a satellite map of Montana, and too much coffee for a business meeting. I don't want specifics, I don't need any details, I just require Thane's presence in another room for an hour or so."

One of the rigidly uptight guys shifted, inching forward with his lip curled. He stopped and settled back into position when Atticus jabbed a finger at him.

"Thane, go with her." Braun's voice broke the short silence. "Mission aside, this shit has been going on too long. Connie's breaking down again with the stress, and you spend the majority of the time either stoned out of your head on pain meds or crippled with pain. If Myna thinks she can alleviate some of that, I'm all for it."

Where the hell was his voice coming from? Myna glanced around, but no one had their phone out. The hum of the computer told her it was on, but the screen was facing away from the mob of testosterone.

Atticus tapped his finger on a small black box on the desk. "Comms device, sweetheart. Braun can't attend long meetings in person, so he telecommunicates." He looked at the five men lined up in perfect order. "A-team, go take a break. Review the data we've already covered, and let me know if you have any ideas. Reconvene here at," he checked his watch, "fourteen-hundred hours."

"Yes, boss," was the unified response, and Myna was a little disappointed they didn't salute him as one entity before they turned and brushed past her to access the elevator.

"Thane." Atticus's green stare locked on his friend. "I can attest to the fact Myna works miracles; my princess is a prime

example. We can spare you for a few hours if you'd like to go with her.”

“Do you need to run it by your Mistress?” Jasper teased.

“Well, Myna’s hands are gonna be all over him,” Liam mused. “It might be wise to do just that.”

Loki growled.

“The bigger question is, does Myna need to ask her Dom for permission?” Saul wondered. He lifted his hand, circling a finger in Loki’s direction. “The prankster doesn’t appear to be in a mischievous mood today.”

This time, she growled a warning. “I don’t answer to Loki. This is my profession, and I’m offering my help. If you don’t want it, it’s not a problem. I’ll just continue what I was doing before I landed in this pit of Masters.”

“Like hell you will.” Loki stood, arms folding over his chest. “You’ll get your ass back downstairs and into bed.”

Myna tapped her fingers over her mouth as she fake yawned. “Beginning to sound like a record stuck on repeat there, *Sir*. I need some fresh air, and I don’t require a contingent of overprotective males dogging my heels.”

“Manners,” Jasper snapped, giving her a long, hard glare out of ice-cold blue eyes. “Anarchy will testify that being pregnant doesn’t mean you escape punishment for bad behavior and rudeness.”

Oh, she’d heard the stories. Both Archie and Caera had regaled her with tales of how their Doms were becoming increasingly creative with chastisement. “No offense, Jasper,

but I'm no longer in a dynamic. Submission comes second to motherhood, so go f—"

"O-kay," Thane interjected smoothly, struggling to push up from his chair. "Why don't I just go with Myna before she tells the sadist to go play with himself in a not-fun way?"

Her attention immediately diverted to his body language, the way he held himself to one side so his right arm took all his weight. His left side was restricted, carrying the bulk of the pain—both his arm and his leg.

The only problem with transferring physical duties from one half of the body to the other was the undue pressure it caused. His right side would eventually get stronger from the additional use, but tire faster and be more prone to damage.

"Use the guest bedroom, Myna. Do you need anything?"

She stepped forward to take Thane's arm but was gently nudged aside by Liam. Still watching as the Viking lookalike hefted the older man from his chair, she answered Atticus. "He'll need water when I'm done. Maybe some over-the-counter pain meds, although I'm not sure they'll do much good if he's been hitting the good stuff. Some oil and clean towels. Someone to drive him home."

"We came together," Saul told her. "Caera's having a session with Connie while we're busy, so I'll make sure he gets back."

"Liam, would you assist Thane to the guest room?"

"I'm not an invalid," he grouched, scowling.

"Could've fooled me. Be thankful he's not sweeping you up into his arms and carrying you."

“Oooh, how romantic.” Liam fluttered his eyelashes in a seductive fashion before he snorted a laugh. “Come on, buddy, you get to steal Loki’s woman and her magic hands for a few hours while we listen to him bitch.”

They made their way from the office slowly. Thane’s left leg impeded his movement, almost dragging behind him. She should probably tackle that first, although given his current state, starting anywhere would be a blessing for him.

“Myna, a moment.”

She ground her teeth and paused at the threshold, so close to getting away from the odor of *eau de testosterone*. It really did mess with a submissive’s head, she thought, being immersed in all that glorious, dominant masculinity. “What do you want, Loki?”

His presence at her back made her shiver. Her body recognized him, craving what they’d had. When his hands settled lightly on her shoulders, her core tightened. And when his breath kissed her ear, followed by the low rasp of his voice...

Internal devastation.

“We’ll discuss how you speak to both me and the Masters later, songbird. Take Jasper’s warning to heart; our son is safe in here,” he whispered, sliding a palm around her waist to sit on the peak of her bump, “but your ass is unprotected. Don’t think I haven’t been doing my research on what I can and can’t do to you for the next few months.”

Bite me came to mind, but not in the way she intended. “Not my Dom.”

“Always your Dom. Always mine.” His nose brushed her hair, inhaling deeply. “I swear your scent haunted me in every dream I had while we were apart. But that’s another matter to discuss, isn’t it?”

She felt herself wrapping around his finger, caught up in him. He knew exactly what words triggered her neediness, her desire to be loved and cuddled. “Just tell me what you want, Loki. I haven’t got time to fool around with your ramblings.”

“Very well. Treating Thane, is it safe?”

Myna frowned. “It’s going to hurt like he’s been shot again, but it’s perfectly safe. I wouldn’t do anything to endanger one of my clients, let alone a friend.”

“Of that, I have no doubts. What I’m concerned about is whether it poses a risk to my recovering submissive and our unborn son.”

“Jesus, you make it sound like I’m a goddamn alcoholic,” she hissed.

“Never.” Loki hummed as his lips skimmed the side of her neck where her hair didn’t cover the sensitive skin. “If helping Thane risks you, I can’t let you do it, not even for my friend. We’ll find someone in Phoenix who can.”

“Because that’s worked so well for him recently. He doesn’t need drugs, Loki. Whoever’s been treating him should be put in front of a review board. Just let me do my damn job and stop fussing over me.” Myna shrugged off his touch despite imagining crawling into it for more. “Don’t bitch too hard.”

Trying to flounce as best she could with an aching core and shaky legs, she stalked down the hall toward the guest room as

she stewed with irritation.

The gall of him! How dare he presume to tell her what she could do with her time, whether she could treat someone in so much pain or not. It wasn't his call, baby daddy be damned. It went against her nature to see anything suffer, and Thane was a man plagued by old wounds.

Unnecessarily.

God, she'd love to get her hands on the idiot responsible. If there was no sign of underlying infection from missed shrapnel or careless hygiene during healing, then the first port of call should have been a physiotherapist to assess the damage done and create a treatment plan that didn't include doping him up to the fucking eyeballs.

Bullets didn't just tunnel holes through skin and muscle, they shredded them. Severed nerves, decimated the fabric of the human body.

Recovery took more than a few stitches with a bandage slapped over the top. New muscles needed to be nurtured and trained into performing their functions. Slowly, carefully. They had to reform, heal, and be worked sympathetically to regain their elasticity and full range of motion.

When she walked into the bedroom, she didn't hesitate to adopt her therapist persona. Before Liam eased Thane onto the edge of the bed, she intervened. "Clothes off, Thane. I need access to what hurts, so you may leave your underwear on."

He offered her a sheepish grin. "I'm not wearing any."

Liam chuckled. "Brother, you need to call Connie and make sure she's okay with this if you're getting bare-ass naked in

front of another woman. Even though she knows Myna, she might not be happy with you flashing the junk.”

“There will be no flashing of anything,” Myna replied tersely. “Professional, remember? Just leave the pants on until Atticus brings the towels. And yes, call Connie before you do anything.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Fumbling in his front pocket, Thane produced his phone. He unlocked the screen, fiddled with it, then pressed it to his ear. “Sugar, are you busy? No, I’m okay. Well, sort of...”

As he explained the situation to his lover, Myna stripped off her hoody and tossed it on the chair in the corner. She rummaged through one of the drawers until she found a stray hairband, bundling her hair into a loop at the base of her neck to keep it out of the way.

When Loki arrived with everything she’d asked for, she gave him a baleful glance before taking it from him and organizing it how she needed it—water and meds on the bedside table, most of the towels spread out over the quilt, and the jojoba oil at the foot of the bed.

Liam was kindly helping Thane divest his clothes as he struggled to stand and undress while on the phone. The scarring on his back made her heart ache for the pain he must have gone through, was *still* going through even now. He moved like an old man crippled by arthritis, his movements awkwardly slow to lessen the discomfort.

By the time his pants were around his ankles, the call had ended, and Myna’s gaze was fixed on his body. The wounds on his shoulder weren’t the worst on his person. The one on

his thigh was a horrifying work of art, more slash and slice than erupting ammunition. “Constance is speechless with gratitude. She isn’t bothered if I’m naked as long as I’m the only one with no clothes on.”

“That won’t be an issue. Thigh or shoulder first?”

“Dealer’s choice.”

“Shoulder, then. Facedown on the towels, please.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The guys helped him down, so he didn’t collapse on his face. When he was comfortable, after some awkward shuffling and repositioning of his limbs, Myna draped a towel over his ass and upper thighs. “If you get cold, Thane, let me know. We’ll upgrade to something warmer.”

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Okay then. Liam, Loki, you can go now. Appreciate the help.”

“I’ll stay, if Thane doesn’t mind.” Loki’s expression was thunderous.

“Whatever floats your boat,” came the quiet reply.

“He might not mind, but I do. I don’t work with an audience, and Thane has a right to his privacy. The door’s there, Loki,” she said with a flick of her wrist. “Make use of it and close it behind you.”

“Come on, brother.” Liam hooked his arm around Loki’s neck and gave a playful tug. “Remember not to rile the hormonal woman. That bottle of oil might end up somewhere you’re not prepared to take it.”

“Listen to Liam. Get out.” Satisfied the Viking Master would handle her pain in the ass, Myna turned away and gave Thane a gentle pat on the arm. “I’ll go wash my hands, then we’ll begin, okay?”

“Whatever you say, ma’am.” Stubbled cheek pressed to the towel under his face, Thane was apparently taking the opportunity to catch a few minutes of rest.

“Less of the ma’am.”

“Yes’m.”

Laughing, she rolled through her usual routine in her head, following each step. Wash hands thoroughly, dry, and inspect nails for overlong or sharp nails. There was nothing worse than trying to manipulate muscles and accidentally stabbing someone.

It was frustrating not to have her paperwork here. She liked to have everything written down, so she could compare a patient from one treatment to the next. Neither did she have her consent forms, which tweaked her anxiety. Not that she believed she would hurt him in any way, or that he’d sue her if she did, but she preferred having written consent.

“Thane, can you confirm I have your permission to treat you today?” she asked as she returned to the bedroom.

“Feel free to do whatever. Can’t hurt any more than it does now.”

That was debatable. Once she started antagonizing the muscles and releasing tension, he might wish she’d just rip out the offending parts and be done with it. She’d had big, strong

men come to her for treatment, bringing their inflated egos for a ride.

They'd damn near crawled out of her office when she'd finished.

"All right." She gave him a reassuring stroke across his back before she began. "Just so you know, screaming, crying, swearing, and passing out are all acceptable."

He wasn't jealous.

No, of course not. He wasn't jealous *at all*.

As Myna cruised into her second hour with Thane, Loki kept guard outside the door. The noises she was pulling from his friend could have been from a horror film, and as time shuffled by interminably, they were getting quieter.

She'd been on his mind all morning. Despite the fact she was getting tetchy about him doing some of what he considered the basics of sub care, he still worried whether she was drinking enough to keep her off the IV, eating enough to sustain both her and their son. Had she napped while he was gone, caught up on the sleep she'd missed during the restless night?

He'd been plotting a way to ask Atticus for a brief lunch break so he could check on her when the elevator doors opened and spilled her into the war room. Well, the emergency war room. Normally, they used the downstairs conference room for anything to do with Jasper's parents and the brewing clusterfuck bearing down on them at a rate of knots, but Att's

B-team had a more pressing issue to deal with and were commandeering it for a few days.

“I think Myna’s safe with Thane, you know,” Saul commented dryly as he approached with two beers in his hands. “Why don’t you come back to the meeting and take your mind off her for a while?”

“Because she’s going to tire, and she’s too fucking stubborn to ask for help. I’ll catch up when I’ve shoved her into bed and cuffed her to the damn thing.”

“There’s no rush. Alpha team were punctual, so Atticus is running over the mission details one last time before they deploy to Montana. With any luck, Dominic and Rita Fairfax will be captured or dead within the next forty-eight hours.”

“Is J still undecided on whether to give the green light on lethal force?” Loki accepted the beer Saul held out and took a slow, shallow sip.

“I think he’d rather throw his hat into whichever side of the ring means less bloodshed. Not that I blame him, knowing what they made him do. Honestly, I don’t think it will be an issue. The A-team doesn’t strike me as being tolerant of dangerous fuckwits. Any sign of resistance, and they’ll exert whatever force is necessary to put an end to this.”

“About damn time.” He, for one, was sick of looking over his shoulder, and it wasn’t even his parents causing chaos. It was actually amusing to imagine his father dragging his beer belly from beneath whatever wrecker he was trying to fix, or his mother paying attention to anything but which of her sports teams were getting trounced by the opposition. “Jasper’s waited too long for this.”

“Two years since they came back into his life,” Saul agreed. “Personally, I want to see their blood smearing the walls and a few intestines, maybe a lung or a spleen, splatted on the ground. How they treated Caera was unconscionable, and the way they tried to dispose of her...” The usually placid Dom’s jaw tightened. “What I’d give to be there, watching them die like rats.”

Often, Loki forgot that Saul’s submissive was Jasper’s half-sister. Aside from the vague resemblance in the right light, and the shocking color of their hair, the little rabbit couldn’t be more different to her older half-sibling. Shy, timid, completely nonconfrontational, Caera was a sweetheart.

“You think Thane’s gonna be fit enough to come out tonight? Myna has magic hands, sure, but the guy’s been riddled with pain for months. One PT session isn’t going to eradicate that.”

Loki rubbed his chin, thinking of the impromptu buddy night Braun was organizing. All the Masters were heading to Avalon for a much-needed gentleman’s evening, while the girls were staying at the house with Bodie and Declan.

It was something he’d wanted to surprise Myna with, before she attempted her unlucky escape.

“We can prop him in a corner with a beer in his hand,” he mused. “Maybe poke him awake if he dozes off.”

“No beer,” Myna said as she opened the bedroom door and leaned heavily on the jamb. She was flushed, a little sweaty, but those eyes of hers were serious when they narrowed at him. “Let him sleep as long as he wants, then you can take him

home. I guess you can take him sooner if...if you dress and carry him to the truck.”

Loki automatically reached for her arms, only to be waved off. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I think I’ll get that fresh air now.”

“You’re sliding down the door frame, songbird,” he pointed out.

“The floor looks comfortable,” she murmured, fighting a yawn. “Maybe I’ll have a nap before I go for a walk.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Rolling his eyes, Loki scooped her up before she sank all the way to the carpet, cradling her in his arms. “Lizzie is not going to be happy you’ve burned yourself out again.”

“Pfft. Not scared of her.”

“I don’t think we’ve seen her angry yet. The quiet ones are always vicious.” He rested his cheek on her hair. “Saul will take care of Thane now. Is there anything he needs to know?”

She hummed softly. “Water. Lots and lots of water. Flush the toxins.”

“Anything else?”

“Don’t let him do anything strenuous. Gentle exercise for a couple days.”

“Got it,” Saul murmured. “I’ll update Connie.”

“And no sex!”

“Think that falls under the nothing strenuous rule, Myna. Now shut up and go to sleep. If you’re still awake when we

get downstairs, you'll be sleeping on your side to keep the pressure off your very sore bottom."

Her gasp was overly dramatic. "It'll hurt you more than it'll hurt me."

"It really won't. My hand's been itching to smack your impertinent ass for days now."

"Go scratch it on someone else's ass then."

"Why would I, when this is the only one for me?"

"Asshole," she muttered, dropping her head onto his shoulder hard enough to make him wince. "Always thinking you're the smartest and the strongest. And the cutest," she half-whispered, tilting her face into him. "With a really clever tongue."

Chuckling, Loki gave Saul a nod, then carried his prisoner back down the hall. She grew heavier with every step, sinking fully into his arms instead of holding herself slightly apart. "My tongue is more than happy to demonstrate its skills. Just ask."

Her wordless grumble trailed off, turning into soft snores before he reached the door to Atticus's office. Booting the bottom of it with his boot, he waited until someone—Jasper, as it turned out—opened it for him.

The blond's scowl was disapproving. "Does she not understand the meaning of *rest*?"

"Apparently not. I don't know what she did, but she's exhausted herself, and Thane is out for the count on the bed." He stepped into the room, keeping his voice down as Atticus

continued to brief his men using a laser pointer on the map projected onto the wall. “Are they ready?”

“Locked, loaded, and eager,” Jasper confirmed as they walked to the elevator. “Wish I could go with them, but leaving Archie isn’t an option.”

Choosing family over revenge was a difficult choice. No, not revenge, *justice*. Whatever happened when Att’s team breached the Montana compound was a bloodier, nastier definition of justice than anything handed down in court.

Dominic and Rita had been judged and found guilty by those they’d hurt the most. If they didn’t know that already, they were stupider than the legends decreed. By all accounts, they were intelligent and every sub-genre of *pathic*. Mainly socio and psycho, but they were the epitome of everything bad in the world.

“They don’t deserve your time or attention, J. Not even as they die. Besides, that asshole who fathered you would only say something cryptic or vicious to haunt you for the rest of your days.”

“I’d rather hear him scream,” Jasper muttered.

“Men like him don’t scream, brother. He wouldn’t give you the satisfaction.”

“Oh yes,” his friend purred in a black tone, “the fucker would.”

Okay then, heading a little bit too far into dark territory, Loki thought. The violence etched into Jasper was too well ingrained, seeping from him like toxic waste from a nuclear reactor. “Got more to live for now, don’t forget that. Beautiful

wife who keeps you on your toes, baby on the way. The future's bright, J."

"Not just for me. Got your own family to take care of now."

Honestly, there wasn't much he wanted now. A business thriving with customers old and new, with fresh talent asking for a seat in the house. A woman who might take some more convincing to accept the love he had to give, and checked off every box on his dream-woman list. A son, who'd grow up into a man and wander down the path to follow *his* dreams.

Slightly smug, too superstitious to voice that smugness, Loki nodded slowly as Jasper summoned the elevator. "This is what we're built for. Not just the kink and the rules, but the entirety of it from tears and snot to laughter and bratty attitudes. Did you ever think when Braun hooked up with Bodie that the rest of us would sink one by one after him?"

"It never crossed my mind. But then, I was too busy trying not to fall in love with Anarchy to think of anything else." The doors pinged open, and Jasper wedged them open with his boot. "Can't say there's a single thing I'd change about the last couple of years though, even the shittiest of bad parts. As horrible as they were, they brought us all closer, individually and as a group. No matter what happens tonight, this will always be my true family."

"Brothers," Loki agreed solemnly, then glanced down at Myna. "Sisters, too, I guess. Although that might be weird considering Atticus has slept with Connie, and Archie. Technically!" he added hurriedly when Jasper's eyes gleamed with murder. "Liam, too. Shit, I'm just digging myself a hole here, aren't I?"

“Take your woman downstairs before I bury you in it.” The slap on the shoulder Jasper gave him was part friendly, part ominous. “We’re meeting at Braun’s at eight-thirty to settle the girls in. Att’s tech team is going through the house now to install a new security system and cameras.”

Stepping into the elevator, Loki prayed that the whole shitshow ended tonight. “Let’s hope it’s an unnecessary precaution.”

Taking his boot from the door, letting them slide shut, Jasper inclined his head. “We’ll soon find out.”

Three pregnant women and romantic movies did not mix well, Myna discovered.

She, Caera, and Archie were curled up under blankets on Bodie’s couch in varying stages of recovery from the crying jag *The Notebook* brought on. Across from them in a cuddle chair, Alicia and Sierra were huddled together, warily eyeing the trio of hormonal timebombs as they played with an assortment of stuffies Sierra had apparently rescued and rehabilitated.

Connie was massaging her nose and drinking wine, while Bodie rocked Declan to sleep after the movie dramatics woke him into a screaming fit.

Wisely, they’d switched from romance to shoot-em-up action.

Two hours streamed past in a babble of gunfire and the kind of chatter Myna wasn’t quite used to being included in. She wasn’t up to par with her energy levels yet, and she’d been

surprised that Loki had bundled her up into Atticus's truck beside Alicia.

After her failed stunt that morning, she kind of expected to be permanently shackled to the bed for the foreseeable future.

“So, are the guys up to something sneaky over there?” Archie asked, blowing her nose sharply into a handful of tissues. Her brown eyes were tinged with pink from crying hard enough to wake the dead, but otherwise...damn her, she was glowing like a little blonde cherub. “Jasper was acting shifty when I asked him what they were doing for the night.”

“Card games, whiskey, and cigars,” Bodie said in a passable imitation of her Irish-born husband. “Braun wants to show them around the work that's been done on the club. Liam mentioned that one of the crews dropped out to focus on a different project, which really put his hackles up, and I don't think he's impressed with what the new crew is doing.”

Sierra nodded, fiddling with a floppy leg on a blue donkey. “He and Wyatt had a big fight about it. Wyatt can't see anything wrong with the work, says it's up to standard, but Liam's got a bee in his bonnet.”

“Busy, busy bee.” Alicia giggled.

Archie nudged Caera with an elbow. “How about Saul? Was he acting suspiciously?”

Myna leaned forward in time to see the girl's face erupt into neon red. Oh, this should be good. Saul's sub only blushed like that when she had a sexy secret to hide. “Spill it.”

“H-He just said if I didn't ask questions, I'd get a reward.”

“Questions about what?” Bodie asked quietly.

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask.”

Everyone groaned in mutual disappointment, then Anarchy turned her crosshairs on Connie. “Come on, Mistress, Thane had to give up the goodies to you. You two share everything.”

Smiling slowly, eyes locked on Myna, Connie shook her head. “I’m afraid to say he’ll be no use to us tonight. He slept for six hours after Myna finished with him. Whatever you did helped him greatly,” she added, her lips quivering. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him move so freely.”

All eyes swiveled to Myna.

“What did you do?” Caera whispered.

“Patient confidentiality stands,” was her honest answer. “I might not be licensed to practice in Arizona yet, but I don’t divulge anything to do with patient treatment. Thane’s issues are his and his alone until he shares them.”

Alicia stretched her legs out, kicking her feet. Her little side slipped, leaving adult Lisha—a rare occurrence indeed—in her place. “Myna is a stickler for privacy. She threatened to kick Atticus into the hall during my treatment because he wouldn’t sign the agreement to say he wouldn’t discuss anything with anyone if I didn’t approve, and he’s my Daddy. She held the door open for a full minute before he caved.”

“I bet that went down well,” Archie said with a shocked laugh.

She’d been on the receiving end of a glare hot enough to melt steel, Myna recalled. Big Daddy had not been impressed by her decision to stand firm, but he’d respected it—and her—

in the end. A minor event in their relationship, one that cemented into a friendship.

“Oh, he was mad. He has a vein right here,” Alicia informed them, poking herself in the right temple, “that kinda takes on a life of its own when he gets really angry, and it was throbbing. Meanwhile, our girl over here is facing down the beast without breaking so much as a drop of sweat from her pores.”

“Not quite true.” Myna grimaced. “I thought he was figuring out a way to fit me in the trash can, with or without broken limbs. Sweat was dripping down my back in rivulets.”

“Don’t let him get to you. Daddy’s just gruff and grumpy. He wouldn’t hurt you any more than he’d hurt me.” Pursing her lips, Alicia considered that, then grinned. “I should warn you that his hand is related to a ginormous wooden paddle, so depending on your pain tolerance...yeah, we should just avoid going there.”

Anarchy snorted. “I second that.”

In an instant, little Alicia resumed her rightful place. “Is my hand now, you’re not allowed to play with it.”

“Sweetie, your Daddy has a hand like a paddle; mine has a hippo stick.”

“Hippo stick?” Myna asked, confused.

“Jasper’s favorite toy,” Connie supplied, sipping her wine. “It’s called a sjambok, and it’s essentially a whip made from braided hippo hide. Has the potential to leave some serious welts, which is why he only brings it out when his kitten grows claws and scores the curtains.”

Myna lifted an eyebrow at the kitten in question and got a shit-eating grin in return. “Masochists and your penchant for pain. Bet you play it up just so you piss him off, don’t you?”

Alicia hissed in indignation. “Bad word.”

“Of course, I do. It’s getting interesting, though, watching him try and think of a punishment he can dole out as the weeks go on and my due date gets closer.” Archie sighed wistfully, staring at Connie’s glass of wine. “Unfortunately, anal play isn’t off the table according to Lizzie, so he still has the upper hand. Might want to keep that in mind when you’re jabbing at Loki’s control.”

“I’ll jab all I want; I haven’t agreed to anything more than him being involved in this,” Myna replied, stroking her stomach lovingly. “I’m not his submissive. He is not my Dom or my lover, so he can sit on my middle finger and swivel if he thinks he’s taking control of me.”

Bodie scoffed. “I’m gonna say my piece now, if that’s okay?”

“We’re big advocates of freedom of speech in this group,” Sierra murmured, dancing one of her stuffies on her lap. “Even when you don’t want to say anything.”

“Because you need to learn how to feel more confident in a social setting,” Connie told her gently. “The good thing about us is, we don’t take offense easily, and we’re excellent listeners. Every voice in this room matters, Sierra. Including yours.” She waved a hand at Bodie. “You have our attention.”

Adjusting Declan so he rested against her shoulder, Bodie settled into the couch and locked eyes with Myna. The blue

was bright and sharp, full of intelligence. “For a long time, I’ve been out of the loop at the club. I have,” she said firmly when Archie made a sound of protest. “Since my parents beat me to the brink of death and shattered any dreams I had of dancing again, I’ve let fear rule me. Stepping outside this house does something in here,” she explained, pressing her fist between her breasts, “and I’m ashamed to admit I haven’t done much to fight it. It’s been easier to hide in here with my Master and my son, and not face what scares me.”

Myna swallowed, not sure she would like what was heading for her.

“Our time at the club has dwindled considerably, more because of that fear than a lack of babysitters. So yes, I’ve been out of the loop because getting information secondhand can’t compare to being in the middle of everything as it happens, and reading the people and the situation as it unfolds.” She bit her lip for a moment, gathering her thoughts. “*But* that doesn’t mean I haven’t picked up bits and pieces in the months since Christmas. Like the fact Loki hasn’t taken a submissive—in the club or in his bed—since you left, Myna. Like the fact he’s been a miserable fucker for weeks—sorry, Lisha,” she added when her sister’s head popped up, eyes just like hers narrowed in censure. “Loki has been the Playboy Master of Avalon since before the day I walked in, and honestly, I didn’t think that would ever change.”

Connie nodded her agreement.

“I guess it’s some kind of Christmas miracle, right? Self-professed eternal bachelor meets a sweet, lonely submissive in a kink club and they have a whale of a time banging each other

for a night, then a week. Only, during those seven days, the bachelor loses his desire to chase stringless sex until he's old and flaccid." Bodie grinned as Caera choked on a laugh. "Because he finally found the one woman with enough of everything he needs to make him the man he's always envisioned becoming."

Well, shit.

Throat closing, Myna shook her head.

"Loki's in love with you, sweetheart. I think you gave him the best Christmas present a man can get when you saw him as Loki the man, accepted him as that, rather than as a fast roll in the sheets. That's all the club subs see him as, mainly because he's projected himself that way, but you got beneath all that and validated him as a man, not a Master."

"Stop."

"Sorry, I've pulled the plug and the water's just gonna keep coming." Bodie shrugged unapologetically. "Now, I know he can be an ass. We'll even upgrade him to an asshole when he warrants it, but the core of him is as strong and as solid as any of our men," she continued, mercilessly rolling over Lisha's squeak of displeasure. "Alicia, I love you, but I'll swear if I damn well want to, okay?"

Alicia threw her stuffie—*not* the esteemed Mr. Bear—at her sister with a huff.

"Loki was there when the guys found me in my shit apartment, bleeding and broken into pieces. He was there the night Anarchy...well, the night she and Jasper almost died."

Oh, there was a story waiting to be told, Myna thought, her interest piqued. A glance at Anarchy offered no insight into what that story might be.

“He isn’t one to show off. He doesn’t throw himself into danger, but he doesn’t fail to have our backs, or our men’s, when we need him most. He’s loyal, he’s funny, and he’s waited a long time for you.” Bodie pointed a finger around the room, making sure it landed on everyone, including Myna. “From my multitude of sources, I’ve deduced that he messed up pretty bad, but I’m going to side with the bad guy right now and defend his ass, because he doesn’t seem to be doing the best job of convincing you to forgive him.”

Not the best job, Myna mused, but he’d made a good start.

“Do you know anything about his family?”

“Oh! Oh!” Archie bolted upright, stabbing her hand in the air. “I do! I do!”

“Only ‘cause you use Daddy’s ‘puter,” Alicia grumbled, obviously still pouting over being admonished by her sister.

“At least I don’t use it to watch porn,” Archie retorted with a wicked smile, “and get caught while doing so.”

To Myna’s amusement, the dark-haired pixie with vibrant blue eyes turned a violent shade of red. Brandishing Mr. Bear by a plump leg, she bounced off the cuddle chair, taking the blanket she shared with Sierra along for the ride. “That was a *secret!*”

“Hate to tell you this, but no, it really wasn’t.”

“Was!”

“Connie?”

“Sorry, Lisha.”

“Bodie?”

“Not many secrets around here, Lish.” Her sister soothed Declan as he stirred.

“Nooooo,” she moaned.

“It’s fine, Alicia,” Caera reassured her friend earnestly. “I didn’t know, if that helps? And it’s not like none of us have ever watched porn, right?” Her expression faltered as she looked to everyone for confirmation. “Oh boy, did I get that wrong too?”

After a brief pause, laughter echoed around the room, building into a crescendo. An illuminating experience, Myna realized, because even though Caera was the cause of it—and seemed baffled by the response—no one was laughing *at* her.

This was family at its best.

“Liam lets me watch it, but only if he and Wyatt are there.” Sierra rubbed her hand over her mouth and mumbled something else.

“Sorry, what was that?” Archie demanded.

She mumbled it again, her chin sinking into her chest.

“Speak up, little butterfly,” Connie urged.

“I have to be careful what...what I watch, otherwise we end up...reenacting it.”

“Ooooh, she has a dark side.” Bodie winked. “I think we’re all in mutual agreement concerning porn, aren’t we, ladies?”

We all watch it, with or without our other halves, and there's nothing to be ashamed about."

Alicia flopped back down in her chair, almost squashing Sierra. "Hmmpf."

"Back to the point, then. Myna, what do you know about Loki's family?"

They hadn't really touched on families during their week together. Talked in regard to just about everything else but those who were—or should've been—closest to them. Her parents were long gone, probably little more than bones draped in cloth now, and she'd been alone for years.

"They're still alive. His parents, I mean. His dad fixes trucks, used to collect comic books, and is having an affair with beer. His mom..." She frowned, trying to remember what he'd said about his mother. "She's pretty much a gambling addict. Spends all her time in sports bars or with her face pressed to the TV at home. I got the feeling he had a good upbringing, but something went really wrong."

"Intuitive," Connie murmured.

Bodie exchanged glances with Anarchy, then shook her head. "Before you write him off as a lost cause, promise me something. Spend some time with him and get to know him properly. Not naked knowledge," she said in exasperation, rolling her eyes toward Archie when she snickered. "The kind of stuff you need to know if you want to make this work."

She was among friends. What could it hurt to admit what she wanted? "I do."

“All he’s been waiting for is someone strong enough to love him,” Connie chimed in, “and be open to taking his brand of love in return.”

“What kind of love?”

“The dominant kind, of course. What else is there?”

The girls were either plotting something or getting into mischief.

The projector screen Liam had set up that afternoon on the stage in the social area was alive with their antics. Out of respect for their privacy and whatever womanly things they discussed on these nights, the Masters had opted to mute the volume, so it was kinda like watching a weird game of charades that was more talking than animated gesturing.

The three pregnant women were nesting together on the couch, Alicia and Sierra were now piled on top of each other on Braun’s new cuddle chair, and Connie and Bodie were at opposite ends of the second couch, with Declan asleep on his mom’s shoulder.

This time next year, there’d be three more babies in the mix, growing up together, and one of them would be his boy.

Loki grinned around the beer bottle pressed to his lips as he drank.

Contrary to what they’d told the women would be happening tonight, there were no card games, no foolish antics. This was all business, and as he checked his watch, he realized it was almost time for the shit to hit the fan.

There were comms units everywhere. Anything and everything technological that could be used to help the team in Montana to breach Dominic's compound. Not only had Att's tech team installed the new security system in Braun's house that afternoon, but they'd also moved on to setting up a temporary headquarters at Avalon.

A joint decision by Atticus, Braun, and Jasper.

They'd wanted the women close but comfortable, and Bodie struggled to settle anywhere but home. They needed them—all their women—safe, and while Atticus's house was the safest anyone would find, there was too great a risk that Alicia or one of the others might decide to drop in on 'guys' night.

"Boadicea seems chatty tonight," Liam pointed out, studying the screen intently.

"Archie's not exactly holding her tongue either," was Saul's observation.

"Stop speculating on what the girls are gossiping about and take your seats. I have confirmation from Alpha team that they are on the property and preparing to breach in five." Atticus was all business, head down as he worked with one of his tech boys. "Bring up the team, Tag. Split the screen into five, get the feed off their individual cams."

The massive screen went blank, then fractured into five segments. Each one flickered to life, with the weird green glow of night vision goggles. So far, the view was dim, just trees and a few boulders, but beyond them was the vague outline of buildings.

“Sound up.”

The club’s music system crackled, then the soft rasp of steady breathing filled the space.

As if it was their cue, the Masters who weren’t already seated—Thane—or involved with the tech side of the operation—Atticus and Jasper—got out of the way and into their chairs. Poised to do whatever Atticus needed them to if necessary.

Not that they could do much from here, Loki thought, dread curling in his stomach as the cameras bobbed closer to their target on screen.

“We have a positive read on the heat sensor, boss,” a voice murmured, and the third camera view tilted down to show a smaller screen alive with a dozen dots scattered around in front of them. “Target count currently twelve. Ready to move on your order.”

“Are the prime targets confirmed on location?” Atticus spoke into the headset.

“Affirmative, Sir. Confirmed on location at twenty-hundred hours. No movement on or off site since.”

It was eleven p.m. There was a good chance Dominic and his bitch were locked down for the night, with a lot of security covering their backs. *If* all those red dots were security and not victims of their sick, twisted games.

“Take down all hostiles. Advance when ready.”

“I should be there,” Jasper muttered under his breath. “This team is good, the best, but they don’t know Dominic like I do. They don’t understand the way he thinks.”

Thane turned his head slowly. The strain he'd carried for months in his face was all but gone, the muscles relaxed. Amber eyes met Loki's for a heartbeat, then flicked to Jasper. "You've spent two weeks tutoring them on what to expect, Jasper. Two weeks of intense, descriptive training on how that asshole operates. They wouldn't have any advantage without you, and you're too valuable to risk. Dominic wants you, and we're not giving him what he wants."

"Spoken like a soldier," Braun said, keeping his voice low.

There were a lot of hand gestures going on, Loki noted. Quick flicks of wrists with single and double digits. Two men veered off left, sticking close to one another as they skirted the outside of the perimeter, while the other three went right, splitting off into individual hunting units as they rounded the porch of the sprawling ranch house.

Camera five was the first unit to encounter the enemy.

All Loki saw was a shadow in the dark before the screen blurred. There was a tussle, material rustling and the rough noises of a skirmish before the lens was blocked fully. The grunts and sounds of men struggling were clear enough, however, before the sick crack of a neck breaking echoed like a gunshot.

"One down," a new voice whispered.

The other units were continuing their spread around the house, securing the perimeter. Another one of Dominic's men bit the dust silently, taken out by a savage blow to the temple before he even realized he wasn't alone.

Smoking was such a bad habit.

Deadly, in fact.

The next ten minutes were pretty quiet, although the Masters were on the edge of their seats, each one scouring the camera views for potential threats.

“Alpha-two preparing to breach the rear door.”

“Alpha-one ready at the front.”

It was fascinating to observe skilled hands at work. They made fast work of the locks, picking them in a matter of seconds. Standing to the side, each man slowly turned the knob and pushed the door open, almost in tandem.

Alpha-one’s camera showed a sweeping foyer leading into a long hallway, and a staircase.

Alpha-two’s came up with an empty mudroom.

“Att, can you bring up the heat sensors?” Jasper’s fingers were dashing over a laptop’s keyboard.

Tag answered absently. “Can’t access them from here. Only Alpha-one can.”

“Tell him to scan again.” The urgency in Jasper’s voice sent the hairs on Loki’s neck and arms to high alert.

The camera views were all inside now, tracking the sweep of the unit’s weapons as they glided through the dark house like ghosts, toward the lights glowing further in.

Atticus issued the order, and three of the cameras halted immediately as Alpha-one pulled out the scanner.

At the rear of the house, Alpha-four seemed to stumble. His head rocked forward as a sick thud of metal against flesh burst

through the speakers. The floor rushed up to meet the camera, then that section of the screen went dark as it smashed.

In Alpha-one's section, the heat scanner was awash with at least thirty dots swarming from the center outwards, heading directly for the four remaining team members.

“Basement. There must be a fucking basement. Cold storage.” Jasper was shouting at the computer. “Att, pull them back. Pull them the fuck back!”

The three units at the front of the house were already retreating to reassess, but it was too late. Far too fucking late. The screens sections were suddenly alive with the rush of bodies, and although shots were fired, it took a matter of minutes for Dominic's forces to completely overwhelm the Alpha team.

Alpha-two went down in a trio of shots, two to the chest into the bulletproof vest, and one to the face. The last view of his camera before a boot came down on it was the body of his teammate, his neck at an awkward angle where a crowbar had slammed into the vulnerable vertebrae exposed between his body armor and the bottom of his helmet.

The weapon was tossed on his back.

Alpha-three and -five were dragged through the house, fighting every step of the way. More gunfire, and a few of the assailants fell as the automatic spray spewed bullets into flesh and walls alike, before the guns were wrenched away.

They were shoved into the mudroom, stripped of their vests as they battled hand-to-hand in a war for their lives. They lost, going down in a hail of fire and blood.

In shock, Loki stared at the screen, and the last remaining team member. His heart was pounding faster than he believed possible, wondering what the fuck was happening and how things had gone so very wrong in such a short time.

“I’ll take this, thank you.” The camera was yanked off the soldier’s helmet and tilted around so a singular face filled the section of screen. At a terse word from Atticus, the section expanded to occupy the whole damn thing. “Jasper, my boy, do you never learn?”

So, this was the elusive Dominic. Sharp eyes, just like his son’s, only a darker shade of blue. The same white hair, although he sported a pervstache as an added extra. Angular features, where Jasper’s were slightly more rounded.

“Give me a moment while we move into the light. I dislike lurking in the dark. Bad things happen there.” Chuckling, Dominic started walking, and the light around him grew brighter, blindingly so. “Now there should be a button to switch this to normal...ah, here we are.”

Dominic came into full focus, the light returning to bearable.

“An admirable attempt, son. Courtesy of Mr. Heisler, I’m presuming? You’ve both proved to be quite persistent in your pursuit of me, yet all you had to do was ask to come home. I’d have granted you an audience then.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Jasper picked up the laptop and, ripping it free of its cables, launched it across the club like a frisbee.

“Our mutual friend here should have an earpiece, should he not? Can’t have a meaningful conversation without that. Oh

yes. I'll take that." Dominic reached out, then plugged the piece into his own ear. "By now, you're aware that your little effort at assassination has failed spectacularly. The blueprints for this ranch were planted in several different locations, and each set was missing a few vital details. Couldn't have you knowing all my secrets now, could I?"

"I'm going to kill you, Dominic," Jasper growled, reluctantly slipping on the headset Atticus passed to him.

"There's my boy. The bloodthirsty brat. All of this could have been avoided if you'd just played the game. Four men dead, one about to die horribly. So much waste." Tsking, Dominic blew out a breath. "I knew the moment their plane touched down. What truck they were driving. The instant they stepped onto my property. Trespassing."

Atticus had his head in his hands, scrubbing his palms over his face. God only knew what he was thinking, feeling, when he'd lost four—soon to be five—good men.

"I want to thank you for this, though. Attacking me this way goes to show there's still a lot of the old Jasper waiting to be utilized. Perhaps I'll send you on a job or two first to recoup some of my losses incurred over the past year. Travel expenses, destruction of valuable stock, the house, and facilities in Virginia. Yes, I think I'm due some compensation before you spend the rest of your life impregnating specially selected females for the program."

"Never."

"*And*—personally, this is the most exciting part for me—you've provoked me into setting stage two into action a few months earlier than planned." Eyes gleaming with malice,

Dominic smirked at the camera. “I’ll make sure Anarchy is very comfortable in the remaining weeks running up to her due date. Can’t have the mother of my grandchildren suffering needlessly now, can I? I saw the scans, son. I can’t express how proud I am that you fathered twins on your first adult attempt at procreation. Girls,” he added with a sneer, as though that offended him, “but they come in handy for other things. No doubt you’ll do better next time and give me the grandsons I require.”

Practically salivating with fury, Jasper roared. “Stay the fuck away from my family, you sick prick. They’ll never be yours, never be your fucking lab rats.”

“Or else what? You’ll get your mercenary buddies to come put me down? Hmmm, where have I heard that before? Oh right, not even five minutes ago. Edward,” he spoke to someone to his left, “why don’t you do the honors and strip our intruder here? Can’t get to work with your canvas covered up. Edward is an artist,” Dominic told them, his attention coming back to the camera. “Picked him up on our way back to the States. Magician with a knife, you know. His specialty is skinning people alive while keeping them fully conscious. Rita wants to study it when she has time; she has theories on how he manages it. Me, I just like hearing the screams.”

Loki’s jaw dropped. He’d listened to the stories of how fucked up the guy was, and he didn’t doubt any of it given Jasper’s history, but to look into those depraved eyes, void of anything resembling humanity, and hear him speak of skinning people as though it was an artform...

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

“So, make sure you kiss your beloved new wife and tell her you love her. Once she’s in my possession, there really is no telling how long it will be before she sees you again, and she will need something pleasant to focus on. Of course, it’s also dependent on how stubborn you’re going to be before you acquiesce and realize there is no winning against me.”

“This conversation is over, Dominic. If you want me, you come and fucking get me yourself. Name the time and place, I’ll walk right into your arms, you sonofabitch, but you stay the fuck away from my family.”

“An interesting proposition, Jasper. No doubt you’d stab me through the heart as soon as you were close enough. But my problem is—aside from the fact I don’t trust you—I have a yen to taste that wife of yours. A long, wet taste.” Licking his lips, Dominic hissed in anticipation. “I’m going to fuck her, Jasper. That’s your punishment for this little stunt. I’m going to fuck her again and again, listening to her cry for her husband. She’ll spend the next twenty years kicking out my offspring every nine months, while these fine individuals surrounding me get some fun out of her as she cooks the next generation of Fairfax soldiers.”

If there’d been a big red button at Jasper’s disposal, there’d be a hail of nuclear weapons raining down on that ranch, Loki thought with dread. All-consuming rage had a smell, like hellfire and sulfur, and it was pumping off the sadist in waves.

The silence in the room was deafening. Witnessing the deaths of four men who’d not only been willing to tackle an operation like this, but become friends on the short journey here, was a kick to the stomach.

Families would grieve tonight. Children would cry over their fathers, wives over their husbands. Parents, siblings, friends would all be woken with the news that huge, gaping holes were taking the place of their loved ones.

It was a bad night, and one spark was going to make it infinitely worse.

“An eye for an eye, Jasper. A son for a son. That cunt stole two of my children from me,” Dominic continued in a voice seething with bitterness. “I’m taking these babies from her, and every single one that comes after. Two birds, one fucking big stone.”

The air bristled with hostility.

Loki felt his hackles rise at the threats being lobbed their way, saw the same reaction in his friends’ demeanor. One by one, they were rising from their seats, moving to stand with Jasper in a united front, even though the asshole on screen couldn’t see them.

“This is the end, boy. It comes down to this: everything you are, everything you own, every fucking facet of your time on this earth belongs to *me*.” Eyes glittering with manic fury, Dominic grinned into the camera. “I intend to take all of it, down to the last drop of blood.”

When Atticus’s man began to scream, the screen went blank.

What a clusterfuck.

Chapter Six

Midnight had come and gone.

It was close to two a.m. and the club was quiet. After Atticus shut down the comms, a strange and unsettling silence blanketed the room. The Masters were in their usual spots in the seating pit, brooding in the dim glow of the wall lights, not a word spoken between any of them as they got lost in their own thoughts.

On the table was a communal bottle of whiskey that was steadily being depleted.

Five men at the top of their careers, highly skilled and perfectly trained, had been cut down effortlessly. Snuffed out with little more thought than slapping a hand against an arm to squash a pesky mosquito.

It was sobering to think that Jasper might have been among them when the bullets started flying, that he could be shackled to a wall in that madman's prison.

Five men dead, Loki mused with a sick ache in his gut, and more to come if Dominic didn't get what he demanded. No, he thought in resignation, there was no *if*. When it came to Anarchy, Jasper would fight until his last breath to make sure Dominic failed.

More blood, more death, and a whole lot of fucking screaming on the way.

"I'm sorry, Att. I'm so fucking sorry." Jasper spoke first, dropping his head into his hands. "This is my fault, the whole fucking lot of it. I should've walked away from here before I dragged everyone into the shit."

Atticus growled. Setting aside his glass, he rose and stalked over to Jasper, lashing out with his right hand and grabbing the sadist by the front of his shirt. Effortlessly, fueled by grief and rage, he hauled his friend out of his seat and held him at eye level. “Shut the fuck up, J. Don’t you dare let that fucker get under your skin and make you think you’re responsible for this. The moment you do that, he wins, and you can kiss goodbye to your wife and daughters.”

Thane cleared his throat. “Jasper, we know the stakes. You accepted them when you signed the contract, so did I. Every man on that team took pride in being a part of something bigger than themselves, of being a part of the solution. They wanted to take Dominic down as much as we do.”

“How many people have to be taken from their families to protect mine?” Jasper demanded, breaking free of Att’s hold. He dropped to his feet gracefully, then poured himself another shot. Jabbing his glass toward the screen where their women were still being monitored, he asked, “Don’t you understand that they’re at risk now? All of them, Att, not just Anarchy. Dominic knows you’re involved; that puts Alicia in his path. Bodie, Connie, Caera, Sierra, Myna...he’ll see them as toys, fun little distractions. Something to pass the time while he fucks with us.”

Saul shook his head. “Caera can’t go near him. They think she’s dead, that Darius put her down after she failed that stupid fucking test. If she ends up anywhere near Dominic, she’ll break. The nightmares haven’t stopped, not completely, and I know that fucker is the starring role. She’d blurt it all out and damn herself.”

Jasper gave him a pitying look. “By now, Dominic has dug into all of us. History, background, anything that will give him leverage. Caera’s missing too much of her past, and she looks like me. That means she resembles him, and he’s too fucking vain not to notice it. Remember the text he sent?”

The threat, Loki corrected silently. He recalled how his heart had skipped a beat reading the not-so-subtle threat wrapped in congratulations for Anarchy’s pregnancy. How could he forget? It was the day Dominic had essentially declared war.

““Little birdies have also told me you have something that belongs to me. Something that should have been destroyed a long time ago.”” Jasper recited the words without hesitation, revealing just how many times he’d read the damn thing. “Brother, he knows.”

“Then we pack them up and ship them somewhere safe. Atticus, you have contacts. You can get them away from here, get them—”

“Panicking isn’t helping anyone. Making rash decisions won’t guarantee safety.”

“Neither did extensive planning,” Wyatt said quietly. “All these weeks of secret meetings and studying blueprints resulted in nothing but a bloodbath. Playing it safe, trying to be smart, or being impulsive and reckless...none of it matters. Dominic is one step ahead of us—six steps ahead if tonight is anything to go by.”

Atticus flicked Liam’s other half a vicious glare. “We suffered an unimaginable loss tonight. Not only my best team, but friends. Family. Good men with more courage in their left

testicle than you have in your entire fucking body. They died doing their duty, and tomorrow I've got to notify five families that their loved ones won't be coming home again. That I can't even give them closure with a body. Do you know what I'm going to do after that, Wyatt?"

To his credit, he took the verbal punch with some measure of dignity. Only a few weeks ago, Wyatt would have unleashed his temper and—given Atticus' understandable mood tonight—been flattened by a raging mountain of man. "No. I don't, because I can't see how we get out of this alive."

"Of course, you don't." Atticus sighed heavily and filled his glass again before returning to his seat. "Tomorrow, we take apart tonight and figure out where we went wrong. What we missed. What cost us the lives of friends. We regroup, we protect our women, and we damn well don't run with our tail between our fucking legs."

"Regroup with what, Att?" Braun asked with a shake of his head. "Zachariah, Timothy, Patrick, Thomas, Isaac. Aside from Christophe, your top string is decimated."

With each name Braun spoke, the first time since they'd all watched them die, Loki saw the knife drive deeper into each Master's heart the same way it did his. Those men were strangers only a few weeks ago, but the time they'd all spent together putting this mission into action had brought them all into a circle of friendship and trust.

Atticus lifted his gaze to the screen.

Their women were all asleep, except for Caera. The lights were still on, the TV showing some movie or other, Declan was asleep in a portable crib beside the couch.

As Loki watched, Caera glanced around nervously, obviously tired and wanting to sleep. Her battle with nightmares was well known within the group, so it was hard to witness the struggle. She didn't know what to do without Saul, that much was clear, and the man himself was already standing, ready to go to her.

It was Myna who roused first, blinking sleepily as Caera tried to slip off the couch. She said something, frowning, then understanding softened her face as Caera replied, gesturing with her hands.

Anarchy woke as Myna pulled Caera back down beside her. His woman curled an arm around the girl's waist, urging her to cuddle in, and then Archie shifted so she guarded Caera's vulnerable side. Between them, they sandwiched the anxious sub in a cocoon of safety.

Saul relaxed, sinking back into his chair. "She can't sleep when I'm not there."

"That's why we need to protect them." Sipping his drink, eyes still on the screen, Atticus gestured to the three women. "Dominic doesn't understand this. He doesn't comprehend compassion and sympathy. He wants to destroy it, to make the world as vicious and cruel as he is, breeding women to design an army that will never be taught a moral compass." He ran his hand over his beard. "You want to know what we're regrouping with, Braun? Anything and everything I can get my hands on to keep those women alive."

"What are you thinking, Att?" Liam asked, rubbing his hand over Wyatt's thigh.

“We start pulling strings. I have connections for more manpower, more weapons. Thane, you still have contacts for the army. Jasper, you’ve been out of the game for years, but you need to think back and come up with anyone who might want to see Dominic dead, anything we can use against him.” Rolling the lip of his glass across his bottom lip, he continued, “We need to find out if Dominic is going to switch bases to one of the other properties.”

“No, he won’t. They’ve been on the run too long, costing them too much time. Relocating again will just set them back further. He’s already proved that he can defend his territory, will believe that tonight’s events will deter us from attacking again, at least for the foreseeable future.”

Loki pursed his lips. “Dominic said something about the blueprints. He planted several copies, right, where we were most likely to look for them. Altered copies, probably taking out the basement where his men were waiting to ambush the team, and wherever the fuck they’ve hidden the labs and holding cells.”

Thane chimed in. “Are any of those copies any use to us?”

“There’s got to be an original copy. Even that sanctimonious prick wouldn’t want the original destroyed. I mean, what if he forgets where one of his escape routes is?” The old bastard was getting on in years, so it wasn’t completely unthinkable. “If you have army contacts, does that mean you can get your hands on explosives? A missile or a bomb?”

Braun gaped at him. “*That’s* your idea? Drop a fucking bomb in the middle of Montana?”

“Why not?” Deadly serious, Loki met Atticus’s eyes, then Jasper’s. “Dominic chose an excellent location. The closest neighbor is thirty-five miles away as the crow flies, the nearest town twice that in the opposite direction. That ranch needs to be blown up, past the foundations, into the fucking earth.”

“We have no way of knowing whether they already have prisoners, Loki. There could be women there, pregnant women. Children, teenagers, if Dominic thought ahead and squirreled some of his previous projects away instead of letting them all burn in the fire at the mansion.”

There was guilt, of course, for pushing his opinion when he’d already thought of that. The Fairfax monsters had been stateside long enough for them to select their new breeding stock, kidnap and ship their victims to Montana. But right now, his priority wasn’t with those nameless, faceless women. “If we don’t do something, then it will be *our* women there. Our subs, our lovers, our fucking wives. There’s not one man here who doesn’t have a stake in this now.”

Jasper tossed back his drink. “I could go in as decoy. Do some recon.”

“With a wire shoved up your ass? Pretty sure your father is paranoid enough to look up there. He’d have you chained and strip searched the moment you surrender, and he’d still come after Anarchy to keep you in line.”

“Then you keep her out of the fucking way,” Jasper snarled.

Loki’s fists clenched in frustration. “Have you *met* your wife, you stubborn asshole? She ferrets out information for a goddamn living, you think she’s not going to hack into every data system, into the fucking satellites floating around in

space, trying to find you if you just disappear? She's not stupid, none of them are. Between her and the others, they'll piece shit together faster than we can blink, and then we'll be fighting two damn wars!"

"Loki's right," Liam interjected before they rose and began beating the hell out of each other. "Everyone, just calm down. J, handing yourself over solves nothing. It just adds a harsher time limit and more risk to the operation. My guess is, the first mission Dominic sent you on would be to come home and kill Atticus, at the very least. Maybe all of us, paving the way for him to waltz in and take his pick of our girls."

That was one angle Loki hadn't considered, and apparently one that none of the others had either.

"Does his wife ever leave the labs?" Wyatt wondered.

"Rarely. Her work is her life. I know they both attend galas and shit when they have to, but that was when they were in Virginia. They don't have the same social circles out there, no obligations to show their faces. Rita would rather bury herself in tests and results than go for a walk in the great outdoors." Jasper blew out a breath. "Dominic tripled the number of men within, what, ten minutes between the heat scans? I've never known him to have that amount of security on hand. At the mansion, he had a few trusted guards, but the brute force came from us. The ones he was training," he qualified. "Can we track where he's finding them? Infiltrate them?"

"If he knows about Atticus, then anyone we send in from the company will be on his list. If I was in his position, I'd be tracking everyone connected to you, to Att, to every employee under the Heisler umbrella at least two generations back.

Going down that route means hiring from outside and doing it in a way that leaves no paper trail, electronic or otherwise.” Thane shifted uncomfortably in his seat, massaging his thigh gently. “I think we need to discuss moving the women to a safehouse. Out of state. Can we smuggle them out without Dominic catching on?”

“I have a friend who works in property development and construction.” Braun leaned forward, his eyes distant in a way that suggested he was thinking things through carefully. “Evander. He buys property from one end of the country to the other, and his company does all the work in house. Maybe he has something we can use, somewhere secure.”

“Hands up, who thinks their woman is going to abandon ship when shit is raining down on us?” Saul snorted, smiling despite the heavy blanket of dread suffocating them all. “Bodie can’t leave the house for long periods, even if it’s to somewhere familiar. Archie will probably try and castrate us all for suggesting it. Connie won’t let her clients down a second time, because her sense of responsibility is frightening. Daddy’s little princess and a certain little rabbit might be easy to persuade, until they realize we aren’t going with them, and I’m not sure how to read Sierra or Myna.”

“Are you saying we have no control over our subs, Saul?” Wyatt demanded.

“Well, you don’t, seeing as you’re technically a sub yourself. Liam is the Dom in your trio,” Saul pointed out, not unkindly. “I’m saying that even if we provide a united front on this, which is a given, they’re not going to just walk away without a reason. Once they know Dominic is involved,

they're going to dig their heels in—Anarchy especially. She practically spits blood at the mention of his name and, pregnant or not, she won't let Jasper ride into this battle alone.”

“She won't have a choice.”

“You won't have any balls left if you put it to her like that. She's killed for you once, Jasper. Sacrificed a part of her soul to protect you, the love of her goddamn life. What the hell do you think she'll do when someone threatens not one, but two of her children?”

“Now there's a thought,” Braun said with an exhausted laugh. “Just send Anarchy in. She'll have the crazy fucker hanging from the rafters by his dick within an hour, with that deluded bitch of a wife bleeding out beside him.”

“Don't even joke about that,” Jasper snapped. “If she ends up within a mile of Dominic, we won't need a fucking army.”

“Sorry, brother.” Squeezing his eyes shut, Braun scrubbed his face with a hand. “It's been the longest night.”

“It has, and sitting here hashing all this out now isn't going to help us tomorrow if we can't keep our goddamn eyes open. All I want is my princess and a bed for a few hours before all hell breaks loose in the morning.” Atticus swirled the last swig of whiskey around in his glass before downing it. “Braun, can Saul and Jasper stay with you tonight? I'll take Alicia, Loki, and Myna with me. Thane, Liam, and Wyatt should stick together.”

“No one's going home,” Braun retorted. “We're all exhausted, physically and emotionally, and we've had more to

drink than is probably wise. The girls are all asleep. If we're aiming for safety in numbers, then we stick together. There are three guest bedrooms, and two couches. The beds are big enough to share if you don't mind being in close quarters."

"You think Dominic has eyes on us already?" This from Wyatt.

"He's had his eyes on us for months. He said that we'd provoked him into setting stage two into action—I think it was already in motion long before the team landed on Montana soil." Jasper set his glass down and rose, inciting the rest of the Masters to follow suit. "Dominic likes his words, Wyatt. He loves to hear himself speak, so he uses a lot of them. The trick is to listen not only to what he says, but *how* he says it. Most of the time, because he thinks he's a clever bastard, he banks on being feared enough that the subtle hints he drops won't be heard."

"So...we really are screwed then?"

Atticus slapped him on the back as they ascended the steps out of the pit, almost propelling him up and over the top. "For tonight, we're safe and alive. Be thankful for it, boy. Tomorrow, we go to war."

Loki hooked his hand under Thane's elbow as he limped his way up the stairs. "I thought you seemed better earlier, but now I'm not so sure."

Thane grinned at him. "Your woman is a lot more skilled than I gave her credit for, Loki. If I were you, I'd keep her. Not felt this good in months, even if I am aching like a bitch in too many places to count."

“Yeah?”

“God, yes. Connie’s got a surprise coming to her later.” He winked, then grimaced. “Shit, tonight is not the time to think about sex. We lost friends tonight.”

“We did. We can’t change that, but we can make the asshole pay for it.” Loki walked beside him toward the exit, noting Saul was sticking with Jasper as he shut down the laptops and screen. “Make jokes, Thane. Think about sex with your woman.” He rubbed his hand over his heart as he thought about Timothy and Patrick, their banter and quick wit. “We can mourn our friends without letting Dominic win. He wants to squash us, make us weak with grief, paranoid with fear for the girls. If we stop laughing, if we refuse to entertain the idea of fucking our women out of respect for Zach and the others, Dominic already has his foot in the damn door.”

“Well, it is a little disrespectful to think about fucking on the night five men died.”

Loki scoffed and nudged his friend with his elbow. “If the tables were turned, and one of us had died instead of them, what do you think they’d be doing right now?”

“Uh...”

“They’d have spent the night toasting us, polishing off a bottle of something not dissimilar to what we’ve just drunk, and then they’d have gone out and found a sweet, warm pussy to lose themselves in. Affirmation of life, Thane, you should know all about that. When death comes knocking on the neighbor’s door, you do everything in your goddamn power to show it you’re still alive and fucking kicking.”

“Uh-huh. And will you be availing yourself of Myna?”

He mulled it over as they followed Braun and Atticus out onto the porch. They waited for everyone to catch up, leaving no man behind even for the short walk over to the house.

“We’re not at that stage yet. Forgiveness comes before intimacy, and I still have some bridges to mend. But I am going to carry her to bed, tuck myself in around her, and thank as many deities as I can think of for keeping her safe. Affirmation doesn’t always mean sex; sometimes it’s just holding the woman you love close.”

“Amen to that, brother.”

A soft, low moan lured her from sleep.

Frowning, Myna wriggled deeper into the covers, then froze as lots of bare, warm skin pressed up against her back. There was an arm around her waist, quiet breaths ruffling her hair, and a thick cock wedged along the crack of her ass. Only two thin layers of fabric protected her. “What the—”

“Ssssh,” Loki whispered in her ear. “Don’t disturb them.”

Don’t disturb who? What the hell was Loki doing in bed with her, and who was moaning? Christ, did she even dare open her eyes or had she fallen into an alternate universe?

Too many questions for this early in the morning.

Slowly, she blinked, relieved the curtains were closed. There was nothing worse than having your eyeballs burned from their sockets before she was awake. Somehow, she was on the edge of a strange bed, facing the wall, with Loki’s

strong arm banded over her waist to keep her from rolling to the hard floor.

“Wh—”

“Ssssh,” he admonished again, his voice quieter than a breath. “We had a rough night, Myna. It was bad. We ended up crashing at Braun’s, sharing a bed with Saul and Caera. They’re sharing an...intimate moment, and Caera’s shy, so we’re giving them some privacy.”

Her barely-awake brain tried to process what he was saying, but she was distracted by the noises coming from behind them and her own body’s response. The carnal quality of her friend’s moans was making her core clench, releasing a rush of wetness between her legs.

Understanding that Caera’s brand of shy fell more on the side of abject mortification, Myna forced her own voice to be barely audible. “How bad?”

Strong fingers stroked her belly rhythmically as he sighed. “There’s bad, and then there’s clusterfuck. My guess is everyone will be having sex this morning to celebrate being alive.”

She swallowed, not liking the implication. “Someone died?”

“Yeah, baby.” His cheek pressed against her hair. “Several someones.”

“I’m sorry.” Dread percolated in her gut as she wondered how to ask if they’d lost anyone she knew. What if she wasn’t strong enough to hear the answer? “The Masters, are they...”

“We’re all fine, little songbird. I promise.” Loki’s hips shifted subtly when Caera moaned again, obviously oblivious to everything but Saul. The bed began to move. “This was not the best idea I’ve ever had. Excuse my, ah, morning wood.”

Slowly, carefully, she turned around so they were face to face. In the dim light, it was easy to see the strain marring his features, the pain he was in. Not all of it was sexual frustration; there was a vein of something darker, running deep, staining the usually jovial expression in his eyes.

Wanting to help, needing to erase some of that darkness plaguing him, she ran her fingers through his hair. God, she’d missed his scent first thing in the morning, when his body was warm. She touched her nose to the center of his chest, running it up to the base of his throat and breathing deep.

“Myna...you don’t have to...”

One thing she’d learned was that death trumped all. It came when it was least expected, took those who should be the last on the list, and negated every stupid argument. Why hold onto a grudge, however small, or withhold forgiveness over something that—in the grand scheme of life—was inconsequential?

Whatever had happened last night, death had paid a visit. Who was to say that the next time it swept in, it wouldn’t take Loki as it retreated?

“I forgive you, Loki.” A coil of tension she hadn’t realized she was carrying around with her broke, allowing her to finally breathe. “We both handled being apart in the wrong way. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

He pushed her onto her back, ranging himself over her as he studied her face intently. “I was immature and selfish, Myna. I didn’t take the time to look at the whole picture, to wonder if there was something preventing you from getting in touch. My reaction was poor, and I’m sorry. So sorry for my part in making life difficult for you.”

“Start again fresh?”

“Yes. I would like that.” Loki kissed her face, starting at her forehead and peppering her flushed skin with dots of hope. When he finally reached her mouth, she was blushing fire hydrant red. “I want to drown myself in you. Float away on your kisses and forget that there’s big, bad evils in this world that don’t always die.”

For the first time, she glanced toward the other side of the bed, relieved that Saul and Caera were shutting out the rest of the world, burying themselves beneath the duvet. By the way the bed was rocking, and from the increasingly raw pitch of Caera’s pleas, they weren’t aware of anything but each other.

“Don’t let her know we’re here,” Loki ordered softly. “Trust me, they need this, and if she realizes we’re here, she’ll bolt.”

Myna’s hands gripped his hips, thumbs teasing the elasticated edge of his boxers before she shoved them as far down his thighs as she could. His cock sprang free, as thick and virile as she remembered, resting on her panty-covered mound. “Better find a way to keep my mouth shut, then, hadn’t you, Sir?”

He groaned, rolling his hips to stroke the length of his shaft against her. “I don’t need sex, little songbird. All I want is to

hold you close and convince myself that you're safe.”

Maybe that was true, she thought, but when a man carried a look of despair in his eyes, he required more than cuddling to chase the pain away. Why else was Saul fucking his sub in a bed occupied by another couple? She'd put the last few dollar bills in her pocket down on the table and bet that he wasn't the only Master seeking comfort from his lover this morning.

She trailed her palms up his sides, shaping his waist and ribs, the muscled ridges of his shoulders, before her fingers dove into his hair. “Atticus warned me of bad things coming. How much do we stand to lose, Loki?”

His forehead touched hers, his eyes sorrowful. “Everything and more.”

“I suggest you stop wasting time then.” It was she who claimed his mouth this time, initiating the kiss with a sharp tug on his hair. The pressure of his lips was sweet and familiar, the hunger in her core keen and insistent.

The chemistry between them burned brighter than ever, the months apart serving only to stoke the fires higher. Skin on skin, every breath tasting of sex and his scent. Beneath the covers, they were merging together with each stroke of a hand, brush of lips.

Loki's mouth caressed the sensitive line of her neck, tightening the pulse of bliss thumping in her pussy into a staccato beat. “I missed you, songbird. There are no excuses for my stupidity, but by Christ, I've missed you.”

She shivered as he traveled down her body, his stubble lighting a trail of sparks to her breasts. Tender, full, they ached

in the caress of his palm, the unforgiving suction of his mouth. Tongue, teeth, and fingers worked in tandem to bring her nipples to peak, using pain and pleasure in equal measure.

Beside them, Caera came with a startled cry.

“Less foreplay,” Myna hissed desperately. “More of what she’s getting.”

Loki chuckled darkly and disappeared fully under the covers, his lips skimming down over her stomach and lower. She lifted her hips when he tugged her panties off, barely stifling a cry of her own when his tongue swiped along her slit.

When he resurfaced, licking his lips, she scowled at him. “That was unfair.”

“Been too long since I’ve tasted what belongs to me,” was his cocky retort. Gently, he settled himself over her, resting the cradle of his pelvis between the spread of her legs. “This is what you want?”

Ignoring the passionate lovemaking happening within an arm’s span, Myna nodded. Whatever was heading their way carried an edge of destruction. It was in his eyes, lurking beneath the surface. She felt it in the frantic pace of Saul’s rhythm, that almost panicked desperation of a man trying to outrun a demon to save his woman. “Be with me, Loki.”

The thick head of his cock, decorated with all those shiny silver piercings, slipped between swollen labia. Her juices coated him, easing the sting of entry as his girth stretched her open. Muscles fluttering around him, she whimpered, arching into the penetration.

Those piercings were both a blessing and a curse.

Loki groaned. “Fuck. Condom.”

She laughed, a little too loudly. “Five months pregnant, Loki. Too late for protection now.”

“Are you laughing at me, little songbird?” Grinning down at her, he tsked in disapproval. “Hands over your head, pretty girl. This tight cunt needs a reminder of who owns it.” He bent and bit her earlobe, sucking the sting away as she hastily obeyed his order. “You belong to me, Myna. You came back to *me*. I own this pussy, that fucking gorgeous ass, your mouth...” He thrust deep, ripping a yelp from her when his cock plunged to the heart of the unbearable ache. “Every inch is mine. I want it. I’m claiming it.”

Keeping quiet was no longer on the agenda.

Caera was orgasming again, with Saul on her heels.

Loki gripped her wrists above her head, yanking her attention back onto him. “I’m buying you cuffs, Myna.” Withdrawing slowly, he made sure his eyes never left hers. “Cuffs and a collar. After our son is born, I’m inking you up. Matching tattoos,” he told her firmly, “and a fucking engagement ring to go on your finger.”

He drove deep again, stealing any answer she might have when the air jumped from her lungs in a shocked exhale. With each new thrust, he built a rhythm, growing more confident, riding her with purpose.

Hips tilting to meet him, Myna stepped into the dance smoothly, rising to his thrusts, falling away when he withdrew. Her insides prickled with sensitivity, squeezing down on the

thick shaft ruining her for a second time. “Never took you for a dreamer, Loki.”

“The only fucking thing I’ve dreamed about lately is you.”

They moved together as though they’d never been apart. Eyes locked, bodies merging in perfect unison. Breath stuttering, she felt the swell of an orgasm rise, gathering low in her belly to spiral outwards.

Caera’s screech of surprise broke the moment until Saul clamped his hand across her mouth and shoved her back under the covers.

Myna’s lips twitched, ridiculously amused by the situation. Even though her orgasm—and consequently, Loki’s—fluttered just out of reach, she didn’t believe they’d have too many more opportunities to laugh.

“Everything okay there, Saul?” Fighting to keep his tone even, Loki’s face was alive with mischief. He lowered his head and began to nibble along her shoulder, rocking his hips to keep the pleasure shimmering through her blood.

“Caera is mortally embarrassed,” came the muffled reply. “Me, I’m good.”

A round of furious whispering ensued; no doubt the shy sub was giving her lover an earful. The heap beneath the covers was jumping around, shifting and bouncing. Caera was either trying to dig herself into the mattress to hide, or she was attempting to bolt.

“Why the hell are you embarrassed, sweetheart?” Myna asked, stifling a giggle when lips brushed a ticklish spot on her collarbone.

“We were having *sex*,” Caera lamented.

“Technically, you *had* sex. *We’re* having sex.” Myna shushed Loki when he muttered something against her skin. “It’s not that much different from scening at the club, Caera. We’re just in closer proximity. The only way it gets weird is if Loki starts stroking Saul’s leg instead of mine.”

Both men snorted in unison.

“Stop talking,” Loki whispered, “and start coming, little songbird. Saul knows how to handle his own woman. I need to take care of mine.”

“Don’t scandalize her,” she hissed back.

“Baby, she can watch for all I care. Front row seat. But my balls are four months’ worth of blue, and this snug cunt isn’t helping matters.” He punctuated his words with hard, fast jabs of his cock that reignited the craving in her core. “Exhibitionism is a kink, you know.”

A moan rippled in her throat. “Your ego is a kink all of its own.”

“God, I missed that fucking sass.” The look in his eyes told her he’d forgotten all about their unfortunate bedmates; his attention was solely on her. “Hell’s raining down on us and all I can think about is you.”

She wanted to cup his face, to feel the dark stubble prickle her palms. To guide his mouth to her throat, where the blood in her veins pulsed beneath her skin, and beg him to mark her with teeth and tongue. To reclaim the sweetness, the almost innocent joy of what they’d shared before the world went mad.

Instead, her arms were over her head, her body stretched out beneath the hard, heavy length of a man balanced on the line between sanity and losing control. Skin to skin, breath merging into one.

Their son cradled protectively between them.

Well, she supposed, a bit of voyeurism never hurt anyone.

Tilting her head back, she lost herself in his kiss. Urgent, demanding, branding. Tongues clashed, almost violently, as they groaned in unison. His cock surged deep in slow, sure thrusts, bringing pain and pleasure into a perfect pinnacle where her orgasm waited, rekindled once more.

She fell with grace, squeezing the thick shaft inside her until lights burst in her head, scattering like blessed stars. Keening Loki's name, she arched, whining until he set his teeth against her shoulder.

"Please," she begged.

Loki obliged, biting hard enough to leave indents in her skin, a rumble echoing through his chest as he surged deep and found his own peace.

Breakfast was a somber, awkward affair.

Loki chewed thoughtfully on a piece of bacon, weighing the tension in Braun's kitchen as he kept one eye on how much Myna was eating. In a few minutes, if she didn't stop pushing her food around her plate trying to fool him into thinking she'd eaten more than she had, he was going to pull her onto his lap and feed her by force.

Six couples, he mused, and one trio. Only four bedrooms.

Braun and Bodie were the lucky couple who'd retained their privacy. He and Myna had experienced the dubious pleasure of sharing with Saul and the still-mortified Caera. Connie and Thane had apparently started the night on the couch until Thane's thigh cramped so badly, they'd ended up in bed with Jasper and Anarchy.

Liam, Wyatt, and Sierra had welcomed Alicia into their bed at five a.m. when Atticus roused her from sleep, plunked her next to Sierra with Mr. Bear, and then gone to work.

Now, Caera was refusing to look at anything but her untouched plate, her blush fading only to flare a few minutes later. Nothing anyone said to her enticed her to interact with the group, but then, Anarchy and Alicia were uncharacteristically quiet, too.

Did they know something was wrong? Were they reading the faces of their men, the heaviness settling over them all as minutes ticked past?

Myna was. Despite knowing what was hanging over them, the threat that Dominic posed, she didn't truly understand how much danger the asshole presented. She wasn't yet aware that only a few hours ago, he'd slaughtered five of Atticus's best men with less effort than it took to pop open a can of soda.

Each Master held his woman close. Cradled on their laps, pressed against their sides. Sierra was pinned on Liam's lap with his arm curled around her waist, while Wyatt drank his coffee with a hand on her shoulder as he stood behind them.

Alicia played with Mr. Bear on the countertop, sighing wistfully as she glanced at the door every few minutes, waiting for her Daddy to come back.

Everything was...off.

Loki linked his fingers with Myna's, stealing the fork from her hand and spearing a chunk of sausage. Pride tickled him as he studied her; relaxed, her eyes heavy but sated, her body loose in a way only really good sex achieved. "Need you to eat more than that, songbird. I don't want to give Lizzie any reason to put you back on the damn drip."

"Lizzie can go suck a donkey," she muttered, scowling as he tapped the sausage against her lips. "I'm not hungry, Loki. I had a late night, then an early morning wake-up call." When she paused, he shoved the food in her mouth. "Did you hear anything I just said?"

"It's rude to talk with your mouth full."

Pretty green eyes rolled in his direction, full of exasperation.

He got a couple more mouthfuls into her before she evaded him, tipping her head down to escape the ruthless prod of the laden fork. "Perhaps I should consider the IV after all. Drink your juice," he ordered without bite, then cleared his throat meaningfully when she reached for his cup of coffee. "I said juice, little songbird."

"It gives me reflux," she grumbled.

"Water, then."

The glare she gave him was silent and unamused. "I—"

Atticus walked in, dressed immaculately in a black suit. Warily, he yanked at the knot at his throat, sliding the tie free of his shirt collar, and tossed it onto the counter as Alicia bounced out of her chair. His arms were already open for her when she reached him, scooping up her slight frame and settling her on his hip like a child, burrowing his face in her hair as she snuggled into him.

No one spoke. All eyes were on the Daddy Dom, and while the Masters knew the source of his distress, it was clear that the women remained in the dark. Although not for long, if Connie's smart brain and the suspicious cogs in Anarchy's mind teamed up.

"Coffee, Att?" Braun offered quietly.

"No, thanks." Exhaling slowly, Atticus turned his jungle-green gaze on everyone in turn. "I spoke to Evander this morning, Braun. *Evander*," he repeated with emphasis when Connie stiffened and went ghostly pale. "Your past is just that, Constance; in the past. Evan is dead and gone. Evander is an ally; one we should be grateful for today."

A stroke of Thane's hand down her spine settled her. "An ally implies an enemy, Att."

He nodded slowly. "Last night, we lost Alpha team during a mission. I notified the families of Zach, Patrick, Isaac, Thomas, and Timothy this morning. They were sent to Montana, to a property owned by Dominic Fairfax."

There were tears.

For Anarchy and Alicia, the dead men weren't just soldiers in Atticus's employ. They were teammates, friends, family.

Guys they'd spoken with daily, laughed with, argued with, teased, and played jokes on.

Grief wasn't just emotion. It had a taste, carried a scent, and was discernible to the naked eye. It possessed a voice, commanded the room.

Anarchy slapped her husband's hand away as he reached for her, then swiped at the tears she couldn't stop. In that instant, she was no longer the sweet, infatuated submissive who'd taken it upon herself to throw her heart at the most intimidating sadist the club offered.

It was easy to forget she was still young when she exuded fierce maternal vibes this way. Cheeks flushed with temper, eyes bright with tears and anger, she was the embodiment of a wronged mother, a female torn between guarding and attacking.

"How long have you known Dominic was back in the picture?" she snapped.

Jasper sighed. "A few weeks."

"*Weeks?*" Leaping to her feet, almost tipping herself over as her balance faltered, she jammed tiny fists onto her hips. "That asshole nearly ripped us apart, Jasper. He cost me part of my fucking soul, and you don't tell me—tell *any* of us—that he's gunning for us?"

"It was a joint decision, Anarchy," Atticus told her, his tone brooking no argument.

Yet, fiery little spitfire that she was, she argued anyway. "Between whom? Everyone with a cock? This breaks every bridge of trust, you know that, right? Because if you've known

for weeks, if you planned a fucking mission, it means you've lied to me at least once. You've lied to every woman in this room," she sneered in disgust, raking sharp brown eyes over each man as though they were claws. "I guess we're nothing but helpless females, too fucking stupid and weak to be included in the loop."

"That's unfair," Saul interjected. "None of us think you're helpless, weak, or anything but smart. Look at it from our point of view, Archie. Each woman in this room holds the heart of at least one of us here. Dominic has proven he is ruthless, dangerous, and a goddamn psychopath."

"A psychopath with eyes on me. On *me*, Saul, and on mine. Do you not think that warrants all hands on deck? That all of us deserve to know what's coming?"

"No," Thane responded smoothly, lifting his shoulder in an apologetic shrug. "I'm sorry, Archie, but no. We defend what's precious to us. All of you have seen violence in one form or another. Why wouldn't we want to keep you as far away from this shit as we can?"

"Because we're already neck deep in it!"

"Arguing over it isn't going to do anything but drive a wedge between us, at a time when staying strong is the only way we survive Dominic," Connie pointed out. "I'm sorry for your loss, Atticus. I know your men are more than just tools in your arsenal."

"At least someone sees sense," Wyatt muttered.

Archie whirled, teeth bared, and looked as though she wanted to slap his face off his skull. Pregnancy hormones were

obviously incompatible with her temper. “Stay out of this, Wyatt. When it comes to Dominic, there is no *sense* in anything. If he doesn’t get what he wants, he’ll tear us apart until he does.”

Caera whimpered, fear leeching her skin of every drop of color.

“That’s why alternative arrangements have been made,” Atticus growled, taking control of the room again. “Evander has a property in Nevada we can upgrade into a safehouse. I’ve already sent a tech team out there to install the security, and we’re working on a secure, untraceable method of transport. Until this is over and the Fairfaxes are dead, every submissive in this room will be relocating.”

Loki grimaced as a united front of pissed off subs rose in outrage. He kept Myna on his lap, hoping she’d be sensible and keep her two cents to herself. As much as he hated the idea of sending the subs so far away, it was logically the smart choice, if Atticus came through on the secure transport.

“I have patients, responsibilities. I can’t just *relocate* to Nevada.” Connie threw her hands up in the air.

“I’m not giving you a choice. I’m sorry, Constance, but jobs can be replaced. Dead bodies can’t be brought back to life, and that’s what we’re facing. That’s the fucking reality of the situation we’re in.” Atticus grimaced as Caera made a haunted sound in her throat and ran, tripping over her feet in panic. Saul was on her heels without hesitation. “It comes down to one thing. We kill Dominic, or he kills us. Last night, he murdered five of my best men without a hitch in stride, so we know what we’re up against. He has no qualms about

killing women, which is why we're taking you out of the equation."

For the first time, Bodie offered her voice. Hands shaking slightly as she entertained Declan with a spoon and apple sauce, she said, "If Dominic is anything like our father, Atticus, he'll know you've changed the game on him. He's probably already planned for it. His men will report back when Connie doesn't go to work or Sierra doesn't make her regular trips to find abandoned stuffies. They'll tell him that Archie and Caera aren't attending their doctor's appointments and maternity meetings. That we aren't all keeping to our normal evenings at Avalon. Take away his prey and the hunt will only get bloodier."

"Women are creatures of habit," Connie agreed.

"We have to take that risk," Atticus insisted. "The crosshairs are primarily on Jasper and Anarchy, but that doesn't mean—"

"Don't underestimate us, Atticus."

Loki blinked as Alicia slid down off her Daddy's hip and stepped back, arms folded across her chest. Blue eyes sparking with indignation, jaw tense, there was no trace of the Little in sight.

Well, shit.

Alicia was bringing out the big guns.

Chapter Seven

She'd forgotten how fascinating the dynamics within the group were, Myna thought as she sat quietly on Loki's lap. Her attention was like a ball bearing being dragged between magnets as arguments and tempers whipped around, each side trying to make their point and keep it on top.

Things were falling into place now; Atticus's warning of impending danger hadn't been unwarranted, and now it seemed she was stranded on a landmine, barely daring to move in case it blew up under her feet.

"Trust me on this, princess. We can't focus on Dominic if we're worried about you."

The pint-sized woman wearing a pink unicorn onesie snorted derisively, a far cry from her usual childlike persona. Rolling her shoulders, she stared her Daddy down. "Bullshit. Where do you think your attention is going to be if you're all here and we're in a different state? Don't treat us like we're invalids, because we're far from it."

"Lisha—"

"Have you forgotten what we're made of? What we've gone through? Bodie survived being broken to pieces. Connie was almost raped. Caera was raised by the son of a bitch bringing this shit down on us, and Sierra's been bullied for most of her life." Jutting her chin up, she continued to glare at him. "Myna hit rock bottom, yet she's bouncing back, and let's not forget that both Anarchy and I have killed."

Myna's mouth dropped open. It was one thing to hear the Little swearing like a sea-worn sailor, but to hear her admit to

killing someone—that both she *and* the adorable blonde had blood on their hands—was enough to rock the foundations of a world she'd thought was absolutely stable.

“Fuck,” Loki whispered. “Anything she says doesn't get repeated outside of this room, Myna. Do you understand me?”

She nodded, but in her head, she was shushing him violently, enraptured by the woman she thought she'd known. Not once during their therapy sessions had Alicia shown even a glimpse of this alter ego, and she was utterly fascinating.

“Time after time, we've been knocked down and gotten back up. Yeah, Dominic might be worse than all that put together, but we can't fight if you bind our hands and stow us away in the closet.”

“I can't lose you,” Atticus gritted out, sounding like he was in pain.

Alicia's combative stance relaxed. “Being in a wheelchair for most of my life taught me a lot of things. We aren't guaranteed a tomorrow, Atticus. For a long time, I prayed that death would come and take me away in the middle of the night. If something happened to me, to any of us,” she added, casting a glance around her rapt audience, “it just means that we spent the happiest part of our lives loving the ones who matter most. I might have died in that goddamn chair, unloved and alone. Our parents could've murdered Bodie in her apartment, never knowing what it is to be loved by a man like Braun, how it feels to hold her son in her arms. Caera's life could've been snuffed out at eight years old without a trace of affection.

“There are a lot of *mights* and *could haves*. But we prevailed, we survived, and we grew stronger, each and every one of us. If we’re going into a fight with Dominic, then we all go in knowing the risks. Understanding that if it all goes south, we have men at our backs who’ll do anything to keep us safe. That we in turn will do whatever it fucking takes to get through this whole.”

Jasper cleared his throat. “This is my fight, Alicia. My parents doing this.”

She scowled at him. “It’s been *our* fight since you became our family, Jasper. I shot and killed my parents. They ruined my life, but that one act of self-preservation saved me in so many ways. This is our family now, for all of us, and when some delusional asshole with an incredibly small dick threatens our family, we don’t split up to run and hide. We stand our fucking ground, and we annihilate them.”

Judging by the expressions of shock and surprise, Myna realized this was likely the first time most of the group had witnessed Alicia in her adult glory.

From her spot on Liam’s lap, Sierra began to clap.

Atticus pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know whether to spank you for swearing so much or kiss you to shut you up.”

She grinned. “You only want to shut me up because you know I’m right.”

“Being right doesn’t make you safe. Quite the opposite.”

“Dominic doesn’t understand the true value of a woman; my father didn’t either. He forces his children into training, but

he doesn't realize that a woman will take him down and rip him into pieces with the right incentive." Alicia moved closer to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Put it to a vote. Majority wins, and the winning side chooses whether we cower in some dingy hotel room for the next six months, or if we stand beside our men."

"It won't take six months to bring this to an end," Atticus assured her.

"No? How long have you spent hunting him so far? Longer than I've been with you," she said without rancor. "I'll make this easy for you and tally the votes myself. On the women's side, we have..." She glanced around at her friends. "Six to stay, one to go."

Amused, Liam asked, "That's not a full house, Lisha."

She tilted her head. "It's not, no, but neither is your side. Caera will vote to go because her fear of Dominic and Rita is overwhelming. She loves Saul, and while her fear doesn't exceed that love, they do clash. Being afraid, running from the source of that fear, means she can keep Saul safe as long as he keeps running with her."

"Someone's been taking pages from your psychology lessons," Thane told Connie.

"No lessons needed. When I'm in my Little headspace, people forget I'm still an adult up here," Alicia responded, tapping a fingertip against her temple. "They say and do things they'd usually be more cautious about around another adult. But not me."

How amusing, Myna thought, to see more than one Master lose color. What secrets had they divulged in Alicia's presence, and what power did she hold over them without them knowing?

"Saul will vote go," Alicia continued, taking a second study of everyone present, this time perusing the faces of the men. "Jasper and Loki, go. Thane, Liam, and Braun...stay. Wyatt, go." She rolled her eyes as Atticus cleared his throat. "Daddy, go. I think that makes six to go, nine to stay. We win."

"Wait a minute," Wyatt demanded, holding his hand up. "We haven't actually voted."

"Am I wrong?"

"Would anyone like to correct my princess?"

When the guys remained quiet, the little diva gave them a mock bow. "Saul should take Caera to the safehouse if he thinks that's best. That goes for anyone who wants to leave. One weak link in the chain demoralizes the whole thing. If we stand together, we do it as one, without cracks or weaknesses."

"Here, here," Thane agreed, lifting his coffee mug in support.

"The princess has spoken," Atticus said with an exasperated sigh. He tugged on a short, black lock of her hair. "Talk it over between yourselves. Let me know by this afternoon how many Evander should expect."

Loki grumbled. "I think the expectant women should take a vacation. Both to keep them out of Dominic's clutches, and as company for Caera. This isn't something I want my woman or

my son tangled up in, Att. I'll give you everything I've got, but not them."

Myna let his hand slide around her bump until his palm covered the center of it protectively, then set hers upon the top. "I'm not leaving our friends when they need us, Loki. If all I can do is sit on the sidelines and wave a tiny banner in support, then that's what I'll do, but I'm not tucking my tail between my legs and running."

"Dominic is a monster," Anarchy cautioned her, offering a sorrowful smile. "You might want to take the out while it's still on the table, Myna. We all know there's no point in me going anywhere; I'm the one with the bullseye painted on my stomach. Where I go, Dominic will follow."

"You're really having twins?" Connie asked, eyes gleaming.

Archie's smile lost the edge of grief and became luminous. "We really are. Two beautiful girls who'll look just like their daddy." She leaned her head back against him. "No matter how much he protests and claims they'll be the image of their mother."

Jasper kissed the top of her head. "I'd rather be reminded of you every time I look at my daughters, than see myself. Of course, if they take after you, there are going to be a lot of terrified teenage boys hanging around at prom time."

Sierra lifted her head, avoiding his eyes. "Maybe they'll be gay. Or bi."

Silence smothered the group for a few long seconds as Jasper's mouth dropped open, working soundlessly, before the

laughter started. As horrible as it was to embrace the humor when families were stricken with grief, there was no denying that sharing the moment within the group relieved some of the vicious tension pressing against them from all sides.

“Sierra makes a good point,” Liam told Jasper, chuckling as the sadist struggled to find his voice again. “Could be you’ll have lovestruck teenage girls crowding your porch, along with those lust-driven, hormonal young boys—”

“Liam, stop.” Giggling, Archie lifted her hand to Jasper’s cheek, petting him softly. “You’ll give him an aneurism.”

“All right, settle down.” Atticus’s tone commanded the room. “Congratulations, both of you. I realize this wasn’t the way you probably wanted to break the news, but—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Archie said, still stroking her husband’s face. “It’s good news, and good news should be shared with family. We’ve never really done anything in the traditional sense, so why should this be any different? We can do it the usual way next time.”

“Next time?” Jasper choked out.

Mischief sparked in her eyes. “You don’t think we’re going to stop at two, do you?”

“The sadist and his brood,” Braun murmured. “From eternal bachelor to shepherd of his own flock.”

“I thought Loki was the eternal bachelor?” Bodie mused aloud. As Declan began to fuss, she picked him up and soothed him.

“Christ, you lot are...*focus*, people!” Running a hand through his hair, Atticus seemed torn between laughing and

losing his temper.

It must be a complicated thing, Myna thought in wonder, to be so used to having men at his command, listening to every word he said, following orders to the letter, and then having to deal with the rabble of his friends, who were nowhere near as disciplined as his employees.

“Yes, Sir, Daddy.” Lithe as a snake, Alicia boosted herself back into his arms and settled herself into the cradle of his arm beneath her butt, staring adoringly into his eyes. “Focusing, Daddy.”

Lips twitching, he shook his head. “Goddamn it, princess. Don’t be so cute when I’m trying to be serious.” He switched his attention to the group as his Little batted her eyelashes at him. “The war room is being set up at Heisler headquarters. We have the equipment, the personnel, and the security there. All who are staying for this shitshow need to consider moving to our place.”

“You have one spare bedroom,” Connie pointed out.

“If Saul and Caera are going to Nevada, that leaves four couples and a trio. Things will be tight, and we’ll be living on top of one another for a while, but knowing Dominic and his threats, he won’t keep us waiting long before he makes his move. The games room will be turned into accommodation, and we can alter some of the offices for those who require a little more privacy.”

“It’s going to leave us in a precarious position, Att. All of us in one place, we’re sitting ducks.” This from Liam, a carefully worded statement full of thoughtful concern.

“Until the additional security comes as backup, our resources are stretched. We’re in between a rock and a hard place, Liam. Do we stretch ourselves further trying to provide security for several locations, or do we concentrate the bulk of what we have on guarding everyone in one place? I know this is going to be distressing for you,” Atticus told Bodie, “but I truly believe that this is best for all of us. I can only promise you that we’ll do our best to resolve this shit as soon as we can.”

Bodie’s smile was shaky. “It might do some good, being pushed out of my comfort zone. This isn’t what I ever imagined becoming, being unable to take my son to the mall or the park. Maybe I just need a kick up the ass.”

Braun’s expression darkened as he leaned in to murmur something in her ear.

“Not dick, Braun. *Kick*,” she shot back.

“I think all of us here beg to differ,” Liam interrupted, giving Sierra a playful nudge. “So, if we’re all moving in and playing house together, when is this going to happen? As it’s already been pointed out, any change in routine is going to alert Dominic.”

“Coming together in one place is different to shipping out the womenfolk,” Jasper argued, rubbing his thumb over his mouth. “Dominic threw down threats he knows we’ll take seriously. He’ll expect us to circle the wagons, although he might believe his warnings were enough to send us scattering.”

“Running will trigger his hunting instinct,” Connie commented. “His personality is warped. He likes to pick and

choose his women for breeding, demands a certain specification. I doubt the women know they're under his scrutiny; if he discarded every woman he considered for that dubious honor, he'd have to kill them, and that would leave a very bloody trail to his doorstep. The ones he steals probably try to escape at some point, and that fulfils the primal hunter part in him."

"It hasn't stopped him over the years," Jasper replied, his lip curling with disgust.

Connie shook her head. "If we managed to identify all his victims from the mansion grounds and the ones tossed away like Caera, I believe we'd find that very few of them had traceable ties to the world outside of his control. Perhaps he lured them in with promises of work, like the housekeeper and her daughter. The majority of them, I suspect, would be failed projects. The ones born and bred into his household."

"Who cares what goes on in the sick fuck's head?" Wyatt demanded, beginning to pace. "Psychology doesn't apply here. We don't need to figure out his next move or what he's planning to do in the future because he's already laid it out, plain as fucking day."

"He gave us what he wanted us to know, Wyatt. Something to chew on and worry over while he sets the rest of his pawns into position. That blanket of knowledge he tossed at us is just that, a blanket designed to blind us. He's banking on us not seeing the hundreds of pockets of variables sewn between the layers." Jasper sighed, stroking Anarchy's thigh as he spoke. "I spent years being taught by him, how to cast lies and

deception as truth. How to divert attention away from what's crucial."

Myna blinked slowly. What could be more crucial than safeguarding the women? Because, judging by the events of the morning, that was exactly the direction Dominic was driving the Masters toward, wasn't it? He wasn't diverting their attention away from Archie and the babies, he was making sure they focused *on* them.

Double-cross?

Could Dominic be hoping that Jasper came to the same realization she just had, that there might be something more important to him than taking what belonged to his son? Was this all a game to screw with Jasper's head, and in turn, all of them?

"What are the odds of us winning this? Honestly. I mean, I'm new to the circumstances of all of it, but it seems to me we have an uber rich psychopath, with God knows how many resources at his disposal, ready and willing to kill whoever stands in his way."

"It comes down to the principle of the matter, Wyatt." Liam kissed Sierra's hair. "He and his wife have spent decades breeding women for children of his blood they could train to sell as killers and experiment on in labs. Dominic's a liar, a cheater, a murderer, a rapist, among other things. Jasper and Caera are just two victims of their cruelty."

"So let the fucking cops deal with them!"

"With what evidence? Do we hand over Caera and let them interview her until she crumbles? Or should we give them

Jasper, so they can arrest him for everything the Fairfaxes made him do before he escaped? How do we know that half the Phoenix PD isn't nestled nice and tight in Dominic's pocket?"

"This is fucking insane."

"It is what it is. Acquiescing to Dominic means wrapping Jasper, Archie, and their unborn daughters up in a neat little bow and offering them on a silver platter. The rest of their lives will be absolute misery; I can't have that on my conscience, can you?"

As though understanding that Liam was firmly entrenched, Wyatt stopped pacing, dropping to his knees in front of his lovers, taking Sierra's hand in his. "Siri, you can't tell me that getting caught up in this is what you want. For fuck's sake, you fix stuffies for a living. Doing this is..."

"Right, Wyatt. Liam is our Master, our lover, our friend, and being with him is the best thing that's ever happened to us. To *me*," Sierra told him with certainty. "Loving Liam fills something in here," she added, pressing her free hand to her heart, "but loving all these guys is like coming home to family. I've never had that before. I won't walk away from it, or them."

"What about me, Siri? Where do I fall into your loyalties?"

Myna's heart cracked at the lost look in the girl's eyes. Sierra might only be a couple years away from being thirty, but there were a lot of the same childlike qualities in her that Alicia possessed. Right now, it was that vulnerable youth that shone through most clearly.

“I love you, Wyatt.” Sierra cupped his cheek. “Stay or go, I’ll always love you. But you’re a coward. This turned into our fight when we became part of this family. If something happens to me, if Dominic chooses me as a target, then at least I’ll die knowing I’m loved by two strong men and a horde of very good friends. I’ll be mourned, which is a gift I wouldn’t have if not for them.”

Eyes darkening, Liam shook his head. “There’s no talk of dying, Sierra, not now. We won’t let anything happen to you, any of you,” he said fiercely, encompassing the women in his stormy gaze. “Wyatt, no one will think worse of you if you go with Saul and Caera. But if you’re with us, you’re *with* us. This isn’t the time for doubts. It’s the time to step up and make every action count, for all of us.”

Coffee mugs raised around the room in silent agreement.

Resignation clouded Wyatt’s expression. “Fine, but if I die, you better mourn me half as much as you would Sierra, at the very least.”

Laughing, Liam leaned forward and snagged him by a fistful of hair, pulling Wyatt up for a long, passionate kiss. Sierra squeaked, then gave him a kiss of her own when her men broke apart. “Sit down and shut up, boy. Atticus is about to blow steam from his ears.”

Archie squirmed desperately. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, but I need to pee.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say?” Jasper asked, immediately shifting to help her to her feet.

“Because everyone’s busy talking, and it was all serious and—” Squeezing her thighs together, she waddled off at high speed. “Sorry!”

As though whatever signal telling Archie to pee was hooked up to Myna’s bladder, she groaned as the slight pressure became insistent. Offering Loki an apologetic grimace, she wriggled off his lap. “Apparently, pregnant peeing is contagious. Excuse me.”

“We only have one bathroom!” Bodie called out after her as she hurried from the kitchen as fast as her feet could move.

“Archie better pee fast then!” Myna shot back, then felt a smile curve her lips as a gentle wash of laughter followed her through the living room.

Dominic might think he’d beaten them already, she thought as she hot-stepped it up the stairs after Archie, but—just as she didn’t know him—*he* didn’t know them. Didn’t understand them, not completely.

From the information she’d gathered, he prized family for its blood. His blood. There was no love for his children, no parental bond that meant anything to him. The only pride he felt was when those children, those *products*—killed on command as they’d been trained to do.

The family brought together through Avalon, however, cherished the bonds forged between them. The women were sisters, through blood and heart. The men, through blood and soul. They knew what it was to sacrifice for each other, to have a strong wall of love and friendship at their backs through the hardest times.

No, Dominic would never understand them.

What he didn't grasp quite yet was that, despite all the odds being stacked in his favor, he was still going to lose.

Their new accommodations weren't that bad, Loki decided as he settled into one of the couches in Atticus's game room. It definitely had some perks—his TV was a fraction of the size of the one on the wall, currently showing the pilot episode of *Game of Thrones*.

Evidently, Alicia was in a bloodthirsty mood.

They'd managed to hash details out that morning, once the girls returned from their bathroom trip. Saul and Caera had come back, too, which had been a surprise, but not as shocking as Caera's declaration that she wasn't hiding in Nevada while her friends remained in harm's way.

Despite her fear of the people who'd damaged her so badly as a child, she was determined not to abandon those she loved when they needed any help they could get.

Brave little rabbit.

Avalon was full of subs with balls of steel, he thought, giving Alicia the side-eye as some poor chap got his head whipped off with a sword on screen. Courageous subs, some of whom were taking full advantage of their Daddy not being in the room.

“Is this something Atticus will approve of you watching, Lisha?”

Eyes glued to the screen, she nodded. “Uh-huh.”

Around the massive room, several snickers were heard. The pool table and gaming machines had been shipped out with some of the other furniture to make way for five king-sized beds.

When Atticus put a plan into motion, he certainly made things happen with prompt efficiency.

A group vote determined the sleeping areas, with Braun and Bodie being allocated the guest room, so they had a quieter space for young Declan. Everyone else had chosen to sleep in the games room, to stay close to one another.

It was a wise choice, in Loki's opinion. Even now, as Atticus, Jasper, Thane, and Braun were down in the war room below, it left Liam, Wyatt, Saul, and Loki on guard duty—or babysitting duty as Wyatt called it.

Connie was curled up on the other couch with Caera's head in her lap, stroking her blonde hair with gentle sweeps of her hand as they talked quietly. Likely about what was happening around them, the clusterfuck coming at them from all sides, and how Caera was going to deal with it.

Sierra was busy in the corner, where some of Att's employees had set up the restoration equipment they'd retrieved from her apartment. Surrounded by a small heap of stuffie carcasses and piles of stuffing and scrap material, she seemed oblivious to anything but carefully hand-sewing a new patch onto a broken toy, under Liam's watchful eye.

Bodie and Myna were having an in-depth conversation on one of the beds while Declan slept between them in a fresh diaper—the changing process was one Loki had studied with intense scrutiny.

Poor, exhausted Anarchy was already tucked up in bed, fast asleep. She'd teetered on the edge for a while, waiting for Jasper to come, but she'd drifted off twenty minutes past, too tired to stay awake for her husband.

Loki checked his watch, noting it was well past eleven. He had orders to send Alicia to bed about now, but he wasn't keen on letting her stay down the hall alone, not when almost everyone was here.

Picking up the iPad Atticus had left before he went downstairs, Loki brought up the security system, scrolling through each camera view with a critical eye, making sure nothing was moving that shouldn't be. There was an alarm set up in case of a property breach, but when a man could only guess what kind of tech equipment Dominic had at his disposal, Loki refused to leave anything to chance.

All clear, he noted.

"All right, it's time for a certain someone to go to bed," he announced, biting the bullet. He saw Connie lift her head to smirk at him before she resumed her conversation.

Some help she was.

"Alicia," he said darkly when she ignored him. "You know your nighttime routine; Atticus told me you do, and that you're capable of doing it all yourself. Get up, go see to your business, and come back in your pajamas."

Narrowed blue eyes slid his way. "No."

For a woman who'd so eloquently stated her adult opinion earlier, she was proving what a brat her Little could be. Atticus

had the patience of a saint or six to handle her when she was in this frame of mind.

Loki, not so much.

“I’m not asking, little girl. Up, now, or you’ll be crying for your Daddy when you finally get into bed.”

Her mouth dropped open, her eyes widening. “Daddy wouldn’t let you do that.”

“I have his permission,” he fired back smoothly, casually examining his fingernails. “I believe he said I was free to use my hand, or that if you were a very naughty girl, there’s a paddle in the nightstand drawer by your bed.”

Her gasp was one of betrayal.

“You’ve got five minutes to do what you need to, then I want you back in here, ready for bed. I don’t care which one you choose to sleep in, but you *will* be in one, asleep, when Atticus gets done with work.” Loki jabbed his finger toward the door. “I’m not afraid to use the paddle.”

Oh, she wanted to argue. The conflict in her eyes told him she was dying to shoot some backchat his way, but her apprehension of the consequences was holding her tongue. The paddle wouldn’t scare her, not unless it was wielded by her Daddy, but Loki was an unknown quantity in her world.

“Daddy wouldn’t—”

“Daddy did. Now go.” For added impact, he slapped his palm against his thigh with a smack loud enough to make her jump.

Go, she did. Her squeak of alarm evolved into disgruntled mutters as she shoved herself out of her seat and stalked past the couch, kicking sulkily at thin air. She glared at him when he caught her by the arm.

“If you slam the door when you go out and wake Anarchy,” he warned, “the paddle will be upgraded to a cane, and the sadist will be the one using it.”

Mute, she nodded, then hurried off when he released her arm.

The door opened and closed with barely more than a click.

“That was diplomatically done,” Myna commented as she slipped onto the couch beside him. Her eyes were shadowed and heavy, the green muted with fatigue, but she still gave him a smile. “Alicia isn’t one who takes orders easily, not without a lot of sass. She once gave me an earful of annoyed gibberish that lasted half an hour, because her session plan included taking three steps unaided.”

“I don’t doubt it. Did she do it?”

“In less time than the gibberish.”

Displeased with the distance she was putting between them, Loki arched an eyebrow at her. “Have things changed so much since this morning, little songbird? I seem to remember us being a lot closer than this, and you kissing me as though it was Christmas again.”

“Doing more than kissing,” she replied, half to herself. “Was it a mistake?”

Ouch, that dug in deeper than he expected. Frowning, he tilted his head. “Why would it be a mistake? Aside from the

fact we're two consenting adults, we did nothing wrong. Personally, I'm hoping it was a step in the right direction."

"Just because we had sex, and I sat your lap for a brief period of time this morning doesn't mean—"

"Yes, it does. This morning wasn't an accident, Myna, or a one-off romp between the sheets. It was the beginning of us, the fresh start of the beautiful thing I came so close to ruining." He patted his thighs in invitation. "I don't like you sitting all the way over there."

"There's literally twelve inches between us."

"Just out of reach of my cock." He rolled his eyes at her. "Don't you think life is too short to be quibbling over this? Come sit on my lap so I can hold you after a shit day."

"Your cock got us into this mess," she grumbled, shuffling across the seat.

No, that wasn't good enough, he thought as their arms brushed. "Would you like me to get Alicia's paddle? I made a request, Myna."

"Not my Dom," she retorted in a sweet tone, "and request implies a choice."

"Should I make it an order?"

She patted his leg amiably. "You can do what you like, Loki. I'm going to bed."

He approved of her decision, even if it was evasive. She needed rest as much as Archie. Instead of yanking her where he wanted her, he skimmed his fingertips over her pale cheek,

across her lips. “Tomorrow will be a better day. Go claim your bed, songbird. I’ll be right here.”

Myna closed her eyes for a moment, exhaling slowly. “Why do you have to be so sweet sometimes? Keep poking at me so I can tell you to fuck off and feel justified about it.”

“Because you’re too damn tired to have any fun sparring with.” Loki bent and whispered a kiss over her cheek, then her mouth. Her skin was soft and warm, reminding him how she’d felt that morning as they moved beneath the sheets. “I’ll come and tuck you in once Atticus and the others return.”

With a delicate yawn, she turned her face against his shoulder and nuzzled at him. “Bed’s too far away. I’ll just rest here for a few minutes and watch Jon Snow do his thing. Maybe dream of him a bit.” A cheeky smile tweaked her mouth. “Or a lot.”

“I’d rather you dream of me.”

“Nearly the same,” she mumbled sleepily. “Got the same eyes. Just need to grow the beard and your hair.”

Preening a little at the idea she was comparing him to such a handsome and rugged character, Loki snorted at himself. He was no bastard raised in the wilderness, but if that’s how she saw him, he wasn’t about to dissuade her of that notion.

He shifted carefully, wrapping an arm around her back and letting her settle against him in whatever way made her comfortable, before he checked the security cameras again.

An hour later, when the rest of the group came in, Alicia was cuddled up with Connie in one bed, and Myna was

sprawled on top of him, her cheek smushed against his heart and her hand clutching his arm.

For a moment, everything was right in his world.

Within a week, he was pulling his hair out.

Communal living was not what hippies made it out to be, and after seven days of cohabitating with his friends, Loki was positive nothing on this earth would ever persuade him that human beings were herd animals.

Alicia was the daily six a.m. wake-up call, bouncing into the room as though she'd spent all night drinking soda in her sleep. Generally, she beelined for Connie and Thane first, although Siera and her guys had been targeted for the honor a couple of times, to Wyatt's dismay.

From there, she made her way around the room, doing her best Tigger on speed impression, summoning everyone for breakfast that she'd lovingly prepared.

The only problem was, her cooking skills were sadly lacking, resulting in several meals including raw bacon, blackened eggs, and toast that was either barely toasted or barbequed.

Her heart was in the right place, but her cooking abilities were somewhere on the dark side of the moon.

Then, there were the hormones pinging between the three expectant ladies. It seemed to Loki that their emotions were syncing on some kind of internal, baby-driven Bluetooth only they possessed. If one cried, they all cried. If one got angry, well hell, take cover because they united into a collective rage.

And as for snacks...

Liam, Braun, and Saul all had psychological scars from attempting to raid the snack cupboard when they thought the women weren't around. Anarchy had all but scalped Saul and Liam while lecturing them, then proceeded to scarf down an entire pack of cookies in front of them; Myna, on the other hand—his sweet, calm, sensitive Myna—had caught Braun with his fingers in the jellybean jar, yanked his prize away from him, and cradled it as she cried until she was almost sick.

Caera was, so far, the least aggressive of the three.

Privacy in such intimate quarters was an issue, to a degree. All of them, with the exception of Sierra, had extensive experience with public scening. Hell, he'd slept with Myna less than an arm's span away from their friends. But it was definitely a new page in his book to be in a room full of Doms trying to keep their subs quiet in the dark.

"We're going, Jasper."

The sadist simply raised his eyebrow at his kitten before taking a bite of today's extra-crunchy toast. He barely contained a wince, chewing carefully as Alicia beamed at him, obviously pleased he was 'enjoying' her latest attempt at gastronomic homicide. "Lizzie is welcome to come here for the meeting, Archie. We've discussed this, numerous times."

"It's a *social* meeting," Anarchy retorted, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "No offense to Caera and Myna, but we as a threesome are pretty much socialized to the max. The whole point of these mornings is to go and make new friends and share the dirty little details of what it's like to carry another human being around in our bodies."

“It’s not safe.”

Loki bit his tongue when the feisty blonde growled under her breath. These disagreements were all fun and games until someone got stabbed with a fork.

“Connie’s still going to work, as is Loki. Atticus has you and the rest of the lone rangers downstairs at all hours of the day while we’re twiddling our thumbs up here. Surely Att can spare one big, strong man with a gun for a couple of hours?” A thoughtful look crossed her pretty face. “Fuck it, just give me a gun. I won’t hesitate to pop those assholes off one by one.”

Alicia grinned, pointing her index fingers at Wyatt with her thumbs stuck up and, with a series of *pop-pop-pops* pretended to shoot him. In Little mode, she didn’t consider the repercussions of her game or take into account the horrors they’d all witnessed on the night the Alpha team died.

Frazzled around the edges already, Wyatt jumped, spilling his coffee when it was an inch from his mouth. He slammed his fist down on the table, teeth bared in a snarl. “*Goddamn it, Alicia!*”

Sierra’s toast plopped preserve-side down on her plate as she instinctively hunched her shoulders. Across the table, Caera mimicked the movement. Alicia went deathly white, freezing in place, all her happy innocence dying away inch by inch.

Fuck, if Wyatt lost his temper with the princess, Atticus might consider lopping off his head and sitting it on a spike at the front door. That vivid image flicked into his mind at the same time he realized he’d been watching entirely too many episodes of *Game of Thrones* this past week.

“Lisha, sweetheart.” Loki stepped smoothly into the fray, aware of the eyes on him. “These pancakes are delicious.” A complete and utter lie, but a necessary one. “Would you mind getting me some more?”

Her eyes jerked toward him. “M-more?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“I-I’ll have to m-make some,” she stuttered, her eyes darting over to Wyatt.

“Even better,” he said gently. “Nothing like a yummy pancake straight from the skillet, right?” When she hesitated, he added, “Go on, sweetheart. Take your time, everything’s fine.”

She scurried as fast as she could around the counter to the farthest end of the kitchen.

“Sierra, Caera,” Loki continued in the same conversational tone, “why don’t you two go and give her a hand?”

He hadn’t even finished his sentence before their chairs scraped back in unison. When they were safely in the kitchen, he glanced at Jasper, noting the fierce gleam of anger in the sadist’s eyes, then rose and hauled Wyatt clean off his stool, using the front of his sweatshirt as a handle.

“I’m not much of a fighter unless I’m pushed,” he snapped, keeping his voice low even as a growl rumbled in his chest. “We don’t scare submissives around here with violence, Wyatt. There’s a goddamn line between dominance and being an asshole, and you just crossed it. If I ever see you intimidate one of the girls—*any* of them—that way again, I’ll put your fucking head through the wall. Do you understand me?”

“She—”

“She’s a Little, you idiot. It’s her happy place when things go to shit. Alicia, Sierra, and Caera all have history with physical and mental violence. As the Doms in this clusterfuck, it’s our job to make sure they feel safe, not terrify them because you’re fucking spooked.”

“Come on, Loki, you watched the same shit I did. You can’t tell me you’re not on edge.”

“If I am, it’s my responsibility not to let that filter down to the girls. Do you think *they* aren’t terrified? The worst we’d get is a bullet to the head, maybe some torture beforehand.” Loki braced himself against the punch of unease that settled in his gut. “Yeah, it would be bad. But in my eyes, it’s better than being raped and impregnated by that maniac, being tested on by the crazy scientist wife, and having a baby taken away seconds after it’s out of the fucking womb.”

Wyatt closed his eyes and took a breath. “I’ll apologize.”

“Damn straight you will, to all three of them.” Giving him a quick shake, Loki shoved him back onto the stool without too much force. “If I were you, I’d brace yourself for a fist to the face, regardless. I doubt Liam and Saul will hit you, but Atticus is a bloodhound when it comes to his princess. He’ll know something is wrong, and he’ll ferret it out of her. Just be thankful he wasn’t here to see this happen.”

“Maybe you should deck him, Loki,” Anarchy suggested, glowering at Wyatt. She waved off Jasper’s hand, then shrugged nonchalantly. “Just saying. If you’ve already given him a black eye, Atticus might not be inclined to knock his head off his shoulders.”

“When will you learn how to de-escalate a situation, kitten?”

“Probably when *someone* learns he can’t treat women like shit for the rest of his life, just because it makes him feel like a man,” she scoffed in disgust. “I’ve got bigger balls than he has. Don’t see me whining like a bitch and ducking for cover every time someone says boo.”

“You haven’t seen what they did to those guys,” Wyatt said slowly, swallowing hard.

The way Archie seemed to freeze in place caught Loki’s attention, at the same time it snagged Jasper’s. Big brown eyes wide, she avoided meeting anyone’s gaze, looking at anything but the men.

Oh, this should be good. Anticipating one hell of a show, Loki meandered back to his seat as the princess and her friends returned to the table, bearing a plate of misshapen, possibly raw pancakes on a plate.

“Thank you, sweetheart, they look...amazing,” he murmured, taking more pleasure from the bright, beaming smile Alicia gave him than he did from the smell of the food. “Why don’t you three go and watch some cartoons?”

Ever the cartoon aficionado, Lisha didn’t take much persuading, skipping away as she giggled with Sierra.

Caera paused, eyeing up the situation with a worried frown. Her eyes darted from Wyatt to Jasper, then to Archie. When they settled on her half-brother, she gulped. “Is there going to be shouting?”

Judging by how the sadist was assessing his sub, there was going to be more than just shouting. Jasper's jaw was tight enough to snap, and his eyes—those pale, icy blues—were blazing.

“Go cover your ears, Caera. Archie's a big girl, she can handle her husband.”

Somehow, Jasper held his temper until his sister was clear of the kitchen. All those years of being trained to control himself were coming in useful. “Is there something you would like to tell me, Anarchy?”

Her lips pursed. “No?”

Loki winced. Not the best path to walk when her Dom was at the forefront. Personally, he'd have come clean without the evasions, because pregnant or not, Archie was going to feel the wrath of her husband and Dominant combined.

“Did you hack into Atticus' system?”

“I didn't hack into anything,” she snapped. “Firstly, I have access to the system as part of my *job*.”

“A job you're currently on leave from,” Jasper reminded her tersely.

“*Secondly*,” she continued, ignoring him, “it's not my fault the live feed was saved on that system. The tech boys always record mission feeds so they can be analyzed at a later date, per Att's orders. The team like...liked,” she corrected somberly, “to watch them, study them for mistakes and ways to improve.”

“You were specifically told not to log into the work computers. *I* told you—”

“I’m as much a part of this as you, Jasper. The stakes are higher,” she admitted, caressing the bump which Loki estimated to be half the size again of Myna’s, “but this isn’t any different than the night I killed a man with a goddamn truck. Zach and the guys were my friends.” Her voice cracked. “Your father is going to curse the day he set his sights on us if I ever meet him. What he did to them, I’ll do to him, tenfold.”

Quick as one of his whips, Jasper lashed out and snagged her by the loose ponytail dangling down her back. Wrapping the gold tail around his wrist until she yelped, he leaned in close, eyes hot and dangerous.

Loki was surprised steam wasn’t coming from his ears.

“There isn’t a single excuse for this that is going to save you from a punishment. When I tell you not to do something, it’s for a fucking reason. I didn’t want that shit in your head, Anarchy. Do you think I don’t know what it will do to you? How you stew over things, how it’ll poison you?” He yanked on her scalp until tears came to her eyes, yet she didn’t struggle. “How could you be so stupid? Are Erik and Gerald not enough to fuel your nightmares anymore?”

She arched her neck to alleviate the pressure on her hair, but her eyes were alive with fire. “I’m not the only one who wakes screaming, Sir.”

“I should be.” Jasper closed his eyes, hissing out a breath between clenched teeth. “When naughty kittens claw the furniture, they get those claws removed. No tech for a month, Archie. You’re banned from using a computer. Once one of the boys has stripped your phone of everything but the essentials, you can have that in case of an emergency.”

“Taking my TV privileges too, Daddy?” She moaned softly, her pride and masochistic urges too strong to ask him for mercy.

“Don’t tempt me.” He began to untwist her hair. “Tonight, you’re sitting down with Connie for a session.”

“No. I’m not.”

“You’ll do as I tell you, for once in your life.”

“No,” she repeated, just as firmly, “I won’t. Because a session with Connie means dropping all this shit in her lap, too. She’s thorough, Jasper. She makes sure she gets all the damn details. Do you really want me to add fuel to her nightmares as well? Spread the sickness through the group? Hell, maybe we should just broadcast the damn recording for everyone to see and leave nothing to the imagination.”

“Fuck.” He bit the word off.

A nasty little predicament, Loki thought, one he wouldn’t like to be in. A Dom’s nature was to do whatever needed to be done for his sub’s health and wellbeing, but in this case, there was no way to do that without compromising someone else.

“Talk to one of the Masters,” Wyatt suggested awkwardly, lifting a shoulder when Jasper’s cold gaze turned on him. “What? It’s the only logical option left. None of the other women should be subjected to the contents of that video, but all the Masters are privy to the details.” He smirked, an edge of his usual cockiness returning. “Loki would be a good bet. Nothing seems to faze him.”

Oh, you asshole. The thought lanced through his head, almost spilling from his mouth. The last thing he needed right

now was playing shrink to a pregnant woman. Didn't he have enough on his plate with Myna? "We've established that Archie has more balls than you, Wyatt. Perhaps if she pushes them in your face often enough, they'll rub off on you."

"Jesus Christ, can we just stop this? How the hell have we gone from going to a maternity social group to fucking therapy?" Shaking her hair free from Jasper's lingering touch, Archie pulled the band off and ran her fingers through the golden locks. "No therapy, Jasper. I don't need it."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"No, you won't. There's an entire calamity waiting to drop on us like an anvil; therapy can wait until after the fallout, whatever that might be." Standing slowly, she kissed his cheek. "I need to pee. When you ask Atticus about sending a guy with us to the clinic, can you drop a visit to Avalon into the conversation? You really need to beat something, Sir, and my ass is feeling neglected."

They stared at her as she walked away.

"Such marvelous control you have over your sub, J. Was marriage the final stroke which severed your balls, or did you lose them somewhere else?"

Jasper shot Loki a death glare. "Myna's wearing yours as earrings, brother."

Rolling his eyes, Wyatt groaned. "While you two are complimenting each other's testicles or lack thereof, you do realize that Anarchy is heading straight to Atticus's office to make her demands, right?"

The sadist growled. "She wouldn't dare."

“Ninety-nine percent sure she would.”

An intense moment of silence followed, then Jasper smacked his palm on the table. He stood, brows drawn together in a frown. “Clear your evening. We’re going to Avalon tonight, even if we have an armed fucking guard.”

Loki chuckled as his friend stomped off after his sub.

Anarchy, one; Jasper, zero.

Chapter Eight

When Atticus pulled strings, he pulled them all.

Avalon's security measures were three times more stringent than what Myna remembered. On top of the upgraded log-in system, the club was peppered with undercover agents Atticus had handpicked that afternoon from the reinforcements he'd brought in from one of his friendlier rivals.

Any new attendees with less than a month's membership to the club had been heavily screened. CCTV cameras were guarding the outside perimeter, and some of those undercover agents were staked out in a nondescript vehicle in the parking lot.

A lot of effort had gone into organizing a family outing to the club, but it was worth it.

She missed the glitter of Christmas ornaments and tinsel, the sparkle of fairy lights and the humorously rude decorations. But the bones of the club were as strong as before, wood gleaming beneath the lights despite the mess of construction in the next barn. Glasses shone behind the bar along with the fancy bottles of alcohol displayed on the shelves behind where the unfamiliar new bartender, Zeke, was giving Liam a helping hand.

Tired, but satisfied with her day, Myna leaned against Loki's shoulder as she searched the social area for their friends. Her afternoon hadn't been wasted; she'd spent a quiet couple of hours kneading and manipulating Thane's body, healing the hurts and strengthening his weak points.

Because he was a good boy, he'd been doing the exercises she'd given him, and she'd noticed a slight but definite improvement.

The highlight of her day, however, was finding Wyatt sprawled on his ass in the hallway with Atticus looming over him like some dark, dangerous fallen angel. The black eye and bloody nose he'd sported were apparently well deserved, if Anarchy's intel was true.

He wasn't a bad guy, Myna mused as her thoughts drifted, but he was an ass.

"How long until renovations are complete, Braun?" Saul asked, idly toying with Caera's hair. The pale blonde strands, not quite as starkly white as Jasper's, threaded effortlessly through his fingers like silk.

"A month ago." The Irishman's reply was terse. "One of the goddamn crews walked out, which set us behind schedule until we found a replacement. A couple of deliveries went astray. Liam and the crew foreman have had some belting arguments about the quality of some of the work, which meant it had to be redone. I'm hoping it will all be finished by July, no later than early August."

"Heads will roll if it's not," Bodie added, trying not to smile. She glanced down at her arms as if expecting to see Declan in them, her expression turning troubled as she remembered that her son was in the capable hands of Sonic, one of Atticus's team. "It's making you go gray, Sir."

"Fifty shades of," Loki jumped in, laughing at the sheer horror on Braun's face. "A couple more weeks, and you'll be joining the silver fox club with our boy, Zeke."

Myna perked up as she finally saw Connie and Sierra winding through the kinksters gathered around the edges of the seating pit, each carrying a tray loaded with drinks. Without thinking, she said, “Silver foxes are fucking hot. Zeke is a prime example. All those variants of gray from dark to pale silver. Throw in a matching beard and...” Fanning herself with her hand, she blew out a breath as her libido surged. “Excuse me. It’s getting warm in here.”

“I know that look,” Jasper commented, patting Archie’s leg. “This one becomes insatiable. She gets a glint in her eye, a little manic, and starts rubbing all over me like a cat.”

Without a hint of embarrassment, Archie’s lips curved. “When I rub hard enough, this cat gets the cream.”

A chorus of groans echoed back at her, while Caera’s pale skin flamed.

“I never really got the perpetually horny experience,” Bodie lamented. “Being pregnant with Declan was something else altogether. All the drugs, all the stress...sex wasn’t really factored into the equation.”

“Surviving was,” Braun rumbled. “Rocking my son to sleep every night and kissing you whenever I get the chance makes up for a few months of keeping my dick to myself, darling.”

Sierra bobbed her tray in surprise, almost dropping the drinks into Atticus’s lap. Only his quick thinking and the support of his hands beneath hers spared him from a drenching. “Sorry! Sorry, Master Atticus!”

“It’s fine, sweetheart. Are these for me?”

“I...well, not all of them,” she blurted, flustered. The glasses clinked together as she struggled to contain her nerves. “The, ah...the, ah...juice is for Lisha.” Her eyes lowered to the drinks. “The beer?”

“Definitely *not* for Alicia.” With a wink, Atticus plucked the glasses from her tray. “Thank you, Sierra. Liam will be very proud.”

Blushing with shy pleasure, she shuffled around to Saul.

It was a sweet moment, one Myna thought she'd appreciate more when her core wasn't throbbing with insistent need. Trying not to draw attention to herself, she rolled her hips lightly, praying the urge would pass or for an orgasm to grant some relief.

Just a little relief.

“So, I spoke with Lizzie this afternoon,” Anarchy announced as the last of the drinks were delivered. Once Sierra and Connie were comfortable next to their Doms, she took Jasper's hand in hers. “Much to Master Meanie's disgust, we've come to an *arrangement*. Lizzie is going to tighten the security at the clinic in time for next week's meeting. Now that we have a small battalion of trained professional killers on hire, Master Logical has agreed to provide us with a driver and some guards.”

“I get who Master Meanie is,” Wyatt jumped in, curling his arm around Sierra's shoulders as she snuggled into him. “Is Master Logical his alter ego?”

Archie snorted. “Master Meanie's alter ego is Supreme Sadist. He only comes out when provoked. Exhibit A,” she

said, with a flourish of her hand directing attention to Jasper's deadpan expression. "Master Logical is Atticus. Though he doesn't like it, he understands that keeping three hormonal women in isolation might cause a few problems."

"He's sitting right here," the Daddy Dom added dryly.

"Temper tantrums, excessive sass, relentless crying jags... the list, of course, goes on. Three first-time mommies need more than the internet and the occasional visit from Lizzie as resources." She stifled an expected yawn. "The guards will be with us until we get to the clinic. They'll do a sweep through the building, then stand watch on the perimeter. I've... appropriated the names of the other attending women from her files, but the tech boys are doing the background checks for me because Master Meanie stole my privileges."

Myna bit her lip, clenching down on emptiness. If she squeezed her inner muscles hard and imagined Loki's thick cock with its pretty piercings stretching her open, she could *almost* reach the pinnacle.

"You *lost* your tech privileges," Jasper reminded her.

She grunted. "We'll leave the house at ten a.m. There should be plenty of time to get to the clinic, depending on traffic. The meeting runs anywhere from an hour to two, so we'll be home by early afternoon."

"Perhaps you should promote Anarchy to head of tactical planning, Att." Thane scratched his jaw idly.

Myna was pleased to see he was back in his comfort zone once again. The more sessions he had, and with the progress

he made during the exercises he did in between, he would find that he spent more time in that zone than in pain.

“Are you okay?” Loki murmured in her ear.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Need me to help?”

It was going to pass, she thought. If she just sat still and ignored the heat gathering between her legs, the sweat dampening her hairline, then it would all go away. Peanut was playing havoc with her bodily functions. “Nuh-uh.”

His chuckle was dark, shooting straight to the heart of her longing. “Okay then, if you’re sure. But I doubt humping the seat like it’s a Sybian is going to give you what you’re craving.”

She wasn’t *that* desperate, jeez. Yet her hips were riding the firm seat, just as he said. Grinding down in an effort to stimulate herself.

“Are you in, Myna?” Anarchy asked.

Pain? Discomfort? Dire straits?

“Ah...”

“Maternity meeting,” her friend reminded her in exasperation. “Non-caffeinated beverages. Cookies. Friendly advice. No men.”

Disapproval throbbed like a heartbeat, emanating from every Master in the pit. Jasper seemed to be holding his tongue, barely, while Saul was giving off distinct *pick up the sub and hide her* vibes.

Loki bristled.

“Yeah, sure.” God, he smelled good. Why the hell did he have to smell so fucking good? Myna dipped her head and sniffed his shoulder. Her moan was low and beseeching as the scent of him aroused her. It wasn’t even anything special, just bodywash and a splash of really sexy deodorant. “Whatever.”

“Take pity on your girl, Loki.” Braun shot her a sympathetic smile. “She’s gonna spontaneously combust in a minute, and cleaning bodily fluids out of the upholstery is a bitch.”

His laugh was devious, and a little black at the edges. “My little songbird is in a predicament.” He tugged on the ends of her hair, rousing more *fuck me* signals to life. “She’s adamant I’m not her Dom. Tells me so every chance she gets. But I’ve made it damn clear to every guy in here that’s she’s mine, so she won’t find any help from that quarter.”

She jerked back. “What?”

“Mine,” he replied simply. “I’ve been patient with you, Myna. I’ve apologized, I’ve spent every night for the last week with you sprawled on top of me, rubbing your pussy against my thigh,” he added in a murmur meant for her ears only. “We had a second taste of each other, and I want more, Myna. I want it all. But before I touch you again, before I kiss and lick and suck every inch of your body again, you need to decide if you are going to be *mine*.”

Licking and kissing and sucking, oh my. His mouth on her pussy would certainly alleviate the ache. Especially if he did that thing with his tongue that made her insides clench until they cramped...

“Are you done being a dick, Sir?” she asked sweetly. “A submissive is for life, not just for Christmas.”

Feminine instincts went wild as he grabbed her, spinning her around as he lifted her to straddle his legs. Nose to nose, she stared at him, licking her lips in an unconscious plea for him to do the same.

“That’s five strokes of a flogger on your greedy little cunt, Myna. Did you forget your manners while you were back in D.C.?” One hand on her hip, holding her steady, he traced a fingertip over her mouth. “Let me prove myself, if I haven’t already. You forgave me, now trust me. Give me a chance to be your Dom, your boyfriend, a father to our boy.”

Oh, he was hard. The thick, rigid bulge of his cock pushed against the front of his pants, providing the perfect ridge for her to rock on. The thin cotton of her borrowed maternity pants—*thanks, Peanut*—offered little in the way of an effective barrier.

She had forgiven him, she couldn’t deny that, but trust was a sticky issue for her. Her heart was still tender; opening it to him again was like trying to cross a deadly chasm with only fragile stepping stones for a path.

But he was...different. Since her return to Phoenix, his whole demeanor was more mature. One scoop playboy and a whole tub of responsible dominance.

“If you break my heart again, there’s nowhere left for us to go. I mean it, Loki. Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, shame on you. Fool me three times, and I’m gone.”

“We won’t need a third chance, Myna. I’m not fucking this up again.”

His tone was even, his belief clear. In his mind, there was nothing that could derail them, no bumps in the road or blocks across the highway to a bright and happy future.

It must be nice to have that kind of confidence.

If he believed it, why shouldn’t she have some faith? The complete devastation of her life in D.C. was surely over and done with now, right? All she had left was Peanut, and she would tear asunder anything or anyone who even thought about taking him from her.

Myna blew out a slow breath. Being alone forever, even in the company of friends, wasn’t how she wanted to spend the next thirty, forty years. She certainly didn’t want to raise a child that way, or for her son to be shuttled between her and Loki throughout his childhood.

“Will you be my Dominant, Master Loki?”

“Can I get a cherry with that?”

A cherry? Baffled, she stared at him, wondering what cherries had to do with the conversation. After a moment, an old saying her grandmother used to say came to mind: *pretty please, with a cherry on top*. “Please, Sir. Please will you be my Dom?”

Brown eyes simmered with pride and relief, but the steel core of him glinted beneath. He searched her face intently, then inclined his head. “Can’t think of a better answer than yes, pretty sub. But I will warn you, if I ever hear *not my Dom* from this mouth again, I’m tattooing it on your ass.”

“That’s not much of deterrent, Sir.”

“On the sit spot,” he elaborated slowly. “The perfect target for a cane whenever you throw those words at me.”

Oh shit. She wasn’t opposed to tattoos at all, she found them ridiculously sexy—the ones that weren’t a train wreck. But she was dubious about her first being those three words, etched into a particularly tender spot. The problem was, she’d thought—and said them to his face—so often since she’d come back, that it was kind of a habit now. “I might have to request a strike three defense on that, Sir.”

He smirked. “Need to break the habit, don’t you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“All right, then. Three strikes, it is.”

He kissed her soundly, sealing the deal, and she felt herself melting. The hormonal surge was fading, losing some of the frantic desperation, but it didn’t matter. When it came to Loki, their chemistry ignited with a whisper.

“Still in the mood to play, sub?” he asked, nipping at her bottom lip sharply.

“Same rules as before, Master Loki?”

“For now, if you’re happy with them, so am I. We’ll go through them again later and change whatever we need to.” Nuzzling at her throat, he groaned. “Come with me. I’ve dreamed of seeing you in my cuffs again.”

Yes, please. She remembered the weight of them, the security they brought. When she’d been floundering on the edge of knowing who she was, *what* she was, the wide leather

cuffs with creamy fleece linings had anchored her on one side of the line.

Trying to be a Domme had caused her nothing but pain.

Those cuffs, a symbol of her submission, delivered peace.

She felt clumsy when he set her on her feet, lightheaded and weak-kneed. She clutched his hand as he rose, excusing them to their friends among a hail of catcalls and cheers that siphoned color into her cheeks.

Following him from the seating pit required no thought, just one foot after the other. Her stomach fluttered with nervous butterflies, each step sending them wild. Anticipation and anxiety merging into one twisted beast.

Her body was altering on a daily basis. Lizzie was still critical of her weight but pleased that it was creeping back up to a healthy level. Her breasts were fuller, infinitely more sensitive, and there were a few pale stretchmarks beginning to make themselves known.

Loki saw her mostly undressed every day, so it wasn't going to be too much of a shock. She wore her panties and bra to bed usually, acknowledging the fact they didn't have too much privacy at the moment. Their reunion beneath the sheets hadn't exposed either of them, certainly not to the extent she was about to be bared.

They crossed into the second barn.

Her eyes widened as she took in the internal scaffolding, the extreme changes being made to what she considered the main hub of the club. Dust sheets were tossed over some of the

equipment around the edges of the room, and there were caution signs everywhere.

“Ah...is it safe to be in here?”

“We wouldn’t be in here if it wasn’t.” Loki paused, gesturing to the other couples already playing. “The construction crews ensure everything is secure before they leave, and Liam triple-checks the place once they’re gone for the night. Health and safety regulations state that no one should approach or play with anything that is cordoned off, so there’s been a few complaints about not being able to use the scaffolding for suspension play.”

Myna laughed, imagining the metal framework being decorated by numerous submissive swaddled in artful ropes, dangling like pretty ornaments from the bars. Someone should turn that into an art display in a gallery, showcasing the beauty of Shibari. “It would certainly be a focal point.”

“It might even bring down the house.” He directed her attention to the newly constructed second floor above their head. “Braun and Liam thought expanding upwards was smarter than moving outwards.”

“I hate to be Mistress of the obvious, Sir, but there aren’t any stairs.”

“They’ll be one of the last things to be finished, aside from the detail work. Braun felt that putting them in before the upstairs was deemed completely safe was lending temptation to a bunch of nosy kinksters. The crew uses a set of portable rolling ladders when they’re working.” He pointed to the edge of the huge platform. “All this will be surrounded by

bannisters to prevent accidents. The architect who drew up the plans had some good ideas.”

The bones of it were there, just waiting to be fleshed out. Currently, it looked roughshod and raw, but she thought she could see how it would look in the end—as impressive as the rest of the club. “Speaking of good ideas, I hope you’ve got one in mind for playing with Jackson Junior in tow.”

“I have a couple,” he informed her with a wicked smile. “Luckily for us, Liam thought ahead and, taking into consideration the number of Avalon submissives in various stages of pregnancy, went on a spending spree to provide safe, comfortable equipment.”

“Oh God, Sierra’s not pregnant as well, is she?”

He laughed. “We’d know about it if she was. That sweetheart couldn’t keep a secret from Liam if her life depended on it, and Wyatt would likely be throwing a fit. Besides, they’ve only been together a few months.”

Myna cleared her throat and tapped a finger on her stomach.

“Hmmm. This is different. This,” he said, turning into her and resting his palms against her bump, cradling it supportively, “is *our* sign that we’re meant to be. You know, aside from our chemistry, the way my heart does this crazy Irish jig whenever I see, smell, or kiss you...” He brushed his lips over hers. “All the other little signs that converge into one big *you’re mine* sign.”

Well, look at him, being all romantic and shit. “Maybe you just have gas.”

The punishing bite he gave her lower lip smarted, but the pain ricocheted down to her clit, inciting a rush of adrenaline to fuel her simmering arousal.

“Maybe I’m in love,” he growled, deepening the kiss until she was ready to dissolve into a puddle at his feet. “Any preferences on how you want to play tonight?”

“Dealer’s choice, Sir.”

“Such trust. Think you can stand for a while? Flat feet, not tiptoes.”

Normally, she’d agree without hesitation, but her stamina had taken a sharp knock. The BDSM community took pride in communication and honesty, and she was now in possession of her very own Dom, which made her part of said community.

Properly, she thought in amazement. Not as a shadowy wraith lurking on the fringes, pretending to be a Domme so she could maintain some semblance of control over her life.

“I can’t guarantee how long, Sir.”

“We’ll see how you cope. Tonight isn’t about pushing your limits, Myna.”

“Just reasserting your dominance?” She flashed him a cheeky grin.

“Reconnecting,” he admonished, adding a wink to let her know she was right. Of course, he wouldn’t admit it out loud. “Without Saul and Caera in touching reach.”

“But that was *so* much fun.” Struggling to keep a straight face, she suggested, “Perhaps we should invite them in next time. A foursome might be interesting.”

She swore the noise he made was something out of a monster movie.

“Although all that metalwork in your cock would send Caera into a tailspin.”

Snagging her hand, Loki dragged her across to a vacant station, lifting her by the hips to set her on the low dais. “I don’t share what’s mine, songbird. Your mouth, your pussy, and your tight ass all belong to me. *Only* to me. Keep up with the sass and I’ll remind you how all that metalwork feels making an unexpected entry, right after I give you the five strikes I promised your cunt.”

Oooh, she’d hit a button. He was resorting to the crass language he only tended to use when his control was straining. How would he react if she pressed a little harder, wound him up to breaking point? She almost pursued that thought, until she remembered just how it felt to have that thick cock—piercings and all—rammed into her ass without warning.

So. Fucking. Good.

Oh yes, painful. So painful her mind had blanked out for a few seconds while her brain fought to process the source of her distress, even as her throat scorched with the barrage of curses she’d fired at him.

She licked her lips, wondering if she was strong enough to goad him into a repeat.

Loki chuckled darkly. “Oh, how could I forget? My pet is a little slut, isn’t she? Dirty talk and anal gets you worked up, makes this cunt weep for the only cock it’s ever going to know again.”

Pet. Jesus, he hadn't called her that since their first night of debauchery. It made her insides flutter with the memory until she was squirming in front of him.

"Yeah, that's right. All the bad words that turn off the good girls make Myna a horny little bitch." When she moaned, he inclined his head. "Dirty girls don't get to wear clothes. You have until I come back to strip, pet. No playing with yourself," he ordered sternly, arching his eyebrow. "The pleasure is mine."

"Everything's yours tonight," she snarked, her voice cracking slightly.

"Keep bratting, it just makes what's coming even sweeter. When you're naked, stand with your feet wide apart and your hands on the back of your neck. Think about what it's going to feel like having your pussy smacked before I fuck you raw." He trailed his fingers up her inner thigh. "Wring every last drop of cream from you before I fill you with my own."

Her knees almost buckled. Sheer force of will kept her upright.

Satisfaction gleamed in his eyes as he turned to walk away. "Strip, Myna. Now."

She was frozen for a moment, stunned by the change in him. For one of the youngest Masters in the club, he was a power unto himself. He hid it well beneath the easygoing playboy routine, but it was there in the cockiness of his stride, the confidence he carried through his shoulders and back.

The crack of a whip made her jump, bringing her out of her thoughts with a thud.

Hurriedly, she began taking off the shirt she'd borrowed from Loki, fumbling with the buttons. It was soft, the cotton well-worn, and she liked the way the size of it swamped her. His scent was embedded in the fabric, so it was akin to wearing a hug.

Her shoes and the maternity pants were next, followed by the plain bra and panties she wore beneath. A simple wardrobe that matched her simple existence. She really needed to find a job so she could afford the basics, like decent underwear.

Completely naked, she shuffled her feet apart as wide as she could, then linked her fingers across her nape. Taking a deep breath, she let her shoulders relax, and closed her eyes, welcoming the warm rush of submissiveness flowing through her.

Peace.

The calm, before the storm that was Loki, swept in to ruin her.

Time ticked past, sinking her further into that quiet headspace. She waited patiently, knowing he wouldn't leave her alone for all to see for long. His jealous streak was quite keen, a flash of green over calm waters.

"It seems like forever since I've seen you like this," his voice whispered in her ear from behind, the heat of his body against her back betraying his presence. "So beautiful and patient, obedient and willing." She jolted as he reached between her legs, dragging his fingers through her folds with a delighted grunt. "So responsive and wet. Is this for me, pet?"

The shiver running down her spine was delicious. “All for you, Sir.”

“Good girl. No more fighting the inevitable, okay?” He nipped her earlobe, but she didn’t flinch away from the prickle of pain. “Lower your arms, hold your hands out for me. No peeking.” He tsked, although she had no idea how he knew she’d opened her eyes.

Slowly, she brought her arms to her sides, missing the support of her fingers around her neck. She offered her hands as directed, tilting her head to follow his quiet steps around to her front.

His palms were warm as he cupped her wrist, then it was enveloped in fluff. Her hips rocked forward when the cuff tightened, fulfilling a need she hadn’t realized she’d been craving. She breathed out slowly, inhaled with fresh calm as the second cuff added weight to her other wrist.

I belong again.

“That’s it, pet. Let me take control. Arms above your head.”

They lifted of their own accord, and she sighed in relief when she sensed Loki reach over her to attach the D-rings to what she presumed were snap hooks. When chains jingled with her testing pull, she smiled. As promised, she was securely on the flats of her feet, but her body stretched delightfully toward the ceiling.

There was a vague tightness in her muscles, a slight ache that warned her she was out of shape. It would only get worse as the pregnancy continued and her playtime reduced, but

maybe one day, when Peanut was old enough to stay with a sitter for a few hours, she'd regain her fitness and flexibility.

Or at least have enough orgasms to think she had.

Something clunked down on the wood between her feet. Hands cupped her breasts, thumbs rasping over her nipples until she squirmed. They were full, heavy, sensitive enough that the heat of his skin sent tingles rippling through her.

More heat, wet this time, latched around her left nipple, teeth capturing the distended bud. He sucked, bringing her up onto her toes. The ache in her core sharpened, wrenching a moan from her throat.

“Keep making noises like that, dirty girl, and we'll be cutting this scene short.”

She bit her lip, stifling her next moan as her right nipple received his attention. Her pussy clamped down on emptiness, growing wetter. Begging silently to be filled, fucked, manhandled.

His lips popped free. “Still okay with standing, pet?”

“I'm good, Master Loki.”

“Think you can handle a spreader bar?”

Oh God. She'd be pinned open, completely at his mercy. Balanced by the spread of her legs and her hands above her head. It made sense; of course, it did. He wanted her pussy available, unhindered by her thighs, when he flogged it as promised.

Pride dug its heels in. “I can handle anything you throw at me, Sir.”

“A pity I can’t give you my worst, pet. One day,” he hummed thoughtfully. The direction of his voice changed; she envisioned him on his knees. “For now, we have a punishment to dole out, and then I’d like to see a little songbird fly. Singing sweet, orgasmic songs as she goes.”

Fingers curled around her ankle, stroking the small patch of skin they both knew drove her crazy. No bigger than the pad of his thumb, it was one of her carefully guarded erogenous zones, but Loki knew them all. “My singing voice is terrible.”

Slap. Her thigh stung from the quick, sharp blow. “Dirty little liar. That’s an extra two added to your pussy flogging, pet.”

A cuff slid around her left ankle, tightened, and a finger slid between the fleece and her skin. By the time the last restraint was in place, she was completely grounded in the moment, secure in the submissive headspace.

The spreader bar clicked twice.

“Nowhere to go now, pretty pet. All trussed up at my mercy.”

That was just fine with her.

Loki wondered if Braun would let him do an erotic photoshoot in the club. He had a friend who was a goddamn magician with a camera and, right now, all he wanted was a full-sized photo of his girl like this. Hell, he was tempted to have a smaller version inked on his back, or somewhere he could see it often, like his thigh.

She almost looked serene, her face relaxed and soft. Her breathing was slow, but it hitched every so often as she shifted her hips. A flush of arousal rose up her chest into her throat and cheeks, while her nipples were peaked and a slightly darker shade.

The long, lean length of her was stretched, not to the extreme, but simply enough to let her feel secure in his restraints. He'd let her flounder on her own for too long, left her to deal with so much she shouldn't have had to go through alone.

“Open your eyes, pet.”

The flush deepened, telling him she liked that name. Every time he used it, she gave him some indication, however minor, that *pet* meant something to her. She breathed in slowly, obeying him as she breathed out.

While her outward expression conveyed peace, her eyes belied the emotions bubbling inside her. The green was hot, desire blazing like wildfire in the depths.

“Fingers all okay? No numbness or tingling?”

“No, Sir. All extremities are alive and well.”

“Excellent. Tell me if that changes.” Loki perused the toys he'd laid out on a rolling table beside her, choosing between the three floggers. He had a fondness for the deerskin, but both the pearl string and rubber ones were new to him. “How do you think being flogged by pearls will feel, Myna? From a pussy's point of view.”

Her eyes slid down to where he stroked a fingertip along the shiny white balls lined along the dozen strands, widening

almost imperceptibly. “I wouldn’t know, Sir. I’m not sure I want to find out.”

“Guess.”

“Ah...like hailstone pelting me in a very tender place?”

He picked it up, running the unusual fronds through his fingers. Giving it a testing *thwap* against his palm, he barely contained a startled yelp as the pearls bit into his skin. Acting nonchalant, as though he hadn’t just seared his hand with a thousand bee stings, he nodded. “I think this particular toy belongs in Master Jasper’s toybox. I don’t like the idea of bruising all that lovely pink flesh.”

“Anarchy will thank you, I’m sure,” Myna muttered dryly.

“She’s a masochist; you, not so much.” Humming under his breath, he exchanged floggers, picking up the one with rubber strands. A quick slap across his tender palm told him it might be a bit too keen for what he planned to do *after* her punishment.

Still, he flicked it teasingly against the outside of her thigh, watching the muscles shiver with the sting. “You enjoy pain, on your own terms. It’s not something you crave, but you’ll take it when given. Like the night I fucked your ass without warning,” he mused, snapping the fronds across her ass cheek. “It was an accident, completely unexpected, but you didn’t cry or scream. There was some violent profanity, yet you didn’t panic or try to emasculate me for my mistake. Can you remember what you *did* do?”

“I-I asked you to wait.”

“Mmm-hmm.” He began to circle her slowly, snapping the tips of the flogger against random areas on her body. Never the same place twice, always moving. “What then?”

“I liked it.”

“I know.”

She hissed between her teeth, arching her hips to escape the sting of the flogger on her ass. For fun, he gave her another two on each buttock, enjoying her lusty whimper. “Sir.”

“Do you think I don’t know when my filthy little whore loves my cock in her ass?” He continued to pace around her. *Flick, flick, flick.* “You have tells, pet. I still dream about those muscles clamping down on me, milking the cum from my—”

Myna cried out silently, her body stiffening. He was willing to bet if he slid his fingers inside her, her pussy would squeeze them off with the strength of her orgasm.

“Did you just come without permission?” he demanded, smacking the underside of her breast gently. “Naughty, naughty girl. That’s another three added to your flogging.”

“I-I don’t know where that came from,” she whispered, turning shocked eyes to his. He saw the flare of wonder, of disbelief. “I’ve never done that before.”

“As much as I love watching you come, I’d advise you don’t do it again without permission.” In contrast to his dire words, Loki cupped her cheek and tipped her head back. “Ready for your punishment, pet, or should I tease you some more?”

The question almost caught her off guard. Almost, but not quite. She stumbled over the start of her answer, then

delicately cleared her throat. “That’s your prerogative, Master Loki.”

He smiled and kissed her, lingering for a few seconds longer than he planned. Her mouth was like candy, impossibly moreish. “It certainly is. I’ll be watching you carefully, Myna, but if you feel like you’re going to fall, use your safeword. Immediately.”

“Will you catch me, Sir?” she snarked, batting her eyelashes at him.

“Every single time.” Easing back, he reached up and checked the temperature of her fingers and the tightness of the cuffs. Satisfied, he crouched and did the same with her feet.

His eyes lingered on her pussy, right in front of him. The dark hairs covering her pubic mound were closely trimmed, pleasing him immensely. While he didn’t mind a woman being completely bare, he preferred that little sign that screamed woman.

Her folds were dark pink, arousal swelling the flesh. Juices glistened, making him desperate for a taste, but he knew if he set his mouth on her, all thoughts of reprimanding her would fly out the window. He’d spend all night on his knees, eating out her cunt until his tongue was numb.

Maybe he’d save that for later.

Rising, he tossed the rubber flogger onto the table, exchanging it for the deerskin. He slapped it rhythmically on his palm, getting reacquainted with the grip of the handle, the weight of the implement. It was like shaking hands with an old friend.

Resuming his circling pace, he rolled his wrist, making the fronds swing.

Myna's breath came faster, her muscles tensing in anticipation. He didn't disappoint, raining light blows across her back and shoulders, her chest and upper arms on the first few passes. The next few circles, he concentrated on her thighs, front and back, and her ass.

Nothing too hard, just enough of a slap between skin and flogger to lull her into complacency. He walked around and around, settling into a rhythm until every step he took was accompanied by a lick of the soft strands across her skin.

When her chin finally dropped to her chest, her surrender was complete.

“Good girl,” he murmured.

Step, *swish*. Step, *swish*.

Pausing behind her, barely breaking stride, he brought the flogger up between her legs from behind. A fast lash, striking her exposed pussy like a viper. He felt the fronds connect, heard them land on her wet flesh, before she jolted in surprise and choked on a cry.

It wasn't difficult to see the evidence of her arousal, not when it glistened on the deerskin beneath the lights.

“One down, nine to go.” He kept walking, slow and steady, swinging his toy nonchalantly. “I think my flogger is going to be dripping with your juices by the time we reach ten. Do good girls enjoy having their pussies whipped, pet?”

She moaned. “This one does, Sir.”

The flogger bit again, from the front this time. A fraction harder, just as accurate. This time, he had the distinct pleasure of watching the shock spark in her eyes, blossoming into dazed bliss. Pain might not be her drug of choice, but she wasn't turning down the hit.

Around and around he went, doling out her punishment in measured doses. His cock throbbed every time she made a noise, straining the front of his pants like a divining rod. But as much as he appreciated her at her finest, squirming in the restraints, he never stopped paying attention to the subtler signs.

The way her fingers and toes moved, the shiver of her leg muscles. Monitoring how quickly her heart was beating by gauging the visible pulse point in her throat. Judging whether the flicker of pain on her face was only the flogger, or the beginning of the end of their scene.

“Color, pet.” He hesitated before striking again, waiting for her answer.

Her breath hitched. “Can you do the last two quickly? Please?”

That wasn't the answer he was looking for. Lowering the flogger, Loki moved in front of her. “Red, yellow, or green, Myna?”

Eyes glassy, she licked her lips. “Green, Sir. I just need to come, really bad.”

He ran the tip of the flogger hilt along her jaw. “Really bad? What a predicament.”

“Don’t tease me,” she whined. “Everything’s hot and achy and swollen.”

Loki frowned, immediately reaching down to cup his hand over her pussy. He didn’t miss her quiet hiss of discomfort as his fingers stroked over her. Oh yes, his little songbird was in a pickle.

There was heat. Liquid arousal pooled in his fingers before he parted her distended labia, easing a single digit inside her. She squeezed down on him, trying to rock her hips for stimulation. “Two more, pet, then you can come as much as you like around my cock.”

“But your finger’s right *there*, Sir.”

“Let me remove that small temptation, then. We don’t want any more accidental orgasms, do we?” The last thing he wanted to do was leave snug, wet heaven, but she was spasming around him subtly enough to warn him she would climax imminently if he didn’t. “Do. Not. Come.”

The pitiful look she gave him played with his resolve, but he refused to cave into her unspoken demands. She’d been a faux Domme for too long if she’d forgotten that topping from the bottom was a brat move, one that potentially threatened the safety of her sit spot.

“Two more.” Stepping back, he chose his stance, standing to the side. Swinging the flogger until the fronds gathered smooth momentum, he lashed it between the vee of her thighs, following it quickly with the last, hardest blow of all.

Deerskin splatted audibly against her cunt, the solid *thwap* almost concealed by her keening scream. The flogger dropped

as her knees gave way, and he was there with an arm around her waist to hold her up.

It took seconds to free her cuffs from the chain, a few more to check her fingers. Adjusting his arm, he shifted so that his left palm pressed against her upper chest, fingers splayed for extra support as he urged her to lean forward. With his other hand, he unfastened his belt and zipper, shoving his pants awkwardly down his thighs.

Thank God for being commando.

Gripping his shaft, feeling his pulse surge through the thick vein feeding his erection, he dragged the pierced head up and down her wet slit. “Color?”

“Fuck colors,” she told him with a touch of fire in her tone. “Inside me. Now. Please.”

“Please what?”

“Please, *Sir*.” She ground herself against him, movement limited with her feet spread so far apart.

Loki obliged, notching his cock against her entrance and thrusting up in one deep drive. His groan melded with her shocked cry, and he fought to keep from losing his shit like an adolescent. She was insanely tight, impossibly wet, and so fucking responsive, she was turning him into a caveman.

Rutting her as powerfully as he could, ever mindful of the precious cargo she carried, he bit the inside of his cheek to stem the tingling already gathering at the bottom of his spine as her inner muscles seized, fluttering around his thick girth like wave after wave of kisses along his shaft.

Fingernails dug sharply into the forearm supporting her torso, adding another slash of pain to distract him. He slipped his other arm beneath her belly, hunching over her back to claim every inch of what belonged to him.

After a dozen frantic thrusts, the urgency calmed. Need thrummed in his blood, but his thrusts became slower, smoother, building a rhythm that nurtured the dying embers of her orgasm into more than just smoke and sparks.

“That’s it, pet. One more time.” Christ, was that his voice? It was at least an octave lower, thick and rough. “Give me a little bit more, songbird. Take all of me, take what you need.”

Her laugh was part gasp, part groan. “Death by orgasm. There are worse ways to go.”

“Not going to kill you, Myna. Just want to feel your cunt sucking on my dick like a lollipop...” He smirked when she jerked back on his cock, sinking down onto him to the root. “You and dirty talk. It’s my favorite game.”

“Bad man.” The nails in his arm became piercing. “Oh fuck, right there. Right there, right there, right fucking *there*.”

Loki didn’t change a thing. Speed, angle, rhythm. He slid his hand down to find her clit, pinching and teasing the rigid bud until a shudder rippled through her. As her chant echoed in his ears, he relaxed his tenuous control on his body, allowing his own orgasm to rise.

Myna shuddered again, vibrating around him, clamping down so tightly on his cock his brain blanked out for several blissful moments. He loved how fucking vocal she was, how

her cries mellowed into sated whimpers, leading him to find his own release before her pussy stopped milking him.

Breathing hard, he held her close for a few minutes more, letting the pulse of his cock fade. He felt her starting to go limp, cursing himself for pushing her beyond the limit of her stamina. Murmuring to her, he eased free, intending to lower her to the floor so he could get the spreader bar off and wrap a blanket around her.

“Keep hold of her, boy.”

Loki glanced up and found Zeke standing at the edge of the play area, a blanket under one arm. Voice quiet, he said, “Didn’t think you ventured into this area during work hours.”

The older man grinned at him. Rugged, weathered, the guy was probably the epitome of most women’s silver fox fantasies. He’d had a haircut recently, tidying up his thatch of thick gray hair. In his early fifties, Zeke wasn’t the oldest member of Avalon, but he seemed to know all the tricks about everything.

Bartending was less of a job to him and more of a social event. He offered advice along with drinks, broke up arguments with one cutting stare from sea mist-green eyes, and had a soft spot for the submissives.

Sierra was one of his favorites, and he made no qualms about defending the shy, bearded sub from some of the ruder members when Liam wasn’t in the vicinity. More than once, Loki had seen him take Wyatt down a peg or two for saying shit out of turn.

“I make a pass through here every now and then when things are quiet in the bar,” Zeke replied, his tone low and respectful. “Like to make sure the stations are clean and stocked between scenes. Thought you might need a hand with the spreader.”

“Appreciate it.”

Shaking out the blanket, Zeke opened it wide and draped it over Myna’s front, eyes averted. Together, they managed to wrap it around her, then he dropped to one knee and deftly released her cuffs, setting the bar aside. “Snacks and water are waiting for you in the pit. Just about everyone’s playing tonight, so we made sure there’s plenty.”

With Myna safe in his arms, Loki glanced around, noting that most of their friends were indeed enjoying themselves. A frisson of something ugly wormed into his chest as a thought struck him: how much longer did they have here, as a close group like they were now?

Braun and Bodie already had a kid. In a short time, the baby pool would expand by four, and he doubted it would take much longer for Connie and Thane to think about adding a plus one to their family. Atticus...well, his clock was ticking down, but he was waiting for Alicia to be ready to be a mother as well as a Little, and with her history, she deserved all the childhood she could salvage.

The way Liam and Wyatt fucked Sierra like horny rabbits, they might welcome a baby at any damn time.

Shaking off the moroseness, Loki ducked his head and kissed Myna’s slack mouth. She wasn’t asleep; her eyes were open, barely. “Are you joining in the fun?”

Zeke's grin didn't fade. "Not tonight. Got me a taste for something sweet, but I ain't found her yet. 'Til I do, I'll just keep on hoping she walks through the door."

"You'll find her." Loki inclined his head. "Thanks for the assist, Zeke."

"Might want to pull your pants up; ain't gonna get far with them down around your knees."

That was true, and a little humiliating. As Loki contemplated how to juggle his sleepy sub and recover his modesty, Zeke just tsked quietly and stepped closer, reaching down to grip the waistband and hoist it around Loki's waist. There was a smile lurking around his mouth as he buckled and zipped the trousers into place.

"Ah..."

"No thanks needed." With a dip of his chin, Zeke walked away, whistling a jaunty tune. He stopped briefly at the next scene, assessing the situation, then apparently satisfied everything was in order, continued on his way.

Loki went in the opposite direction, wondering if Zeke would rub this moment in his face in the future. It was a favorite pastime for his mistakes to be brought up and dissected amongst the Masters, especially if they found humor in it.

Miriam and Caitlin, the lesbian couple who he'd dabbled with at their request, were one such mistake. It was only because he'd been warned about how they tended to end their *arrangements* that he'd managed to avoid being belted by

Miri's Wanker Whacker—her handbag, the bottom lined with bricks—on his way out of the damn door.

But they were firmly in the past now, busy toying with another naïve Dom, while he held his future in his arms.

He wouldn't want it any other way.

Myna was nuzzling her cheek against his chest as he carried her down the walkway to the social area. If she'd been a cat, he was sure her purrs would have deafened him.

There was only Saul and Caera in the seating pit when Loki settled into his spot. Like Myna, Saul's little rabbit was spaced out on her Master's lap, her thumb in her mouth as she dozed.

"She's hanging out with Alicia too much," Loki said quietly, jerking his chin toward her. He snagged one of the bottles of water from the ledge behind him, twisting the cap off. "She's becoming more like a Little every day."

Saul smiled, evidently pleased. "I don't mind. Those tendencies have always been there. It just sucks that she only lets that side play when she's stressed or boneless from orgasms. Like Alicia, she didn't have much of a childhood. She's not hurting anyone by reclaiming some of it now."

Carefully touching the rim of the bottle to Myna's lips, Loki held it steady while she drank. Long, slow sips. "Is she ready to be a mom?"

"No more than I am to be a father." With a huff, Saul lifted a shoulder. "We take what we get when we're given it. Sometimes there is no being ready. You just have to deal with whatever comes your way, like it or not."

Truer words had never been spoken.

Chapter Nine

The clinic was a homely affair, if she ignored the examination rooms lining the outer edge of the small space. Housed between an office block and a pizzeria, it wasn't the fanciest or the most well-funded, although Myna saw evidence of recent improvements to the interior—fresh paint, relatively new furniture in the gathering area, recently published books and magazines instead of ones from a decade ago.

She wondered if Atticus was making donations to Lizzie's cause.

As she walked in behind Caera and Anarchy, she cast her eyes around. Aside from the front door at her back, there was only one other entry point that she could see—the fire door at the rear of the room. A couple of large windows looking out onto the street at the front, but they were covered with security grills, no doubt to protect whatever drugs Lizzie stocked in the tiny pharmacy wedged between the exam rooms.

Two of Atticus's men were standing guard, she reminded herself as unease at being in the open, so to speak, trickled through her blood. They were armed, and pretty damn dangerous if the cold look in their eyes was any indication.

She got the impression they would shoot first and not bother to ask questions later.

They were the only reason the men were allowing this excursion to happen.

Loki had made his protests known before he went to work. Like Saul and Jasper, he wasn't happy that this maternity meeting couldn't be held at home, but once Anarchy had asked

him if he wanted to run the background checks on a dozen pregnant women, their partners, their family members and associates, he'd quieted down.

Of course, Atticus had run the checks anyway.

She couldn't deny it was nice to be out of the house. Fresh air, the sun on her face, a steady, scenic drive into Phoenix. It was all good for the soul. Socializing for an hour, learning about what was happening to her body from those who'd already been through it, was a little bit of frosting on the freedom cake.

"Ladies, you made it!" Carrying a pitcher of juice from what Myna assumed was the breakroom, Lizzie broke into a beaming smile when she spotted them. "Oh, I'm so pleased. I know you might be wary, but trust me, you don't understand how vital having a network of support from all corners will be during your pregnancies."

Archie rolled her eyes. "We needed some space from the guys. They're in uber-protective mode right now."

Lizzie's smile never faltered, but her eyes darted across to where a small huddle of women were already seated. "There's something primal, and lovely, about protective daddies. I promise you'll be safe here." Her voice lowered. "The guards Atticus sent have swept the building. He hasn't apprised me of many details, so don't divulge anything. He's made a very generous donation to the clinic in exchange for our confidentiality."

Myna snorted. "You mean, silence."

“Anything said here is kept within these walls, but we need new equipment, and I’m not above taking a bribe.” Lizzie winked. “Why don’t you settle in? I recommend the armchairs, they’re like sinking into a cloud. I’m setting the refreshments out, then we’ll probably begin.” A frown marred her brow as she scanned the group again. “It seems we might be on the quiet side today.”

Caera’s shoulders relaxed a fraction.

“Would the guards like some juice?” Lizzie mused, lifting the pitcher. “It’s warm outside, and they’re both in suits.”

“Just lecture them on being dehydrated,” Myna muttered, thinking of how the doctor had blistered her ears about not eating or drinking enough.

“Good luck with that.” Anarchy shook her head. “Those guys are scary, even for our line of work.”

Obviously taking that as a challenge, Lizzie squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “Let me handle them. I don’t need to be dragging two hefty men in here because they’re stupid enough not to hydrate. Take a seat, I’ll be back in just a moment.”

Caera didn’t wait to be told a third time. She hurried over to one of the chairs that was as far away as she could get from the other women, curling into it as though she’d rather be anywhere else.

“She’s gotten worse since Dominic came back into the picture,” Archie murmured sadly. “She doesn’t trust anyone who isn’t in our immediate circle.”

“Do you?”

“No, but I’m not quite as paranoid about it. Study, assess, then make a judgement. That’s my style. Caera just lumps everyone into the enemy category.”

“Aside from Saul.”

“Ask her how she met him. That wasn’t always the case.”

They walked over to Caera together, taking the chairs on either side of their friend.

Someone had made a pretty display of cookies and chips on a small coffee table, and there were some dull glasses clustered to the side. Lizzie set the pitcher next to them, then strode off to the breakroom, no doubt to make the guards outside a jug of their own.

The atmosphere was relaxed, Myna noticed. It was a relief not to be shrouded in constant anxiety, surrounded by men who were mired in it, no matter how hard they tried to conceal it. There was breathing room here, the calmness that came with bumping shoulders with normal people.

Being here made everything at home seem surreal.

“Want me to introduce you?” Archie gave her a gentle nudge, and Myna realized she’d been staring at nothing, with her eyes on the other women in the group. “Rebecca’s the brunette, she’s on kid number...four, I think. Maybe five. Her husband’s a big shot lawyer, so she just stays home and pops babies out to keep herself amused.”

Myna winced. “Me-ow, Archie.”

“Oh, it’s not criticism. She readily admits that being a stay-at-home mom is basically living the dream. Next to her is her best friend, Florence, who essentially lives in the same reality.

Her husband owns a string of hotels in Vegas, spends most of his week there. She gets laid when he's home, knocked up every now and then, and just blows through his credit cards whenever she has the opportunity."

"The one who looks like she should be in her room, wearing pigtails and doing her homework?"

"Sickening, isn't it? She's almost thirty, has three kids already, and looks like a pedophile's wet dream. Unfortunately for her," Archie added in a whisper, "that's exactly what she married."

Jerking in her chair, Myna hissed, "What?"

"Before this stuff with Dominic, I used to get bored if I had a few minutes without something to keep me busy. I got nosy and started poking around in what piqued my curiosity. Att's techs took over the case once I stumbled on exactly what her husband does in Vegas, and the sick prick should be getting a special visit from LVPD rather soon."

"He's a pedophile, and he has access to three kids?"

"Not for much longer. Up to where I got in my investigation, I found no evidence linking him to abusing his own children. There are several in Vegas, however, who haven't been as sheltered or as lucky."

Sympathy radiated as Myna imagined what it felt like to have a sex offender as the dominant force in a marriage. When Florence was told the truth, it would destroy her, surely. "Does she know about his extra-curricular activities?"

"God, I hope not. That would skirt a bit too close to the Dominic-Rita line for my liking. If I were her and I knew, I'd

cut his gonads off while he slept and make him eat them.” Archie’s smile was cold and sharp. “Let him choke on them as he bled out.”

“Frank *and* beans?”

“The whole goddamn works.”

“Savage.” Slightly relieved that the authorities would handle the asshole instead of Anarchy, Myna tilted her head toward the remaining two women. “What about those two?”

“Mindy and Mandy. Identical twins, literally down to the soul. They’re sweet girls, middle twenties, I think. Sweet,” she repeated with a roll of her eyes, “but unfortunately, the stereotypical California blonde type. They’re both acting surrogates for the same couple. The way they talk about going into labor and the delivery process, it’s kind of obvious they’re expecting to just fart and pop those babies right out of their vaginas.”

“Is that an option?”

“Not unless we give birth to tadpoles.”

“I kissed my prince; I didn’t fuck the frog,” Myna muttered, her gaze locked on Lizzie as the doctor carried a fresh pitcher of juice and two glasses toward the door. “I think we—us three,” she clarified, reaching out to touch Caera’s arm, “should make a pact. We’re all due within like three weeks of each other, right?”

“August twenty-fourth.”

“September twenty-first,” Caera whispered. “Did Lizzie give you your date?”

“September eighteenth.” Myna had called the doctor three times to make sure it was correct. It was kind of nerve-racking to have an actual, specific day to look forward to, even if there was a possibility of being early or late. “So, I think whoever has their baby first,” she said with a pointed stare at Archie, “should give the other two a heads up on what to expect.”

“My experience is going to be dramatically different to both of yours. Both of you get to huff and puff and push a baby into the world. Cue the cuddles and the adulation. Me? Thanks to Jasper’s super sperm, I’ve got twice the work to do, and I’m damn sure my vagina is gonna be sore after the first one!”

“Could be worse,” Caera mused, her shell cracking. “Maybe you’ll have triplets.”

“Uh, no. Just no. Lizzie told me there were two. *Two*.”

For the first time in forever, Myna saw the younger woman’s lips twitch. The beginning of a weak smile, but it was something.

“Scans can be misread. Sometimes a smaller fetus hides behind a larger one, or in your case, behind two.” When Archie gasped in mock horror, Caera finally lost some of her stricken expression. “You never really know what you’re going to get until they arrive.”

“This is very true,” Lizzie interjected, dropping into the chair next to Myna with a sigh. “Science is a wonderful tool, but we haven’t perfected it. We are humans operating machines, and neither is infallible.”

Archie moaned. “This is *not* reassuring me!”

“All you can do is pray everything goes to plan. You know your doctor knows her shit,” Lizzie told her with a wink, “and your birthing team is ready to jump into action when the time comes. Jasper will be by your side; your friends will be waiting. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Oh, if only the good doctor knew what was stalking them, Myna thought, sharing a glance with Caera. Kidnapping, experimentation, child abduction, rape, death. A whole freaking cocktail of things to worry about in great detail.

“Enough with the doom and gloom. Today is a good day. The sun is shining, our group is small and cozy, and we have the happier side effects of pregnancy to discuss.” Standing, Lizzie caught the other women’s attention and gestured them closer as she poured glasses of juice and handed them out. With one for herself, she took her seat again as group leader once everyone was comfortable. “Ladies, I’d like you to welcome Myna to our little gathering. She and Caera have similar due dates; in fact, they’re only three days apart. Mindy and Mandy are fortunate to share the same date.”

One of the blondes beamed. “We’re having twins.”

Myna frowned. “Both of you?”

The other one giggled. “No, silly. We’re suffragettes!”

It was so, so fucking difficult not to laugh. Fighting to keep her face straight, Myna nodded. “Oh, I see. Congratulations.”

“*Surrogates*, Mindy,” Lizzie corrected gently.

“The parents are paying us twenty thousand dollars to carry their babies, so they can have twins like us. It’s totally, like,

amazing.” The other one, Mandy, seemed oblivious to how twins were created. Big blue eyes radiated with an almost insane joy. “We’re going to be introduced together on the same day, at the same time!”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Lizzie said, “*Induced*, Mandy. And I’ve already told you that inducing both of you at the same time isn’t going to happen unless there’s something wrong with the babies. They’ll let you know when they’re ready to arrive.”

Both women pouted, which was a bad idea in Myna’s opinion. They’d obviously had some filler work done in their lips, and pouting made them both look like a baboon’s asshole. It wasn’t an attractive sight, not with that shade of lipstick, anyway.

She tuned them out as they whined in protest, sounding like three-year-old toddlers in need of a nap. It was becoming clear that they held no love for the children growing inside them—which, okay, was fair enough seeing as they wouldn’t raise the kids—but for the cash injection heading for their bank accounts.

Or bank account. Singular. She wondered if they trusted each other to a point where sharing *everything* was normal for them, then shuddered as her thoughts veered away from financial matters into an image of the two blondes dividing some poor guy’s dick into halves.

Ugh. Just not worth thinking about.

Myna sipped at her juice, surprised to discover it was fresh, not the diluted kind she’d expected. It was chilled, the taste tart and slightly bitter, without any of the pulpiness she hated.

“Everything okay, Myna?”

She looked at Lizzie and smiled. “Just surprised we’re having fresh juice, that’s all. I’ve been avoiding it in case it gave me heartburn.”

“That’s a good point to make. Obviously, oranges are a citrus fruit, so there is that element of acidity to it. But the benefits are phenomenal. For example, vitamin C. An essential element of your pregnancy nutrition, but one where supplemental intake can be more harmful than useful. Eating oranges or drinking juice doesn’t pose the same risk.” Excited by the change in subject, Lizzie set her glass down and began to count points off on her fingers. “It boosts iron absorption, which is so important for the baby’s development and your health. An eight-ounce glass of juice can provide twelve percent of your daily folate requirement—meeting that requirement can lower the chances of conditions such as spina bifida by *seventy* percent. It’s an excellent source of potassium, so it can help with low blood pressure, and antioxidants.”

“It does all that?” Florence queried.

“And more. If it gives you heartburn, just cut back on how much you drink, or even try drinking it at different times of the day. The only time I’d recommend not drinking it is if you have gestational diabetes, but for now, it’s safe for all of you to enjoy.”

As though convinced, Rebecca, Caera, and the airhead twins drank theirs faster.

Positive she was going to suffer for the rest of the day, Myna decided to keep sipping hers, waiting for the ache to

start. Heartburn was a bitch, and not even she was brave enough to take it on.

“Does anyone else have any nutrition questions for me?”

“What are the strangest cravings a patient has ever had?” Rebecca asked.

“Hmmm. Well, one patient—who shall remain nameless—had been a vegan since she was twelve. Imagine how shocked she was when her moral values were overridden by more primal urges. Steak, burgers, fried chicken...” When the women snorted in amusement, Lizzie grinned. “You get the idea. Her baby—a little boy—decided that veganism just wasn’t his style and demanded that his mother tailor her eating habits to suit him.”

“Did she go back to veganism?” Archie wondered. She drank slowly, then smacked her lips together. “What brand of juice is this? Jasper needs to buy me lots of it.”

“We get it from a local supplier a couple of blocks over to the west. I’ll get you the address before you leave. To answer your question, surprisingly, she didn’t. Pregnancy opened her eyes to something new, and she embraced it. I think that’s a lesson we should all learn, with child or not.”

The discussion switched direction. Rebecca and Florence shared anecdotes about their previous pregnancies, but Myna blanked them out. Listening to self-pitying stories about how Rebecca’s husband bought her a diamond tennis bracelet to compensate for her first child being a boy instead of a girl, or how Florence’s husband spent the majority of her maiden voyage into labor on his phone checking stock reports, wasn’t what Myna was here for.

“Help yourself to cookies, ladies. Mindy, Mandy, yours are sugar-free, as usual.”

Hmm, she fancied a cookie or two, Myna thought, perusing the plate as it was passed around the circle. She took two peanut butter ones, then gave it back to Lizzie, who plucked one for herself before she set the plate back on the table.

“Okay, so why don’t we let Myna tell us who she is now that she’s got an idea of who we are.” Giving her a subtle lead-in, Lizzie gestured to the others. “You’re new to Phoenix, right?”

Ugh, she hated being under the spotlight. Resigned to it, she drank half her glass of juice, then nodded. “I was here at Christmas, visiting with friends,” she lied smoothly. They didn’t need to know her *friend* was actually a BDSM club. “I spent a week here, then had to go home. Circumstances changed, and I found myself back here again.”

“Oooh,” Mandy crooned, eyes wide. “Is the daddy here?”

“Yes. He’s part of the reason I came back.” Myna offered Caera a grateful look when she rested her hand on her thigh in support. “Although I didn’t know I was pregnant for a few months.”

“Oh. My. God.” Mindy slapped her sister’s arm. “That sounds just like Bianca! She didn’t know she was pregnant until she went to the toilet, and boom, pushed that little demon right out into the bowl.”

Several mouths dropped open in shock.

“I remember! He was so small, she barely felt anything!” Mandy rubbed her hand over her belly. “That is *totally* gonna

be the way I give birth. Just let gravy do the work so I don't have to."

"*Gravity*," the group chorused.

Time ticked past, and Myna found herself beginning to enjoy the interaction. The twins' naivety was strangely endearing, although Archie was probably worrying whether her daughters might suffer from the same affliction. The other two were snooty in the way an abundance of money made some people, but they seemed like decent women beneath it. Perhaps their husbands' wealth hadn't completely corrupted them yet.

As they all laughed at a story Lizzie was telling them, Myna yawned. She checked her watch, noting that her body was aware it was almost nap time, even if she didn't. Rolling her head to ease the stiffness in her neck, she frowned.

The laughter died away, leaving the women silent.

Silent and still.

Feeling her eyelids grow heavy, she blinked at her friends. Caera was fast asleep, curled up in her chair, while Archie's head was tilting slowly to the side. The other four women were passed out.

"About damn time. Knew I should have added a higher dose to the juice," Lizzie muttered to herself as she rose. Stretching, she glanced around at the unconscious women, then her eyes met Myna's. "I'm sorry you got pulled into this, I really am. You and Loki seem like good people."

Weight dragged at her. Limbs, body, head, and heart. There was a huge neon warning sign flashing in her brain, but it was

too late. Whatever the doctor slipped into their drinks had been working for over an hour, shutting them down from the inside without a single hint of something being wrong.

Tongue thick, she tried to speak. It wouldn't work properly, and her brain was too sluggish to piece together thoughts, let alone voice them.

The sting of betrayal was the last thing she felt before the lights went out.

Humming under his breath with Three Days Grace on the music system, Loki studied the thick black outline on the back of his client's thigh. Pretty damn perfect, if he did say so himself. Once the block color went in, and the shading, the half-skull, half-zombie portrait would unquestionably turn some heads.

Robert, his client, was a fitness freak and liked to shock people. This wasn't the first time he'd been under Loki's needle, and he liked to say it wouldn't be the last. As long as he kept coming up with ideas that gave Loki's creative brain something to play with, he was welcome anytime.

Unlike Indigo, who was dutifully inking a string of cute yellow duckies around a pretty brunette's ankle, looking as bored as a man could be.

They'd had a slew of walk-ins that morning, several of which had booked appointments for larger pieces. Others, like the brunette, wanted smaller pieces that could be done in between existing clients.

If only he wasn't keeping one eye on the clock, waiting for the phone call to tell him that Myna and the other two subs were safely back at the house, under the Masters' protection.

Not that he didn't trust the security guards to do their job in broad daylight on a public street, but this was a war that wasn't taking any prisoners. Dominic wouldn't give a flying fuck about other victims being drawn into the crossfire; he'd proved that already.

Switching black for the blue-green Robert wanted for the zombie half of the face, Loki told himself the twist in his gut was just anxiety, not some foreboding sign. Atticus or one of the others would have sent up the bat signal by now if something was wrong.

The pressure was getting to him, he thought with a frown. As color began to bloom beneath Rob's skin, Loki dismissed the unease. He was just paranoid, that was all.

No phone call was good news.

He worked patiently, diligently, filling in the area with a steady hand and critical eye. There were a lot of details to add in, but he loved lifting an image off the skin and into life. The buzz of the gun was physically comforting; the vibration of it in his hand, the persistent noise.

Outside on the street, a horn blared loudly. Tires screeching, someone yelling obscenities. It sounded like someone was having a very bad day.

Rob chuckled lazily, not moving a muscle. "Someone should learn to drive."

“Or get off the road,” Loki agreed. “You doing okay or you need a break?”

“I’m good. The view is fucking awesome from here.”

Curious, Loki lifted the needle away and glanced over in the direction Rob was staring. He rolled his eyes when he saw Ginny bending over the customer’s side of the desk, bopping her hips to the rhythm of Fall Out Boy. Her ass, barely contained by the denim skirt rising perilously high, bounced lightly as she filled out paperwork. “She’s a wildcat, Rob. Not one to toy with if you don’t want scars.”

He heaved a sigh. “Something tells me she’d be worth it. Hell, you can tattoo my battle wounds when she’s finished with me, a lasting memento.”

Laughing, Loki resumed his focus. “You’re both adults. Just don’t come crying to me when my receptionist sends you home with gouges.”

The door burst open behind him, but he ignored it. One job at a time, and unless he was needed for a consult, Rob had his full attention.

“Welcome to Blessed Ink...oh my,” Ginny said, a hum of approval in her tone. “What can I do for you, handsome? Hey, hey, you can’t just—”

The panic in her voice alerted him, and he spun on his chair to see all six-feet-six of Atticus stalking toward him. The expression on his friend’s face turned the twist in his gut into a sharp, tight knot.

“Dominic went hunting,” Atticus stated without preamble. “You need to come now.”

Jesus Christ, who was dead now? Setting the gun aside, Loki said to Rob, “Excuse me. Take a break, let Ginny get you a drink.”

“No problem.”

The chair spun as Loki shoved out of it, grabbing Atticus’s arm and hauling him away from the customers. “What the hell happened?”

“The clinic was breached. The security team on the girls didn’t check in at their allotted time, so another crew headed over there. They found the guys sitting in their truck, out cold. Alive, surprisingly.” His voice was calm, but Att seethed with unspoken fury. “Five women unconscious inside.”

“Myna—”

The Daddy Dom shook his head. “The doc and four pregnant women, none of whom are involved in this. We’ll question them as soon as they’re more alert, but right now, none of them remember a fucking thing.”

His body felt dead from the neck down. Terror chilled his bones. “They got all three?”

“Yes. There are no visible signs of a fight or a struggle.”

“Archie wouldn’t have gone without mauling someone.”

“She would if it meant protecting one of the others from harm.” Atticus rubbed his hand over his face. “Jasper put a tracker on her, one most people wouldn’t think to remove. Not right away, at least. The tech teams are already working on trying to locate it, but it’s possible whatever Dominic is transporting them in has a jammer.”

Loki blew out a slow breath. “Please tell me you’ve got J locked down before he runs off to get himself killed.”

“Locked down tight. He knows what the score is, Loki. What’s at stake. We’re calling everyone back to base. Wyatt’s on his way to pick up Liam, Zeke, and Braun from Avalon. As soon as we have a lead, we’ll follow it. I promise.”

Shocked, Loki stood for a moment, trying to process that his worst fucking nightmare had just come true. “I told him it was a fucking stupid idea to let them go. We’re all to blame for this, Att. Not one of us stood up to Archie and said no. Fuck!”

“We’ll get them back. We will,” he insisted, “but you need to make your excuses here so we can get back to base. The clock’s been ticking without us knowing, and Dominic has a head start. We need to cut that lead time down as much as possible before we make a move.”

Ginny walked over, her lips turned down at the corners. “Go, Loki. Whatever the emergency is, it’s bad. I see it on your face. Indi and I will handle the business.”

“Thanks. Make sure Indi gives you a ride home tonight, Gin. I don’t want you walking around alone.” She wasn’t a target, she wasn’t likely to attract Dominic’s attention, but Myna shouldn’t have been taken, either. Dominic’s methods were underhanded and sneaky.

It wasn’t until he was in the back seat of one of Att’s fleet of SUVs that he realized he was shaking. The same fury afflicting his friend was bubbling inside him now, rippling off Thane in the front seat as well. Silence filled the vehicle, which he was pleased about—he was in no mood for reassurances or platitudes.

He was too busy praying they'd find the girls before they were sucked into the chaos of Dominic's fucked-up world. Bargaining with a god he wasn't sure existed to keep three innocent women from being hurt.

"Where's Saul?" he asked suddenly.

"Sitting on Jasper. Figured babysitting duty would give him something else to think about until we're all home." Atticus glanced in the rearview, his green eyes dark. "Too late to say it was a mistake, Loki. The only blame lies with Dominic."

Loki's lip curled in a snarl at the sound of the bastard's name. Shaking his head in disgust, he turned his head to watch the city flick past in a flurry of buildings and people. Somewhere out there, likely beyond the boundaries of Pheonix, were three women who'd been stolen like cattle from a field.

It was doubtful Dominic would keep them here, even for a short time. The asshole was aware of Atticus's resources, and he wouldn't want to risk someone on the Heisler payroll spotting something that led the team straight to the girls.

No, Myna, Caera, and Anarchy were likely on their way to Montana.

But how?

By road, it was a lengthy journey. Damn near twenty-four hours, depending on traffic and weather conditions. A flight was considerably shorter, more like three hours in the air.

It would have been easy enough to get the girls on a private plane, Loki thought darkly, rubbing his thumb over his chin as he mulled it over. Belatedly, he realized he hadn't removed the

thin sterile gloves he used when tattooing, so he stripped them off and tossed them aside.

All evidence pointed to the expectant mothers being unconscious, which suggested drugs. Give them an extra dose of whatever shit they'd been pumped full of, bundle them into shipping crates, and load them as cargo. They'd sleep for the duration of the trip, and if they woke prematurely, would be lethargic and weak.

“Where’s the doctor?”

“Sleeping off whatever they gave her, same as the rest of them.”

“Is she under surveillance?”

Atticus’s jaw tensed. “We ran her credentials, Loki. Her background, her financials, anything and everything we could find out about her checked out. References were glowing. Even Archie couldn’t find anything to sully the doc’s reputation. Do you think she’s a suspect? Honestly?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

The big guy sighed. “All right. Might as well talk it out on the ride home. Convince me.”

Well, it was better than twiddling his thumbs for the next hour. “The security guys swept the building, right? Clear. Only Lizzie was there. The fire door remained shut at all times, no alarms to say it was set off by someone unauthorized opening it. The front door was guarded, so I’m assuming the team on duty didn’t call in any unexpected additions to the group once our girls went in.”

“All reports came back fine until they missed their check-in.”

Loki nodded. “Everyone was found unconscious, inside and out. Did Dominic’s men gas the place? If so, why were the security guys out cold? Is there anything on them to suggest they were struck with an object?”

For a few moments, silence resumed as all three men considered what Loki’s implications meant.

“No wounds on anyone. The guys have the same symptoms as the ladies found inside. Whatever the cause, it got all of them.” Tapping his thumb on the steering wheel, Atticus blew out a breath. “Keep going, Loki. I hate where this is headed if you’re right, but it makes sense.”

“What if she drugged them? Someway, somehow, Dominic got his claws into a kind, compassionate woman and managed to make her turn on her patients. He doesn’t want Archie hurt, probably doesn’t give a shit whether Caera is or not. Drugging and smuggling them out is fairly quick and clean.”

“Myna?” Thane queried quietly.

Pain gouged his heart as though serrated blades cleaved through it. Pressing his fist to his chest, Loki choked down the rage that threatened to spew. “Collateral damage. They couldn’t risk leaving her behind. If Lizzie is trying to stay undercover and close to us as a group to report back to those fuckers, she couldn’t have Myna telling us whatever she might remember.”

“What could Dominic have over her?”

Loki scoffed bitterly. “Who the hell knows? Maybe he’s paying her for the trouble, maybe she’s one of the failures that didn’t get put down. Maybe she’s not who we fucking think she is, and the whole backstory you’ve checked out is bullshit.”

“One step ahead, yet again.” Atticus shook his head. “Thane, call Tag, tell him to get Grit and Christophe to put her in one of the holding cells until we get back. If she’s involved, she’s not slipping away when no one’s looking.”

“We need blood tests on them all,” Thane added, shifting in his seat to pull his phone from his pocket.

“The other pregnant ladies are under hospital care. I’ll ask one of my contacts if he can...appropriate some samples before they go home. Mason has some med tech experience; he can have the fun of sticking Eugene and Tyson with a fucking needle.”

Thane lifted the cell to his ear, holding his finger up for silence. “Tag, it’s Thane. No, he’s got his phone on him, why —*what?*”

Atticus glanced over, took one look at Thane’s face, and slammed on the brakes. Tires screaming on asphalt, no doubt leaving thick black marks, the car screeched to a halt.

Loki jerked forward into his seatbelt, cursing as it locked and snapped pain across his chest. He barely missed smashing his face into Thane’s headrest.

Cars cruised around them, horns blaring at the rude stop, but all focus inside the car was solely on Thane.

“We’re on our way,” he said in a low, tight voice. Slowly, too fucking slowly, he ended the call and set the phone carefully on his thigh. He rubbed a hand where his own seatbelt had stopped him from going through the windshield. “We need to go to Avalon. Now.”

Atticus was still. Frighteningly still. “What’s happened?”

“It’s gone.”

They saw the smoke from ten miles out. Thick black plumes of it rising into the afternoon sky and blocking out the sun like an omen.

Atticus drove like a demon, overtaking other vehicles on the road with the focus of a man possessed, breaking every traffic law and speed limit on the way. He seemed oblivious to everything around him, hellbent on getting to the club to prove Tag a liar.

The smoke, and the number of emergency vehicles they passed, proved the tech right.

Dominic had hit them with a double whammy.

Loki didn’t have proof to back up that theory, but deep down in his guts, he knew the bastard was behind it. What better way to keep the hounds off his trail than to rip up the path behind him, twisting the Avalon family into a wreck, and making damn sure Atticus’ team was on their toes dealing with other things?

It wasn’t going to work, Loki vowed, tracing the M tattoo on his wrist. The fucker could keep lobbing grenades, but they were forging ahead. They had to. Avalon was a loss—the

amount of smoke suggested the club was nothing but fiery ruins, but it was only a building, and buildings could be rebuilt.

Insurance was a godsend, but it couldn't replace a life.

Their women needed to take priority.

Telling himself that didn't stem the constant trickle of sick dread souring his belly. Wondering when and where Dominic would strike next to divert their attention was a horrible thought pulsing in his head. Their homes? Connie's office? His shop?

How much more did they have to lose?

The familiar rural landscape whipped past in a blur, and the dread thickened. Mile by mile, brewing in the deafening silence. Seeing the cop cars parked on either side of the entrance of Avalon's driveway didn't ease his anxiety at all.

The SUV shuddered to a halt as Att made the turn, hitting the brakes again as two uniformed officers stepped in front of it. As the Daddy Dom lowered the window, holding his security badge up to the cop approaching his side, the other officer walked around the vehicle.

"No entry."

The hot sting of ash on the air was pungent. Acrid and ugly. He'd been able to smell it for miles, but now, so close to the source, it represented the death of so many dreams.

"Our friends are down there." Atticus snapped the words out.

“This is a crime scene, sir. I’m sorry, but only emergency vehicles are permitted to pass.” The cop was mid-thirties, with short-cropped dark hair and black shades covering his eyes.

“Our friends are down there,” Att repeated, “and we’re not leaving until we see them.”

“That badge doesn’t mean shit here.” Folding his arms over his chest, he stared at Atticus implacably. “I need to ask you to move out of the way for priority vehicles.”

Growling under his breath, Atticus snagged the phone out of Thane’s hand and punched in a number. He put it on speakerphone as it rang, then cut off the woman who answered with a curt, “Kaylee, it’s Atticus Heisler. I need to speak with him.”

“Oh, hi, Atticus! Let me just see if—”

“Now, Kaylee.”

“Yes, sir. Hold on one moment.” The line went dead for all of ten seconds before a man came on.

“Att, what can I do for you?”

“Chief, I’m on location at a fire.” Reeling off the club address, Atticus peered out of the window at the cop’s name badge. “I’m with an Officer O’Hare, who is refusing me entry.”

“You showed him your badge?”

“I did. Apparently, it means shit here.”

“For God’s sake. Put him on the phone.”

“Oh, he can hear you just fine.” The malice in his voice was pure acid.

“O’Hare, let the man through. Heisler Security has been instrumental in helping us solve several cases. Report to my office when your shift ends.”

“I—uh, yes, sir.”

Loki almost snorted. Trust Atticus to bypass every level of command and go straight for the Chief of Police.

“Appreciate it, John.” Atticus spoke as the cop stepped back, gesturing them through. Dismissing him as though he didn’t exist, he drove the SUV down the drive, toward the carnage. “We’ll catch up soon.”

“I look forward to it. It’s been too long.”

When Att tossed the phone back to Thane, Loki leaned forward. “How the hell do you know the Chief of fucking Police, and why does he owe you favors like this?”

“I introduced him to his wife,” was the grim reply. “His submissive wife.”

“Connections,” Thane muttered. “Worth their weight in gold.”

The silence fell again as they neared the parking lot. Crammed with six fire trucks, there wasn’t much room for anything else. Through the thick blanket of smoke, fire crews ran with hoses, trying to tame the inferno gutting the ruins of all three barns.

Dumping the SUV where it wouldn’t hinder access, Atticus was the first one out into the fray. Loki took a bolstering breath before he opened his door and stepped into the smoke, helping Thane as his bad leg tried to give way.

Side by side, they surveyed the wreckage.

Not just a fire, Loki thought with hatred burning as fiercely as the blaze in front of them. It wasn't *just* a fire when chunks of wood and metal were speared into the ground like javelins. The field of debris was too wide.

The front of Braun's house was totaled. The windows were blown out, pieces of the club jutting from the walls. There was a hole high up where something had smashed through the stone at high speed, right into the room where Declan might have been sleeping on any other day.

Three firefighters were hosing it down, trying to stop it from going up like the rest of the damn place.

"Over here!" Atticus shouted, waving them across to where two ambulances were parked out of the immediate danger zone.

Setting aside his discomfort, Thane matched Loki's fast pace, skirting around a section of roof still smoldering. It was a fucking good thing Braun hadn't gotten around to replanting the field behind the club, otherwise the utter disaster might've escalated into a catastrophic clusterfuck.

Braun sat on the footboard; a blanket draped over him as he breathed deep into an oxygen mask. Beside him, Liam did the same, staring into the dancing flames with an expression that scared the spit from Loki's mouth.

"You guys okay?" Atticus demanded as he dropped to one knee in front of them, coughing as a wave of smoke drifted in their direction.

It only took a couple of breaths before it clogged Loki's lungs. His admiration for firefighters quadrupled in that moment, wondering how the hell they found the courage to walk into this hell every damn day.

Braun shook his head. Soot smeared his hands and face, blood dripping from a nasty cut on the back of his hand. The hand gripping Liam's with fervor. Slowly, he reached up with his free hand to shift the mask so he could talk freely. "Zeke's in the ambulance next to us. Broken leg, bad burns. Real bad." He started coughing, took another long hit of oxygen. "Possible brain bleed, internal damage. They're trying to stabilize him before they move him."

"Fuck." Resting his hand on Braun's knee, he asked, "What about you guys? Are you okay?"

Loki's gaze tracked over the shell of the first barn as shouts echoed. In a shower of bright sparks, the remnants of the wall collapsed with a shriek. He frowned as he studied the burned-out wrecks of four vehicles in the lot, clamping his hand over his nose and mouth as he squinted against the smoke.

"Cuts and burns for me. I was on the periphery when it blew. Got caught up in the blast, tossed a few feet. I'll be fine." Another pause, more long draws of clean oxygen. "Liam's got burns. Busted his arm. They're taking us to the hospital as soon as Zeke's stable enough to go."

"They're all working on him?"

Braun nodded. "More paramedics are on the way, so I'm told. Smoke inhalation's a bitch."

Four trucks, Loki thought with despair. Three men in the ambulances.

He remembered Atticus saying that Wyatt was on his way to pick up Liam, Zeke, and Braun. Blaming his lightheadedness on the smoke and the relentless heat, he bit his lip before asking, “Where’s Wyatt?”

Liam shuddered in a full-body ripple of what could only be grief. Reddened eyes filling with tears, he did nothing to stop them as they trailed down through the soot and grime on his cheeks.

“Wyatt’s dead.”

For long, dreadful moments, the world went numb. The noise of burning wood and flames hissing as water rained down on them faded into nothing. Cold down to the bone, there weren’t words to describe the shock of pain in his chest, how it detonated so fast and sharp.

Atticus, jaw tight, cupped the back of Liam’s head and touched his forehead to their grieving friend’s. Murmuring something only Liam could hear, he did what Loki always thought only Daddy Doms did best—comforting, consoling, caring.

Loki met Braun’s mournful gaze.

“Fucker set this up,” Braun wheezed between gulps from the mask. “Liam found anomalies in the new wiring. All wrong. There were...explosives...in the walls. Got the crews out, we were right behind. Liam made it out of the door, then me. Zeke slipped on something, went down.” Voice so, so tight, Braun took a few seconds to steady himself. “Barn three

went up first, the other two...in quick succession. Wyatt stopped to help Zeke as the last one exploded. They were on the porch...so fucking close.”

Loki felt his own throat squeezing shut. He reached out for Braun’s shoulder just as Thane stepped beside him and slid his arm around the broad, slumped shoulders.

“The blast knocked us flat. Some of the crew got caught in the debris. Two dead,” he said slowly, as though he couldn’t comprehend it. “We managed to get up. Somehow. The explosion must have hit Wyatt from behind. He...he was...fuck. We found him on top of Zeke. Both of them...face down. Wyatt had his fucking back.”

Liam sobbed; the sound muffled beneath the mask. He dropped his head onto Atticus’ shoulder, and the sobs became soul-wrenching cries.

Chest starting to heave, Braun pressed his lips together tightly, dark blue eyes shimmering with wetness. “Liam was trying to pull him...with a broken arm. It was so fucking hot... Wyatt was already...gone. Nothing we could do.”

“You’re not to blame for this, Braun.”

“Had to make a choice. Zeke was still...still alive.”

“Wyatt saved his life,” Thane murmured softly. “You and Liam kept him that way.”

Braun closed his eyes, wheezing in another breath. “Should’ve—”

“No,” Thane said sharply, his tone firm yet oddly gentle. “Wyatt made his own choice, Braun. He could have been running for his life, but he chose to stop and help a friend. The

same damn thing you would've if you'd been close enough. Wyatt sacrificed himself to save a life. We don't get to diminish that by throwing what-ifs around. We honor his bravery, and we make fucking sure he's remembered for it."

From the next ambulance over, two EMS personnel jumped out of the back, slamming the doors closed as the engine roared to life. One of them gave it a sharp smack, before they both jogged over to their own rig.

One man, one woman.

The ambulance pulled away slowly until it maneuvered past the fire trucks, picking up speed as it headed down the drive.

"All right, guys. Sorry for leaving you like that." Tall and leanly fit, the uniformed EMS tech pulled a penlight from his pocket. "We're going to need some space to work. There's an incoming rig about ten minutes off, but I think we're going to take both of you now."

Thane and Loki reluctantly stepped away from Braun as the medic checked his vitals, but Atticus simply continued to hold Liam as close as his injuries allowed. After a few moments, he patted the younger man's back gently and eased away, giving the tech access.

"I think we're ready to go." With assessing brown eyes, the medic—Duval, as his badge proclaimed—looked at Thane first. "Your friends are in good hands. Follow us to the hospital if you want. The doctors won't let you see them until they're cleared, but I know it helps in situations like this to be near them."

Liam tugged his mask off, tears still spilling down his face. “I’m not leaving him here.”

Duval sighed and pulled the mask back down. Crouching slightly, he turned all his attention to Liam as his partner came to join them. “I’m sorry for your loss. I promise you, my colleagues in the next rig will take every care in the world with your loved one. We can’t take him with us, there just isn’t room, and unfortunately, you and Braun have to be our only concern now.”

“No, I won’t—” The protest was weak.

“Liam,” Loki interjected, dropping his hand on top of the two already linked. “Sierra only has you. Every choice needs to be for her. She can’t survive if she loses both of you in one night. She *needs* you.”

Gray eyes stormy with grief closed as Liam’s face twisted.

“Look, we’re going to stay with Wyatt. Thane, Atticus, and me. We’re going to find him, and we’re going to stay with him until the ambulance arrives. He’s not going to be alone. Can you trust us to do that for you? For Wyatt?”

Never in his life had he seen his best friend so devastated. The Viking Master was no more; in his place was a lost, broken boy whose world was in pieces at his feet. It would pass, eventually, but for the moment, until he figured out how to gather those shards back into some sense of order, there was only pain.

Lips quivering, Liam nodded slowly.

Chapter Ten

The clink of chains stirred her awake.

Wondering if Loki was playing some stupid kinky game at too-fucking-early o'clock, she groaned in protest, tugging her arms against the restraints. She felt awful, her head thudding in nauseating beats, sweat pooling in uncomfortable places. Her mouth was dust dry, not an ounce of moisture left, and there was a bitter tang on her tongue.

Groaning, she tried to roll onto her side for the glass of water Loki insisted she keep beside the bed, but pressure tightened across her upper belly, the tops of her thighs. Her legs were pinned by the ankles.

What the hell was her lover playing at? She thought groggily, trying to open her eyes. The room smelled funny, almost...medicinal. It offended her nose, the odor of cleaning chemicals burning her olfactory sense.

This wasn't Atticus's house.

In painstakingly slow motion, memories swirled and drifted, settling into a picture that made her blood run cold. The maternity meeting. The juice. The traitorous fucking whore who'd betrayed them all and likely delivered them to Dominic with bows tied around their necks.

When she got her hands on Lizzie, the goddamn liar, she was going to rip the doctor's heart from that black hole of a chest.

The lights were too bright, spearing into her brain as soon as she cracked her eyes open. Jesus, had no one heard of a

dimmer switch? Was the mad scientist wife using it as a torture tactic?

A door opened somewhere behind her.

Here we go, she thought, trying to ignore the fact she was strapped down and naked. Lack of clothing was *not* her biggest issue right now. Besides, whatever they doled out, she was going to give back tenfold once she figured out how to free herself.

“Awake at last. I was beginning to think the transporters had overdosed you.”

Huh. That wasn't the voice she'd imagined when she thought of Dominic's wife. She'd expected gritty, harsh, a little obnoxious. In reality, she was almost melodic, more... personable. Even if the words she spoke were utter bullshit.

“That would be a shame, wouldn't it?” Myna shot back. “One less mouse for your experiments.”

Something clunked beneath her, raising the back of the chair—or table, whatever it was—so she was sitting up, staring blearily at a reflection of herself in a wall-length mirror. Hell, she was definitely going to have to work at freeing herself from all the cuffs and chains.

“Do you restrain all your guests like they're at a high security prison?”

The woman who walked into view again exceeded Myna's expectations. This was no short, dumpy freak in a lab coat. She was a couple of inches shorter than Myna, sure, and she had some curves, but *dumpy* was nowhere in the vicinity.

It was gratifying, but not much comfort, to be right about the lab coat.

Blonde hair, ruthlessly twisted into a knot at the base of the other woman's neck, silver threads of age weaving through the glossy gold. Rectangular, wire-rimmed glasses perched on the end of a prim nose, as the blue eyes behind the lenses scanned down a clipboard.

Shame about the makeup she was using to conceal her age. Far too much of it in play, without the finer touch to blend it in properly. Or perhaps the bitch had been in a rush to greet her husband's new broodmares.

“Until they learn their place, yes. This is easier than chasing hysterical women through the halls.” Still reading, the woman dragged her fingernail down the board, then set it aside on the counter running along the wall to Myna's left. “There are a few rules we abide by here. Obey them and we won't have an issue.”

Gritting her teeth, Myna barely refrained from telling her they already *had* an issue. The big fucking issue of being drugged and kidnapped along with her friends. But with those friends nowhere in sight, being polite might be more productive than acting like a raging bitch. “Am I allowed to see Anarchy and Caera?”

“Cool one, aren't you? Most are screaming by now or crying. I despise it when they cry.” Shrugging that off, the blonde regarded her with neutrality. “My name is Doctor Rita Fairfax. This is my home, and you will respect it and me while you're under my roof, however long that might be. Make no

mistake, you will *not* be alive when you leave, but the remainder of your time breathing depends on you.”

Well, when she put it like that...the bitch wasn't going to get a rise out of her, no way. Rita obviously had her spiel down pat, but unless she whipped a knife from her pristine white coat and cut Myna's throat with it here and now, nothing was swaying her from the belief that the cavalry was already in motion.

When they arrived, hell was gonna rain down on this shithole.

“The rules are as follows,” Rita continued, studying her face as though insects were drawing patterns on her skin, probably searching for weaknesses to exploit. “I am in charge. When I give an order, you obey it. Any attempt at escape will result in the death of you and your child. Until Dominic approves you, you are nothing important, simply the free product that came along with what we ordered.”

Like they were takeout, Myna thought with disgust. “All right.”

Blue eyes narrowing with suspicion, Rita stalked away in low-slung heels to the counter. Metal clanged on metal, then she returned with a tray. Slotting it into the side of the exam table, she selected a penlight, clicking it on and beaming it into Myna's eyes.

Flinching, she hissed as the light burned.

“Why are you so amicable about this? Are you more susceptible to the drugs used to subdue you?” Evidently baffled by her captive's behavior, Rita scowled. With an angry

click of the penlight, she dropped it back on the tray. “Your behavior reflects the fifth stage of the process.”

It wasn't hard to guess what the stages were. Fear, denial, despair, resignation, acceptance. She wondered if death was considered the sixth and final step in Rita's *process*.

“I want to be with my friends,” Myna stated simply. “It seems more prudent to offer compliance than aggression.”

The woman grunted softly. “There are tests to be done. If, while those tests are being carried out, you continue to act like a rational human being, I will permit you to return to the others. Perhaps you'll be a positive influence on my daughter-in-law and the defective.”

Oh, that was almost enough to snap her leash. The *defective* was terrified because of what this monster did to her when she was a goddamn child. The only influence Myna intended to be on Caera was a bolstering one; the girl needed to find her spine again, fast.

“What kind of tests?” She tried to cradle Peanut, but the chains pinning her wrists to her sides were too short.

“Whatever I require.”

The bitch's requirements were many, as it turned out.

Myna lost track of time as she was stuck with needles, violated with a catheter, rigged up to heart and blood pressure monitors. Her stomach roiled sourly as Peanut came under the spotlight, her heart aching as he showed on the ultrasound screen in 3D.

“I wouldn't get attached,” Rita commented absently, pressing harder with the transducer. “Should Dominic decide

you don't fit our needs, neither of you will live long. If he recruits you, the boy will be removed after birth, and you will join the others during your recovery period."

Bile seared her throat. "And my son?"

"Normally, we don't keep substandard products in the training program. However, with our stocks being depleted due to circumstances out of our control, it's possible we may choose to enroll him for a time." Apparently satisfied by whatever she saw, Fairfax began packing up the equipment. "Fortunately, Lizzie was correct, and you are having a boy. Substandard females are disposed of, usually at the time of recruitment."

Shit, the bile just kept coming, rising in a burning tide. Control slipping, Myna gagged. It wasn't hard to decipher what the bitch meant. Of course, they wouldn't think twice about kidnapping an already pregnant woman, then terminating the pregnancy so the poor woman was ready to breed with a better prospect. "By substandard, you mean not fathered by Dominic?"

"Precisely." Rita almost seemed pleased. "I'm surprised you know so much about how we operate. Your relationship with Loki Jackson has been brief and rocky, by all accounts. Why would they include you so soon?"

Because they were trying to warn me away from the danger you pose probably wasn't the answer she wanted, Myna thought. "Because we're friends."

"Idiotic societal constructs. What has this *friendship* accomplished, other than pulling you into a situation you have

no business being involved in? Are you expecting the rest of your friends to come riding to your rescue like white knights?”

“We both know they’re coming.”

“Undoubtedly. The men in my son’s life appear committed to their women, so it stands to reason they’ll attempt a breach of the compound. The last lot weren’t so lucky, were they? Messy deaths. Needless, really, when all we want is our son.”

“Dropping him an email wouldn’t work?”

Rita’s expression said she wasn’t impressed. “I’m sure he’s told you all manner of lies about his upbringing. The truth is, perhaps we didn’t value him as much as we should have. Jasper remains our most prideful achievement despite his diversion away from the path we chose for him.”

“Loving him might have helped.”

“Love doesn’t lay the foundations for a strong soldier. Discipline, training, strict guidelines, *those* are the key elements for creating perfection.” Lifting her hand to end the discussion, Rita moved over to the counter and opened one of the drawers. Shaking pills into her palm from three different bottles, she brought them over to Myna, along with an uncapped bottle of water. “Vitamins, minerals, everything a fetus needs for growth and development.”

Hell, no. Referring to Peanut as a fetus was one way to get her hackles up, but there was nothing on fucking earth powerful enough to compel her to take anything concocted in this hell. “Thanks, but I don’t take candy from strangers.”

“I have them in suppository form.”

Okay, as far as unspoken threats went, that one was a doozy. Having those creepy as fuck hands near her pussy had been deeply disturbing, but having the lunatic's fingers *inside* her, pushing drugs up her ass? That was a firm, unbreakable hard limit.

“If you do anything—*anything*—that harms my baby, I will break your neck into so many pieces, the coroner will have to piece it back together like a jigsaw puzzle.”

The crazy bitch just smiled in satisfaction. “Dominic is going to love that sassy attitude. He prefers his projects to give him a challenge, focus his attention after a busy day. The ones who snap and snarl and fight have the additional benefit of taking longer to break.”

“Good luck with that. After the shit I've been through recently, all my easily breakable bits are locked in an airtight safe.”

“You'll make strong sons,” Rita mused with interest. She fisted one hand in Myna's hair, tugging her head back so pain bit deep into her scalp, dropping the pills into her mouth when it dropped open in response.

Myna didn't have time to spit them back at her before the bottle jammed between her lips, and the fucking psychopath squeezed the plastic, so water literally fountained into her mouth. It was either swallow or drown, and she felt herself gulp in an effort to save herself.

The bottle was pulled away.

Coughing as some of the water choked her, Myna glowered at the smugly amused bitch. “That was rude.”

“Over the years I’ve wasted too much time being reasonable. I’m done with you for now. Once the mild sedative kicks in, you’ll be escorted to your living quarters. I would expect a visit from Dominic sometime this evening, he’s eager to become acquainted with his new prizes.”

Vitamins, my ass, she thought sourly. All the sedatives a growing boy needed during his development. As her vision started to blur around the edges, Myna dreamed of how she was going to make the bitch pay. “We’re not the spoils of war.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. Jasper declared war when he refused to come home, when that thing he married murdered Gerald, and Heisler terminated Erik. Two perfect killing machines snuffed out. All that time, training, and genetic design gone to the dogs.” Anger seething in the woman’s tone, she curled her lip in disgust. “They’re paying for it now, aren’t they? Three of their women snatched from their grasp, and that whorehouse of sin they love so much nothing but smoking rubble. There’s something primal about death and destruction, isn’t there?”

Gerald and Erik? She didn’t know those men. As her eyes began to roll and drift of their own accord, Myna managed to slur, “Who died?”

“I don’t bother myself with names, dear. They’re dead now, what does it matter?”

It mattered a great fucking deal when it was her friends who were in the line of fire. Grief stabbed her repeatedly in the heart as their faces floated through her foggy mind. There wouldn’t be any normality for a long time after this. Death left

gaping holes, and if she survived this nightmare, what kind of hell would she be going back to?

The beat of the heart monitor was the last thing she heard, but as the drugs claimed her, it was Loki's handsome face and dark, soulful eyes that followed her into the black.

The boy had sacrificed himself.

Loki closed his eyes and took a deep breath as Atticus' SUV followed the ambulance carrying Wyatt's remains to the hospital morgue. It was going to be an image that haunted him for the rest of his life, the sight of their friend so badly damaged that he was barely recognizable.

Fire was a cleanser, but by God, it was merciless.

They'd kept their promise to Liam, forming a guard around the boy—and wasn't it fucking stupid calling him a boy when he'd been not much older than Loki and Liam—until his body was in the correct hands.

Wyatt hadn't been the best man, certainly not when it came to Sierra. His love for her had been skewed by his dissatisfaction with her life and her choices, and his aversion to her physical conditions wasn't something he'd been able to hide.

He'd caused her pain, and that was something Liam had been working on making him atone for. Wounds like that weren't healed overnight, but Sierra had forgiven him because she was a sensitive little soul at heart, and she believed that being included in the relationship with Liam would help him on the right path.

While Wyatt's attitude had changed, particularly under his Dom's watchful eye, but there'd still been moments when the asshole crept out for a stinging swipe at their shy submissive. Maybe, with time, he'd have become an exemplary example of a changed man, learning from the Dom who cherished Sierra with everything he possessed.

But Wyatt's clock had stopped, and there was no more time.

"Drop me off at the hospital," Thane said out of the blue.

"We're all going to the motherfucking hospital," Atticus responded gruffly, keeping a respectful distance behind the rig. There were no lights, no sirens, because the person on board was already well beyond help.

"It's not a coincidence that Dominic took out Avalon so soon after kidnapping the girls. Perhaps it wasn't his intention to blow it up today, but if there were explosives in the damn walls, he was going to take it out at some point. This is a distraction to pull our focus away from Montana, to keep us close to home." Thane's voice was grim, colder than Loki had ever heard it. "An explosion of that size and power, he didn't intend to leave any survivors. My guess is he had cameras in there and gave orders to detonate as soon as the guys figured out the place was rigged to blow."

"Why not detonate before they found the explosives?" Loki asked.

"Atticus wasn't in there."

The Daddy Dom tipped his head in Thane's direction. "I've been hunting him for months, causing him trouble every which

way he turns. Cutting into his financials, whittling away at his men. Makes sense he'd want me out of the way."

"Easier to put a bullet in your head," Loki pointed out.

"That's reassuring, thanks."

"What do we know about Dominic? He likes to be noticed, he enjoys dramatics and flare, as long as it doesn't draw attention to their business. Hiring a sniper isn't dramatic. For too many, it's a job to check off on a to-do list." As a former sniper for hire, Thane probably knew that better than most. "Blowing up a kink club not only gives him that thrill of a big, flashy win, but offers him camouflage. All the hate shit going around, focusing on the LGBT community? It's a pretty good cover. The police will likely investigate and write it off as a hate crime that cost three men their lives—one of whom was in a menage relationship with a woman and a bisexual Dom."

"They won't write anything off," Att snarled. "Not when one of our people died and gouged a fucking hole in our family."

"You know as well as I do, Dominic covers his ass. They might be able to trace the explosives so far, if they're lucky. The new crew who came in to finish the club rehab after the other lot walked out are going to be the main suspects for rigging the place, but they'll have false identification, nothing that can be tracked back to Fairfax. They're in the wind already."

"So, who has he pinned it on?" Loki wondered. "That asshole doesn't leave loose ends dangling. Somewhere, he's linked it to someone."

“I don’t know, but that’s a problem for another day when our foundations aren’t crumbling faster than we can rebuild. We need to call Connie so she can be prepared. Drop me at the hospital. I’ll stay with Braun and Liam until they’re discharged, and make sure Zeke’s okay.” Thane rubbed his chin. “You need to make your move, Att, while Dominic’s busy gloating. The window of opportunity is short; he knows we’re going to need to regroup. As much as it pains me to say it, mourning Wyatt must wait.”

Fingers tapping on the steering wheel, Atticus was quiet. Eventually, he shook his head. “I’ll assign Sonic to go to the hospital. Braun and Liam know her, and she won’t be as conspicuous as you if Dominic has men sniffing around keeping tabs on them.”

“She has bright blue hair,” Loki said dryly.

“Dominic’s men will know Thane by sight. If we’re going to Montana locked and loaded, then I need my goddamn sniper. Sonic has her own vehicle, so she can drive the guys home if and when they’re discharged.”

“It’s doubtful Dominic will attempt to finish off either of them, or Zeke. She’ll be safer at the hospital than at home,” Thane murmured, almost apologetically. “Logically, strategically, that would be the next place to strike, but I think Dominic is arrogant enough to believe we’ll be in a tailspin long enough for him to get some playtime in with his new toys.”

“Hey!” Loki snapped.

“Saying it how it is, that’s all. From what Connie’s said, his attention is going to be on Anarchy and Caera more than

Myna. Archie's been his main goal, and Caera is the lost treasure. He's going to want to torment them, torture them mentally before he does anything more, but I wouldn't like to put a time limit on how long he'll play those games before he steps it up a level."

"His own daughter." Loki shuddered. In one respect, he was grateful for the son in Myna's womb. He didn't have to worry quite so much about his child being raped, although with sick perverts like Dominic still breathing, it wasn't something that could ever be ruled out. "Do we know who's going to Montana?"

"Braun and Liam are out, obviously. We need Jasper. Thane, you, and Saul if he's got his temper under control."

Thane sighed. "We need Connie."

"No. We're not risking any more women."

"There are three women who are being held against their will, facing horrors we can't imagine. They're going to need support."

"There are more at home who are going to be alone, with their Doms walking into the firing line to save their friends. Sierra's lost one lover, and the rock she leans on is in the hospital with smoke inhalation and a broken arm. Connie's needed here, and she'll be a damn sight safer."

"We should clone her." The words jumped from Loki's mouth before he realized he'd spoken aloud. "I mean, if we had six of her, this wouldn't be an issue."

Thane snorted. "No, but my dick would have several."

“Well, you could share,” Loki pointed out, knowing damn well that despite all the Masters loving her like a sister, not one of them would trade their subs for a carbon copy of her.

Thane’s response was a growl.

“Connie stays at home.” Atticus’s tone brooked no argument. “As soon as we get the girls out, they’ll be on a flight back. Whatever trauma needs to be dealt with will have to wait until they’re home.”

The big guy sounded a hell of a lot more confident about that outcome than Loki felt.

“Call Connie, update her. Try and keep the girls away from the news until we get home, if they haven’t already found out about Avalon. Ask her to send Sonic to meet us at the hospital; we’ll stay with the guys until she arrives.”

“And then it’s go time?”

“Then we bring Dominic to his fucking knees, one way or another.”

“That missile’s looking pretty good now, right?”

“If the girls weren’t being held captive there, I’d drop a fucking nuke on the bastard,” Atticus said darkly. “But with any luck, we won’t need one.”

Loki crossed his fingers and toes in solidarity.

“*Pssst*. Myna. Myna, wake up.”

Something cold was tapping her cheek, over and over. Grumbling, Myna swiped clumsily at it, irritated by the disturbance. She’d been floating somewhere dark and warm,

away from the niggling feeling that something was desperately, horribly wrong.

“Come on, wake up. We’re breaking out of here.”

Breaking out of where? A second later, the memories came flooding in, all the way back to the meeting at the clinic. Instinctively, she curled her arms around her belly, cradling Peanut protectively.

Opening her eyes carefully against the sharpness of the light, she found herself staring into big, brown eyes full of steely determination and a trace of fear. Not Loki’s, which was a shame. Nose to nose with Archie, she blinked. “Where are we going?”

“Oh, good, you’re lucid. Come on,” the feisty blonde ordered again, wriggling herself into a sitting position. “We have to find a way out. They took Caera hours ago and haven’t brought her back yet. We need to go get her and take cover somewhere safe.”

Mind still a little lagged, Myna frowned. “I don’t think anywhere is safe here.”

They were in a cell, that much was obvious. White walls, no windows. A stainless-steel toilet and sink in one corner, and three metal beds against the walls. There was a small table bolted to the back of the solid door, an inch off the floor, and she saw a flap cut out, but sealed.

Only opening from the outside, she guessed, trying to focus on it. Big enough to pass food or a jug of juice through. God, she was never drinking anything orange again.

“The tracker’s still working,” Archie hissed. “Either they’re not jamming the signal, or Att’s technology is superior.”

Surprised, Myna sat up, a little too quickly. As her head spun, she sucked in a breath to counteract the brief flare of nausea. “You’re wearing a tracker? Did Jasper put a chip in you?”

Shaking her head, pressing a finger to her lips, Anarchy reached down between her legs and tapped a fingertip to the shiny silver ring in her clit. The small blue jewel set into the metal sparked in the overbright lights, the same color as Jasper’s eyes.

That clever sonofabitch.

“They could have given us some damn clothes,” Myna muttered, acknowledging the tracker with a nod of her head. “Have they got cameras on us?”

“Oh yeah. I got bored waiting for you to wake up.” Lifting her hand to the door, she raised her middle finger in salute at the steady red light above it. “Definitely visual. Not sure about audio. Guess we’ll find out if they come in and take my ring. Doesn’t matter anyway, Jasper and the Masters will already be on a plane.”

“This is why you’re not huddled in a corner, crying?”

“Won’t do me any good, will it? Besides, we need to be strong for Caera. If we break, so will she. Me and my girls,” she patted her bump to include them, “aren’t pushovers. Rita can bluster and spill her vile venom wherever she likes, but we’re not afraid of her.”

Remembering what the bitch had said before the drugs kicked in, Myna wondered whether she should say something. If Avalon was gone and people were dead, Anarchy needed to know, to be prepared, but what if Rita had said it only to unsettle them? Grieving captives were less likely to cause trouble, at least until the tears dried up.

Before she could say anything, locks thumped open on the outside of the door, and it swung open with a creak of rusty hinges. One man, armed with a baton, stood guard as two more dragged in a limp, silent Caera and dropped her on one of the beds with all the care they'd show a dead dog.

Wordlessly, they left, locking the door again.

“Caera!” Anarchy slipped off Myna's cot and waddled across to their friend as Myna managed to swing her legs off the edge and stand. “Oh baby.”

Shivering uncontrollably, Caera huddled into herself, her arms around her stomach. Bruises were forming rapidly along her arms and legs, mostly from punishing grips by unforgiving hands, but a few were welting.

Making it to the other bed without falling, Myna perched on the opposite side of the girl, so she was supported front and back. Resting her hand on Caera's shoulder, she was horrified to find her friend was so cold to the touch.

“We need to get her warm,” Myna told Anarchy, and in unison they managed to squeeze onto the narrow bed with Caera sandwiched between them.

“There are bruises around her throat,” Archie whispered, eyes blazing with hatred. “They fucking beat her.”

“B-Because I e-escaped once,” Caera stuttered. “They won’t let it happen a-again.”

“Baby, we’re going to kill every last one of these fuckers for touching you. They just punched the uber-Dom button without even realizing it.” Tears glimmering, Anarchy cuddled Caera from the front as Myna mimicked her from behind.

They were stripped down to their barest form, Myna thought darkly. Naked, without blankets to keep warm. A psychological attack on their pride, their modesty, their insecurities.

Caera hiccupped. “They’re going to kill my baby.”

“Like hell they are,” Myna said indignantly.

“Dominic doesn’t want a bastard girl. They’re going to kill her tomorrow, take her away.” Her voice grew more strangled by the word. “My daughter. Saul’s daughter. We’re never going to get to hold her, to love her. She’ll never take a first breath. There won’t even be a grave for her, a marker to show she existed. They want her gone.”

The urge to protect swamped her. As she cradled the trembling girl in her arms, feeling every involuntary quiver of fear, Myna’s jaw locked. Sometimes she forgot just how young these two were compared to her, the trials they’d already faced.

She was the oldest. Did that make it easier to fall into the role of group mother? It seemed so, because the emotions bubbling through her were completely maternal. She’d stand in front of both these women because it was what any mother would do, but it occurred to her that she might have to make a

choice if the guys didn't hurry up and get their asses to Montana.

The child of her body, or the children of her heart.

Which would she save?

God, her hormones were on the fritz if she was thinking of Caera and Archie as her children, for fuck's sake. Yes, she was a few years older, but that didn't automatically relegate them into—

Caera sniffled miserably, and Myna's instincts roared to life.

“Listen to me. You are not alone, Caera. We're not going to stand back and let them take something that belongs to you and Saul. They don't get to kill babies because the kid isn't what they want.” Temple resting against Caera's, she met Archie's supportive gaze. “But you have to dig deep and help us. Being afraid is a horrible feeling, especially when you come face to face with what scares you. This isn't the time to give in, sweetie. This is the time to find your spine and snap it straight, because we're in the middle of a clusterfuck.”

“That's the worst of all the fucks,” Anarchy added, trying to add a lighter tone.

“Our friends are coming for us, our men are going to do whatever it takes to get us out of here, but we aren't just going to sit here and wait for them. We have a job to do, Caera. Do you know what it is?”

She shook her head, but her body language was changing subtly. Saul's frightened little rabbit might be running the show, but the woman inside her who was Jasper's blood,

who'd survived the Fairfaxes before, was sitting up and listening.

“Keeping our babies alive. By any means necessary. Keeping them safe runs hand in hand with protecting ourselves.” And if that wasn't possible, if it came down to exchanging one life for another, Myna would rather her son die with her than be raised for even a single hour by these monsters.

That wouldn't happen, she reassured herself silently. One thing she truly believed was that Loki and their friends already had a plan in mind. Jasper would single-handedly tear down any barrier or building in his path to get to Anarchy, and she sensed a dark vein of violence in Saul.

“I think we should try and get some rest.” Anarchy stifled a yawn, her eyes heavy. “Whatever Rita has tucked up her sleeve for us isn't going to be pleasant. I vote we don't eat or drink anything they give us unless we absolutely have to.”

“Not after the stunt Lizzie pulled,” Myna muttered, her lip curling in disdain.

Caera's head lifted. “Lizzie?”

“You don't remember? That backstabbing whore is the whole reason we're here. She drugged the damn juice, knocked everyone in the room out. The guards too, I think,” she said slowly, recalling the jug Lizzie had taken outside. “Doctor fucking Do-Good is working with these asshats.”

“No. No, that's not possible. She passed every one of Atticus's tests before we even got in touch with her. I ran the

background check on her myself.” Archie’s brown eyes were wide with shock, glinting with hurt.

“I heard her just before the drugs dragged me down. She’s in this, right up to her slender neck.”

“Fuck. We treated her like family. She was in Att’s home, she touched us...”

“She’ll pay.” Caera’s voice cracked like a gunshot. “The Masters will make sure she does.”

“If she hasn’t bolted already.”

“It won’t matter.” Finally, something powerful was rising inside Caera. The shiver of her muscles was altering, becoming less fearful and more...aggressive. “She broke our trust, our confidence. Atticus wants to eradicate every trace of Dominic and Rita, dismantle the entire operation and disintegrate the pieces. If Lizzie did this to us, that makes her a part of it, no matter how small. Running only turns her into a loose end, and Atticus won’t leave any of those alive.”

“Are you finally with us, sweetie?” Anarchy asked.

Blowing out a breath, Caera nodded slowly. “This is the last straw. I *liked* her. It makes me wonder who else in our life they’ve corrupted for their benefit.” She grasped Archie’s hand as she leaned back into Myna, connecting all of them. “Ever since we figured out that Jasper’s my half-brother, I’ve been afraid. Knowing the guys were hunting Dominic, I’ve been scared because I knew this day would come. Everything comes full circle eventually, right?”

“One way or another,” Archie agreed.

“I can’t promise I’ll be the bravest, but I’ll do my best not to let the side down. It’ll help when they’re dead, when they can’t come back. Maybe then the nightmares will stop.”

Her mouth to God’s ear, Myna thought. Loki had explained the predicament Caera lived in, how she couldn’t sleep for more than a few hours without waking up screaming. Finding Saul had been a blessing—he watched her while she slept, rousing her at the first sign of a nightmare and letting her slide back into slumber.

Being here without him wasn’t going to be fun for any of them, but Archie was right. They’d have to resist whatever offerings Rita shoved through that damn hole in the door for as long as they could. Slipping drugs into food and drink seemed to be the popular method of subduing them, so resting as much and as often as possible to conserve their energy was all they could do.

Conversation dropped off as Anarchy’s eyes began to droop. She was exhausted and, despite her brave façade, lines of stress were etching grooves into her face. Not once had she mentioned that she’d been to visit Rita in that horrible room, or what the woman had in store for her.

That didn’t bode well, in Myna’s opinion.

Caera’s body was limp and relaxed, her breathing steady. If she was asleep, God only knew how long her peace would last.

Despite the bright lights, the warmth and closeness of another body was comforting enough that Myna let her guard down. Eyes closed, she floated on the fine line between consciousness and sleep, trusting herself not to fall all the way.

Stress was tiring, eating away at her already overtaxed system.

Dozing, she sent a prayer to anyone who might be listening, asking for the cavalry to arrive before their captors began tearing them apart, piece by piece.

She jerked awake, completely disorientated.

There was no clock to tell the time, no windows to gauge how long she'd been asleep. Another psychological torture, designed to blank out the outside world and keep them trapped in the here and now. Soon, they would begin to wonder if they'd been here for a day or a week, with no way to monitor the passage of time.

Shivering, her back and limbs feeling the chill, Myna groaned softly and tried to move. She was stiff in all the wrong places, wrapped uncomfortably around Caera. Her bladder was full, to the point she was already talking herself into crossing the cold room to use the equally cold steel toilet.

Her friends were still asleep, but Caera was unnaturally tense. Stroking the girl's arm in soothing motions, Myna hoped she wouldn't start screaming. The guards didn't appear to be in possession of an ounce of compassion, and they were too attached to those nasty batons for her liking.

“So, you're the unexpected addition to my new project,” a voice said, startling her with its proximity. Male, mature, a touch of amusement in the quiet tone. “My wife believes I'll enjoy breaking you. I prefer to pick my own breeding bitches, but in this instance, I think she's right.”

Disgust coiling in her stomach, Myna turned her head slowly to look at the foot of the bed.

There was more than a passing resemblance to Jasper, she decided, studying the man as he watched her. Jasper was perhaps taller and would have definitely filled out the ten-thousand dollar suit much better than this asshole, but the facial similarities told her that this was, without doubt, the sadist's father.

They almost had the same eyes, although Dominic's were a deeper shade of blue. She preferred the arctic blue of Jasper's, the sharpness and honesty of them. They didn't hold the shadows and murky darkness of a tainted soul, not like these.

Like his son, the father had shockingly white hair, only he sported a moustache like some kind of accessory. He probably thought it was attractive, but in her opinion, it only added weight to the pedophile side of the scales.

Where Jasper's sadism was ruthlessly controlled, Dominic's was unapologetically blatant, sparking in his eyes like moonlight off a rabid wolf's fangs.

"I think it's time for my other acquisitions to wake up and meet their new master," he purred. "Why don't you do the honors? You can refuse," he added when she hesitated, not wanting to drag them into this fresh hell before she absolutely had to, "but my men would be more than happy to do it for you."

Myna's gaze shot to the two men standing by the door. Thickset, steroidal goons, lightly smacking brutal batons against meaty palms. Dead eyes, she noted, the kind that were

like a shark's. They'd roll up white in pleasure when they went in for the kill.

One smirked at her, changing his grip on the thick rubber shaft so that he dragged it phallically through his fingers.

Brilliant. The dangers just kept multiplying.

Shoulders sagging, she leaned over Caera to shake Anarchy awake. When sleepy brown eyes blinked at her, Myna shook her head and shifted her focus to the right. Beneath her hand, Anarchy went rigid as she realized they were no longer alone.

After giving her a supporting squeeze, Myna ran her hand along Caera's arm as she murmured in her ear. "Baby, you need to wake up now. You need to be strong, remember? Don't panic, just fucking breathe."

It took longer than it should have to rouse the girl, long minutes where Myna expected a baton to come crashing down on them, but eventually Caera groaned tiredly and asked, "What now?"

"All right, we've wasted enough time. On your feet, in a line facing me." A jerk of Dominic's head set his minions into action. "I expect you know what my projects entail by now. It's refreshing to have some new blood—some familial blood—coming into the program."

Caera was dead white. Eyes huge, she stared at him as though the monster from under her bed had finally clawed its way out. In a way, that was true. This was her father, her personal demon.

The first goon grabbed Myna by the arm, yanking her up off the bed without time to find her feet. Dragging her across

the floor on her knees, he almost tore her shoulder from the socket as he pulled her to standing.

The second one rounded the bed, snagging Archie by the hair and using it as a leash to tow her across the room to take her place beside Myna.

When the first thug returned to the bed for Caera, Dominic lifted his hand to stop him. Rolling his shoulders beneath the silky fabric of his suit jacket, he stepped around to the side of the bed, his grin flashing maliciously when Caera shrank away from him.

“My pretty girl, look how you’ve grown,” he crooned, reaching down to grasp her wrist in an iron hold. He tugged her off the bed, almost reverently, and studied her as though she was a rare artifact. “Such a bad girl, letting me believe you were dead all these years. I told Rita we should wait and let you mature, but she was adamant we get rid of you. A waste of resources,” he murmured, using his free hand to tilt her bruised face to the light, tsking in sympathy. “Did she take her jealousy out on you, my darling?”

Myna’s stomach knotted at the seductive purr in his voice. This wasn’t a father talking to his long-lost daughter; this was a man trying to soothe a wounded beast so he could get his own damn way. She took a step forward, intending to...fuck, to do *something*, but the slap of a baton across her breasts doubled her over in pain.

“Do not interfere with family,” Dominic growled without taking his eyes off his daughter. “Your presence here is simply a bonus for me; your son’s survival is dependent on my generosity. Take another step out of place again, and my men

will gain great pleasure in breaking your legs until the bones are nothing but dust.”

Cupping her stinging flesh, Myna gritted her teeth. She’d choke on her scream before she gave him the satisfaction of hearing it.

“There’s nothing to fear here, Caera. Once we dispose of this inferior product inside you, Rita will make sure you’re fit and ready for the next step in your journey. The journey you should have taken long before now.” He settled his palm over her stomach, a look of distaste on his face. “The new, improved line of Fairfaxes will be nurtured here. Linebred for absolute perfection. Warriors will be created between us.”

Anarchy snarled, “Get your hands off her, you fucking pervert.”

Bending his head, Dominic brushed a kiss over Caera’s mouth, making her gag. Ignoring her impending nausea, he pushed her into line, then turned his attention to Archie. “I’d recognize you anywhere. Another very naughty girl, killing Gerald. He wasn’t the smartest of my offspring, but he was loyal and knew how to obey orders down to the letter. That transgression led to the capture of Erik, didn’t it? My wife holds you responsible for the loss of them both, but I...well, I say they got what they deserved.”

She jerked back. “Huh?”

“Gerald should have been able to contain you with ease. The fact that he didn’t shows you were able to outwit him, and that mistake cost him dearly. There will be no repercussions for that from me.” He walked around her, trailing his fingertips across her skin. “Jasper, however, is going to pay for not only

eluding me, but for his betrayal. His children will be part of what he so desperately wants to end, and he will father many. These are just the start,” he warned, poking her belly. “The first time I fuck you, I’ll make him watch. He’s lost any right to this body, and he’ll learn that his actions have consequences.”

Baring her teeth, Archie glared at him. “Sounds like an enormous repercussion to me. You don’t want to punish him; he’s everything you dreamed he would be, except for the fact he has a conscience. Controlling him is your end game, and there’s no fucking way I’m letting you turn me into a goddamn shock collar for him.”

Myna winced, sensing the tension in the room change, crackling with animosity. The goons shifted, batons primed to strike, but Dominic was faster. Her own nipples, still stinging from the thug’s strike across her breasts, cried in sympathy as he snagged Archie by the right nipple, twisting the bud until she rose onto her toes.

“Handy things, piercings,” he sneered, rotating his wrist slowly. “Breeding stock aren’t usually allowed body adornments, but seeing how effective they are at shutting a whore’s mouth, perhaps I should reconsider my stance.”

Lips white, tightly pressed together, Archie didn’t make a sound. Her breath huffed through her nose in short, sharp bursts. As the seconds ticked past, her muscles began to shake with the effort to control herself.

“You will be whatever I want you to be.” Dominic’s sadistic side was well and truly alive now, his nostrils flaring wide as the first hint of blood caught his attention. “If I have to

make you bleed, wrench screams from your throat until your vocal cords scar, or just beat the attitude out of you, I will. My son will return to my command, one way or another.”

Bracing for the batons to rain down on her, Myna lifted onto the balls of her feet, preparing to charge him. The man was more brutal than she ever thought, even with what she'd been told. The threat of him was potent, his insanity a stench in the air.

Archie's eyes slid over to her, wetness gathering on her lashes. She shook her head in tiny movements, warning her not to do anything.

It galled, but Myna understood. If she tackled him now, she'd be taken down swiftly. Battles needed to be picked carefully, and Caera was the one who they'd go to war for. Being broken and bloody in the morning meant she wouldn't be able to fight, and Anarchy would be no match for these two knuckleheads when they came for Dominic's prize.

Blood dripped in a thin line over his fingers now, the bar in Archie's nipple rending delicate flesh.

Suddenly, the crazy blonde broke her silence, not with a declaration of pain, but a long, low laugh that startled them all. “Do you think Jasper hasn't done all of that to me? My husband is a goddamn sadist; you can't hold a candle to him.” Teeth flashing in a feral grin, she stared at the asshole directly in the eyes, fearlessly. “Threaten all you want, Dominic. Go through with it if you dare. Just understand that once you start, there is no going back. Whatever you do to me, it's coming right back at you.”

He scoffed, but it seemed to Myna as though some of the pressure he exerted lessened. “Jasper likes a brazen attitude. I don’t.”

Archie’s grin only widened. “Bet you don’t like the taste of your own cock either, but you won’t have a choice when I cut it off and stuff it down your throat.”

The shock on Dominic’s face was worth memorializing. He blinked at her, astounded, as his mouth worked soundlessly for a few seconds.

He wasn’t used to breeding stock giving back as good as they got, Myna realized. She imagined most women were scared shitless when they came into his possession, alone and unaware of what was happening. They’d beg and plead, feeding his megalomaniac appetite until his ego damn near exploded.

But this...a pint-sized blonde daughter-in-law rendered him speechless.

His hand fell away from her breast, blood smearing his fingers. Only a moment later, his palm connected with her cheek with a crack, snapping her head around. Chest heaving with seething anger, a tic appeared beneath his left eye. “Jasper will be lucky if there’s anything left of you by the time he comes home.”

Still smiling, Archie straightened. “This coming from a grown man who slaps like a fucking girl.”

Obviously thrown by her, Dominic lifted his hand to strike again, then clenched his jaw. He took a step back, inclining his head. Indicating she’d won this small battle, but that he

intended to win the war. Once he'd dissected the last five minutes and found a way to worm beneath her bravado, he probably would.

When his eyes landed on Myna, her insides recoiled.

He wasn't going to keep beating on a woman who routinely got her kicks from being tied up and having her pleasure wrung out through pain. No, he'd already figured out how to get under Anarchy's skin, and that was to inflict her punishment on someone else.

Tag, you're it.

"Bring this one to me in the morning. If she doesn't come quietly, break her legs and drag her down to my office." Radiating sinister energy, he smirked, then strode away with the two thugs at his back. "Sleep well, won't you? All of you are going to have a busy, busy day."

Well, fuck.

Chapter Eleven

It was dark when they got home.

Braun and Liam were being kept overnight for observation, under Sonic's watchful eyes. The smoke inhalation was concerning, especially since Braun's lungs appeared to have taken the worst hit. Liam's arm was now in a cast, and he was being treated for shock, smoke inhalation, and burns.

Zeke...

Well, Zeke was in a bad way, Loki thought as he rubbed his hand over his face and stumbled over the threshold into the

house. The next twenty-four hours were crucial, but one thing was certain; he owed his life to Wyatt.

“How are we gonna break this to Sierra?” he asked quietly.

Thane studied himself, then Atticus and Loki. “It’s pretty evident something bad has happened. We stink, we’re covered in shit, and we all look like we just survived a tour in Baghdad. It’s in the eyes,” he explained when Atticus lifted an eyebrow. “Grief, exhaustion, stress...it’s unique.”

“We can all tell her,” Att said thoughtfully. “Offer a united front, group support.”

“No, she’s not comfortable yet with being around all of us, especially not without Liam.” Feeling antsy, his heart leaning toward Montana like a divining rod while his brain argued that the least they could do was destroy Sierra’s world as gently as they could, Loki pinched the bridge of his nose. “She has little tendencies, right? It so happens we have a giant, cuddly Daddy Dom in our sad and sorry troupe.”

“I spook her,” Atticus murmured. “She saw me spank Lisha and hasn’t quite forgiven me for whaling on her best friend’s butt.”

“Fine, I’ll do it.” Exasperated by the constant delays that kept popping up, just like Dominic wanted, Loki blew out a breath. “Go find Connie for backup. We should be in fucking Montana already, getting our girls back. Jasper’s probably broken out of his cell already and hitchhiked his way there.”

“Loki,” Atticus said darkly. “I promise you, we are wheels up at the first possible opportunity. We owe this to Liam, and we sure as hell owe it to Wyatt. Until Liam comes home,

we're all Sierra has, and if we're going to leave her here while we fly to a different state where good men have already died, she needs to know she has a solid place to land when she falls."

"I know. I know, all right? It's just...fuck, I can feel that asshole crawling under my skin, wondering what the hell he's doing to our women." He shrugged off Thane's hand and made a show of kicking off his soiled boots. "Find Connie. Have a sedative or something ready in case Sierra goes postal and tries to stab the messenger with her fabric scissors."

"Want me to come with?" Thane asked.

"No. Get a shower and clean up." He stalked past them into the kitchen, pausing by the sink to strip off his dirty shirt and scrub his hands and face. It wouldn't remove the stink of smoke and ruin from his hair or pants, but it might lessen the impact.

Nerves fluttered in his gut as he dried off and ran some semblance of dialogue through his head. How the hell was he supposed to tell her that her lovers were in the hospital, one on an oxygen machine and the other on a morgue slab?

Dragging his feet, just a bit, he walked down the long hallway to the games room, cracking the door open and peering in to gauge the situation.

Declan was asleep on Braun and Bodie's bed, sprawled like a tiny starfish on the covers, triggering an ache in Loki's chest. His son was in danger, and he might not have a chance to know him, to watch him grow like a weed the way Declan was.

Connie was nowhere in sight, but Bodie was sitting on Alicia's bed, stroking the girl's hair as they watched some inane comedy on the screen. Lisha was half asleep, and Bodie's attention flicked over to check on her son.

Sierra was still in her corner, concentrating on the stuffie in her hands.

Shit, this was going to be harder than he first thought. Usually, there was a gaggle of females to gather around in support whenever the bad stuff hit the fan, but they were down to just four now, and one of those was absent.

Blowing out a sharp breath, Loki pulled the door open and walked in, pressing his finger to his lips when Bodie's head turned to see who was there. She tilted her head curiously, then must have read his expression, because alarm filtered into those striking blue eyes.

Choosing a couch close to Sierra, he sat and spread his legs wide, bracing his elbows on his knees. "Sierra, sweetheart. Could you come here please?"

She blinked at him as though surprised he wanted her. Eyes sliding over to the other women, she slowly set the stuffie down and rose from her seat, approaching him warily. She stopped an arm's length away.

Leaning back, Loki patted his thigh. "Sit, sweetheart. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I..." She worried her lip between her teeth, inching forward until she perched like a feather where he indicated. Her nose wrinkled. "You smell funny."

“I know, sorry. It’s been a long day.” Curling an arm lightly around her waist, he steeled himself for what came next. From this moment on, he would be the bad guy in her head, the one who broke the news and became a constant reminder of the worst moment in her life. “Sierra, this is going to be hard to hear. There was an explosion earlier, at Avalon.” Rip the wound open quickly, not bit by bit. “Wyatt was killed, sweetheart. Liam’s alive, but he’s in the hospital.”

The light flicked off behind her eyes as though he’d flipped a switch. She stared at him blankly, her face slack with numb shock. Unblinking, unmoving.

A shadow fell over them, and Bodie planted herself in front of them, her hands clutched at her waist. “There was an explosion at the club?”

He held out his other arm, welcoming her in. She sat beside him, burying herself into his side. “Braun’s fine, baby. Some mild burns, but he sucked in some smoke. He’s in the hospital too, but the doctors are pleased with his status.”

She shuddered, her cold fingers kneading his pants for comfort. “A gas leak?”

“No. Dominic rigged the place to blow. There’s nothing left, baby, I’m sorry.”

“Who else? Who else did we lose this time?”

Stroking Sierra’s side with his hand, Loki sighed. “Two of the construction crew were killed. Braun and Liam made it out ahead of Wyatt and Zeke, but Zeke slipped and went down. Wyatt stopped to help, got them both out onto the porch when

the final blast ripped through. It sounds like Wyatt put himself between the explosion and Zeke, taking the brunt of it.”

“The house?”

“It took a hit. I don’t know if it will be structurally sound.”

Bodie nodded, tucking her face against his bare chest. “Will they be home soon?”

“No sooner than tomorrow.” He turned his head and rested his brow against Sierra’s. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

“Daddy?”

Goddamn it. Well, at least he wouldn’t be shattering another little’s heart tonight. Drawing Sierra closer to him, he looked at Alicia and was so fucking glad there was nothing wrong with Atticus. Her big blues were already wet, tears sliding down her cheeks as she stared at him.

“I need to hold Declan,” Bodie murmured, slipping from beneath his arm. “She needs you more right now.”

As Braun’s beloved rose and hurried over to cuddle their son, Loki gestured for Lisha to come in for a hug. He grunted as she launched herself into him, damn near crawling under his skin, leaving tears smeared over his chest. “Baby girl, your Daddy’s absolutely fine. Taking a shower, that’s all.”

“Are you sure?”

“He’s been with me all day, I promise.”

“It’s not fair.” She sniffled, voice stumbling on a sob. “Why does he need to hurt so many people? He can’t just steal our friends and kill them!”

Baffled, Loki frowned, wondering who the hell Atticus was kidnapping and terminating in his spare time, before it dawned on him that she meant Dominic. Christ, his brain was slowly reaching meltdown point, and there was still so much to fucking do. “Because he’s an asshole who thinks he can get away with it, Lisha.”

“We’re gonna make him pay?”

In fucking spades, he thought savagely. For every tear that fell, every drop of blood and bruised splotch, Dominic would make restitution. And in payment for Wyatt, for Braun, and Liam, and Zeke...well, when gamblers couldn’t repay their debts, the sharks got their pound of flesh regardless.

“Yeah, baby girl, we are.” Kissing the top of her silky black hair, he gave her a little pat. “Why don’t you go find your Daddy in the shower? I bet he could use some Lisha love right about now.”

Easing back, she bit her trembling lower lip as she studied Sierra. Seamlessly, she drifted from scared little girl into mature adult woman. “You should clean up, Loki. I’ll find Atticus when Connie gets back.” She rested her hand on Sierra’s thigh. “You have things to do, and Sierra needs someone familiar. Best friends forever,” she said sadly, when his eyebrow winged up. “She knows you, but you’re not Liam or Wyatt. Connie will know what to do.”

He couldn’t really argue with that, he supposed, but he was going to try. “I’m not sure leaving you alone with her is for the best, Lisha. She’s in shock, but we don’t know how she’ll react when she snaps out of it.”

Alicia patted his cheek. “She’s going to cry, Loki. She’s going to cry, and scream, and the pain is going to drag her down until she can’t think straight. I’ve got her, I promise. You need to shower, change, and get ready for the fight of your life. I’m a Little,” she reminded him dryly, “not stupid. Do you think I don’t know that this could be me by tomorrow?”

“I wonder how we ever managed to find ourselves such strong women.”

A trace of darkness tainted the blue. “We’re strong because we understand there are monsters out there, and we know that someone needs to fight them. Dominic is the biggest one of all, and he *must* die. My father was the same, don’t forget. A rabid animal in human skin.”

Loki nodded. Bodie and Alicia’s parents had been at the top of the evil totem pole long before Dominic knocked them off and replaced them. “All right, if you’re sure. Where did Connie go?”

In an instant, her expression became pure innocence. “I have no idea.”

“Lisha,” he said in a dangerous tone.

Her lips pursed. “It’s not any of my business if the Mistress found out that the doctor was involved in our friends’ kidnapping. Just as it’s none of your business if she decided that she was the best person to, ah...*extract* information from that doctor.”

“Oh Jesus Christ,” he hissed. Clutching Sierra close, he pushed to his feet and carried the grieving woman over to the nearest bed, laying her down gently. He brushed his lips over

her forehead as he pulled the covers over her. “Sweetheart, we can never bring him back, but we’ll do everything in our power to make it some kind of right. If you need anything, anything at all, you ask for it.”

She was sunk so far down, he doubted she heard him. She blinked slowly, like a doll with sticky eyelids, but there wasn’t even a hint of recognition or life in her eyes.

“Stay with her,” he ordered Alicia as she crawled onto the bed to curl against her friend. “If your Daddy comes in here, tell him he needs to get downstairs.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Rolling his eyes at the brat, he bolted for the door, barreling through it and charging down the hall to Atticus’s home office. His palm slammed down on the elevator panel before his feet stopped moving, then waited impatiently as the damn thing rose from the floors below. He heard water running in the bathroom, and hoped to God whoever was in there didn’t take forever to finish up.

Connie was a sensible, level-headed woman, he told himself repeatedly. A psychologist, for God’s sake. She’d sworn oaths or whatever the fuck they did, so she wasn’t going to break the one about doing no harm.

But she’d been tortured and abused in her early twenties, he remembered. She of all people knew what was waiting for the girls in the enemy camp. There were children at risk, lives of good friends—friends who were more like goddamn sisters to her—hanging in the balance.

The elevator doors pinged open. Throwing himself inside, he slapped the button for the lowest floor where the cells were before the doors opened fully. Atticus wouldn't house the doctor in a cushy office, not when they suspected her of being a key part of the kidnapping.

The metal box descended quickly, dropping smoothly to its destination, and he muscled his way out the second the doors cracked open again. There was security, he thought. Guards who wouldn't just let Connie waltz into a locked cell and interrogate a witness when she had no clearance.

But she was pretty fucking clever, utterly charming when required, and a hell of a Domme when charm didn't work.

The cells were empty when he got there. Breathing hard, he wondered where the hell everyone was. Saul was supposed to be here, babysitting Jasper so the sadist didn't do anything stupid, but it seemed that leaving the pair of them in each other's company had been a miscalculation.

Interrogation room, he decided, spinning around in his socked feet and running in the opposite direction. His lungs were burning, lecturing him on the idiocy of strenuous exercise after he'd downed a few good lungful's of smoke himself.

The wide glass window of the interrogation room was brightly lit. Like, glaringly so. Wincing against the strength of it, Loki peered inside and felt his heated blood cool to ice in his veins.

Jasper and Saul leaned against the wall, faces hard and impassive. He'd expected that level of animosity from Jasper, but the hatred in Saul's eyes was fucking impressive.

A body hit the other side of the window, making him jump back in surprise. It began to slide down the glass—no, not it, *she*—but Connie stepped into view, her hair disheveled, and gray eyes burning with loathing.

What the hell was she wearing?

Thane was gonna lose his shit when he saw her in those jeans—obviously Alicia’s, which meant they were *tight* in several places—and a black wifebeater that was a few sizes too big. It left her arms bare, and Loki watched as the right one bunched as she raised her fist, ready to swing.

“Never get in the middle of a catfight, Loki,” he admonished himself, barging through the door. Only this wasn’t a catfight, this was a systematic destruction of another person. “Connie, enough!”

Catching Lizzie by the throat, Connie glared at him. “You want a shot at her?”

God, did he. The urge to replace her hand with his and throttle the bitch until her eyes bulged was strong. He imagined the softness of her skin bruising beneath his fingers, the way her pulse would rocket in terror before it began to slow. Until it fucking stopped.

This wasn’t who they were, any of them.

Instead, he raked his gaze over the doctor’s resigned features, examining the black eyes, swollen cheekbone, and undoubtedly broken nose. She was leaking tears and blood, and he really didn’t give a damn about her, but Connie?

He’d spare a traitor to save his friend.

“I don’t hit women, Constance.” He fired a scathing glance at Jasper. “Why the hell are you letting her do this?”

“I don’t hit women either,” was the cold reply. “Connie needed to let off steam.”

“And when she’s beaten the bitch to death, what then? Does that constitute letting off enough *steam*? Anarchy wouldn’t want this,” Loki snapped, stepping between the two women to grip Lizzie’s shirt and haul her away from the livid psychologist. “Caera wouldn’t want this.”

“What about Myna? Don’t you think she’d like her pound of flesh from the woman who drugged her, bundled her up in a shipping crate, and delivered her straight into my father’s arms?” Standing straight, Jasper’s face darkened when Loki shoved the woman into a chair. “They fucking *paid* her, Loki. Handed over a shitload of cash for her to betray three pregnant women who’ve done nothing to her. She’s broken every oath she ever made, shattered trust that should be held above all else, and sold *our fucking women down the motherfucking river.*”

This was new. As Jasper’s furious roar echoed in the room like a god’s thunder, Loki felt the power in it punch into his gut, firing his own temper. “Then man the fuck up and kill her yourself. Connie doesn’t get to bear the weight of murder, Jasper. It’s not her burden. You want her to suffer like Archie does, with the guilt and the nightmares?”

“There won’t be any guilt,” Connie snapped, stepping forward with intent. As Lizzie cowered in her chair, she shook her head in disgust. “She deserves everything she gets.”

They've spilled enough of our blood today, it's time they know what it's like to bleed."

Loki laughed, a cold edge to the sound. "Do we really believe Dominic gives a shit about her? Painting this room with her blood won't do anything but put black marks on our souls, Con. If she held any worth for him, she'd have been on that plane to Montana. He left her here for us to hunt down, to waste time questioning her, when we should be elsewhere."

Lizzie coughed, splattering blood. "He's right. I don't know anything you don't already know."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"Sierra's upstairs, Constance." Loki blocked her from lunging again by slinging an arm across her chest. "I told her that Liam's in the hospital, and Wyatt's dead." Ignoring the reactions from his friends, he kept his voice firm. "She needs you now."

"What the fuck?" Jasper demanded. "Wyatt's dead?"

Saul went pale. "Dominic."

Tipping his head in confirmation, Loki took Connie's hand, studying the bloodied, swollen knuckles. "This isn't the way you protect your girls. Tend to your hand, Con, and then do what you're best at and offer Sierra the comfort she's desperate for. Until Liam comes home, you, Alicia, and Bodie are the only ones who can keep her together."

"You were supposed to wait for me," she murmured, swiping at her eyes.

"You were busy annihilating the enemy," he whispered back, "but your skills are required somewhere more important

now. Lizzie's karma is coming, I promise."

"It better." Sniffing, she shot one last deadly glare at the broken woman in the chair, then left the room.

"Dominic is laying traps," Loki stated as soon as the door closed behind her. The blue of Jasper's eyes was almost neon when they locked on him. "Avalon's gone. Three men, including Wyatt, were killed in an explosion. Zeke's in critical condition; Braun and Liam are staying being kept for observation." He glared at Lizzie. "She's an added distraction."

"Connie knew? About Avalon?" Saul asked, damn near vibrating with emotion.

"She did, but not for long. We asked her not to say anything until we got back and could explain in person. We didn't want anyone hearing it from a news report."

"No wonder she lost her shit. Why the hell are we not on a plane to Montana to put this son of a bitch down?"

God, there was no point asking him. He was just as frustrated with the lack of doing as they were. Every inch of him was crawling with the need to act. "I don't know. Have you heard anything?"

Jasper shook his head. "I can't believe we lost Wyatt. The guy was a dick most of the time, but Liam saw something in him. They loved him for some reason, so there had to be a redeeming quality we couldn't see."

"He saved Zeke's life, giving his own in return. If that's not redemption, I don't know what is. Now, we have to do our damndest not to end up in the ground next to him." It

sounded callous, even to his ears, but the way Dominic had the decks stacked against them, Loki understood that their focus couldn't be on anything else but the next step.

Exhaling slowly, Jasper made a visible effort to set his grief aside. Wyatt certainly hadn't been the most liked member of the group sometimes, but his death was leaving a mark on everyone who'd been part of his life.

“Anarchy's tracker is still working. Either Dominic isn't using jammers, which indicates he isn't worried about us finding the girls, or Att's tech team geniuses created a tracker that surpasses his current blocking tech.”

“The team know where the girls are?”

“The property in Montana. One of the outbuildings, so it's likely the labs and holding areas are underground, presumably linked to the house via the basement.”

“You're sure it's still on her? That they haven't removed it before shipping the girls to a different property?”

Jasper's mouth curled into a wicked grin. “It needs a heat source to keep the signal viable. A nifty little trick Mason came up with. If it's removed or...” He swallowed hard. “Or if the heat source dies, it sends out a distress call. The only way it can lose complete communication with the home unit is a top-quality jammer, or if it's destroyed.”

“After this, I'm getting Caera chipped whether she likes it or not.”

Jasper shot Saul a look. “I didn't chip my wife, asshole. Mason had the prototype ready to go, and Ky modified it into

a clit ring. If Dominic finds it, he won't have to start cutting Archie up to get it out.”

“One quick tug and he can rip it out,” Loki muttered to himself, wincing at the thought. “Look, we need to get this thing back in its cell.” He kicked the chair Lizzie was in, rousing her from wherever she'd drifted to escape the pain. “Let her sit and rot for a few days. Fate can decide what we do with her.”

“She's already dead,” Saul sneered, his usually laidback demeanor gone.

“Maybe we should find out the full story before we kill her. I just don't have the time or inclination to deal with her now.”

“The full story is, she got a quarter million to deliver our women to a deviant,” Jasper drawled. “Don't need much more than that to judge, jury, and execute her where she sits.”

Jesus Christ, were they destined to circle around this again and again? Frustrated to the point he wanted to yank his hair out, Loki snapped, “We don't do anything until Dominic is dead. All efforts, all focus, gets aimed in his direction. Get her back to her cell so that we can gear up and—”

His phone vibrated in his pocket a second before it began to ring. Thank God for small mercies, he thought as he pulled it out. “Atticus.”

“Reinforcements will be in Montana by five a.m. We ship out in fifteen, wheels up in thirty. Is the situation down there under control?”

He glanced up at the camera in the corner and flipped Atticus the bird. “It is now. The doctor could use a medic.

Connie's gone upstairs to deal with Sierra and the girls."

"Jasper's the team medic."

There wasn't a cat in hell's chance of Jasper doing anything to alleviate the woman's pain, and they both knew it. "We'll secure her, then meet you upstairs."

"Leave her. Her assigned guard is on his way."

"Okay."

The phone went dead.

"Problem?" Jasper demanded.

Taking a deep breath, Loki shook his head. Relief surged through his veins at the thought of finally being on the move. Dominic had played the game well, throwing an obstacle in their path that they couldn't walk away from, but by God, the delay was a thorn in Loki's side.

They were leaving a chunk of the group in the hospital, another portion heartbroken and grieving, and setting off on a mission that promised there might be no return from—doubly so in his and Saul's case, seeing as they had zero combat experience, and only the rage of angry Dominants as their weapons.

"We're going hunting."

"Fucking *finally*." Jasper stormed toward the door, taking the opportunity to expend some of his pent-up frustration. He shot the doctor a bitter glare. "Better hope I come back with my wife and daughters in one piece. If you think my father's temper is bad, wait until mine comes out to play."

Lizzie went dead white beneath her bruises and the blood. Her reaction told Loki she knew Dominic personally or had at least met him in person. As much as he wanted to inflict terrible pain on her, his curiosity insisted that he weed out every little detail before one of the professionals snuffed out her existence.

“What about that?” Saul jerked his chin toward her, hands fisted.

“There’s a guard coming for her.”

With a grunt, Saul followed Jasper over to the door where they stood waiting impatiently for him.

Loki bent, pushing his face up to hers until his nose almost touched the ruin of hers. “There’s nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. We trusted you with the lives of our women, our children, and you shit on us. Pray to God while we’re gone, Elizabeth. Pray real fucking hard. He ain’t gonna save you, but it’s best to make your peace with Him before we get back.” Smiling coldly, he grabbed a handful of bright blue hair in his fist, yanking her head back until she whimpered. Gesturing to his friends, then himself, he added, “If anything’s happened to our families, there won’t be much left of you to fit in a box.”

It felt wrong to be cruel. It went so against his grain that he wanted to take a step back and smack himself until easygoing Loki returned, but too many things had shifted today. The universe was skewed, littered with anxiety and death, and his axis was tilting along with it.

Finally, he understood how powerful men snapped when their loved ones were threatened, how they went on a rampage when the worst happened. It was so fucking easy to lose

himself in the fury, in the darkness he'd never known existed inside his own mind.

If this was what Jasper felt, what he'd been trained to *embrace*...

That fucker earned a new level of admiration for his self-control.

Releasing the doctor with a sharp jerk, he wiped his hand on his pants and spun away. Until he got off that goddamn plane with Myna by his side, Lizzie ceased to exist.

One short shower, a change of clothes, and twelve minutes later, he was standing in the kitchen with his brothers by his side, and a dozen strangers surrounding them.

Thane was inspecting his sniper rifle, settling pieces back into the open padded case on the counter, his gaze keen as he studied every element. Long fingers stroked the various segments as though reacquainting himself with the deadly weapon.

Dressed in black, each and every man stood at attention, waiting for Atticus to brief them before they headed down to the garage where the SUVs were waiting.

“Christophe and Grit are staying behind as protection.” Face grim, Atticus turned his gaze to encompass the room. “Key players of the tech team are already on their way to the plane; we’ve sourced a building a few miles away from Dominic’s property where they can set up base.” He pointed to half a dozen men Loki didn’t know. “It’s your job to keep them safe. Dominic is gonna know when we land, where we

set down, and what we're coming for. We are not falling into the same trap we sent Alpha team into blindly."

Stiffly, the long day catching up with him, Thane rolled his shoulders and snapped the case shut. While his condition wasn't nearly as bad as it had been only a few weeks ago, without Myna to maintain his treatments, it was obvious he wasn't at the top of his game.

"We have reinforcements meeting us at the location. Their involvement is classified; if any of us are still alive when this ends, we have no knowledge of their existence." Atticus's tone was grave. "At this point in time, we only know of three female captives. There may be more, and there is the possibility of infants being on the premises."

Several of the men's expressions darkened.

"Jasper and the reinforcements will be hitting the barn. We believe there is an entrance to the underground laboratory setup in there, which is likely where the captives are being held. Tag, Mason, and Ky will be your techs," he told Jasper. "Your earbuds will be synced to them. We've upgraded some of the equipment, so hopefully they'll be of more use than last time."

Jasper scowled. "I know that fucker's tricks. I'll find the way in."

"Thane and you three," Atticus continued, singling out another three of the unfamiliar men, "are on sniper duty. You'll be given your positions on the plane. Once you're set up, you have the green light to pick off anyone who comes within radius. Don't wait for us. If we can start culling the

numbers down before they regroup at the house, we stand a better chance of survival once we're inside."

He checked his watch. "Saul, Loki, you're with me and the rest of these fine men. Let us do the hard work; your job is to help the women get the fuck out of there. Can either of you fire a weapon?"

"I can," Saul said with a shrug. "Revolver though, not a rifle."

"I'm better with a knife," Loki stated, then shrugged when Atticus lifted one dark eyebrow. "What? My creative side doesn't stick just with ink, you know. I spent years whittling pieces of wood when I was a kid. A knife in my hand is second nature."

"There's a difference between carving wood and cutting throats," someone said dryly.

Loki turned and faced the man who'd spoken—military type, short cut brown hair, scarred face, hard blue eyes. "That's my woman and my son we're going after, and some fucking good friends. I don't care if it's the goddamn Pope, I'm gutting anyone who stands between them and me."

"Make sure they're kitted out appropriately, armor and all." Atticus stepped in smoothly before the briefing was disturbed further. "We're using a private airfield fifteen minutes from here. We're taking off the moment the last boots clear the steps. Equipment is on board. We're breaching as soon as everyone is in place. Move out, boys."

They began to file down the hallway to Atticus's office and the elevator. It would take them down to the garage.

“Are we taking dibs on Dominic and Rita?” Jasper wondered. “If so, I’ve got a bullseye on that bastard.”

“First come, first served, J. We have no way of telling what contingency plans they have. This ends today.”

“Daddy?”

All eyes turned to Alicia as she pressed herself against the doorjamb, shrinking away from the men striding past her. Her face was pale against the cheerful purple of her onesie, and Mr. Bear dangled from one hand.

“Princess, I put you to bed. You should be asleep.” Atticus held his arms out to her, and she ran toward him, practically climbing him like a tree. “I don’t want you to worry, Lisha. Stay with Connie, and be a good girl until we come home.”

“What if you don’t?” With her face pressed against his neck, her words were muffled.

“Then my brave, beautiful princess needs to become a queen. She needs to be strong, for herself and her friends.” He pressed his face into her hair, breathing deep. “She needs to remember that her Daddy loves her, no matter where he is, and he will always be standing by her side.”

Fuck, this was heartbreaking. Loki gritted his teeth as his throat tightened.

Alicia shuddered and nuzzled into him.

“After a while, you’ll want company, Lisha. A new Daddy, and that’s okay. But you get Connie to check him out and makes sure he’s good enough for my princess.” The pain on his face was excruciating, as though he was already anticipating not coming home.

“I’ll never want another Daddy. Never ever.” She leaned back and cupped his face in her hands. “I love you, Atticus. If you do something stupid like dying, I’ll never forgive you. I can’t love anyone else the way I love you.”

“You’re the brightest star in my sky, princess. Never thought I’d love anyone as fiercely as I love you.” He kissed her sweetly at first, deepening it until she went limp. Letting her slide down to the ground, he murmured, “We have to go, baby. Go back to Connie now.”

Lip quivering, she eased back and tucked Mr. Bear’s head under the utility belt already strapped around his waist. Tears brimming on her lashes, she walked to Thane, and Saul, Jasper, then Loki, hugging them all tightly.

When she ran down the hallway, her sobs were like fucking acid in an open wound.

“Maybe you should stay at home, Att,” Jasper suggested grimly. “It’s our women in danger, my parents at the root of it all. I don’t want to be responsible for that sweetheart spending the next twenty years grieving her Daddy.”

Atticus exhaled slowly, almost growling. “Then I suggest we don’t fucking die today. They’re your women,” he said slowly, meeting each of their eyes, “but they’re part of *our* family. This is a one-for-all, all-for-one deal. Like hell am I going to stay here and let you idiots loose.” He jerked his chin at Thane. “You’ve said your goodbyes to Connie?”

Amber eyes gleamed. “I got the ‘if you die, I’m going to kick your ass’ speech. Followed by a lot of tears.”

“All right then. Let’s show Dominic the true meaning of family.”

They came.

Myna didn’t know what time it was, but those assholes unlocked the door, walked right in with those fucking batons extended, and went straight for Caera.

They’d taken her, the bruises on her face stark beneath translucent skin, but not without a fight.

Two naked, pregnant women were no match for armed hired goons. Between them, they sported a lot of flowering bruises, vicious welts that would take days to fade. Myna’s left wrist was swollen and painful where she’d tried to deflect a blow away from Anarchy, and she suspected she had two broken fingers on the same hand.

Archie wasn’t faring much better—her feet were blue and purple with contusions from kicking the dickheads, her shoulder had been wrenched badly enough to make the masochist scream, and she was still shuddering from the violation of the thick fingers groping at her pussy.

She’d broken the fucker’s nose for that, Myna thought with grim satisfaction, hence the broken fingers, but it didn’t help her friend.

Either of them.

Now Caera was in Rita’s possession, and time was slipping through their fingers. They had to figure a way out of the locked door before the psychos inflicted any more trauma on the girl.

“The guys won’t be long.” Myna cleared her throat, clinging desperately to the knowledge that the Masters weren’t going to leave them here.

Thoroughly riled, Archie hissed through her teeth. “We’re not waiting for the guys. They could be minutes away, or hours. Jasper can finish off what’s left after we’re done with the fuckers.” Hobbling on her tender feet, she paced. “That clown with the fat hands is going to wish he hadn’t taken liberties.”

Liberties. Such a polite word for sexual assault.

“Good, we’re on the same page.” Myna glanced at the door. “They’re going to come back for me. Think if I kick up a stink, you can slip out unnoticed? If you can get to Caera, maybe you can stop whatever it is they have planned for her.”

“You mean the goddamn abortion. Fucking bitch.” The furious blonde swung her foot at the bed in frustration, pulling the kick before her already battered foot connected with the metal frame. “Christ, this is so messed up. I shouldn’t have mouthed off to Dominic. I *knew* I shouldn’t, even when the words kept coming. I set you right in his fucking crosshairs.”

“Like we weren’t already in them,” Myna replied dryly. “Yes, it’s all your fault, you idiot. You had the gall to fall in love with Jasper, who wants no part of his father in his life and had the audacity to be friends with us. Mmm-hmm, I can see how that makes you responsible for a psychopath’s actions.”

“Are you mocking me right now?”

“Well, duh.” She managed to smile, however faint. “You’ve lived with this a lot longer than I have, but from everything

I've picked up, this has been boiling to a head for months. Rather than cursing the universe for dumping us in this position, maybe we should be thankful you're not here *alone*."

Archie squeezed her eyes shut. "Alone would be bad."

"Yeah, it would. None of us here are alone; we have each other. No matter what Caera's going through now, she knows she's not alone either. Me and you, we're going to kick some ass and make these assholes rue the fucking day they messed with us."

Sniffling, Archie choked on a laugh. "We're swearing an awful lot today."

"It's a sign of intelligence," Myna stated soberly. "That means we're too fucking smart to let some oversized gorillas with rubber bats stop us from rescuing our friend."

Brown eyes full of the same dread that lurked inside Myna, Anarchy rubbed her hand soothingly over her belly. Stroking the babies in her womb without being able to touch them. "Doing this, fighting them, it comes with risk, Myna."

Mirroring her actions, Myna soothed the fluttering of her son's movements. So small, so defenseless, so goddamn innocent. "It does. We can wait for the guys, sit here and take whatever Dominic dishes out, but the risk is the same. He can snuff us out in a heartbeat, take our babies from us without a second thought, because he can. Hell, he'll probably kill me as soon as Atticus's team breaches this place, because I'm pretty much collateral damage. The prize he wants is you and Caera, because you two are the chain around Jasper's neck."

"Don't say that."

“Why not? It’s true.” Cold spiraled down her spine. “I’d rather die fighting my way out of here than sit back and take his torture. My son is not going to become Dominic’s toy to abuse and train into a monster. And I’m not going to sit on my hands while they rob Caera of her daughter. They’ve stolen enough from that girl without taking her child, her future, and her hope.”

“You’re tied to Jasper too,” Archie insisted.

“I’m not the woman he loves and married, and I’m not his half-sister.” Remembering how Dominic had fawned over his daughter, she winced in disgust. “Although I think Fairfax’s new obsession with Caera stems more from the fact that she’s *his* blood, not that she’s Jasper’s sister.”

They both gagged.

Anarchy pressed her hand to her breast, grimacing. The nipple was raw and bloody where Dominic had almost ripped the piercing out, the tip almost black with bruising. “None of us are going to die here. Well, aside from the bad guys. When Jasper gets a load of this...” She grinned, letting her hand fall away. “In a way, I almost pity them.”

“Who? These assholes?”

She nodded, still grinning. “They spent years trying to warp J’s mind, training him to be a killer, and somehow, he resisted. He became more than just a brainless automaton slaughtering whoever they pointed at. But this...I get the feeling Dominic believes Jasper’s a tame, domesticated man now.”

Myna snorted.

“Exactly. Threaten his wife and daughters with physical, mental, and emotional harm?” Archie breathed deep, as though appreciating something truly beautiful. “Shit is about to get biblical around here.”

“Blood and death and gore, oh my.” God, she needed to get warm and have a nap. After Dominic’s visit last night, sleep had eluded them all, keeping them alert and aware that they could be whisked away at any time he demanded. “I think we should make a pact.”

“A pact?”

“Yeah. If one of us gets the opportunity to get out of here and rescue Caera, we go. No looking back. Until biblical shit rains down on our heads, we’re on our own, and Caera’s the most defenseless. She froze when she saw Dominic, I doubt she’ll react any differently to Rita.”

“Naked, pregnant, injured...” Anarchy pursed her lips. “Still formidable as hell.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“All right. First one to break free saves Caera.” She held out her hand, pinky finger extended.

“We’re doing pinky swears?” Myna asked with a smirk.

“The only swear that matters,” Archie replied solemnly, nodding her approval when Myna slipped hers into position.

There was a moment when their digits curled around each other and locked that clicked something into place for her. Whatever *this* was, it was different to the love she felt for Loki, but no less jarring. This was a bonding she’d never

expected, a connection to another woman that was strong and unyielding.

Maybe it was the imminent danger and distinct possibility of losing her baby, her dignity, and her life in quick succession, but she finally felt as though she belonged.

Acceptance was a beautiful gift when given freely.

When the locks on the door clanked, they both exhaled slowly as their eyes met.

There was so much more to say, like what to tell Loki if she didn't make it through this mess. How she'd loved him even when she hated him, thought about him when her mind should've been on salvaging the scraps of her world. How sorry she was for her bitchiness; for not realizing she was carrying his child sooner, that they'd both lost out on the first exciting stages of this new journey; that he might never get to meet their boy.

Above all, she wanted him to know that despite the men she'd once had in her faux harem, the ones who'd flitted in and out of her life with barely a flicker, he was the one who mattered more than anyone else. The first to conquer her heart, command her love, make her feel like more than a throwaway fuck.

Anarchy was intuitive, she thought. The woman was ridiculously brave, possibly slightly insane if her fearlessness was anything to go by, but she'd know what to say to Loki if the worst happened.

She was a woman in love, after all.

“Want to go quietly?”

Myna considered the question as the door swung open to reveal their earlier nemeses, one of whom was sporting tape over the bridge of his nose. Her lips twitched, recalling how it had broken with a delightful crunch, and his howl of pain.

The spark of malice in his ugly eyes promised retribution.

Buckle up, Peanut. We're in for a rough ride.

"I'm not sure they're giving us a choice," she murmured, her pulse stuttering as he flicked his wrist, extending his baton fully. Not a solid rubber one this time. No, he'd upgraded. The room lights glinted off the metal shaft, and instincts told her she wasn't going to see the day through.

Feeling sick, she swallowed hard.

Anarchy had challenged Dominic, and he was retaliating. Not by harming her, smothering her in physical pain and daring her to flaunt that kickass attitude again, but by hitting her where it hurt most. If he understood anything about Archie, it was that she was loyal to her friends, to those she loved.

Myna was the lesson.

"Boss wants that one unharmed." Pointing the baton at Archie, the broken-nosed thug spoke in a thick voice. "If she fights, knock her out."

With a glance at Myna, Archie lifted her hands in surrender. "We had enough of a beating earlier, thank you." She winced as the other goon snagged her arm, the one that had been wrenched, and started dragging her from the room.

"You," he growled, swinging the metal stick in Myna's direction as he grinned wolfishly. "Boss says I can take a

minute to teach you the correct way to treat your hosts. Broke my nose, bitch. Think I can break all of you in sixty seconds?”

He was taller, broader, heavier. The muscles in his arms were bigger than her thighs, and even though the dominant urge of a mother defending her child was inside her, she was aware she didn't possess the sheer love of violence that he did.

“Myna! Goddamn it, don't you—” Archie's terrified shout was cut off by the door swinging shut.

“What's your name?” Praying her voice wasn't as shaky as she thought, she squared her shoulders.

He leered at her. “Want to scream it while I fuck you into little pieces, bitch?”

“I have my reasons. I'll tell you one if you give it to me.”

The leer became a suspicious frown. She didn't think there were many brain cells at work behind those horrible eyes, but he was using whatever he had at his disposal. In the end, his curiosity won.

“Miller.”

Though her courage was quickly sliding into terror, she summoned a smile. “Thanks. I'll make sure the good guys know who to look for when they get here. The one who beat two of their women, broke bones, left bruises. They are gonna hunt you down like a dog, Miller, and they're gonna make you scream before you die.”

Getting him mad wasn't the smartest idea, but when faced with the prospect of a slow, methodical death, she could only hope his anger might speed the process up.

Miller's face creased with fury. Stepping forward, he lifted the baton to the side and swung. The tip caught her across the hip as she stumbled back, the pain a slashing blow as it struck deep.

Her leg threatened to collapse, but she scurried away, trying to keep out of his reach. Her heart lurched every time he lashed out at her, relief warring with adrenaline when he missed. Was he toying with her?

Sweat beaded on her skin despite the chill of the room. Weakening from tiredness and not eating, she tripped clumsily, her back rapping into the wall. Instinctively, she wrapped her good arm around her stomach, defending her child, and raised her injured arm to block the blow he aimed at her chest.

Metal slammed into bone, and for the briefest second, she went numb. Blessedly, wonderfully numb. The sharp snap of her wrist breaking fully snapped her out of it, agony ricocheting up her arm, into her spine, into her brain. A scream scored her throat as bile followed swiftly on its heels.

Everything flickered as she fell to her knees. The lights flashed in sickening waves, her pulse rolling in time with them. Every frantic beat of her heart throbbed in her shattered limb, until she bent forward and threw up what little she had in her stomach.

Still, she sensed him looming over her. Imagined him lifting the baton over his head, grasped in both hands like an executioner's axe, bringing it down for the killing blow on her head.

Retching, sobbing, she searched inside herself for some link to her son. Telling him she was sorry, she loved him, she'd

hold him one day in a world where men didn't breed women as a business, and cold-blooded murder wasn't a sport.

“Miller, enough.”

Sliding into shock, it took her a moment to register Dominic's voice. It hummed with the power of a Dominant's command, rich and displeased. She wished it was Loki's voice instead, confident and soothing, telling her she was a good girl, she was loved.

“But boss—”

“Sixty seconds was your limit. You wasted most of that dancing around after her. Make sure she's in my office in the next five minutes. If I see any additional injuries, down to the smallest bruise, I'll take it out on you.” That tone grew menacing. “Her pain belongs to me now.”

Miller clamped his hand down on her neck, fat fingers biting into the muscles on either side and snagging in her hair. Tiny bites of pain compared to the trauma of her wrist. Cursing under his breath, he lifted her effortlessly, apparently amused when her legs kicked weakly.

She lost her balance as soon as he set her on her feet and shoved her forward. Another round of vomiting threatened to rise as her head grew light, but she somehow staggered from the room with her tormentor at her back, prodding her relentlessly with the tip of the baton.

They were out of time.

Chapter Twelve

Montana was fucking beautiful.

Huddled with Atticus's team in a clump of undergrowth, faces blackened and determined, waiting for the signal to move, Loki studied their surroundings with a critical eye for movement that didn't belong to their side.

The air was different here, cleaner and a little damp in the minutes before dawn. The soil felt softer beneath his boots, and he might have been mesmerized by the greenery if his mind wasn't racing ahead, trying to sense some connection to Myna from the ranch house a few hundred feet ahead of them.

Already, the snipers were in position. Though there were no audible gunshots, Atticus reported three hostiles down, so Thane and his team had their heads in the game.

The sheath housing the machete on Loki's side tapped against his boot as he shifted in his crouch. It was lethal, which is what he wanted, but too long for close combat in confined spaces. He much preferred the hunting knife he was spinning around in his hand, getting used to the weight of it, balancing it on his palm.

Grit had given it to him in the garage before Loki climbed into the SUV, along with instructions on how to use it. "Go for the soft spots—throat, stomach, under the sternum. Stab, twist, yank for maximum damage. Go for the jugular, carotid, and femoral arteries."

Beside Loki, Saul stroked the hilt of the handgun strapped to his side. The intensity on his face in the pre-dawn light told

him his friend was prepared to use it, no matter the consequences.

They were evolving rapidly, shifting with the changes as they came. While Loki didn't relish the idea of hurting anyone, of taking lives, he'd made his peace with it. After tonight, he wouldn't be the simple tattoo artist making his living by day and playing kinky sex games with his sub by night, just as Saul wouldn't ever be *just* a blogger again.

"Incoming, to the left," someone murmured.

Several guns lifted, pointing in that direction, until Atticus quietly ordered them to stand down, but all eyes were on the two figures sliding through the shadows as though they'd been born in them.

Like the team, they were all in black. Beanies were pulled down tight over their hair, and the camouflage on their faces was flawless. Not an inch of skin left unmasked.

They crouched in front of Atticus, but the one on the right cast an assessing glance over the impatient team.

Loki's jaw dropped open.

It wasn't the fact that she was obviously a *she* that shocked him, he thought in bewilderment, but he knew those fucking eyes. The shape of them, the incredibly pale shade of blue. The keen hunter's stare he'd seen so often in Jasper's lately.

Atticus finished up his brief conversation with the second new arrival, then turned his head to address the team in a voice so low, it was barely discernible from the gentle breeze wafting through the trees. "Team, meet our reinforcements. Darius and Tabitha."

Saul jerked and went rigid. “*Darius?*”

Ignoring him, Atticus continued. “They’ll be going in with us. Troy, Wesley, and Ashford are hooking up with Jasper’s team now.”

A second pair of ice-blue eyes surveyed the crew, this time male.

“Does he know you enlisted his siblings?” Loki muttered, damn near hypnotized by the similarities between his friend and the newcomers.

“Yes. It was a long shot, but—”

“We want to be an instrumental part of taking Dominic down.” The woman— Tabitha—folded herself cross-legged on the ground and tugged a gun from a holster on her hip, checking the safety, then the clip. “Our father is a dick. His practices are immoral and barbaric. Had we known about this earlier, we’d have volunteered our services.”

Jasper’s *siblings* were here.

His *assassin* siblings.

Saul growled.

Darius’s cold gaze landed on him. Evidently, he knew exactly who Saul was, because he inclined his head. “I didn’t save her once to let her be enslaved here again. There’ll be time to talk after.”

Someone snorted derisively, but Atticus shot his hand in the air for silence as something thudded on the ground not so far away. He pressed his fingertip to his ear, listening intently.

“Sniper team’s workload is picking up. Dominic knows we’re out here. Reinforcements have reached team two.”

Another joyful reunion for Jasper, Loki thought dryly, at the worst possible time.

“That’s our cue. Give us five minutes, then follow. We’ll clear as much shit out of the way as possible but watch your backs.” Darius rose fluidly to his feet, unsheathing a knife that was serrated on one edge, smooth on the other. “After you, sister dearest.”

Tabitha sighed and put her gun away as though bored. Unfolding herself, she moved like a panther, standing so quickly it was hard to believe she’d ever been on the ground. Then she grinned, white teeth flashing from the camouflage. “If I must.”

They darted off again, running through the woodland with barely a sound. It was unnerving how *quiet* they were, and a little disturbing to think they could sneak up on just about anyone without detection.

“Get ready to move.” Atticus stood, staying as low as a man of his stature could. “We go in and clear the upper levels first. We’re cleaning house tonight; no one leaves there alive unless they’re one of ours. Stay alert, watch each other’s backs.”

Pushing to his feet, Loki shook the feeling back into them, wishing he’d chosen to kneel rather than crouch. As he settled the hilt of the knife firmly in his palm, Loki watched the Daddy Dom stroke his hand over the bear still tucked into his utility belt, then shift the good luck charm around to a safer spot at his back.

It only took two minutes and fifteen seconds before the abrasive sound of gunfire broke the peace of dawn. Birds flocked to the skies, disturbed from their usual routine, and the wildlife was no doubt running as fast as they could in the opposite direction.

Loki had seen enough war movies to imagine the carnage. Bullets spraying, blood splattering, bodies—two in particular—dropping. He wasn't stupid enough to deny he was scared; it seemed he wasn't the only one, either. Around him, the team were muttering prayers almost silently or making the sign of the cross over their chest.

They were good, strong, brave men with experience under their belts.

It was reassuring to discover he wasn't the only one bracing for the worst.

Gunfire was still erupting in bursts, but the intensity was slowing. Did that mean Darius and Tabitha were on the run, or had Jasper's team been identified too? Unless one of Dominic's minions had spotted the snipers?

Jesus, how did Atticus balance all this shit on a mission? Who was where, and what they were doing? How to balance the success of an op against the survival of his men?

The man in question glanced at his watch, his shoulders straightening as he drew his weapon. "Team two is in. Remember, women and any children to safety. Everyone else dead." He lifted his hand and flicked two fingers forward, then broke cover and ran toward the shooting.

Loki's legs froze for the shortest second before he followed the team. They spread out through the trees, using the thick trunks to mask their approach, and he felt something flow between them. A sense of purpose, comradery.

Breathing slow and deep, he allowed himself to shed doubts and insecurities, choosing to focus solely on finding his woman—their women—and winning the goddamn war. His feet moved of their own accord, learning from the others around him. He was a city boy through and through; if left to his own devices in the maze of trees, he'd probably have been lost for days.

The shots grew louder, accompanied by shouting and barked orders. His eardrums vibrated with the sharp crack of weapons firing, and he realized more weapons were joining the fight.

Still, it was a shock when they passed the first body.

Bodies, he corrected, noting the two sprawled where they'd fallen. One with a broken neck, the other with his throat slashed wide open. Morbid curiosity made him wonder which of Jasper's terrifying siblings were responsible for each man.

Not the time to think on that, he reminded himself, ducking behind a trunk as bullets peppered it. Knife in hand, he waited until one of the other men signaled to continue, then fell in step with those ahead.

More bodies. A hell of a lot more than he'd expected, and none of them dressed in black. At least a dozen, he summed up after a rapid count, and most of them were bleeding from one catastrophic wound or another.

As though a veil was lifted, they fell into the thick of the fight. Even as Atticus led the way into chaos, more men were pouring out of the house. A never-ending stream of muscle and weapons.

In the middle of it all, Darius and Tabitha were dancing.

Bloody blades glistening in the rising sun, they were cutting a swath through Dominic's men, but they weren't enough despite their skills. Maybe they'd underestimated the number of hired help their father commanded, or perhaps they just liked the challenge of being outnumbered, but the five-minute advantage hadn't gained them much.

Shots were being fired from both sides now.

On Loki's left, a guy not much older than him dropped like a stone, a hole in the middle of his forehead.

Blood and fear tainted the fresh air.

Tossed into the fray, Loki went to work with his fists and feet. This was nothing more than a bar fight on steroids, he thought, slamming the hilt of the knife into someone's temple. Bar fights, he knew how to handle. It was all the fucking bullets whizzing around unsupervised that made his blood run cold before adrenaline revved his system.

He slammed into an older guy, instantly reminded of Zeke. Before his thoughts could veer toward his friend, he found himself in a predicament. The muzzle of a revolver jerked toward his face. He twisted, ramming his elbow into his opponent's ample gut, slashing his knife across the gun-wielding arm and ripping a shout from the man as blood splattered.

The gun tumbled to the ground, and Loki realized that his weapon was sharper than he'd thought. His eyes dropped to the growing puddle of blood, fascinated by the color, then shook himself back into the here and now.

No one left alive, he reminded himself as he stalked the injured man.

Clutching his wounded wrist, the enemy couldn't stop his blood from pulsing through the clasp of his fingers over the wound. His hazel eyes were wide, lips moving, but Loki heard nothing but gunfire and the rush of his heartbeat.

Lifting his knife to the man's throat, he told himself there was no other way. The sickness Dominic wore like a badge of honor was infectious, spreading to everyone who encountered him; these men were no exception. They were accessories to kidnap and captivity, at the very least.

What if they'd raped Myna? Their filthy hands all over his woman, defiling her, demeaning her. Would he let them live then? Hell no.

But taking a life went against everything he'd been taught, didn't it?

Someone stepped up against his back, one arm sliding around his waist and holding him in a damn strong grip. Before he could turn to defend himself, a black-gloved hand slid down his arm from elbow to wrist, and drove the blade into vulnerable flesh.

More blood erupted, metal slicing effortlessly through soft skin, opening the jugular and carotid veins in one fell swoop. He'd never forget the shocked gurgles, the thud of another

person's body thudding to its knees in front of him, the warm spray of bodily fluids across his face.

“The first one's the hardest,” Tabitha whispered in his ear. “You'll thank me later.”

He staggered back when she released him, and some part of his stunned brain followed her path as she swaggered back into the fight, drawing her gun and casually firing shots into several heads while they were preoccupied with their own battles.

Christ on a crutch, he'd killed somebody. Waiting for the guilt to rise up and devour him for his actions, Loki watched a drop of blood hang suspended on the tip of his blade, then someone hit him from the side, taking him down to one knee as a barrage of bullets sprayed from the house.

Fuck, this was not the time to dwell on morals, he thought, ducking his head and shielding his face with an arm. He had to do whatever it took to get Myna back safe, and if blood was the price, he'd pay it—whether it was his or every single one of Dominic's men.

There was a sharp, piercing scream from inside the house, masculine in tone, and the unending rain of bullets cut off abruptly.

Darius whistled sharply from the doorway.

“Saul, Loki, with us,” Atticus shouted, loping across the bloody battlefield like some gigantic grizzly bear. He gave some signal to the rest of the team, and more shots were fired between both sides.

Loki scrambled up, staying low as he ran to meet his friends on the porch.

“House is clear,” Darius told them. “The upstairs and ground floors have been checked. I expect we’ll have company once we go down, but I believe the majority of Dominic’s men are out there.”

Loki glanced around at the bodies. There was still too much gunfire, a lot of screams and pained moans from the wounded. Part of him wanted to help, but he reminded himself that the men were responsible for their own path, and they’d chosen Dominic.

Atticus’s team were splitting into two units now, half slipping into the trees to hunt the men who’d abandoned ship. The other half...he winced as Tabitha stepped up to a man bleeding badly from a gunshot wound to the stomach and...

A single shot rang out.

“Jasper’s team have met complications from their end,” Atticus added, his head tipping to the side as he listened to the next update. “Some kind of electronic security door. Palm and retinal scans required.”

“Ashford will be through that in two minutes,” Darius scoffed. “We need to focus on what’s waiting for us. The specs we found show that Dominic did some serious building work below ground before he built the ranch on top.”

“Wait. He *built* all this?” Saul asked.

“Sure as fuck didn’t buy a ready-made underground facility. Bought the land back in the seventies, constructed the lab and everything he needed during the latter end of that same

decade, into the eighties.” As he spoke, those icy blue eyes scanned the vicinity, even as his hands made short work of checking his personal arsenal of weapons. “The ranch house and buildings were built not long after. Been here ever since, waiting for something to kick off in Virginia.”

Antsy, disturbed by the scent of so much blood, Loki clenched his teeth. “History lessons can wait until later. Our women are down there, alone with those...” There wasn’t a word to convey what he felt about Dominic and his wife.

“I feel your urgency, but if we move before Ashford gets that door open, we’ll meet our maker thirty seconds later.” Hands fisting, Darius’s attention veered over Loki’s shoulder. “I’d feel better if both of you stayed up here, but Atticus assures me that won’t happen any more than keeping Jasper from going in.”

Saul glowered, swiping at blood trickling from a cut along his eyebrow. “Our women, our fight.”

It was easy to see Jasper in the man standing in their midst. His grin held the same cocky wickedness, while his eyes glimmered with a disturbing sheen of darkness.

“My father is a devious prick. As cruel and heartless as he is smart. The only reason you’re still alive and breathing is because the big guy here actually managed to circle Dominic from three steps ahead.”

“Calm down, Saul. We’re going to get them back,” Atticus reassured him in a low voice, eyes constantly scanning the dwindling fight. Only the occasional shot was being fired now, each one signing a death warrant. “Darius and his siblings have a right to be here; taking Dominic down is closure for

them. We know what was done to Jasper, and it's no different than the shit Dominic put these guys through."

Darius shook his head slowly, reading Saul's face. "You're not pissed off that we're here, are you? No, it runs deeper than that. Do you think my father's perversions run through my blood, Saul? That I want to claim and fuck my baby sister?"

"No," he bit off.

"Ah, deeper still, then." Thoughtfully, Darius rubbed his chin, smearing blood over the black camouflage. "Do you believe I abandoned her?"

Loki stepped back as his friend's face lit up with unmistakable anger. Even with his adrenaline pumping from spilling blood, and gearing up for whatever faced them next, getting between a Fairfax assassin and a furious Dominant wasn't on his list of ways to get royally fucked up today.

Before Saul imploded, Atticus set a hand on his arm. "Deal with this later, when everyone's safe. Jasper's team are through the security door and taking fire."

"Excellent. Ashford is especially gifted with electronics." Whistling in a piercing tone, just two quick blasts, Darius summoned his sister over. "There's a lot of ground to cover down there. Clear each room as fast as you can. Leave the door open and mark the frame on the right-hand side so we don't waste time backtracking."

"Always ruining my fun," Tabitha commented as she jogged up beside them. She wiped off the gory blade of her knife on her thigh, then twirled it. "Are we going back to hell, brother?"

Their relationship was baffling. Somehow, they were a team, despite all Loki knew about how they'd been raised—poked, prodded, tested. Taken away from their birth mothers, kept segregated from everyone else but their captors, bullied and trained into, well, *this*.

Tabitha, her eyes alive with sadistic joy, was obviously in her element. Blood splattered her face, was probably saturating the dark clothing she wore, staining the skin beneath. Not her own, but that of all the men she'd gleefully taken part in slaughtering.

Not that Loki objected, per se. How could he when his hand—guided by hers—had ended a life? There was a reason for the bloodshed, a damned good one in his opinion, and he wasn't going to utter a single complaint about the way this shit was going down.

“How many men are down?” Darius asked Atticus.

“On our side? One dead, three wounded but mobile.”

“Field dress the wounds and order the team to hold the perimeter. We're almost done here.” With a nod to his sister, they stepped into the ranch house, expecting the others to follow.

He recognized the foyer and hallway from the live footage of Alpha Team One's demise. Three bodies decorated the stairway, blood cascading down the steps in almost artistic rivulets. The artwork on the walls was similarly marked, only with sprays of thick, red drops that were already beginning to darken.

Horror movie stuff.

The further they went into the house, the tighter Loki's fingers curled around his knife. The atmosphere was eerie, as though the dead might rise and...shit, his imagination was running away with him. There was enough horrible crap going on around him without his brain conjuring more.

Without hesitation, their guides led them into a huge room where the rising sun was starting to gleam through the windows. A table stretched a good fifteen feet long, still cluttered with half-eaten breakfast plates and mugs of cooling coffee. Chairs were toppled, pushed back, and Loki thought of how they must have sounded, scraping on the wooden floor in a scream of urgency.

The massive screen on the wall told him why.

Camera angles from all sides of the ranch bounced in a steady pattern. The woods, the yard, the drive. The barn where Jasper's team had made their entrance.

"Are you sure?" Darius demanded.

Loki jolted back into the conversation, noting the subject. Darius and Tabitha were studying the empty weapons rack against the far wall, the one with enough slots to hold three dozen firearms.

There hadn't been three dozen men outside, he recalled with a frown.

"On the video, the heat sensors picked up the original movement from here, which means this is where the cold storage access has to be. That," Tabitha said calmly, "is the only thing large enough to conceal an entrance. They're not

going to waste time climbing a fucking ladder from the basement, Darius.”

He shrugged. “Fine. Atticus?”

Atticus joined their unlikely ally and between them, they searched the rack. The Daddy Dom fingered an indent in the side of the unit, his curiosity obvious. When he pressed harder, something thumped loudly behind the wall, and the entire thing rolled slowly to the left.

“Told you.” With a bounce in her step, Tabitha pulled her gun from its holster and moved to brace her shoulder against the wall beside the opening, gesturing for Saul and Loki to do the same.

Atticus gave them a nod, flicking the safety off his gun once it was in his hand, and took his position with Darius, using the unit as cover.

Silence.

Cautiously, Tabitha peered around the edge of the hole revealed by the weapons rack, then stepped forward and through as her brother fell in behind. Saul went next, then Atticus, and Loki found himself at the back of the line, his palms sweaty as he followed them down a set of well-lit steps.

Plenty of electricity, he decided, eyeing the lights guiding them beneath the house. Rita would need it for her experiments, wouldn't she? For her equipment. As they went deeper, his rage began to bubble, his desperation to find Myna escalating as he realized how fucking close they were to finding the kidnapped women and taking them home.

His heart was in his mouth by the time the group reached the hidden level.

In the distance, distorted by concrete and darkness, the sound of violence and gunfire hummed between the walls.

Darius tapped a finger against his eye, then pointed it around. An order to keep their wits about them, their eyes open for danger. He smacked Atticus on the shoulder, indicating the bigger man should follow him, which left Saul and Loki in the company of a blue-eyed, murderous fairy.

As their companions split off to the right, Tabitha beamed at them and jerked her head. She set off at a steady jog straight ahead, and there was no choice but to stay with her.

The place was too big. For every section of hallway, there was another junction. Doors were lined up like soldiers, telling Loki that Dominic was intent on expanding his operation.

Dutifully, they checked each one as the sound of fighting faded away. Were they moving away from the source, or had one side won? If so, which side, and how many more men were likely to be coming at them if the good guys had lost?

Loki shook that thought off. The good guys losing meant Jasper was either dead or captured. Would Dominic try and escape if he managed to snare his ultimate prize? Pack up his prisoners, his wife, and flee to yet another godforsaken property?

Door after door, his hopes rose...and came crashing down.

It felt good to slash his knife into the doorframe, gouging the wood the same way his heart was being clawed into pieces.

Just how fucking big was this hellhole?

Suddenly, Tabitha stopped, holding her hand up in silent command. The corridor branched into three directions, all glowing with the same dim light. Head cocking, she gestured for them to listen.

Faintly, ever so faintly, he heard a woman scream.

Cold water sluiced over her head in a constant deluge.

Stricken with vicious shivers, Myna swung from the chains holding her upright. The cuffs were too tight around her wrists, especially the one Dominic had taken great pleasure in wrapping around her broken limb.

It was hot and swollen, throbbing sickly with pain, and her hand...

Spluttering as Miller finished tipping the second bucket of freezing water over her, she glanced at her abused arm. Her hand was turning a funny color, losing circulation. If she lived through this, there was a high probability she'd lose her hand at least, if not her lower arm.

She needed a medic, but as the learning tool in Anarchy's lesson, she didn't have a voice. Dominic's warning about cutting her tongue out was stark and fresh, but she was quickly reaching a point where dying was preferable to this.

"She can't take any more!" Anarchy shouted, her fury palpable.

"You know what it will take for me to release her. I've made my terms clear. Submit. A simple compromise, yes? Surrender yourself to me, completely, and I'll let her down."

Ever the actor, Dominic rolled his wrist grandly. “I’ll even make sure she receives medical attention for that wrist.”

Meeting her eyes through the rat tails of wet hair dangling over her face, Myna shook her head adamantly. They both knew what *surrendering* entailed, and her life wasn’t worth the extortionate price.

“I can leave her hanging there as long as it takes. Do you know the beauty of my craft, Anarchy? I can work with just about anything with a cunt and a heartbeat.” Strolling over to Myna, Dominic’s eyes lit up with consideration as he reached out to dig his fingernails into the taut peak of her breast. “I don’t relish the idea of killing her, but she doesn’t need her arms or legs to be useful to me, does she?”

Her stomach sank into her feet. There was no mistaking his insanity this close, and his threat was sick enough to become reality.

“The perfect incubator, really,” he mused, tilting his head. “No need for guards when the stock is permanently immobile. Nothing to tie down when it’s time to breed.” He dragged his nails down her frozen skin to grab her pussy. “Just a helpless, fertile womb ready to impregnate with the next Fairfax.”

A whine of protest rippled in her throat. His hand was warm, fingers cupping her disinterested sex. She wanted to cling to it, just for the heat source, but his touch was too vile and intrusive to tolerate.

Feeling part of herself withdraw from the present, Myna held Anarchy’s gaze, begging her silently to leave, to run, to do what they swore one of them would do if given the opportunity.

Archie wasn't bound by rope or chains, but by Dominic's possession of *her*. Myna had warned that she was expendable, that he'd kill her without second thought, and he would if Archie didn't bring herself willingly to his heel.

"Tight," he whispered, for her ears only, as his fingers pushed into dry flesh. "My wife is a genius with chemicals, you know. Drugs that can trick your mind into believing I'm fucking this tight cunt with a red-hot poker instead of my cock." He shivered in delight when she gagged. "Drugs that can transport you away from the present, back into the arms of that boy you love so much."

Myna closed her eyes, swamped by pain and revulsion as his fingers delved deeper. With effort, she blanked her mind, refusing to think of Loki while another man violated her. Memories of her lover would not be tarnished by this monster, not when she needed them to stay whole.

"Help me, and I'll help you," Dominic crooned. "Persuade your friend that capitulating is the only way to survive. Tell her to kneel at my feet, and all this horrible pain will end." Something clamped down on her wrist, over the cuff, and squeezed until the broken bones ground together. "Your son will live a good life. One with purpose. I'll even consider allowing his father to carry on with his pathetic existence."

Her brain flicked from one pain to another. She was so cold, so numb, that pain flared like beacons. So damned cold, it felt as though her heart was slowing with every minute that ticked past. Her knees buckled, wrenching a cry from her as her shoulders took the brunt of her weight.

Maybe this was karma, she thought dully. All her life, she'd thought about herself. Pushing herself through college, earning her qualifications, striving to build her business. She'd stepped on toes to get there, to achieve what *she* wanted.

That yearning to be better, to become someone, had spilled into BDSM. She'd hurt herself by ignoring her instincts and stepping into the lifestyle as a Domme, for God's sake. Flaunting herself as such while parading a harem of subs through the clubs in D.C.

All the while wishing to be held. To be seen and loved for who she was.

Hurting the people around her...it was her greatest regret.

Opening her eyes, she stifled the whimpers crawling up her throat. There was a time to be strong, and a time to surrender. "All right. Okay. You win."

Blue eyes bore into hers, blazing with satisfaction.

She bit her tongue when his fingers curled inside her, his fingernails digging into the wall of her vagina like talons, before he released her. Shoulders screaming for mercy, sick down to the soul, she searched for her friend's eyes, the last remaining link to a happier place.

"A-Anarchy, I love you. I'm sorry I'm not strong enough to see this through." She pleaded silently, trying to convey everything she felt. "I'm sorry I won't live through this to see your daughters born. But you..." Christ, her tongue was thick, clumsy. Just like her heartbeat. "This is the best way. Y-You need to survive this. You need to run."

Denial flashed in sorrowful brown eyes.

Anguish crossed Archie's face, followed swiftly by indecision. It was only when Myna forced herself to wiggle the littlest finger on her unbroken hand, invoking the pinky swear, that Anarchy abided by the promise they'd made to each other.

She ran, taking all of Myna's hope with her.

"Stupid woman," Dominic snapped as the door clanked open. "Where is she going to run? There's no way out of here. If she doesn't get lost in the tunnels and manages to find the exits, she can't bypass the security." Those cold eyes gleamed with dark malice. "Miller, go retrieve my daughter-in-law. Don't forget to give our guest something to remember you by."

Something struck Myna across the back. It slashed across her wet, unyielding skin with a crack, rendering her blind from the agony. But it was the force of the blow, the unmitigated hostility of it, that stole the last drops of air from her lungs.

Gasping, wheezing, it felt as though her chest was strapped in an iron cage. She fought to suck in a breath through the constriction, barely drawing enough to keep her alive. The noises rattling in her chest scared her almost as much as she wanted this to be over with.

Miller strode past her, a vague shadow in her blurred vision. He moved unhurriedly, pausing to collect his jacket, shrugging it on after unrolling his sleeves and buttoning them at his wrists. "Here or the cell, boss?"

"Bring her back here. Let her see what her bravery costs."

Another sip of air.

She wished she had the energy to break free of the chains and bolt for the open door. She imagined shoving past the brute stepping into the corridor, running after Anarchy as fast as Peanut allowed. Finding Caera and disappearing into the depths of this underground torture chamber until help came.

Then she blinked as Miller's head...disintegrated.

Blinked again as his body crumpled in a heap where he fell.

A laugh whistled through her teeth when Dominic cursed and scrambled away from the open door, panic seeping from his pores. He took cover behind her, the coward, and she hardly felt the sharp edge of a knife press against her throat.

The man who stepped through the door wasn't who she was expecting, not after the first hazy glance. Her throat closed as the stranger stepped in, sure it was Jasper before she realized otherwise.

Similar, she thought. But those eyes and the stray tuft of white-blond hair peeking from beneath a black cap were unmistakably the genetic calling card of the man using her as a shield.

"Look what I found," he drawled in a flat tone. "A rat cowering in its hole. Things never change, do they, Dominic?"

"Troy?" The incredulity in the older man's voice might have been touching if not for the fact his hand shook.

"Wonders never cease. Been dreaming of this day for a long fucking time, old man. A shame the honor isn't coming to me, but I brought some friends who deserve it more." Troy whistled sharply, his eyes raking briefly over Myna. "Are you going to take it like a man, or go down like a whipped dog?"

Three more men entered the room, their faces grim and streaked with blood. Though they weren't as starkly stamped with Dominic's features, it was easy to see that they were all his sons. Particularly the last one.

A tear slipped down her cheek as she rasped, "Jasper."

"Myna. Goddamn it." He gave her a look that warned her she probably appeared as shit as she felt, then searched the room. His shoulders slumped slightly as he found it empty, but he locked eyes with her again. "It's okay, baby. We're here. My father is going to let you go, if he wants any chance of living through the next five minutes."

"L-Loki?"

"He's coming, I promise."

"My sons, what a sight you are." The blade twitched against her neck. "Why don't you put your weapons down, and we'll talk about the future. This is a great day. A *great* day for the Fairfax legacy."

"Four of us," one of the other men said mildly. "One of you." Cold eyes, several shades darker than Jasper's gave her a once-over dismissively. "We can wait you out, Dominic. Five minutes, ten tops, and she's going to be useless as a shield. Step away from her and maybe both of you can die with a modicum of dignity."

Myna's laugh was weak, more of a lackluster moan as her lungs hitched. Well, at least someone here could say it exactly as it was. There was no dignity in this place; she was going to die as naked as the day she was born, wet, and cold, and in pain.

But at least she wouldn't die alone.

"J-Jasper," she wheezed. "Tell him I-I love him. That I'm sorry. H-He should know."

"Ssssh, darling," came the gentle response. "You can tell him everything he needs to know when he gets here."

Everyone in the room heard the lie, but she took comfort in it anyway. Her hand fluttered, trying to reach her son, to caress where he slept one last time, but the chains were too short and her arms too numb.

Two of the men were sneaking around the edge of the room, gliding the way she assumed they'd been trained. They'd tackle Dominic from the sides, she realized, and as the knife nicked her skin again, it was clear he understood their tactics too.

"I *raised* you," he hissed furiously. "All of you! What do you think your lives would be like if I hadn't selected your mothers, brought you into existence? You'd be nothing! You owe me your fucking lives, everything you have."

The third stranger shrugged as he moved in from Myna's left. "I'd be a lot fucking happier. Wouldn't you, Ashford?"

The man on her right laughed. He was the one who'd so callously accepted she was dying in front of them. "Don't hear me protesting that scenario. Would be nice to look at a naked woman in my bed and not have a dozen ways to kill her come to mind. Troy?"

Troy stood shoulder to shoulder with Jasper, both so at ease, yet she saw how they were poised to lunge. "Oh, I don't know. There are perks to this life, I guess. Eradicating

privileged, lawless, entitled assholes from the world is a favorite hobby of mine now.”

Jasper didn't speak. His hand was by his side, long fingers spread wide. As she watched, he folded each digit into his palm slowly. A countdown, she thought, to the end of Dominic's reign.

Three. Two. One.

She held Jasper's gaze as he charged toward her with his brother by his side. Behind her, Dominic yelled in outrage as Wesley and Ashford attacked.

Strong, warm hands grabbed her arms, gifting her with the touch of a friend.

When sharpened steel bit into her throat, she hardly felt it.

Tabitha was a speed demon, Loki thought as he and Saul tried to keep pace with her. Her energy was impressive, unwavering, even though some part of her had to be tiring. He suspected she was high on adrenaline, on the thrill of the hunt—or the kill.

The woman's scream they'd heard was long gone, but their guide seemed to know where she was going. Not even the three men fleeing from the opposite end of the tunnels put a hitch in her stride; she'd dispatched them almost before they knew she was there.

Now they were in a new section of the facility, far beyond a point where he thought he could find his way out alone, and Tabitha was sliding along the wall, muttering to herself. “Come on, come on. Give me another sign.”

It baffled him how she faded into the shadows whenever she stood still. Like a goddamn chameleon. With her dark clothes and the black camo makeup obscuring the paleness of her skin, when she stopped, not a muscle moving, she just... blended.

She tapped her finger on her earbud, then held up a finger. "Jasper's team have located Dominic and one of the females."

"What? Who?" Both he and Saul demanded together.

"Shush." Those blue eyes, so like Jasper's, shuttered for a moment. Concealing any emotion she might be feeling as her gaze bounced from Loki to Saul. "Jasper won't confirm, he's just requesting medical backup."

Loki's stomach plummeted. Questions pinged incessantly through his mind. Who was it? Why did they need medical attention? Where were they? Was it Myna? Caera? Anarchy? The same questions, repeatedly.

"Focus," Tabitha snapped, poking him in the shoulder. "It's best you don't know until this is done. It's the only way to keep your head in the fucking game and on your goddamn shoulders." She turned a hard stare on Saul, who looked as frantic as Loki imagined he did in that moment. "One female has been recovered. That leaves two more in danger."

She was right. Of course, she was. But that didn't stop dread from settling heavy in his heart. Irrefutably, they were too late to keep at least one of their girls from being hurt, and that was a horrible weight to bear.

"Have you got the balls to do your job?" Tabitha demanded. "Or should I send you back to play clean up with

the rest of the team up there?” She jerked her thumb up, indicating the battlefield somewhere above their heads. “I watched both of you fight and kill for your women. Are you going to fall at the final hurdle?”

God, she was good. Playing on their pride and dominant instincts, knowing damn well neither of them were going to back down now, not when they were so close to the ones they loved.

Saul shook his head, his jaw tight enough to snap. “No.”

“One man with balls to match his stature,” she said tersely. “What about you?”

Loki sighed and straightened his spine, readjusting his grip on the slick hilt of his weapon. “It’s a one-for-all, all-for-one deal,” he said, repeating what Atticus had said before they left the house in Phoenix, which now seemed like a lifetime ago. “We don’t leave this shithole until we’ve got everyone who matters.”

“Excellent.” Tabitha gave a little bounce on her toes from one foot to another, then shook out her arms. “Just think, there’s the *pièce de résistance* yet to come. Dominic’s demise,” she continued with a happy little squeal that was so odd coming from a woman who was liberally covered in the blood of several unfortunate men. “You’ll want to be here for that.”

Saul’s grin was practically wolfish.

Loki’s mirrored it.

Her anticipatory celebration was interrupted by the sound of labored breathing and running feet echoing toward them.

Loki turned his head, locating yet another corridor in this claustrophobic rabbit warren, and jabbed his finger toward it.

As they shifted positions fluidly, he tightened his fingers on his knife, ready to strike. As the noise grew louder, he frowned. It wasn't the heavy clomp of boots heading their way, but a waddling, slap-slap-slap of bare feet on concrete.

“Wait,” he snapped, too late.

Tabitha's hand lashed out, snagging the fleeing person by the arm and swinging them into the wall with a pained *oomph*. In a heartbeat, she spun the small figure around, her free arm pressed against a delicate throat, the tip of her knife poised to strike above a bare breast. With a grunt of surprise, she relaxed her arm. “I guess we can knock the tally down to one.”

Trembling, Anarchy kept her back pressed firmly to the wall, her hands protecting her stomach. “Don't kill me! I'm unarmed, I—” Huge brown eyes, swollen and reddened with exhaustion, flicked to Loki. “Oh God. Loki. Thank God! You're here. You came.”

“We're all here, Archie.” The moment Tabitha stepped back, he found himself with an armful of naked, quivering woman. He held onto her tightly, wishing it was Myna who was safe. “Jasper's here, somewhere. Do you know where the others are? Myna and Caera?”

Tabitha cleared her throat. “We have one of your friends already. Do you know where the other one is?”

Was it his imagination, or was she pointedly directing the conversation?

Anarchy's hands clung to his bloody shirt as she simply breathed. After a long moment, she nodded and eased back, swiping at her eyes. "I'll take you. I think I remember where Rita's room is, but things are...muddled." She spotted Saul standing to the side, and with a quiet cry, launched herself at him next. "She misses you. So much."

Pain etched into his face, and Loki sympathized completely. It hurt more than words could ever explain to have Anarchy within touching distance without knowing the fate of his own family.

"Saul, you handle your gun capably enough. Think you can get this one to safety by yourself? Yes? Good," Tabitha stated without giving him time to answer. "Follow the marks on the bottom corner of the walls at each corridor junction." She bent and trailed her fingers over one such marking, scowling slightly. "B.E. should be barn exit, so H.E. will likely take you back to the house. If you get lost, *do not* wander. Hunker down in a room, gouge the door, and use your comms unit to tell the team you need assistance. They'll locate you."

"But I—" Saul protested.

"Your friend is injured, pregnant, and in shock. She needs medical attention."

"I can take you to the room," Archie insisted, even as she sagged into Saul's arms. She gripped his arms, trying to keep herself upright.

"Case in point." Dismissing them both, Tabitha snapped her fingers twice and set off down the corridor. "Loki, with me."

He shot his friends an apologetic glance before he hurried after the pint-sized ninja. There was something going on here, and he was going to find out what the hell it was. If that meant keeping pace with Jasper's insane half-sister, then so be it.

Lengthening his strides to keep up with her bouncy ones, he mulled it over in his head. If Archie was safe and now in Saul's protective custody, that meant either Myna or Caera were the ones in dire straits with Jasper's team. Whoever it was, the other was with Dominic's psychotic whore of a wife.

"You know," he said accusatorily.

"Many things. Most, actually. My IQ is exceptional." She didn't falter as she gave him a winning smile. "Photographic memory, too. Aren't I just the dream package?"

Somehow, that wasn't a surprise. Her brazen attitude, the utter confidence she possessed, told him that she was in perfect control of her world. Knowledge was a weapon in the right hands, after all. Perhaps she got her thrills from diving headlong into danger like this, where her natural-born—or laboratory-born—skills played little part in her survival.

Knowledge, for all its strengths, couldn't deflect a bullet.

"You know," he repeated slowly, "where Myna is. You know where Caera is. Why don't you want me or Saul near our girls?"

"Not just a pretty face," she murmured. "Oh, that reminds me!" Fiddling with something on her chest, she said, "We have a kitten in the basket. Repeat, we have a kitten in the basket."

Loki growled, narrowing his eyes at her evasion. "Tabitha."

She huffed down her nose and took a right down the next corridor. “Yes, I know, okay? Right now, you’re needed here. Trust that if nothing else.”

“Where’s Myna?”

“Soon,” she promised cryptically. “Now quiet. Rita’s office is somewhere...down...here.” Her steps hesitated beside one door, before she shook her head and moved to the next. Was she consulting a map in her head? If she’d seen the original plans for the facility, her photographic memory would have it imprinted in her brain.

Tempted to strangle her for the answers he wanted, Loki bit his tongue when she jammed her fist in the air for silence, then circled a fingertip over a nondescript door. It was the same as every other fucking door in this place, in his opinion.

Nevertheless, he adjusted his stance, easing to one side of the frame as she took the other. She reached out and gripped the handle, pressing it down slowly and smoothly before pushing the barricade open.

“...the rabbit. Should’ve killed the fucking rabbit, girl!”

Tabitha stepped inside first, making a purring sound of approval in her throat. “Huh.”

On her heels, ready to tackle whoever was in his way, Loki stopped beside her and had to take a deep breath, then swallow back the urge to vomit.

If he’d thought the battlefield above was a scene of violence, it was nothing compared to the slaughter that had occurred in this room. Blood sluiced the floor, splattered wetly

across the walls. It dripped from the overbright spotlights aimed at an examination table, from every-fucking-where.

Shock punched him a second time as he recognized the slim figure straddling a ruined mess of flesh and bone, mindlessly stabbing the dead woman over and over again with a scalpel clutched in both hands. “Caera.”

She snarled, teeth bared, but didn’t look up. Her hatred was palpable, a furious force of nature. “Kill the rabbit. Kill the rabbit. Should’ve killed the fucking rabbit, girl.”

“What the hell do we do with this?” he hissed at Tabitha.

Grinning, she waved a hand at the gruesome tableau. “My advice is let her work her shit out. That cunt isn’t going to get any deader, but that angry little firecracker will feel *so* much better.” She chuckled darkly, eyes lighting up with glee. “I hope they don’t rip Dominic’s throat out before I tell him he let a fucking legend slip out of his grasp. Baby sister over there has some serious potential.”

“No. Just...no.”

“Aw.” Face set in mulish lines, she actually pouted. For about three seconds, then she perked right back up again. “Sucks that she got to Rita before I did. I’ve been dying to gut the bitch for years. Oh well.” She shoved her knife back into its sheath, then sauntered toward the macabre scene with a jaunty step. “Hey, sweetheart. Look at your pretty handiwork. Think you might freak out when you take a look at yourself, but this is a damn good job.”

Caera kept bringing her joined hands down, ripping the scalpel through dead tissue.

“That’s enough now. I brought you a friend.” Tabitha crouched, snagging one of Caera’s gory wrists, clamping down on the cuff that was just as bloody as the rest of her. She jerked back as Caera swung with the other hand, the lethal blade she held flashing through the air. “Now that’s just naughty. We don’t try and kill the rescuers, do we?”

Loki’s jaw dropped as Tabitha twisted the wrist in her grasp, bringing the arm up behind Caera’s back and gently rolling her off Rita’s corpse. With her other hand, she wrestled the scalpel free, tossing it aside, and maneuvered Caera onto her side, making sure there was no pressure on her stomach.

“Loki, find a blanket or something warm. Her body temp is gonna crash once the adrenaline wears off. Quiet now,” she murmured as Caera sobbed and thrashed. “Everything’s okay, sweetheart. It’s over, you finished it. Such a good girl.”

Jesus, she sounded like a goddamn Domme giving aftercare.

Shoving his knife into the sheath on his hip, he began rooting through the cupboards and drawers, hoping to find something suitable, but there was nothing. Rita obviously hadn’t indulged in anything that might offer comfort or warmth. All he found were drugs—some he’d never even heard of, the labels handwritten—and some medical tools he was pretty sure hadn’t been used since the eighteenth century.

Fuck it. He wanted out of here, pronto. Not just because this entire debacle was turning his stomach into greasy knots of revulsion, but because it finally clicked that if Caera was here, it meant Myna was the one in trouble.

Stripping off his less than clean shirt, he crossed over to Tabitha. Kneeling, he reached out and gently, ever so gently, set his hand on Caera's. "Hey, beautiful. Do you remember me, Caera? Do you know who I am?"

Her palms were cut up, no doubt from where they'd slipped during her murderous frenzy. There was a canula in her arm, steadily dripping blood from the tip. An IV bag was on the floor not six feet away, the dark blue liquid inside leaking from the tubing into a pool that was rapidly mixing with Rita's bodily fluids.

If she had any other wounds, he couldn't see them beneath the blood.

She blinked at him, showing no recognition at all.

"Caera, do you know who I am?" he repeated slowly.

"Shock's probably kicked in by now," Tabitha commented, stroking matted hair away from her sister's face. "The first kill can knock your legs out from under you, but a kill of this magnitude to pop your cherry?" She whistled between her teeth with a shake of her head. "She'll be lucky if she remembers anything at all about this. Trauma this bad usually gets filed away in the crazy vault, never to be unlocked."

"I'm not a prayer type of guy," he replied tersely, shaking out his shirt and carefully threading one thin arm through the sleeve, "but if God's feeling generous, that's what I'm praying for."

Between them, they wrangled the material over Caera's head, and with a wince of disgust, Loki eased the canula from her vein before he eased her other arm through the opposite

sleeve. His hands were decidedly unsteady as he stroked his fingertips over her stained cheek.

“I’ll carry her,” he volunteered, keeping his back to the body. “Tell whoever you’re talking to that she’s safe.” He stood, crouching to scoop her up. Her eyes were still blank, but at least her body was limp now, calmer. “How much stress does it take to lose a baby?”

Tabitha pursed her lips, rising with that fluid grace and dusting herself off. “I don’t know, but the bigger question has to be, how much of that shit did Rita pump into her before she snapped?” She gestured to the puddle of ominous fluid on the floor. She did that thing to her chest again, and muttered, “Bunny’s in the burrow. Requesting medical assistance on the surface.”

“How do you know their pet names?” he demanded. “Kitten in the basket, bunny in the burrow.”

She smiled serenely, nudging him forward. “My brother, my sister. Once we learned there were more of us out there in the wild needing help, I did some digging. Needed to know if it was worth my time, dragging my ass back from Europe. I liked what I saw on paper, thought meeting them would make the choice one way or the other.”

Leaving the room was a godsend. “What choice?”

“Whether I want to stay in their lives or not.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Stay here with me, Myna. Don’t go drifting off again.”

Whimpering, she tried to lift her hands to the weight on her neck. It burned, fiercer than the horrible ache in her core, but not quite as much as all-consuming fire in her left arm. “S-Stop...”

“No, don’t talk, baby. Just stay nice and still for me, okay? Just sit right here with me.” Jasper’s voice was near, his thigh a solid support beneath her head. “I think the bleeding is slowing, but I need you to be calm and quiet, little one. Help’s coming.”

“We can carry her out,” someone stated matter-of-factly. “Get her secured in a chair and haul her back up. Jasper can walk behind, keep pressure on the wound. It’s better than sitting here twiddling our thumbs.”

“Too clumsy,” someone else argued. “One stumble, the slightest jerk, and that nicked artery is going to turn into a geyser. She’ll be dead before we see daylight again.”

“We’re not losing anyone else tonight,” Jasper snapped. “I know what I’m fucking doing, so be quiet, Ashford, or go and find someone else to piss off. If doctors can insert a goddamn needle into a jugular vein and remove it without killing their patient, Myna can damn well survive Dominic’s attempt to cut her fucking throat.”

“I still say we cauterize it.” A third voice chimed in.

“Bright idea, idiot. As soon as her skin starts burning, her blood pressure goes through the roof, and pop goes the artery. Jasper’s right. If he maintains pressure on the wound, and she

doesn't wake up enough to have a panic attack, the wound will clot and begin to heal itself. The hospital will suture it, and she'll have an *I survived Dominic Fairfax* scar like the rest of us."

The voices were jumbling in her head. Feeling sick, her skin clammy and cold where it wasn't burning up, she tried to tune them out. There was too much fogging her brain to listen to them argue; pain was at the forefront of all she was, but lurking under it was a flickering movie of memories.

The sadist stroked her face as she whined and restlessly shifted her legs. "No, little one. Still and quiet, remember? You're safe now, there's no threat left here. Dominic will be dealt with soon, I promise you. Rita's dead. Caera and Anarchy," he said quietly, his voice cracking on his wife's name, "are both safe. They're with Loki and Saul. You'll see them soon."

Her eyes fluttered at the mention of Loki. She needed him. Jasper was solid and firm, a blessed and welcome reminder of home, but he smelled wrong, and her body didn't fit to his. His touch provided relief, a comfort she was grateful for, but it wasn't the same.

"P-P...nut." It sounded garbled to her own ears, but she remembered how Miller had hit her in the back, the way she'd lost her breath and couldn't find it again. Her lungs felt bruised now, but at least she wasn't suffocating.

"Peanut?" Through the thin slit of her eyelids, she saw Jasper frown in confusion. "I don't know what you're...oh. Shit. The baby?" When she blinked stupidly in agreement, he

smiled and shifted slightly to take her hand beneath the blankets covering her.

How far gone did a woman have to be before she realized she was swaddled?

“Peanut,” he told her, guiding her hand to the curve of her lower belly, “is right here. You kept him safe, Myna, through everything. We’ll make sure they check him out as soon as you get to the hospital. We’re so proud of you, all of you.”

Tears stung her eyes.

“Not everyone goes head-to-head with Dominic and lives.” The chunkier version of Jasper dropped to one knee beside her. His name was tumbling around in her disordered brain, but she didn’t have the energy to pluck it free. “I’m sorry we didn’t get here sooner.”

“Dominic played his hand well, Troy. We all have regrets.”

“We do indeed. Have you decided how you want to end this?”

“Preferably with him dead.”

“That we all agree on. You’re the oldest of us, brother. The light who led the way to freedom for those of us here today. We wouldn’t have broken free if not for the whispers of the one who rid himself of the shackles binding him to the mansion.”

Jasper looked weary. “So, killing him lands on my head because I’m older?”

Troy’s mouth ticked up at the corners. “No, although that’s reason enough. Dominic started a war with you. Kidnapped

your women, threatened your friends, murdered people close to you. Tried to take your unborn children to perpetuate his sins.”

“Through my own stupidity. I went back to the mansion to do exactly this, only I didn’t complete my mission. I landed myself back on his radar, then came home to Anarchy and led him right to her. My actions set a shitshow in motion.”

“Oh bullshit,” one of the others called out, stomping over. “I’ve seen his records, Jasper. I hacked into his system, for God’s sake. Our father never took you off the radar. He followed you all your life, waiting for a weakness to pry apart a chink in your armor. This might have happened twenty years ago, or in another five, six years. He was never going to let the pedigree stud walk away.”

“Ashford,” Troy chided.

“What? It’s true. We were the original batch of test subjects, but there’ve been a lot more since. More than even I’ve been able to root out, I’d guess. Most of them dead and buried for failing one test or another.” He shrugged. “But from all of us who passed those motherfucking tests, you are the only child born to Dominic and Rita. You know that already, of course.”

“Like I need reminding.”

“They’re to blame, not us. We were simply what they made us, and now we’re what we made of ourselves. Rita’s dead, and I hope on everything holy she died screaming her black heart out. We’ll burn this place to the ground and salt the earth.” Ashford gave him a long, considering stare. “Dominic is the final piece, and it’s your choice what we do with him.”

Before Jasper had a chance to answer, someone knocked on the door before several large shapes paraded into the room. “We brought supplies and a stretcher. How’s she doing?”

“She’s awake, but she lost a decent amount of blood. Broken fingers, broken wrist. Her body temp is far too low. Pulse and blood pressure low. Extensive bruising and welting from what I’ve seen; we haven’t had a good look at her back.”

“It’s the same. She’s got a hell of a contusion across her upper back, numerous welts.” Ashford supplied helpfully. “Got an eyeful before we tackled that asshole to the floor.”

The biggest form stalked forward, morphing into a familiar face. Atticus lowered himself to his knees beside her, cupping her cheek gently. “Swear to God, I’ve never known women as strong as you three. All right,” he sighed, “let the medics do their job, then we can all get the fuck out of here.”

“Anarchy?” Jasper demanded.

“Keeping everyone on their toes up until ten minutes ago. She was dead set on coming back down here for Myna, but Loki intervened and stayed with her, which didn’t make him happy. She won’t listen to anyone else, not even the armed guys on the team, and she refused to get on the chopper to go to the hospital with Saul and Caera.”

“Oh, did she now?”

“Think your kitten grew into a tigress overnight, brother.” Atticus clapped him on the shoulder, then moved away as two men took his place.

They took her blood pressure and shone a light in her eyes, muttering numbers to each other as Jasper kept her cradled

between his legs. One of them carefully assessed her broken arm and fingers, but even the softest touch wrenched yelping cries from her dry throat.

“Okay, let’s see if we can change this dirty shirt for something more sterile. If the bleeding’s stopped, we don’t want a nasty infection getting in.” The younger of the two offered her a tentative smile. “Stay very still. I’ll be as gentle as I can. Col, I need a pad and some gauze.”

What if she started bleeding again and didn’t stop? Her chest was coated in the damn stuff from when Dominic’s knife cut into her throat, pumping too fast. Troy had worked fast, getting her down from the chains, but it had been Jasper who’d clamped his hand on the side of her neck, the heel of his palm jammed against the wound.

After that, things were hazy, but she didn’t think she could bear to watch all that crimson flowing out of her, not knowing if it would stop.

“Hey, look at me. Look at me, Myna.” Jasper placed his hand on the side of her face, blocking her view. There were only those ice-blue eyes left to stare at as she began to tremble. “In a few minutes, you’re going to be up there in the sunshine, with Loki right by your side. They’ll load you into the chopper, take you to the hospital, and this will be fixed. Until then, you’ve got me and Atticus right here. We’re not leaving you, and we’re not going to let you die. Trust me?”

She blinked, not daring to talk.

“That’s a good girl. You’ll feel a tug on your skin. It’s just where the shirt’s sticking to your neck. Relax and breathe. Good girl.”

The soiled shirt plopped onto the floor beside her, and she felt something being pressed where it had been.

“The pressure worked, but don’t let her make any sudden movements. It’ll need sutures, the bastard made a mess. Can you support her head while I wrap this around her neck? Col, get me a bandage.”

Frozen in place, she blew out short, unsteady breaths as Jasper’s hand slid beneath her skull, cradling it securely as the medic worked quickly, securing a pressure bandage in place with careful movements.

“Well done. Perfect patient.” The medic winked at her. “Get these blankets off and bring the stretcher in. Almost done, Myna.”

Her body protested the flood of cold air assaulting it as his orders were obeyed.

“There’s blood between her thighs,” the other medic murmured.

Silence crashed down on the room.

Shit, this was bad. She saw it on Jasper’s face as his anger flared bright. She tried to tell him, without words, that it wasn’t what he thought, but blinking and whining didn’t get the message across.

“Shush, little one.” He lifted his gaze to Atticus. “The hospital needs to be made aware. All three need examining. If he laid a fucking finger on them, I’ll castrate the fucker myself.”

His half-brothers gave a quiet cheer of support.

His thumb stroked her temple, lulling her to sleep. The cold and her exhaustion were eating at her bones, so it wasn't a hardship to close her eyes. Hands touched her, sliding her away from his heat onto a cold, rigid board. They did something with her wrist before settling it beneath her breasts, and then the blankets were draped over her, followed by straps, tightening until she was fully immobile.

There was even one over her forehead, restraining her from moving her head.

“Move out. Take extra care on the steps. No jolting or tripping.”

She started to fly, then her eyes popped open against her will, searching for her friends.

“Right here, Myna,” Atticus told her, resting his hand on her shoulder as he carried one corner of the stretcher. “Jasper’s right next to me. We’ve got you.”

Not needing to see the walls of the tunnels closing in on her, Myna closed her eyes again and listened to the quiet murmurs from the men, losing herself in the rhythmic clomp of several pairs of heavy boots on concrete.

She tilted at one point, her feet pointing to the ground, and when she leveled out again, her next breath wasn't clogged with damp air, but the scent of hay and warmth. Only a few moments later, that warmth spread over her like an embrace, the darkness behind her eyelids illuminating with sunlight.

“Jasper! Myna!” Anarchy’s shout was loud and unapologetic.

“Go on, J. I’ve got this.”

The stretcher jostled slightly as Atticus took full possession of the front, and she opened her eyes in time to watch the sadist run toward his wife, arms already outstretched to engulf her. She almost managed to smile at the sight, a little jealous when he kissed Archie as though the world had stopped revolving while she'd been gone.

“Myna.”

A thrill of contentment settled in her belly, where Peanut seemed awfully quiet. The almost smile became an actual one with some fierce persuasion, her body drawn toward the man charging at her from Anarchy's side.

A needy hum bubbled up, her version of his name.

Loki skidded to a halt, his boots sliding slightly in the dirt. He was bloody, bare-chested, and seeing him again was a balm on her soul. Some of the stress and anxiety she'd bottled up trickled away, evaporating in the presence of her warrior.

“My little songbird,” he whispered as Atticus gave an order to the others carrying her to wait. There was more blood on his hands as they paused a hair's breadth away from her face, his desire to touch her as evident as his disinclination to soil her further. “I've been so fucking worried. No one would tell me what happened, and I've been waiting...fuck, what did he do to you?”

“She can't talk much,” Atticus supplied, his tone calm. “Her left arm's mangled, and she's bruised damn near head to toe. The wound on her neck is concerning, but Jasper put his magic hands to use and stopped the bleeding.”

Slowly, Loki pinched the blanket between his fingers and drew it from beneath her chin. The muscles on his chest contracted and relaxed swiftly as his breathing became heavier, his fury a tangible force. “He cut her throat?”

“Not deep enough to achieve his intent. He nicked the jugular, but Jasper did exactly what he’s been trained to do. EMT in a past life, remember?” Atticus was trying to calm his friend, but Loki was already mired in hatred. “Dominic will pay for his crimes, brother. Today. We’ll make sure of it.”

“If I don’t get to him first, that cocksucking son of a cesspit whore.”

Myna strangled on a whimpering laugh. The insult was certainly one she’d never heard of, but it summed Dominic up perfectly. When those hands she loved tenderly caressed her face, she sighed and leaned into his palm.

What was a little blood in the grand scheme of things?

“She needs to go to the hospital, Loki. You have a choice to make, brother. Go with her, or stay and watch Dominic receive his comeuppance.” Atticus didn’t seem to care which he chose, but Loki...oh, her white and bloodied knight was torn.

She understood completely. Every vengeful bone in her body, broken ones included, yearned to be standing next to Loki, her hand clasped in his, as the monster who screwed up a legion of young, impressionable children for his own gain met his maker.

“I’m going with you,” Loki told her earnestly, leaning down to brush his cheek against hers, then pressing a kiss to

the center of her forehead, the tip of her nose, her mouth. “I need to be with you and our son more than I need to—”

“No,” she croaked. There was a shroud of darkness closing in on her, laden with pain and fatigue. Thin tendrils wrapping around her ankles, snaking up her calves, preparing to haul her down beneath the surface. “Stay. Watch.”

Hurt clouded his eyes for a moment before comprehension dawned. “You want details. Are you sure?”

Her soul was still shuddering with revulsion at the memory of disgusting fingers penetrating her core. Damn right, she wanted details of how the asshole died. Every last one, down to how high his voice rose when he screamed. With any luck, someone would do the responsible thing and cut off all his offensive appendages, starting with his fingers and toes, finishing with his incestuous dick.

She moaned in agreement.

“All right, pet. I’ll see it through.” His lips touched hers again, but this time it felt as though he was miles away. “As soon as it’s done, I’ll be right behind you. We’ll get you closure.”

A tiny spark of relief flared before pain smothered it. Eyes closed, she floated as the conversation carried on around her, the sensation of flying returning again.

“Go with her, Loki. I’ll stay and deal with the rest of this.”

“She wants closure, Att. Do you think I’m going to deny her anything right now? If she asked for the fucking moon, I’d have it tethered to the end of her hospital bed on a piece of string by the time she wakes up.”

“The hospital is hours away by truck,” Atticus pointed out. “Faster by chopper, but if anything happens...you might not make it in time, even with a bird at your disposal.”

“You,” Loki said in his Dominant voice. “What are the chances of my girl going downhill?”

“I, ah...well, there’s several factors.”

“Name them.”

“Low blood pressure for one. We’ll hook her up to fluids once she’s loaded. Without X-rays on that arm, I can only presume she’ll need surgery. They’ll probably suture the neck wound while she’s under sedation.”

Something made a *whomp-whomp-whomp* noise, growing louder by the minute. The air was moving, subtly at first, but as the sound built around her, it become a whirlwind. She lost track of the conversation, their voices lost in the chaos.

Was it too much to hope the world wouldn’t be quite so dark when she woke?

“Live for me,” Loki whispered in her ear, barely audible above the debilitating noise. “Live for our son, Myna. I love you.”

His voice followed her into the black.

Loki stared into the sky long after the chopper disappeared into the blue. The morning was bright and fucking cheerful, but the carnage exposed by sunlight did more than turn his stomach. He was glad Myna hadn’t seen the extent of what had been done in the dawn; trees blistered and splintered by

bullets, blood splattered over the undergrowth like an oversized Picasso painting—with more soaking into the dirt.

The tech team was on site now, digging through the electronics, while the rest of the team kept themselves busy, dragging bodies from where they'd fallen to their final resting place in the tunnels. He'd caught part of the disposal discussion between Darius and Atticus, slightly amused by their detached approach.

Darius was adamant that the whole damn place be set alight, starting with a small explosion in the basement level to eradicate the bodies before fire ravaged the rest. Atticus disagreed, arguing that an explosion and the resulting fire would only bring the authorities faster if someone noticed the smoke.

Apparently, they'd reached a decision, and a couple of teams were already in the wind, on their way to hijack a cement truck or two to drown the torture chamber and the bodies in thick, gray liquid stone.

The practical side of him liked the clean-up process, learning how to tidy a crime scene with numerous fatalities without leaving a trace. Not that he was planning on murdering anyone else after today but given the company he liked to keep...it might come in handy one day.

The emotional part was just a wreck. Every dominant instinct screamed that he should be beside her in the big metal bird, standing guard to protect his woman and his son. But she'd made a request, and he was bound by honor and his own stubborn pride to fulfil it.

Once Dominic was dead, Loki was on the next chopper out, hitching a ride with Jasper and Archie. The sadist's kitten remained quietly adamant that she wasn't leaving until the deed was done, and Jasper was in the same boat as Loki.

There was nothing they wouldn't do for their girls.

"Atticus went in your stead?"

Loki turned his gaze from the empty sky to his friend. "Yeah."

Rubbing a hand over his stubbled jaw, Thane leaned awkwardly on his rifle case. "Make the right choice?"

"I don't know," he admitted with a heavy sigh. "Feels right on one hand, absolutely wrong on the other. Doesn't matter now. It's made. Myna's being taken care of, and Atticus will stand watch while I do this little thing."

Thane huffed a breath. "Nervous?"

"After what I've been through this morning? Not as much as I should be."

"You did well. Take pride in it, even if you needed a helping hand."

Take pride in killing a man. He never thought he'd add *that* to his list of lifetime achievements. "You saw?"

"Had my eye on you and Saul the entire time. What's the point in being a crack shot if I let one of you idiots land in hot water?" The other man smirked, but Loki sensed his tiredness. "Wyatt died yesterday because we missed a step. Burying more friends isn't on my agenda."

"Takes its toll, right?"

“I think it has to. These men,” Thane said slowly, gesturing to the corpses being dragged past them, “were on the wrong side of the fight. Their choice, absolutely, for whatever reason. But chances are they were born to parents who loved them, had friends who may or may not miss them, a woman who’ll grieve if they were men worthy of it. Snuffing out those lives, especially face to face, carries weight.”

Loki rubbed his hand over his heart and reminded himself that the bad guys wouldn’t have mourned Myna if they’d murdered her. “Does it get easier to carry?”

“In time, once you balance it in the grand scheme.”

“Justification.”

“Precisely. The man you took down would have gutted you where you stood. They came ready to kill, Loki. That’s all the justification you need.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Leaving his heart in the sky somewhere over the great state of Montana, he focused on what he was here to do. “Have the creepy Fairfax siblings got this execution figured out yet?”

Thane laughed and straightened. “They are rather eerie, aren’t they? They mess with your head with their similarities to Jasper.”

“It’s those goddamn eyes.”

“I agree. It’s disconcerting seeing Jasper stamped so obviously on a woman’s face. Caera’s different, it’s more subtle. That one, though...” He tipped his chin to indicate Tabitha, who sat on the stoop sharpening her knife as though it

was a lazy Sunday morning. “For all his faults, Dominic’s genes are certainly dominant.”

“Including the batshit crazy gene?”

“Yup.”

The yard was almost clear when Atticus’s team formed a circle in the bloody dirt. Loki moved forward to join them, offering his arm for Thane to use as a crutch. The way his friend was moving told him he’d been in an uncomfortable position for a long time, but he’d have to wait a while before Myna could give him any relief.

Jasper strode out onto the porch, Anarchy tucked under his arm. He held her to one side as two of the Fairfax brothers dragged their father out of the house into the circle, with the other two following behind as escorts.

Archie’s face was a mask of unadulterated hatred, and he got the feeling Jasper had bundled her into the blanket as much for containment as shielding her modesty. The little blonde firecracker was revved up and ready to kick ass, despite her grueling ordeal.

They had some damn strong submissives at Avalon, he thought with pride.

Someone had stripped Dominic down to his bare essentials. Though his hands were bound in front of him, he was still able to use them to cup his pride and joy, the weapon he’d brandished for years.

“We’re clear?” Jasper called over his shoulder.

“We’re located in a no-fly zone,” one of the tech teams shouted back. “The drones are up, and there are no human heat

signatures in the vicinity. All clear.”

Grim faced, Jasper searched the team, spotting Loki. He summoned him with a crook of his finger, then gently pushed Archie into his arms when Loki climbed the steps. “Keep a hand on her at all times. I don’t want her near that fucker ever again.”

She bared her teeth. “Just give me five minutes with him.”

Tabitha chuckled. “I like that one. She’s spunky.”

“And doesn’t need any encouragement from you,” Jasper retorted dryly. Squaring his shoulders, he kissed his kitten on her snarling mouth, before taking his time to approach his father. “I warned you to stay away from my wife, Dominic. Numerous times. Not only did you ignore me, but you also dragged my friends into this.”

Loki grimaced as Jasper’s fist lashed out, cracking into his father’s jaw. The older man staggered back, only to be shoved ruthlessly forward again by Troy.

“Braun lost his business, possibly his home. One friend is in the hospital fighting for his life, while another lost his and all the opportunities he had for the future.” Another brutal blow, this one spinning Dominic around and sending him to his knees. Jasper left him there, circling around him like a predator on the hunt. “You kidnapped my wife, my sister, and an innocent woman who has no ties at all to you. Beat them, hurt them, tried so fucking hard to break them.”

Ashford—Loki thought it was Ashford—shifted his weight from foot to foot.

Gripping a handful of hair, Jasper yanked Dominic's head back sharply, directing his gaze toward the porch. "That woman there is my heart and fucking soul. Despite everything, she stands there whole. She beat you, Dominic. She won. Just like Caera, and Myna."

"Brought you home, though, didn't I? All my lost projects back under my roof."

"And what did that get you? A pile of corpses and a death sentence." Chuckling, Jasper released his hold, planted his boot between Dominic's bare shoulders, and kicked him face-first into the dirt. "A wife who died screaming when the daughter she thought she'd dispatched years ago turned the tables on her. Nasty way to die, at the hands of a reject she thought she could bully. I've seen the body," he added as an afterthought. "There's not that much left of her. Amazing what a furious woman can do with a scalpel."

A cold streak shot down Loki's spine at the memory of *exactly* what Caera had done.

"So, the question is, how do I make you pay for all the lives you've destroyed? I know five people who'd like to have a shot at you. Five people you trained to have no mercy."

Tabitha rose and stretched like a cat, sidling up the steps to stand next to Anarchy. Winking at Loki, she whispered something in his charge's ear, then turned her own near Archie's mouth so he couldn't hear a goddamn thing.

Anarchy became animated, whispering frantically, her hands gesturing like she was conducting a manic orchestra.

Straightening, Tabitha rolled her head on her neck. She beamed at Loki, her smile cunning and damn near feral, then gave Archie a pat on the arm. Kicking her heels on the steps, she sauntered down into the circle, spinning her knife between her fingers.

“Sorry to interrupt, big brother, but we don’t have all day.” Nonchalantly, she walked over to Dominic and, mid-stride, slammed the toe of her boot beneath his chin, exerting enough force to flip him onto his back. “Lesson number three: don’t toy with your kill. I’ve broken that rule *so* many times, amongst others.”

Groaning, Dominic brought his hands to his mouth as blood dribbled out.

“Get on your feet. Jasper’s made a good life for himself, he doesn’t need any more blood on his hands. Me?” Her grin spread wide, that feral edge gleaming. “I’ll kill you ten times over and still dance on your grave, you prick.”

He coughed, spraying blood and a tooth across the dirt.

“Darius, help daddy dearest to his feet. We have a specific request from the audience.”

Cracking his knuckles, Darius strolled over unhurriedly. Gripping the back of Dominic’s neck, he hauled him onto his haunches, then exchanged nape for hair and yanked the older man onto his feet. “Tabitha adores wet work. Didn’t you teach us that taking enjoyment in a kill hones our skills?”

Dominic swallowed hard. “Please...”

Setting the tip of her knife against the hollow of his throat, Tabitha scored a line down the center of his chest, bisecting

his abdomen. As he hissed and whimpered, she blinked her lashes innocently. “How many women begged you to stop, I wonder? Not to take their babies. How many children bear the mark of your cruelty, or rot in shallow graves?”

“You’ll never know if you kill me.”

“Then I guess we’ll never know.” Tabitha glanced at Anarchy. “You sure?”

Jasper stepped forward. “Tabitha.”

“Yeah. I’m sure.” Vibrating under Loki’s restraining hands, Anarchy nodded without hesitation. “He assaulted Myna. His men touched me. They were planning on aborting Caera’s baby so he could rape and breed her himself. Let him rot in hell without his precious junk.”

Oh shit. Loki felt his own cock shrivel and hide as Tabitha’s expression became a mask of satisfaction. Several men in the team lowered their hands to cover their equipment as she ruthlessly grasped her father’s genitals in one hand, and emasculated him with the other.

Dominic’s scream was unlike anything Loki had ever heard. He squeezed his eyes shut in an effort to block it, but it was already lodged in his head. Only a second passed before the howling turned into muffled cries, and when he dared to look, Dominic was on his knees again, hands trying to stem the catastrophic bleeding coming from his groin, doubled over as he gagged.

Feisty as ever, though deathly pale, Anarchy took a step forward and jabbed a finger at him. “How does that taste, you fucker?”

Having seen enough, Loki lifted her off her feet and carried her away from the scene, much to her disgruntlement. There was no doubt Dominic got what he deserved, but there wasn't any reason to hang around and watch him bleed to death for shits and giggles.

His priority now was getting to the hospital, even if he had to hitchhike all the way there. Although, shirtless and covered in gore, he'd likely end up in a prison cell first.

"I'll take her," Jasper called out, catching up with them and plucking his sub from Loki's arms. "What the hell did you do, Archie?"

Her mouth set in mulish lines. "I told him he wouldn't like the taste of his own cock when I cut it off and made him choke on it. Tabitha asked me what I thought was a fitting punishment, so I told her."

"Jesus, kitten. Do I need to ban you from having any contact with her? She brings out the bloodlust in you."

"Don't blame this on her. Dominic kicked everything into motion."

Loki cleared his throat. "You said he assaulted Myna. That his men touched you. Did he..."

Sympathy flashed in her angry eyes. "No. He didn't rape her, Loki. There was some finger action; he was trying to intimidate her, so she'd pressure me to submit to him. I think he hurt her, but she didn't...she told me to run, to leave her there with him. Pinky swear."

"Pinky swear?"

She nodded and rested her head on Jasper's shoulder. Tears filled her eyes as her bravado waned. "We swore that if there was an opportunity for one of us to escape, we'd take it. Caera was in trouble; she was taken to Rita's lab so they could terminate the pregnancy. We knew we didn't have a lot of time, so whoever got free had to find Caera before it was too late."

Jasper and Loki locked stares, a thousand messages pinging between them in silence.

"He'll be alive for a minute or two longer if you want to go break his jaw," Jasper pointed out. "He might not feel it by now, but you'd have some fun doing it."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Loki exhaled slowly. It was so tempting to find something solid like a baseball bat and spend Dominic's last moments erasing his face, but what would that gain? The fucker was pissing the contents of his veins over the ground with every dying beat of his callous heart. "Appreciate the offer, J. The only thing that's going to set my world to rights now is Myna. I need to clean up and find a shirt before I ride my thumb to the hospital."

Jasper frowned. "Why the hell would you hitchhike?"

"The last chopper left with Myna on board."

"And the first is heading back. Did you think my kitten was escaping her visit to the doctor?"

"I'm not going to any stinking hospital!" Anarchy snapped, scowling when Jasper's foreboding glare smothered the continuation of her protest.

“You are, so be quiet. Caera was the first out of the hole. They washed some of the blood off her, and it seems she was beaten. Between that, her hands, and the mental break, she was deemed a priority. But the pilots were ordered to return immediately.”

“Since when does Atticus have two helicopters at his disposal?”

“They’re not his. They’re part of the favor he called in from his associate.” Releasing Archie from his controlling stare, Jasper laid his cheek on top of her head. As a collective whoop of celebration echoed from the yard, he closed his eyes, and his beatific expression was an honor to witness.

“How does it feel?” Loki asked softly.

“It’s odd. Like a forty-year-old knot of tension just unfurled in my chest and evaporated.” His mouth curled into a smile when Archie’s hand pressed against his heart. “Might take me a while to fully comprehend that my family is safe, but I’ll get there. I’m ready to go home.”

“About that...” Anarchy peered up at him. “What was that you were saying about Braun, and people in hospital? You were messing with Dominic’s head, right?”

“Oh fuck,” Loki hissed under his breath. They didn’t know. It was almost a surprise to discover that Dominic hadn’t used Wyatt’s death, and the destruction of Avalon, as a weapon against them.

Slowly, Jasper lowered her to her feet, one hand on her hip, the other on her cheek. Eyes soft with sorrow, he shook his head. “No, kitten. Not long after Rockford kidnapped you,

Dominic detonated explosives he'd had planted in Avalon. Luckily, Liam stumbled upon them a few moments before, which saved numerous lives, but he, Wyatt, Braun, Zeke, and some of the building crew were caught up in the blast."

Her lips trembled. "Who died?"

"Wyatt. He took the brunt of the damage, saving Zeke. Two crew members lost their lives as well."

She shook her head, huffing out a dull laugh. "All the times I told myself he wasn't good enough for our Liam, for Sierra...that he'd never be able to redeem himself for the way he treated her...I didn't like him, particularly, but there were moments when he made Sierra happy. Guess I was wrong about his chance of redemption."

"I think we all were." Jasper wiped away a tear trickling down her cheek with his thumb.

"The others?"

"Zeke's prognosis wasn't good, last I heard. A lot of internal damage. Liam broke his arm, sucked in some smoke. Braun, too—the smoke, not his arm." He kissed her forehead. "Avalon's nothing more than ashes. We're wounded in several places and it's...it's going to take time to get used to our new world while we heal."

"Dominic's head on a spike is a good start," she muttered. "Does Sierra know?"

"Loki told her. We had to leave, but she wasn't alone."

"Connie."

“Yes. Bodie and Alicia, as well. She’ll be in good hands until Liam is discharged, or we get home. Now this is over, we can open communication channels again.”

“I love it when you use the lingo.”

“I’ll use more later when the doctor gives you the all clear.”

Loki cleared his throat abruptly. “Shower. Shirt. *Myna*.”

Jasper grimaced. “The only showers on site are in the house. I can rustle up some clean clothes, and you’ve only got an hour or so before the chopper gets back. You’ll be with her again by nightfall, Loki.”

Nightfall might have been a year away, if the ache in his chest was anything to go by. He paced as Jasper led Archie away to sit down, but his gaze never left the tableau of activity humming around the place.

The last bodies were being dragged from the woods, never to be seen again once the concrete trucks arrived. He wondered if the order would come to burn the house and barn once the facility was filled in—and God only knew how many truckloads that was going to take.

Hell, Jasper or one of his siblings was probably the heir to all the Fairfax’s money, property, and whatever else, unless Dominic’s will deemed otherwise. Knowing the crazy bastard, it wouldn’t be a surprise if he’d left it all to some pedophilic cult to carry on his work.

Across the yard, Tabitha hopped onto Darius’s back and pretended to choke him out. When he dropped to his knees, she raised one arm in victory, then draped herself over him with a laugh.

Those two had the oddest relationship. In fact, all five of the new arrivals seemed familiar with one another. Only Jasper's interactions with them were stunted, as though he didn't know how to deal with those of his blood.

Ashford's nose was almost touching the screen of his phone, while Troy and Wesley stood over their father's body, animatedly discussing something with vivid movements of their hands.

Loki ran his palm over his jaw, feeling stubble scrape his skin. Dominic's genetic stamp marked all his children, including Caera. Mostly the eyes—the shape and color of them—but what piqued Loki's curiosity was what had been different about each sibling's mother. What traits had been strong enough on the maternal strands of DNA to override the cruelty of the paternal ones?

Did it even come down to genes? Had Rita done something medicinal to alter their futures, or had they just been born with immensely moral souls?

Somehow, these six human beings—seven if he included Caera—had held onto their humanity throughout despicable childhoods. They'd refused to be broken, to cling to the shackles latched around their necks, and elevated themselves above the bar Dominic set in place.

Now they were free, completely. Their father wasn't a guillotine dangling over their necks anymore, waiting to strike and drag them back into the fold.

The Fairfax legacy would end with them.

From the ashes, he mused, thinking of not just Jasper and his siblings but everyone who'd been affected by Dominic and Rita's scheming, something new would rise. Death cycled into life, back into death, and it was a perpetual circle no one escaped.

Today, they'd shattered their world as they knew it.

Tomorrow, they'd start picking up the pieces.

Two hours, sixteen minutes later, Loki counted his steps in the hospital corridor as he walked from one end to the other and back again. His anxiety ramped up with every footfall, his eyes flicking to the door as he passed it.

Jasper had neglected to tell him this wasn't a normal hospital. No wonder nobody was concerned about explaining away the graphic injuries, copious amounts of blood, and three naked pregnant women in varying stages of trauma.

The facility was owned by Atticus's *associate*. Considering the fact this nameless, faceless individual's enterprise dwarfed Atticus's by at least two helicopters and an entire medical facility, Loki came to the conclusion that they were now swimming with an entirely new class of whale.

Not that he wasn't grateful, far from it.

Caera was lightly sedated in a private room, undergoing tests and monitoring in case any of that shit Rita had been trying to pump into her was in her bloodstream. So far, it seemed Saul's sub had snapped before the IV was connected, but she was oblivious to anything that happened before she reached the facility.

A blessing, really.

She'd taken a beating, her bruises growing darker with every hour that passed. Stark against her pale skin, they told a story that kept Saul's anger simmering under the surface of his worry.

In the next room, Jasper was practically wrestling Anarchy onto the bed so the doctors could examine her. Despite her fervent protests that she was *fine*, she wore her own collection of bruises and welts, her feet were swollen and tender from kicking her captors, and one of her nipples was badly damaged from having the piercing twisted and almost ripped out. There was some damage to her shoulder where it had been viciously wrenched.

Jasper's demand for an internal examination hadn't gone down well. Her admission that she'd been touched was a sore spot for the sadist—one Loki understood perfectly, given that Myna had too—and his protective instincts were clashing loudly with her vehement desire to *not* be poked and prodded.

Loki winced as Archie's voice breached the closed door.

Her husband would win, it was a certainty. Jasper adored her, but he was a sneaky bastard. He'd probably already calculated how long it would take for her to crash with exhaustion, buckling under the stress, before he sweettalked her into acquiescing.

The man was an utter hardass, but he knew his woman.

“Mr. Jackson?”

He spun back to face the wide double doors at the end of the corridor. A doctor—presumably the one who'd whisked

Myna away from Atticus's care moments after she'd been lifted from the chopper—waited, scrub cap in hand.

Although she was an older woman, her face still carried youthful lines. More from smiling, he thought as he hurried toward her, but there was no smile now. He met her pale green gaze directly, bracing himself for the worst.

Atticus pushed through the doors a moment later, pocketing his cell phone. Still bloody, he'd been making calls for hours, checking on things back home, organizing the teams still holding the fort at the Fairfax ranch, doing whatever the hell it was he did.

As his friend took position by his side, Loki was grateful for the support.

“We didn't have an opportunity for an introduction earlier. I'm Doctor Hewitt. I met Ms. Cookson off the bird, and I've been with her since. We managed to raise her temperature, and the procedure to suture her neck wound was successful. Unfortunately, she will bear a scar around five inches long, but given the alternative, she's a very lucky woman. She lost a considerable amount of blood, which we're replenishing.” Hewitt swiped her thumb over her cheek absently. “There's a considerable number of contusions and a couple of open welts. We cleaned and sewed them up, but we're mindful of infection. I'm led to believe she was found in less than sanitary conditions?”

Loki nodded, unable to find his voice.

“We were requested to perform an internal examination,” she continued, her tone gentling. “There's no evidence of rape, however there is some bruising and a couple of small

lacerations to the upper vaginal wall. Fingernails would be my guess. Nothing serious enough to suture, but again, we've cleaned them up. She'll be sore, but we've given her some medication to alleviate her discomfort. By the time she comes around from the sedation, she shouldn't have any undue suffering."

Atticus muttered something under his breath.

"The wrist...the break is straightforward. No pinning required as we originally believed. We've strapped her broken fingers, and once we've reduced the extreme swelling around the joint, we'll get her in a cast for a few weeks."

A breath shuddered free, along with his voice. "The baby?"

"His heart rate is rather high. He and his mother have been under a lot of stress, which is understandable. We have him on monitors, and the nurses are checking his stats every thirty minutes. Now that the worst is over, Ms. Cookson needs calm, quiet, and fluids. I'm not concerned about premature labor right now, but it is something to be aware of." She sighed softly. "I'm recommending that she stay with us for at least a week. Any upheaval now only adds more stress."

"Whatever you think is best."

"The nurses are just cleaning her up, then they'll move her from recovery into this ward. She's going to be sleepy for a while yet, but I have no objections to you keeping her company."

Like they'd be able to keep him away from her. Instead of throwing down that challenge, Loki nodded gratefully and held out his hand. "Thank you."

“No problem. I’m on duty until this evening. I’ll check on her before I leave.” Nodding at Atticus, Hewitt turned and pushed through the doors.

Loki shuffled to the nearest chair and dropped into it, letting his head fall into his hands. He was vaguely aware of Att’s massive palm on his shoulder, took comfort in it as the worst of his fears slipped away.

Dodged a fucking bullet, was all he could think.

Someone, somewhere, had listened to his prayers and answered them.

Chapter Fourteen

Myna eyed the fork with calculation.

Would those tines reach the godforsaken itch on the underside of her wrist? So far, the pen hadn't worked, and she'd almost lost a tongue depressor trying to reach the damn irritation plaguing her every waking breath.

“No.”

She glared at Loki halfheartedly. It was difficult to give him a full-bore death stare when the man had barely left her side in the last four days. If she felt rough, he was the physical embodiment of it.

Dark stubble was now more like a fledgling beard. The bags under his eyes weren't quite as prominent as they'd been before she convinced him there was room for two in her hospital bed, but there were still shadows lurking under the beautiful brown irises.

“It's driving me crazy.”

“Ignore it.”

The wattage of her glare increased. “I'm going to gnaw my way through the damn thing in a minute.”

He chuckled and wiggled his fingers for her to give him her wrist. “Not advisable. That shit will probably taste horrible.” With the ease of a man in control, he reached for the tongue depressor and slid it between her skin and the cast, manipulating it so the rounded wooden tip struck gold. “Better?”

She moaned in reply, closing her eyes as he hit exactly the right spot. “Yes. Right there. Just...like...that...”

“Never thought scratching an itch was orgasmic,” he murmured, amusement in his voice. He didn’t stop wiggling the stick until her eager noises faded, but when he finally removed it, he was gentle. “Do you need anything else tending to?”

Oh, so many things if her body was whole. The nurse had reduced her pain control to its minimum dose, so Myna was feeling less than sunny. Throw in a few nightmares and flashbacks on top of the discomfort, and sex was not at the forefront of her deepest desires.

Add in the elephants tiptoeing their way around the room, being fervently ignored...

“I’d give my broken arm for a cheeseburger.”

Loki smirked, cupping his palms around her cast, his thumb stroking over the big, black words Archie had penned onto the white. *PINKY SWEAR* was written in block letters, a reminder of the promise they’d made. “I’ll see what I can do, pet. We need to talk first.”

Immediately, she drew herself in, prepared to defend her vulnerable areas if he jabbed at them. Though she refused to admit it, now that the ordeal was over, she was standing on shaky ground. “Oh?”

He gave her a sympathetic look. “Want to pick the topic?”

Steer the discussion away from what hurt? Yes, please. “Well, I’d say the weather is nice, but I haven’t been outside for, like, a week so—”

Sympathy turned to baleful. “Anarchy and Jasper are leaving this afternoon.”

Ouch, jab number one. Direct hit. “Mmm-hmm.”

Caera had already gone home, discharged with the provision that she seek psychological support once she got back to Phoenix. Her blood tests were clear, none of the toxic shit Rita had designed in her veins, and despite the overwhelming stress of the situation, the baby was doing well.

“It’s going to be a few more days before Hewitt will allow us to travel.”

Myna deflated slightly. She’d been hoping—*praying*—that the doctor would take pity on her and let them go back with their friends, but Peanut...her son was strong, but he’d taken one too many knocks to bounce back quickly. He needed the extra few days under strict medical care, even if it was driving his mama crazy.

She glanced around the drab room, kitted out in bland beige with a lovely but lonely picture of some wild mountain range. The past few days here had been manageable, partly because she’d slept a lot, but mainly because Archie kept sneaking in from her room whenever Jasper and Loki took a short break.

She suspected they’d done it on purpose, going for coffee and bathroom breaks together to give the sassy blonde an opportunity to steal some friend time.

Everyone was leaving her, again.

Her lip quivered as her gaze landed on the patched bear sitting beside her bed.

Atticus had pressed Mr. Bear into her hands the morning he left, the morning after the massacre at the ranch, and kissed her forehead. He'd been so apologetic, explaining that he needed to get home to Alicia, and start dealing with the clusterfuck still unraveling in Phoenix.

Thane went with him, eager to return to Connie.

“You don't have to stay,” she said quietly. She'd overheard some of his phone conversations when he thought she was sleeping, and knew he was needed elsewhere. Certainly, he'd be of more use at home right now than sitting here with her, watching the sun pass time across the beige wall. “Peanut and I will be fine for a few days. Your friends need their circle around them.”

Rita hadn't been lying. People were dead—*Wyatt* was dead—and Avalon had gone up in fire and smoke. It had taken two full days for the firefighters to extinguish the wreckage, but grief wasn't so easily contained.

Expression flat, Loki pinched the skin on her forearm reprovingly, hard enough to sting without leaving a mark, ignoring her hiss of disapproval. “This is just one of the issues we have to talk about. My woman needs *her* circle around her, Myna. Right now, that's me. Avalon was more than just a kink club. Over the last few years, it's given each of us our own circles. We all interlink and overlap, which makes us strong as a family.”

“They—”

“Love you. As much as I do, which is why I'd have my ass kicked thoroughly and shipped straight back here if I dared go home without you. I'm not leaving the most important person

in my fucking life in Montana by herself so I can go salvage what's left of the past.” Shaking his head, he held her cast in one hand, and rested his free palm on her belly. “We’re all going to have to move forward from this, Myna. Braun will rebuild his home and the club; Liam and Sierra have to grieve and find their path without Wyatt. We’ll help them, but only when we go home *together*.”

Her heart hitched.

He leaned down to kiss the cast right above where the broken bones were mending. “Anarchy told us a lot of what went on down there, pet. Did you think we wouldn’t find out that you see yourself as disposable? That you believe you hold no worth? You were prepared to sacrifice yourself and our son for two women you’ve known a matter of weeks. You told Archie to run, fully aware of what Dominic intended to do to you.”

Fingers groping at her, biting into soft flesh. The flashback struck quickly, forcing her core to squeeze against an attacker who no longer breathed the same air as her. Tender muscles cried, still a little bruised from Dominic’s assault.

“If she’d stayed, she’d have given in. I saw it on her face and I...he was a monster. He was going to hurt her, the way he hurt me to pressure her into submitting, to get his talons into Jasper.” She swallowed hard, trying to wet her lips with a dry tongue. “They took Caera away. Wanted to kill the baby so he could breed her himself.”

Loki exhaled slowly. “I know. But it makes me so angry that you prioritized your own health and safety below theirs, even as I’m fucking proud of you for standing up for them.

You are not *less than* anyone, Myna. If you'd died," he paused when his voice cracked, then repeated, "If you'd died, I'm not sure I'd have anything left worth living for."

The dam she'd been holding on to with her fingernails for four days began to crumble. Tears stung her eyes, then wet her lashes. Within seconds, they streamed down her cheeks until they dripped off her chin onto the blanket.

He wasted no time standing, sliding onto the bed beside her. He tugged her against him, arms banding around her as best he could with her injuries, surrounding her with safety and comfort as she cried like a storm unleashed.

Everything got washed into the deluge—the brave faces she'd slipped on, the fear she'd clung to even after they told her Dominic was dead and gone. Her anxiety for Peanut, the pain she struggled not to show no matter how much her body screamed.

She shattered because she could, because he was there holding her.

Because he wasn't leaving her to flounder on her own.

By the time the tears stopped, her mind was empty. Barely aware of her surroundings, all she felt was the protective cage of his arms, the rhythmic thump of his heartbeat beneath her ear. As he stroked and soothed, his voice a low murmur of reassurance, her body finally relaxed and gave her permission to sleep.

One week after their return from Montana, Loki stood at the edge of what used to be his favorite place in the world with

his friends by his side. Not all of them—Liam was holed up at Atticus’s house with Sierra, and Saul refused to be parted from Caera for any length of time.

Police tape cordoned off the scene, and arson investigators were crawling through the wreckage of Avalon for evidence. There were more people in Braun’s house, inspecting the damage, but Braun seemed convinced they’d condemn it as unsafe.

The memories of that day were far too fresh to be pulled apart right now, but Loki was helpless to stop them running through his head. The smoke, the heat, the flames rising so fucking high as years of Braun’s hard work burned to the ground. The flashing lights of the firetrucks, the methodical yet somehow insane movements of firefighters doing their jobs.

Wyatt’s body on the ground.

The air still reeked of smoke, but the fire was gone. All that was left were craters in the ground and charred ruins.

“Fuck,” Braun mused, running his hand over his face.

“That sums it up,” Jasper muttered, his face taut with anger. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“If you take the blame for this, I’ll belt you.” Braun straightened, then coughed sharply. His lungs had taken a pounding, the effects of the smoke inhalation lingering. “This is on Dominic, not you. Christ, I wish I’d been there to see him pay. Did your sister really cut his cock off and stuff it down his throat?”

Loki grimaced, not needing that memory to resurface just at this moment.

Troy, Wesley, and Ashford had disappeared back into the ether once the ranch basement had been sealed with however many tons of concrete. They'd left a contact number with Jasper, told him to stay in touch, then just...did what they'd been trained to do.

Darius and Tabitha, however, were currently bunking in Atticus's headquarters, apparently eager to get to know their big brother more and making an impression on several fascinated subs—Alicia got starstruck every time she saw Jasper's newest sister.

“She did. No hesitation.” A look of grim satisfaction crossed the sadist's face. “It doesn't begin to make up for this, or any of the shit he'd done over the decades, but at least he didn't die easy.”

They took a companionable moment of silence to bask in that knowledge.

“So, what happens next?” Thane wondered.

Braun sighed heavily. “Once the investigation is complete, we'll have to wait for the insurance to come through. We'll rebuild, but it won't be exactly the same. Probably tear the house down,” he said slowly, turning his head to study it with tired eyes, “and start again. I'd like to put in a memorial garden, or trees, something to mark all those who've been taken.”

“That's a good idea.” Thane nodded his approval, eyes thoughtful. They glinted in the sunlight like a cat's. “You

know, I still have my house. Haven't gotten around to putting it on the market yet. It's been redecorated, refurnished, in case I decided to rent it out. It needs to be lived in now, new memories and a new family to negate the old. You, Bodie, and Declan are welcome there as long as you have a need of it."

Braun paused, studying him. "You're a good man, Thane. I'll talk it over with Bodie, let you know."

Shrugging off the compliment uncomfortably, Thane gave him a wry grin. "Family steps up. Best damn thing I ever did was move here from Chicago. Got myself a new job, friends who are more like brothers, and," he reached into his pocket, pulling out a small black box as he turned to Atticus, "hopefully a wife."

"No fucking way, brother," the bearded giant drawled.

"At least wait for him to get down on one knee, Att. Let him do this shit right," Loki joked.

"This isn't the best place to do this," Thane admitted, his eyes raking over the remnants of Avalon, "but I think also, it is. There's a lot to look forward to, but wading through the shit to get there is going to be tough. We're facing fresh beginnings, and if the last few weeks has taught me anything, it's that time isn't on our side."

Mumbles of agreement followed.

"You gave me Connie, Att. Somehow, you saw exactly what she needed, and I'll be forever grateful that you chose me to be the one who loves her. In her mind, you're the one who represents the father figure she never really had, which is why I'm asking you for your blessing."

Atticus stroked his beard slowly, then tipped his chin at the box. “Is it worthy?”

Thane popped the lid, letting sunlight illuminate the gold band. “Vintage rose gold with a hexagon cut ruby.”

Loki’s eyebrows rose as he studied it. The ruby was beautiful, set in the center of the ring. Two small diamonds—along with an almost tear-shaped one—flanked it on either side, giving it a flowery appearance. Like a stunning red rose set between two leaves.

It was dainty and feminine, yet the ruby suggested power.

Connie would love it.

“It’s part of a set,” Thane continued anxiously when Atticus said nothing. “The wedding ring has more of the diamond-leaf thing going on. I—”

Still silent, Atticus extended his hand and snapped the lid down with an ominous crack. A heartbeat later, he yanked Thane into a bear hug. “The only thing that needs to be worthy of her is you. There’s never been a day when I’ve doubted that. Keep her happy, brother, and you’ve got all the blessing you need.”

Sappy bastards, Loki thought as his throat stung. Was today not emotional enough without adding this into the mix? He snorted to himself. At least an impending engagement was more hopeful than the funeral vibes ricocheting through the group.

As congratulations were shared, he noticed Jasper staring off into the distance, pale blue eyes not seeing the carnage in front of him but something only he could see. Stepping beside

him, Loki gave him a friendly nudge. “Earth to Jasper. Anything interesting out there?”

It seemed like forever before the sadist blinked, his lips twitching at the corners. “Just a big black hole. Did I miss something?”

“Just a public display of affection. What’s wrong?”

Those eyes slid to him warily. “We need to talk.”

“Okay. I’m all ears.”

“I wanted to bring this up when we had some semblance of privacy. We’ve been glued to the girls for days, which hasn’t left much time to discuss it. I’ve already spoken to Saul, and now you get your say.” Jasper cracked his neck, his expression somber. “Grit’s been interrogating Elizabeth Rockford. It’s time to make a decision on what to do with her.”

Fuck, he’d known this was coming. The thought lurked in the back of his head every morning when he woke, but it was easy to dismiss it when he had Myna and Peanut to focus on instead of the rage Lizzie brought to the surface of his control.

“How involved was she?”

“Significantly. Dominic bought her loyalty without difficulty, sliding half a million into the clinic in donations to keep her hands clean. Deposits were little and often so they didn’t attract attention.” His gaze returned to the destruction, colder than Loki had ever seen it. “From what I’ve gathered during observation, she had aspirations of working with Rita, becoming her protégé. Not for the breeding side of the operation, but she likes the idea of creating new, *innovative* medications.”

Like they were supposed to buy that shit? The bitch was no more a philanthropist than he was a Muppet in outer space. Suddenly, he had an itch to tattoo *LIAR* on her forehead for the world to see. “What do you bet Rita had those same aspirations when she was younger?”

Jasper’s jaw tensed. “That cunt was rotten from the minute she was born. Fate played a fucked-up game matching her with Dominic.”

“Not so fucked up,” Loki commented casually. “There’s a reason why things happen, Jasper. We wouldn’t have you or Caera without them.” Or slightly insane blue-haired ninjas running around causing havoc. “Anarchy would be warming someone else’s bed at night.”

The sadist’s snarl was ferocious.

“We have something to be thankful for to counteract everything they did. Some of it...” Loki trailed off, thinking of Wyatt, and the men who’d died doing their jobs. “There are things which can’t be compensated. They’re weights that we’ll carry for the rest of our lives because we’re the fucking good guys, but the responsibility lies with Dominic.”

Jasper’s laugh was bitter. “Good guys don’t stand around discussing whether to kill a woman, Loki. The line we’re straddling is starting to blur.”

“Yeah, we do. If we were the villains in this scenario, she’d already be dead.” Thoughtfully, he ran a hand through his hair as he balanced everything carefully in his head. “I don’t think you need my vote, Jasper. Saul wants her gone, and by your expression, you’ve already murdered her ten times in your

imagination. But,” he added before his friend could speak, “I’ll give it to you regardless.”

“Once the decision is made, there’s no going back.”

An image of Grit waiting for the phone call with a gun pressed against the doctor’s head came to mind. Rather than brushing it aside, Loki forced himself to focus on it. There was blood already staining his hands, and a black mark on his soul.

“One-for-all, all-for-one. Letting her go isn’t an option, not when she’s admitted the direction she’s leaning in. Give her ten, fifteen years and she’ll be the next Rita. We’ll be too fucking old and crippled to charge into battle, and I’ll be damned if the next generation get saddled with dealing with her. She’s the last connection to the project.”

“Aside from the seven known genetic connections to it,” Jasper said wryly.

“Well, if Caera starts playing around with chemistry sets or tying Saul to the damn bed, then we’ll have to talk.” Loki took a slow, bracing breath. Maybe he’d get a private room in hell when he died. “Make the call, J. This is the last chapter of the book. Close it down and move on to the next.”

“It’s already done.” Atticus’s proclamation was a low rumble of displeasure.

Jasper turned with a scowl. “We agreed—”

“To do what was best for the majority. Loki’s right; she posed too great a risk to release her, and there was no way in hell I was keeping the bitch. Do you think Anarchy would be comfortable working at the office, knowing the woman who

drugged and aided in her kidnapping was under the same roof?”

“Of course not.”

“Then we’re in agreement. It’s done, she’s gone.”

That, apparently, was that. In Atticus’s book, Elizabeth Rockford’s name was unceremoniously crossed out in ink.

“We’re going to swing by the hospital and check on Zeke. Sonic needs a break, and she won’t leave his side unless someone’s there with him.”

“He’s in an induced coma,” Loki pointed out, a thread of pain tugging deep in his chest. It still seemed too surreal to think of the older Dom sleeping his life away, giving his brain a chance to heal. With the burns he’d suffered, it was a blessing, but yet another worry to add to the collection. “He’s not going to notice if she slips away for a shower and something to eat.”

Atticus smiled slowly, although it was tinged with sadness. “According to her, he knows she’s there. She tried to convince me to let her take all her vacation days at once so she can sit with him.”

“And you being you simply gave her the time off?” Jasper guessed.

“Paid leave.” One big shoulder shrugged. “The research teams have been working their asses off. The majority of her work on the Fairfax operation was exceptional. She deserves the time off, and I’m not gonna tell her what she can and can’t do. Besides, it’s good to know he’s not alone when we’re not there.”

“Think she’s fallen for him?” Loki wondered.

“Fallen? Try smitten. Reminds me of a little blonde kitten who toppled head over heels for a stubborn jackass, once upon a time.”

“Yeah, and look what happened to her,” Jasper muttered.

“Yes, of course, it’s such a shame she’s still entrenched in that love shit, happily married, and expecting twin girls.” Atticus punched him in the arm. “A pity the jackass can’t pull his head out of his ass before the fumes start fucking with his head again.”

“I’m good. Just melancholy, I guess, being here.”

“I’d advise against telling Connie that in your next session,” Thane interjected. “She’s implementing periods of reflection time into her schedule. Basically, playing weird music and humming along with it.” He grinned at Loki. “She asked me to remind you that she’ll see you in the office at four, once she’s done with the girls.”

“When hell freezes over, with Satan’s face pressed to the underside of an icy lake.”

“She could probably arrange that,” Thane mused. “That was me reminding you, so don’t get me in trouble if you don’t show up.”

“Pussy whipped,” Braun commented with a shake of his head.

“Switch,” the other Dom corrected. “Just remember that it’s my ass on the line, literally, when it’s her turn to top.”

“We’re all going to be in trouble if we don’t get moving. Alicia’s clingy as it is, I don’t want to make things worse by showing up later than I told her.”

Thane, Att, and Jasper began to wander back to the truck, banter flowing between them. Loki didn’t miss the way Atticus and Jasper flanked their friend, offering silent support if he needed it.

“This isn’t the end,” he said, more to himself than Braun.

“For some things, it is,” was the quiet response. “But for us? No, it’s not.”

With one last look at the place that had been more like home than his own damn digs, Loki walked with Braun a few feet behind the others, directing the conversation toward babies and managing a family.

He was eager to return to Myna, to collapse on the bed with her and watch a movie with her head on his shoulder, and their hands linked over their son.

Both of them, safe.

Connie the psychologist was an absolute bitch.

Myna hated her with fiery passion.

While the Masters were out doing ‘errands’, Connie had called a group therapy session, something she liked to do every few days. It might have been fun, if the group didn’t consist of three traumatized but in denial pregnant women, and one sneaky psychologist who tended to prod and poke at open wounds until the emotional infection oozed out.

She could only thank God that Saul—fiercely opposed to letting Caera out of his sight—was banned from joining them, because if the men got wind of what was discussed...she wasn't sure if spankings or house arrest would be their punishment for hiding from their other halves.

Everyone had agreed to stay bunked down at Atticus's house, at least for a time. Not because of security breaches or imminent threats to their lives, but because two of their own were suffering.

Sierra spent most of her day diligently repairing her stuffies, occasionally breaking down and sobbing into a ragged pile of unfinished toys. Her movements were more like a robot on autopilot, but every now and then a panicked expression crossed her face, and she'd search the room for Liam.

He was never far away. Grief was draining his energy, as well as his injuries. The doctors had discharged him, with a promise from Atticus to monitor him until the damage to his lungs healed. Aside from his broken arm, he'd picked up a few minor burns which Connie checked and redressed daily.

Poor Zeke was still in the hospital, in a medically induced coma. The burns he'd accrued weren't going to heal quickly, and there was no doubt he'd be scarred for the rest of his life.

Stretching out on the bed, too tired after having her thoughts and emotions pried from her head, Myna tried to concentrate on the cartoons Alicia was rapturously enjoying, but the ache low in her belly made it difficult.

Her body wanted an orgasm. Her heart demanded a reconnection between her and Loki. There was something

missing, floating just out of reach, and she knew it came down to losing the physical intimacy that first brought them together.

They hadn't spoken about what Dominic had done to her. Each time Loki attempted to broach the subject, she shut him down immediately, unwilling to open that box again. So far, he'd allowed her the comfort of that, but she was aware he'd make her face the issue before they did more than just sleep in bed again.

Archie had dealt with her fear faster, and more efficiently. Her trust in Jasper held no limits, and she'd dragged him off as soon as the doctors gave her the all clear.

Myna's anxiety hit a peak if Loki's hand rested on her thigh. It was utterly ridiculous, but she was stuck in a rut. The violation of her core went deeper than just flesh.

Dominic's fingers had marked her inner self, where her confidence and self-esteem were closely guarded. His voice was a constant echo in her ear, frustrating her to no end.

The bastard was dead, castrated and gagged by his own dick, for God's sake. His body was entombed in tons of concrete, yet his fucking ghost apparently liked haunting her.

It was time to break the cycle, she decided.

When Loki got home, she'd just demand that he get his pants off at record speed, then get *her* off even faster. It was one lousy hurdle. She was strong enough to vault one goddamn barricade, wasn't she?

She soothed herself by rubbing the undercurve of her belly, right where Peanut fluttered beneath her palms. His movements were growing stronger as he developed and,

despite the initial scare in Montana, her new doctor was quick to reassure her that all was as it should be.

“It’s just sex, right?” she murmured conversationally. “I like sex, even when it’s rough, but there has to be consent.” She glanced over as Alicia cackled and scooped up the enormous puppy chewing on the arm of the couch. “Your daddy’s a good man, so we don’t have to worry about that, do we?”

Across the room, sniffles came from Sierra’s corner. Liam popped into a sitting position, but Connie was already striding over, pausing to rub his shoulder and murmur something before she went to comfort Sierra.

Declan bounced excitedly, clapping his pudgy hands in delight when Snog the devil dog wriggled free of Lisha’s grasp, sliding to the floor before attacking her pants leg. With short, sharp tugs, the pup began dragging her off the couch, growling dramatically.

“Apparently, we can’t leave for an afternoon without you getting into trouble, princess.” Atticus’s tone resonated with amusement rather than censure as he stepped into the room. “Snog! Enough, you pesky mutt.”

Thane came in behind him, followed by Jasper with his arm around Archie. His sub gripped a plate in both hands, piled high with sandwiches. Braun was next, and his face lit up the moment he laid those dark blue eyes on his family.

Loki was the last to come in. His eyebrow lifted at the cartoons on the screen, a smile twitching his mouth. Tiredness etched lines in his face, but it seemed to be the norm for them all at the moment—tired, grumpy, sad, quiet.

Now or never, she told herself. She was either brave enough, or she wasn't.

Like Braun, love shone in his eyes when they landed on her. But as astute as he was, it quickly shadowed to concern. He studied her face as he crossed to her, then dropped to one knee beside the bed as she struggled to sit up. "Bad day, pretty songbird? Why do you look so worried?"

Was it a blessing or a curse for a man to read her so well? Not just any man, but the one who was staking his claim on her, making his position in her life perfectly clear.

She linked her fingers into a bridge. A smile attempted to break free; she wouldn't be surprised if it appeared as a grimace instead. Unwilling to let him see the extent of her vulnerability, she kept her eyes down. "I'm not worried."

"Something's bothering you. Is it the baby? Do you not feel well?" His voice was low and calm as he pressed the backs of his fingers to her cheeks, then her forehead. "Warmer than usual, but not feverish. Maybe you just need a nap. The group sessions with Connie are too much for you."

He wasn't wrong, she supposed. Sometimes it felt as though she, Archie, and Caera were ticking timebombs sitting in their individual chairs, waiting for Connie to light the fuse. Silence was an equalizer, rendering them mute despite Connie's prompts to say something.

"It's not that, I...I need to ask you for something, and I don't know how."

"Sounds painful," he joked. A moment later, something in her expression must have clicked for him, because he was

suddenly attentive. *Master Loki* attentive. “Because it is, isn’t it?”

“Not really. I’m just a bit apprehensive, and it’s annoying me.” There, that was a sensible, adult response. Calm and reasonable without revealing the depth of her *annoyance*.

Deliberately, Loki set his hands palm down on her upper thighs, his fingers fitting to the shape of her muscles. Knowledge darkened his eyes when she went rigid, her breath seizing. “There’s no reason to be afraid, pet. I won’t hurt you.”

“I know that. I do,” she insisted weakly.

Slowly, he rubbed her legs firmly, bringing his touch down to her knees, only to take it higher on the return stroke. “Is this what has you tangled in knots, Myna? Be my good girl and tell me why you’re trembling like I’m going to eat you.”

“It’s stupid. I know it’s stupid. He hurt me, but it isn’t like he raped me. I shouldn’t be reacting like this over a rough fingering and some bruises.” A vicious shudder ripped through her, betraying her true feelings.

“Why not?” Loki demanded. “The fucker touched you without consent, pet. Whether it was his mouth, fingers, or cock, he had no right. He bruised you, made you bleed, and threatened worse. React however the fuck you want.”

“Because I’m stronger than that!”

His thumbs glided up the crease of her clenched thighs to the apex, wrenching a whimper from her. “Strongest woman I know. Can you ask me for what you need?”

The thing she loved about a BDSM dynamic was that once she said the word, control slipped from her possession into his.

All she had to do was dig deep, find the guts to give him the words, and he'd take care of the rest. "Please will you help me, Sir?"

The change happened quickly, so fast her breath caught. The warm brown eyes of her doting lover became darker, more...focused. Like an eagle fixing his gaze on his prey, but not quite as predatory. Protective, utterly Dominant.

"Thought you'd never ask," he told her, leaning forward to kiss her softly. He patted her trembling legs gently. "Strip naked and wrap yourself in the duvet, pet. Wait here for me until I come back."

"Until you..." Oh God, what was he planning now?

Feeling exposed with her friends in the vicinity, Myna closed her eyes and almost laughed at the absurdity of the situation. Two weeks ago, she'd been on full display in front of Archie and Caera, not to mention Jasper and his half-brothers, and everyone else who got an eyeful.

"Two minutes, pet. Be ready."

She sensed him walk away. Two minutes wasn't a lot of time to get herself settled *and* obey his orders, but perhaps that was the point. Stripping and waiting was her part to play; settling her down was Loki's.

Opening her eyes, she saw him stroll across the room to speak with Atticus, who now had Alicia hooked on one hip, and a squirming pup under his arm.

Carefully, Myna wiggled off the bed, using her good hand to push down the stretchy maternity pants she wore, followed by her panties. Removing her top was slightly more

problematic—Loki helped her dress in the morning, easing her cast through the arm of one of his oversized shirts.

Getting out of it wasn't as easy as she thought.

She maneuvered her right arm out first, wincing as the muscles bruised from Miller's beating complained loudly. Her body still hurt, two weeks later, and some of the bruises continued to linger.

Shimmying as though it might aid her, she got her head through and into the shirt, and then everything got a bit... tangled. A spot near her spine twinged with pain as she twisted to pull the material off. "God-fucking-damn it!"

"Bad language!" Alicia chastised from somewhere nearby.

Embarrassed heat rushed into her face. She was wrestling herself in a damn shirt, with her private areas on display for all to see. "Sorry, Lisha."

"s okay."

"Yes," Loki purred from behind her. "Everything will be okay, pet. Here now, you've got yourself in a pickle, haven't you?"

She stiffened when his fingertips grazed the outside of her thighs before sliding beneath the hem. She felt like a present being unwrapped as he drew the shirt up and over her head, taking a few extra seconds to work the material over her cast. "I'm not so inept I can't take a damn shirt off."

"I don't believe I implied that," he responded casually, setting the offending item to one side and pulling the duvet off the bed. "Get the attitude out of your system, pet. You don't need a defense mechanism with me."

Oh, she did. Without it in place, locked and loaded, there was no hope of keeping any secrets from him. He might be the most laidback of the Masters, but he was deceptively intense when he wanted to be. “I just want sex, Loki, not a shrink session.”

“Keep it coming, pet.” He hummed under his breath, draping the duvet around her shoulders and pulling the edges between her breasts. “Some habits you never lose, Myna. Your tongue gets sharp when you’re afraid.”

She reached up and snatched the edges from him, huddling into the cocoon of warmth. “My tongue is sharp all the damn time.”

Full lips curved. “Speaks volumes, doesn’t it? Come with me.”

She didn’t have a choice when he set his hand on the small of her back, ushering her forward. Of course, he wouldn’t let her trail behind him, mulling over her doubts. No, he wasn’t even letting her drag her feet.

“Where are we going?”

“This is going to be painful for you,” he said gently, guiding her into the hallway and down past the first couple of doors. “If I’m pulling you apart and putting you back together again, we’ll do it in private. In here, pet,” he ordered, steering her into Atticus’s bedroom.

Myna balked, digging her heels into the carpet. “No. Nuh-uh.”

“Problem?”

The huge bed was neatly made. One side of the room was almost militarily tidy, while the other was what one should probably expect from a Little. Stuffies were scattered everywhere, as though they'd all been packed into a cannon, fired straight up into the air, and left where they fell. Clothes were strewn all over in the same haphazard fashion.

It smelled like Atticus, and the sweeter, more floral notes that Lisha preferred.

“We are not having sex in their damn bed, Loki,” she hissed, resisting his effort to nudge her further into their friends’ private sanctum.

“We can use his office,” was the calm response, “but I’m not sure the desk will be all that comfortable.”

“That’s fine, we’ll just postpone this until a later date.” She took a step back; he slid his fingers through her hair until he cupped her skull. “This is really bad taste, Loki. We can’t fuck in someone else’s bed.”

“Sure we can. Alicia suggested it, Atticus approved it. We had sex in a bed with Saul fucking Caera beside us,” he reminded her. “That was a bit of harmless voyeurism with some exhibitionism thrown in for fun. This is more important. I want you to feel safe, Myna, and free from distractions. All your attention on me, nowhere else.”

“But—”

“Ssssh. One of us is the Dominant here, one of us is not. Which one are you?”

She swallowed hard enough for her throat to click nervously. “Not.”

“Not what?”

“I’m not the Dominant here, Sir.”

“Good girl. Remember that.” His fingers stroked her scalp lovingly. “Two steps forward, pet.”

Her heartbeat pulsed in her ears as she obeyed. The door clicked shut quietly at her back, then Loki was sliding the duvet from her shoulders. “Close your eyes and breathe.”

“This is too intimate, Loki.”

“Intimacy is what you need right now. Eyes closed, breathe. Beats of five,” he directed. “In, hold. Out, hold.”

Fine, she’d follow his instructions. What did she care if they were desecrating their friends’ personal space? It was only a room, right? A room where they slept and made love. Where Alicia chattered to her Daddy about her daily adventures, and he kissed her goodnight.

God, this was so wrong.

Somehow, it was better to focus on that than on what she was doing in here. There wasn’t a stitch of clothing on her, and despite the warmth, she was cold. Trembling. Her breath hitched on every other inhale, and she was damned sure she wasn’t wet.

Finally, she found the rhythm. Five seconds for each set. Focusing on the numbers wasn’t helping either. Each inhale, every exhale, brought her five seconds closer to facing her fear.

“All right, pet, come to me.”

Jittery and off-kilter, she opened her eyes. He waited beside the bed where the duvet was now spread wide over the mattress. His feet were bare, as was his chest. The bars in his nipples were a disturbing reminder of what Dominic had done to Archie's. Tattoos brought his skin to life, but she was curious about why there weren't more.

He was a canvas half-finished.

With hesitant steps, she inched her way to him.

He smiled. "Anyone would think I've got a gun to your head. It's okay to be scared, remember? You know your safewords, you know me. We're going to take this slow." When she was within reach, he grasped her hips and tugged her closer. "I love you, Myna. It doesn't matter what he did to you or how long it takes to get you through it. You're mine, and I love you."

Her teeth clamped on her bottom lip.

"Put your hands behind your back. Do not move them from that position." Though the command was clear, his tone was on the light side. "Let me reacquaint myself with this beautiful body."

Her movements were jerky as she did as she was told. She was grateful she was in a completely different pose to the one Dominic put her in. Even though there weren't cuffs or chains in sight, she wasn't sure how she'd react to being stretched out again. Her nightmares revolved around dangling from her wrists, and in them, the pain was just as real as it had been in his dungeon.

Loki prowled around her, a lion in denim jeans. Starting with her back, his hands stroked her skin, tracing the marks left from the batons. She shuddered when his fingertips brushed over the place where Miller's final blow had struck, stealing her ability to breathe.

"My brave girl," he crooned quietly. "Just breathe, pet. There's nothing to be afraid of here."

No sooner than his hands stopped roaming, his mouth went on a journey of its own. From the nape of her neck, visiting every sickly bruise and scarring welt, he kissed a path down to her ass, then knelt behind her to continue the homage to the backs of her knees.

With every reverent kiss, she felt the echo of pain before he swept it away.

Her pussy clenched once as he made the return trip, this time with fingers and lips working in tandem. Her skin began to hum instead of flinch, and her shoulders relaxed from their tense hold.

He nipped her earlobe, the heat of his chest pressed against her back. "I love every part of you. I love you when you're strong, and when you're vulnerable. I love how you fight to stay in control, and how fucking gorgeous you are when you submit. Your sass, your temper, your instinctive need to please even when you're scared. What's your color, pet?"

"Green, Sir."

"Good girl. If your arm begins to hurt, you can move both of them to your sides." Laying a trail of kisses from her nape, around the ball of her shoulder to her collarbone, Loki moved

to stand in front of her. “I’m not going to hurt you, Myna. My good girl knows that, doesn’t she?”

Her exhale was shaky. “Yes, Sir.”

More kisses caressed her face. Forehead, cheeks, nose. A long, slow melding of mouths that made her knees weak before his lips traveled along the length of her jaw, the line of her neck. Across her collarbones, then down to her breasts. The fullness of them filled his palms, his thumbs rasping over her nipples, teasing them into tight peaks.

He sucked on one while toying with the other, coaxing her arousal into life, then swapped. By the time her breasts were aching, her nipples painful little buds, her pussy felt swollen and wet.

“There we go. Perfect. On the bed, pet. Nice and easy now,” he murmured in a low, soothing tone. Hands on her hips, he shifted her until her back faced the ocean of mattress, then lowered her until she sat on the edge. A careful push on her shoulders sent her toppling to stare at the ceiling. “Spread your legs for me when you’re ready, Myna. Take your time. Remember who you’re with.”

The way he treated her like fragile glass should have been patronizing. An adult tutoring a child who wasn’t the brightest spark in the fire. Instead, she felt treasured, loved, the most precious thing in the world to him.

The look in his eyes told her everything she needed to know.

Steeling herself, she shuffled further onto the bed, reluctantly raising her feet and placing them flat on the covers.

Not wide enough for him to do anything but catch a glimpse of her pussy, but as nerves tangled her in a gnarly web and her breath snared, it was all she could manage.

“That’s okay, Myna. Relax and steady your breathing again.” Loki rested one knee on the mattress, curling his fingers around her calves. He began to stroke them, down to her ankles, up to her knees. “There’s no rush.”

Up and down, the calluses on his palms scraping lightly over sensitive points.

Up and down, his fingertips circling her kneecaps.

Up, up, up until his touch warmed her thighs.

She locked herself down, body turning to stone. Thighs pressing together, protecting the vulnerable center between them. A pathetic whine emanated from her throat, the only sound of protest she could make.

“Easy, Myna. Just relax,” he repeated, patience seeping from every part of him. Body language, touch, voice, eyes. He was completely at ease, absolutely in control, and she was starting to unravel. “My hands on you. Only mine. Take a deep breath, pet. Listen to my voice, stay here with me.”

Her teeth ground together until her jaw complained. Sweat pearled as he leisurely ran his hands up her thighs, down again. Over and over until her overtaxed muscles succumbed to the pressure, growing lax.

“When you’re comfortable, let them fall open. Don’t force it, let it come naturally.”

Against her own advice, her body surrendered to his hands. Maybe she was being fanciful, but it felt like trust shimmered

between them in a tangible bond. Her mind was a whirling mess of emotions and distrustful thoughts, always calculating the risks, the potential ramifications of handing over something that had been violated.

Her feet moved of their own volition, spreading her legs wide. Her knees drooped to the sides, opening herself in her entirety to his gaze.

“Gorgeous girl,” he praised without hesitation. “So trusting.” He shifted position again, this time kneeling between her spread legs. “Think you can trust me just a little bit more?”

Swallowing back a healthy dose of anxiety, Myna nodded.

He cupped her pussy with one hand, the heel of his palm against her clit.

She remembered how cold she’d been, water dripping from her hair, sluicing over her skin. How she’d been wracked with pain, her system overwhelmed with it. How, for one horrible moment, she’d sought the warmth of Dominic’s hand because it might have been the last source of heat she ever felt.

Her hand lashed out in reflex, only to be captured in a firm, gentle grip.

Loki lifted it to his lips, kissing her knuckles. “It’s only me, Myna. Tell me who I am.”

Whimpers clogged her windpipe.

“Tell me who I am,” he repeated, adding an edge of dominant authority.

“Loki. Master Loki.” She blew out a strangled breath.

“Very good. Am I going to hurt you?”

She shook her head slowly, almost in question.

“I need the words, little songbird. Am I going to hurt the woman I love beyond all else?”

“N-No, Sir.”

“Keep that in mind.”

Her eyes widened as his fingertip probed the seam of her labia, sliding effortlessly through her juices from top to bottom. Her hips hunched, trying to evade the inevitable intrusion, but his digit slid inside her effortlessly.

A wounded yelp ripped from her, more from shock than anything close to pain.

Her inner muscles clamped down on it, squeezing firmly while her mind bounced between past and present. Revulsion rose like a tidal wave, only to recede when she met Loki’s eyes. *Loki’s*, not Dominic’s.

“Greedy little pussy,” her Dom said with blatant approval. “Color, pet.”

Shit, shit, shit. Not red. Pleasure shimmered through her as he pressed in deeper, eased out again. She was wet; there was no mistaking *how* wet she was for him. But the feeling of being invaded persisted, swinging her back and forth between yellow and green.

Another finger joined the first, stretching her open.

As her eyes fluttered shut, Loki tsked and demanded, “Eyes on me, Myna. Look at me and tell me a color.”

The pads of his fingers rubbed against her vaginal wall. Instead of the bite of pain she half expected, a euphoric sense of bliss wound through her veins. She gasped, eyes popping open and latching onto his. “Oh, green. Green, Sir. Please.”

He leaned forward and touched his lips to her belly, then set his hand beside her head and braced himself over her. As he kissed her thoroughly, his hand worked between her legs, fingers pumping in a slow, measured rhythm, his thumb settling on her clit.

Her hips began to squirm, chasing the first delicate trails of an orgasm. Bucking to meet his touch, she lifted her good arm around his neck, her fingers clutching a fistful of his hair.

“Who am I?” The words whispered against her mouth.

“Master Loki.”

“Who am I?”

She whimpered, desperate for the ecstasy building in her core. “The man I love.”

“Who am I?”

“My everything!”

He bit her bottom lip. “Perfect fucking answer, pet. You’re going to come all over my fingers like a good girl, and then you’re going to do it all over again when I get my cock in this tight little cunt.”

Relief swamped her as the growing pressure began to unfurl, spreading tendrils of pleasure spearing into her nervous system. His fingers drove into her harder, faster, drawing wantonly wet noises from her pussy. There was no pain, no

ugly sense of violation; all she felt was the strengthening of a fragile bond.

She shattered with a choked scream when he hit the cluster of nerves inside her, detonating her G-spot with firm, unyielding jabs. Again and again, sending her spilling over the edge in a shower of crystal shards.

For several long moments, time didn't exist. She tumbled and rolled with the throb of her pussy, each pulse of insane delight casting her further adrift.

She'd barely caught her breath before she heard the rasp of his zipper, then felt the fat crown of his cock and all his piercings pushing into her. Hypersensitive, still squeezing reflexively on emptiness now, she opened herself, groaning his name as he thrust deep.

"Mine," Loki growled, her gentle lover from only minutes ago fading into the background. He'd eased her past the trauma, now it was time for him to reclaim what belonged to him. "My songbird. My woman. My fucking everything."

As he gave her back her own words, she buried her face in his neck and rode to the finish with him, losing herself in the connection she'd missed. When he stiffened, his orgasm releasing with a low, resonant groan, she found herself tipping over the cliff again.

Right into his waiting arms.

Epilogue

New Year's Eve

It was strange to be gathered as a family in Atticus's games room instead of Avalon, but somehow, taking the shift of dynamics into consideration, it felt oddly right.

Gone were the beds they'd slept in for weeks after Wyatt's death, replaced with the twelve-foot-tall Christmas tree decorated in tinsel and ornaments. Tiny white lights glimmered from between the evergreen needles, and all they needed to complete the sense of home was an open fire.

Big, comfy couches were ranged in a circle around a huge table laden with food and drink. More than one baby bottle lurked among the more adult beverages.

Some romcom played on the massive screen, the volume low enough to be heard over the hum of conversations.

Loki leaned into the corner of the plump couch, beer in one hand, and Myna in the other. As he listened to Jasper's retelling of an all-action, bloody story he'd heard—from Tabitha, no doubt—he toyed with the ends of his submissive's hair as she rested her head against his shoulder and dozed.

The arrival of Alexander Garrett Jackson, weighing seven pounds and three ounces, was the best thing that had ever happened to either of them, even if it meant sleepless nights, a crash course in diaper changing, feeding and burping, the art of rocking him to sleep without waking him the moment they set him down...

The list was endless, exhausting, but Loki couldn't imagine life without his son now. He certainly didn't want to think of it

without Myna by his side.

To his left, Jasper mimicked his position, looking smug as Anarchy slept with her head on his thigh, much like she'd done when the gang was several people smaller, hanging around in the hospital waiting for news on Bodie.

Motherhood looked good on the masochist; it probably helped that her daughters were fucking angels as long as they were together. Beautiful, identical baby girls with wisps of white blonde hair, just like their daddy.

“Resisting the urge to go over and check on them?” Braun handed Jasper a beer, then strolled over to where Bodie was having a spirited conversation with Sierra, who'd imbibed a few more glasses of wine than she should—one was usually her limit.

Automatically, both Jasper and Loki glanced over toward where three portable cribs, complete with tinkling mobiles, were lined up side by side. Saul was there, cradling his dark-haired daughter, the same adoration in his eyes that had shone when the midwife first handed him the pink-wrapped bundle.

Like a big kid, Alicia gripped the edge of the twins' crib, fascination written all over her face. She was glowing with excitement. From the moment she'd been allowed to hold Kaylyn—Jasper's firstborn by six minutes—she'd been obsessed with her. That obsession extended to Mia soon after, then Garrett, and finally, Sasha.

Loki grinned. “Nope. I think they're in good hands.”

Jasper's mouth curved. “Think we can convince her to babysit?”

“Don’t fucking think about it,” Atticus rumbled, one foot propped on the opposite knee as he sipped his scotch. Knowing exactly where his princess planned to spend most of the evening, he’d staked out the seat directly facing the cribs, sitting like a king on his throne. “I’m sure you’ve all seen Snog’s Instagram feed by now. You’ve seen what Alicia does when she has free rein and spare time.”

Thane snorted a lazy laugh. “You gotta admit, the Ken doll outfit was remarkable. Where the hell did she find a wig for a damn dog?”

“It’s called the internet,” Att replied dourly. “Something she’s now banned from, for life.”

Connie ran her bare foot up her lover’s shin, then curled her leg around his. For once, she seemed relaxed, her eyes a little heavy, as she leaned into Thane. “I was surprised you let her loose on social media, Atticus. Kid in a candy store comes to mind.”

Pretending to glower, Atticus kept his gaze on his woman. But his eyes gleamed with amusement. “Banned her from that, too, until she reminded me how the goddamn dog went viral with his Pinocchio ensemble, and proceeded to lecture me on how we should be promoting pound puppies so that all the shelter dogs in the world can have a home like Snog.”

Myna made a soft sound in her throat. “That’s sweet.”

Loki kissed the top of her head. “So, you won’t protest when we get Garrett a dog in, oh, six months’ time?”

“Please. He’ll be nine months old.”

“Raise ‘em young, raise ‘em right,” Liam drawled. His attention had been locked on the golden star on top of the tree, and it wasn’t hard to guess where his thoughts were located.

Grief had taken its toll on him in the past few months. He was leaner, his gaunt appearance adding credence to his Viking Master title. Both he and Sierra wore the scars of a life ripped away from them far too soon, although surprisingly, it was she who’d stepped into the role of provider and caretaker.

Thrived in it, to some degree.

Like her stuffies, she’d washed their emotional wounds, tended to the hurt they both suffered through. Cut pieces and patches from herself to shore up the holes in Liam.

Her resilience and inner strength was equal to any of the Avalon submissives, in Loki’s opinion. She’d loved Wyatt long before Liam ever came into the picture—although God knew why when the guy had picked her up and dropped her whenever he required a quick fuck—yet she’d broken out of her shock and become something...more.

Seven months later, she wasn’t missing Wyatt any less, but she’d done him proud by standing at his funeral and—with Liam by her side—speaking to those who had taken the time to say goodbye.

“See, Liam agrees with me.” Gloating slightly, Loki bopped her on the tip of her nose.

She narrowed her eyes at him before closing them, nestling her head more comfortably against his shoulder. “If you think I’m potty-training our son and house-training a puppy at the same time, you’re delusional. Same goes for teething. We’ll

discuss pets when Garrett understands the concept of what noise a cow makes.”

“Challenge accepted.”

“Someone needs to wake Caera,” Connie interrupted, already unfolding herself to move. She hesitated when Liam rose and crossed to the sleeping sub. “Almost an hour. That’s an improvement.”

“Or a setback when you consider she was sleeping a few hours at a time before...before,” Liam repeated lamely. He crouched beside Caera, laying his hand gently over hers as she twitched with dreams. “Hey sweetie, wake up now. Sasha needs her mommy.”

During their communal cohabitation, they’d all learned how extreme Caera’s night terrors were on a scale of one to ten. *One* covered this stage of her submersion—twitching, jerking, whimpering—and she was usually roused without too much difficulty.

Ten was apocalyptic, resulting in desperate screams, cold sweat, bucking, and fighting. A ten was rare if she was monitored during sleep, but the one time they’d missed all the signs, it had taken three of them to pin her down and wake her.

Caera jerked upright with a gasp, eyes unfocused as they searched the room blindly. A soft touch on her cheek snapped her attention to Liam, and a hesitant smile touched her lips. “Did I miss it? Is it time?”

“No, sweetie. Not quite yet.” Though his own smile didn’t quite meet his eyes, Liam gave her one in return. “Just making

sure you were okay. You've been asleep for a while, and Saul's keeping your little queen company."

Fierce love illuminated her face as she found her family. "He's going to spoil her. He hardly ever puts her down."

"That's a daddy's privilege."

She knuckled her eyes tiredly. "Did he tell you he wants another one?"

Atticus chuckled quietly. "The man's a sucker for punishment."

"He's not the only one," Archie chimed in, her voice slurred. Stretching with a quiet moan of contentment, she rubbed her cheek on Jasper's thigh and sighed. Well, snuffled. "The sadist is already trying to knock me up again. Meanie."

"I want to enjoy my kids while I still can," Jasper told her. "Fifteen years, remember? If we're having a big brood, they're going to be close. A proper family. When I'm old and gray, with cataracts and a touch of memory loss, I'll remember my gorgeous wife and all the times she bit me during sex."

A ripple of laughter filled the air.

"Once. I bit you once, and got my ass literally reamed for it."

"Damn right, you did." He threaded his fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp. "There's not a day I don't thank God for you, kitten. I'll make sure each and every one of our dozen kids know how much I love you."

Connie choked on a sip of wine. "Setting the bar a bit high there high, J."

“We’re working on getting that number down,” Archie said pointedly, then hummed quietly in her throat. “Although if he keeps doing this, I might just sacrifice my vagina for the cause.”

Loki opened his mouth; Myna said simply, “No.”

“Maybe not a dozen...”

“*Definitely* not a dozen.”

“Six?”

“Are you carrying them in *your* uterus and spending twenty-two hours pushing them from *your* vagina?”

He rubbed his chin. “What’s yours is mine?”

Saul wandered over, swaying from side to side. “Are we missing out on all the fun?”

“Oooh, gimme!” Connie leaned forward and set her glass on the table, then held her hands out for the baby. The yearning on her face tugged at the heartstrings. “I haven’t had cuddles in days. I keep trying to persuade Thane that we should try for one, but he’s stalling.”

Loki’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. How much wine was in her system? It was unusual for the universal keeper of group secrets to let anything slip out.

Thane and Saul exchanged a look as the proud father moved closer and handed over his pride and joy. Sasha was asleep, her fist stuffed in her mouth, and Loki snorted under his breath as he caught a glimpse of the *Bondage Baby!* romper.

“Starting her early, aren’t you?”

Saul winked. “Blame her Uncle Jasper.”

The sadist lifted his shoulder. “My girls have one each.”

“Which they’re never wearing in public,” Anarchy mumbled. “You should have seen him cackling when he found them in the store. The sales assistant thought he was insane.”

“It’s funny because it’s true.” He gave her a quick tug on the hair.

Connie cradled the baby close, her eyes half-closed. Hell, if Thane wasn’t going to give her a kid, Loki was seriously considering doing it himself, just to see the soul-deep contentment on her face. After all she’d been through, she deserved some of the happiness spreading throughout the group.

“I’ve been stalling because I want to do everything right.” Injecting an edge of dominance into his tone, Thane hooked a finger under her chin and made her look at him. “We’ve had a rough couple of years, Constance. Longer for some of us, going all the way back to Braun and Bodie, well before I met you. This year has been the hardest. So many secrets unraveling, welcoming new friends and lovers into the group, losing others. But we’re coming into a new year, and I thought, how can we welcome it in a way that makes a statement?”

Everyone was quiet now; even Alicia slipped onto her Daddy’s lap without a word.

“I love you. You knocked me on my ass without realizing it, the first night I went to Avalon. I spent five minutes in your company at the bar, and I knew. There was no doubt in my

mind that you were, are, and always will be the woman who owns my heart.” He cupped her cheek, stroking his thumb over the tear sliding down the curve. “We can have as many kids as you want, sugar. Hell, let’s make our own football team. But before we start making more life between us, I want *our* lives to be official.”

Releasing her, he shifted off the couch, his hand already in his pocket. By the time he was on one knee, the box was in his palm. He flicked it open, resting his free hand on her leg, and said, “Constance Monroe, will you do me the honor of walking by my side for the rest of our lives, as my lover and partner, my submissive and Domme, and as my wife?”

Gray eyes huge and glistening with more tears, Connie stared at him. Her arms, supporting the sleeping baby so protectively, began to tremble. “Saul, take Sasha. Please.”

Her voice was shaky, thick with tears.

“Yes’m.” Grinning, Saul reclaimed his daughter and stepped out of the way.

Connie lunged forward, damn near taking Thane to the floor. Nodding frantically, she kissed him soundly, her hands in his hair.

“Anyone else think that’s a yes?” Liam commented, holding his arms out for Sierra as she abandoned Bodie and darted to him. “Because if it’s a no, there are some pretty fucked up mixed signals going on.”

Connie broke the kiss and laughed. “Like I could ever say no to him.”

“You have,” he retorted with a smirk. “Several times when I wanted inside your ass.”

She scowled, then kissed him again. “This time, it’s a yes. Yes, Thane, I’ll marry you.”

“With the football team?” he asked hopefully.

“Fuck it, let’s make two.” More kissing, growing more lustful as the seconds passed.

“I’m not seeing a ring on that finger,” Atticus grumbled, roping an arm around Lisha’s waist and securing her on his lap before she broke free to be nosy.

“Oh, the ring.” Glowing, Connie leaned back and clasped her hands together. Her mouth dropped open when she finally took a moment to *see* it, which spoke volumes about how she felt about Thane. “Oh my God. That’s an engagement ring?”

Thane chuckled, then groaned and levered himself back onto the couch. Plucking the gold band from the box, he took her left hand and slid it on her finger. “This is *your* engagement ring, sugar. The matching wedding band is at home, waiting for you.”

“It’s stunning.” Shocked, she held her hand up to the lights twinkling on the tree, adoration in her eyes. Not for the jewelry, but for the man who’d given it to her, and the promise it represented. After several long moments, she let rip with an un-Connie-like squeal. “I’m engaged!”

Chaos ensued. The women were on their feet, huddling around Connie and adding their squeals to hers. Coos of admiration, laughing hugs, little dances of joy...this was what part of being a family was all about.

Loki joined in with the bear hugs and backslapping as Thane was thoroughly congratulated.

Glasses were eventually lifted, and surprisingly, it was Liam who led the toast.

But Loki's attention focused on the dark-haired submissive who'd drifted away, no glass in her hand, back toward the cribs. He frowned and, giving Myna a sweet kiss that tasted like the sip of champagne she treated herself to, slipped away from the group and followed Alicia.

Garrett was sleeping, which was a miracle. In the crib beside his, Kaylyn and Mia lay side by side, their hands touching. Mia's eyes were partly open, as though wondering whether to wake, but with a few gentle kicks of her legs, she settled back down.

"They're so peaceful when they're asleep," he said quietly as he stood beside Alicia.

Her sigh was reverent, but...off. "They're beautiful."

"They've had some good genes to work with." He gave her a wink, but her shoulders just slumped. "Okay, little one, spit it out. What's making you so unhappy?"

She sniffled and ran the cuff of her dinosaur onesie under her nose. "It's nothing. Stupid."

"No, it's not. Come on, tell Uncle Loki," he coaxed.

The vibrant energy of her Little was flat. She heaved a sigh and ran her fingers along the edge of the crib. "I's got a present for Daddy. Was gonna give it to him tonight, but now I can't."

“Is it broken?”

Her lip quivered. “No.”

“Is it special?”

She nodded. “Don’t wanna ruin Connie’s night.”

“I see. Will it make Connie happy, too?”

Her shoulders, no longer as frail as they once were, shrugged dejectedly.

He studied the group, marveling at what they’d created without ever meaning to. Every single piece fit, and even though there was one missing, they were still a strong, loving, passionate family. “I think that if a present for one brings happiness to all, it should be shared. Go get your gift, little one. Whatever it is, Connie won’t mind.”

Dark blue eyes, so like her sister’s, brightened slightly. “Really?”

He chuckled her gently under the chin. “Absolutely. Spread the love, Lisha.”

She hesitated, then nodded and hurried away, sneaking through the doors leading into the hallway.

Pleased there was a skip in her steps, Loki smiled down at his son, tempted to brush a fingertip over the ridiculously soft skin on that plump cheek, but knowing from experience what he’d unleash. A few dark hairs were growing into a tiny tuft on the boy’s head, and while his eyes—when he was awake—were all Loki’s, the rest of him was just like his mother.

Leaving sleeping babies in peace, he sauntered back toward his friends, taking a swig of beer, mulling over his own plans

to wed his woman. A week ago, they'd celebrated their unofficial one-year anniversary, the day they'd met and connected, starting this journey together.

Next year, which was rapidly approaching, he was going to make their official anniversary permanent with a wedding. The day they'd reconnected and turned their future from a dream into reality.

"Where did you sneak off to?" Myna whispered as he curled his arm around her waist.

"Practicing my parenting techniques."

"Oh really?"

"Mmm-hmm." With one eye on the door, Loki stepped forward to admire the ring on Connie's finger, kissing her on the cheek as Myna hugged her. "You couldn't have picked a better man than him, Connie."

Her heart was in her eyes. "He's perfect."

The engagement was affecting everybody, the joy contagious.

With twenty minutes to go before the ball dropped, Saul was slow-dancing with Caera, their daughter pressed between them as they swayed in place. Bodie curled on Braun's lap, kissing him as they supported Declan's sleeping form in a joint cradle of their arms. Archie was teasing her husband; Connie seemed content to hold on to Thane with her cheek against his heart.

Liam's face was against Sierra's neck, kissing a path up her throat that seemed more tender than sexual. When she clutched his shirt, he rested his forehead against hers, and they

shared a private moment that wasn't entirely mired in lingering grief.

“Daddy?”

Atticus's head lifted, his gaze landing on her unerringly. A frown marred his brow as he studied the messily-wrapped gift clutched in her hands. The gift paper was stuck together with clumps of tape, and the bow was a knot of tangles. “What have you got there, princess?”

She stood behind the couch nearest the door, adorably shy. She licked her lips nervously. “Is for you.”

The frown deepened. Obviously sensing something wasn't quite right, Atticus moved slowly and sat, crooking his finger at her. “Come here, little girl. I love gifts from my princess.”

Dragging her feet, shooting Loki a worried glance, Lisha approached her Daddy. The paper rustled in her grasp, and when she was within reach, she shoved the package at him.

“Thank you, Alicia. Did Santa forget to put it under the tree?”

She nodded slowly, wiping her hands on the soft blue material of the onesie.

Carefully tearing through the wrapping paper where it wasn't swaddled with tape, Atticus pulled out a box. Eyebrow arching with curiosity, he turned it over in his hands. “Is it a watch?”

All eyes were on him now.

Alicia inched back a step, shaking her head.

The box was innocuous, slim, and black. It definitely looked like something a watch was packaged in—Loki had seen several like it down in the offices below.

Opening it, Atticus froze. Every muscle on the biggest guy in the room just...seized. Eyes locked on the contents, it was easy to see the jungle-green darken dangerously as the tree lights changed rhythm from twinkling to solid.

The box closed with a snap.

Setting it aside as though his bones were old and fragile, he rose from the couch and took a step toward his Little. She took three back. “Stay right where you are, little girl.”

Tension throbbed through the room like a bass chord.

Trembling, she linked her fingers together at her waist and waited.

Myna huddled close to Loki’s side.

One stride closed the distance, and Atticus lifted Alicia off her feet by her waist. He studied her face in silence, then enfolded her in his arms and rocked her. “Honestly?”

“Yeah.” It was the barest whimper.

A smile cracked his stern face, growing wider by the second. A laugh rumbled through his chest. “Well, one thing is for sure, princess, Santa’s going to have to work extra hard next Christmas to top this.” He kissed her sweetly, rubbing his nose against hers before he shifted her onto his hip. “Seems like my princess is fixing to be a mommy by this time next year.”

Bodie's expression hardened. "You knocked up my baby sister?"

Beside her, highly amused, Braun folded his arms over his chest and tried to appear serious. "Yeah, you asshole."

"Be supportive or be quiet," she snapped. "And yes, I realize I probably just earned a spanking, but I don't care." She pointed her finger toward the couch where Declan slept soundly, then swung it over to Sasha. "Are you sure she's ready for one of these, Att?"

"Were you ready?" Alicia asked quietly.

"No," Bodie admitted, "but then Braun wasn't kissing my boo-boos better and sticking cartoon band-aids on them, either. I love you, Alicia. I'm thrilled for you. But you're still recouping the childhood you lost."

Wriggling down the side of her Daddy, Alicia set her feet apart in a strong stance. One diminished considerably by the attached slippers that resembled a dinosaur's, complete with stuffed white claws. Behind her, Atticus mirrored Braun's pose.

"I suppose I am. Being Little brings me peace, just like loving Atticus does. It doesn't mean I'm incapable of functioning like an adult when I need to. Never did I dream I'd have a man like this standing at my back," she said, reaching back to grab a handful of his shirt. "When Abraham raped me as a teenager, I wished I was you. Away from that place, away from them. Now...I don't want to be anyone but me, with all my quirks and childish tendencies."

“Childlike,” Connie corrected in an irritated undertone before Thane shushed her.

“If I was anyone else, I wouldn’t have my Daddy. I wouldn’t be celebrating the new year with friends who’ve come to mean so much to me, and I don’t know if I’d have you in my life the way I do.” She smiled to herself and rested her hand lightly on her stomach. “There wouldn’t be a mini-mountain man in here.”

“Damn well better be a boy,” Jasper muttered. “We’re outnumbered three to two.”

“This is the happiest I’ve ever been, Bodie. If this is the pinnacle, I’ll treasure it.” Alicia nodded her head as though confirming the truth. “Don’t worry about me.”

“That’s my job,” Atticus agreed.

Loki discovered he was holding his breath, waiting to see if the situation was going to escalate into the last family drama of the year.

It didn’t.

Shoulders relaxing, Boadicea’s eyes glinted with mischievousness. “Well, I guess if you’re *that* happy, Braun won’t have to castrate Atticus.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware I was going to.”

“Of course you were. Defending your sister-in-law’s honor is the right thing to do.” Smirking, she stepped forward as Alicia giggled and ran to her. They hugged tightly, one of the first times Loki had seen them expressing their emotions so openly. “Sorry, Lisha. I know you’ll be a great mom, I do.”

“Can we celebrate now?” Connie demanded as soon as they broke apart. “Because I for one am dying to hug the mother to be!”

“Me first,” Att protested. “Again.”

It was like a carousel, Loki thought as he grinned at Myna.

Atticus scooped his woman into his arms and kissed her until she was flushed and clearly aroused. From there, she was spun from Master to friend, embraced by all as she laughed in delight.

From wheelchair to motherhood, she’d had one hell of a ride.

“One minute to go,” Liam announced. Keeping Sierra tucked under one arm, he lifted his drink with the other. “A toast to the end of a fucked up year. To the ones we lost,” he said somberly, giving Sierra a kiss on the top of her head, “and the ones who came into our lives when we needed hope the most.” Sad gray eyes brightened as they landed on Sasha, then moved across to stare at the cribs. “To the friends who always have each other’s backs—”

“And kick ass,” Saul interjected.

“—and kick ass,” Liam repeated with a wry smile. “Last but not least, to Avalon. Where it all started. Where one day, when Braun gets his ass into gear, we’ll be seeing in the New Year again.”

“Amen to that,” Jasper agreed, reaching down for his beer. He raised it high. “To Avalon.”

Almost in unison, everyone lifted their hands, regardless of whether they had a drink or not, and chorused, “To Avalon.”

“Ten seconds,” Thane warned, already turning Connie to face him. “Ready for this, sugar?”

Loki spun Myna into his body, full contact. Her Peanut belly was flat now, but her curves were perfect. Curling his arms around her waist, he gazed into her eyes and saw the future. *Their* future.

Garrett was just the start.

“I should have told you this a year ago,” he whispered in Myna’s ear. “And every day since. I love you, little songbird.”

“Not as much as I love you.”

“Three!” Alicia squealed.

“Two.” Sierra chimed in, blushing as Liam nudged her.

“One.” Anarchy whooped.

“Happy New Year!”

There was a long silence, everyone braced for the babies to wake at the noise, but Loki thanked his stars that, for once, his son didn’t begin his glass-cracking wail. The twins, if they stirred, were their usual angelic selves.

Not a damn peep.

Cradling the back of Myna’s head, he kissed her, pouring every hope and dream he had for them into that meeting of lips. Her small purr of submission thickened his cock, making him deepen the kiss until he swore he’d come just from that alone.

The only resolution on his mind was proving to her what she meant to him, day after day, for the rest of his life.

The End

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